Copenhagen

by badscienceshenanigans

Summary

AU where Garrett keeps his shit together and sends FitzSimmons to work for Hydra. They are not very helpful.
Fitz didn’t see her trip on her own two feet-- just saw her go shoulder-first, hard, into the doorjamb.

“Hey! You leave her alone!” he burst before he could think.

“Fitz! Sto--” But before she could tell him to stand down, one of their escorts knocked him roughly in the stomach. Took the wind right out of him by the looks of it.

No sooner had he sunk to the floor than the guards slipped out and sealed the door. Well, there they were. Slightly beat-up and definitely locked in their own hex room.

“Are you alright?” Simmons knelt down to see him. His eyes were shut tight, mouth going open and closed without sound. People were rarely winded long enough to actually pass out. Full-blown panic, on the other hand, only took a few seconds to set in.

“Hey. Look at me,” she urged. He heeded, eyes now wide open in barely-contained alarm. It was clear how much he hated it, too-- knowing intellectually that he’d be fine in a matter of moments, but still trapped in a visceral reaction, wanting to breathe and not being able to. She laid a hand to his forehead, stroking back into his hair.

“I’m not going to let you pass out. I’ve got you.”

He gave a tiny nod, just hearing her over the rushing in his ears. Then, little by little, he found his chest opening again. Gasped. Heaved a coarse breath in and out. Leaned out of her touch.

“How about you, are you alright?” Took another breath. “You hit that wall pretty hard.”

Simmons rolled her eyes. “That was self-inflicted,” she admitted. “Somewhat.”

It had looked for a moment as if Fitz were about to make a break for it. Not that that could have worked. Even if they somehow managed to take out all the Hydra people on the plane-- including Garrett, Mike, and Ward-- neither one of them knew how to fly it. That left crashing it as the most realistic terminus of a breakout attempt.
Simmons had already tried to get herself killed for SHIELD a couple of times, and was arriving to a point in life where she was ready to consider other options. Ideally these the kind where you did the right thing and lived to tell about it. The two of them would be covering that topic in a few minutes once they had themselves under control. In depth.

She ran her hands over her face and suppressed a growl. Not wanting to caught crossways in whatever he was doing, she’d tried to shiny to the side and then bungled her own steps. Whatever plan he might have had fell apart with her balance.

They wouldn’t be getting out of there through traditional heroics. Certainly not the solo, spur-of-the-moment kind. God, did they need to have a talk about that. In a minute. When she didn’t want to wring his neck anymore.

In the meantime, they weren’t going anywhere. They needed to shake it off, figure out what kind of a bind they were in, and then decide what to do about it.

“Do you know how people say when you’re about to die, you see your life flash before your eyes? They lied, Fitz... I’m sure I saw my tombstone. ‘Here lies Jemma Simmons. Captured by enemy forces. Was alright until she tripped into a wall. The end.’”

“C’mon, Jemma, don’t joke about that.”

“Of course I’m joking,” she said. “There won’t be a tombstone. You know I want to be composted, I’ve been very clear on that point.”

“Christ,” he muttered, looking to the ceiling. This was mostly to himself-- if she was talking this much, it meant she was coming down from the adrenaline. He’d best follow suit.

Simmons tended to go quiet when things got ugly, and so did he-- at least, he used to. A year into their time at Sci-Ops there’d been a fire a floor above them. They’d spent precious minutes backing up data in complete silence, then hustled out together with hard drives in their pockets. It wasn’t until several minutes later, after the brass told them to go home and they went to a pub to celebrate with a mid-afternoon “we didn’t get incinerated today” drink, that they finally thawed out. And thaw they did-- they hadn’t drunk nearly enough to be as bubbly in that pub as they’d been. That was all nerves.

That same stillness-and-urgency followed him out to the field. Usually. A couple times lately he’d felt himself go hot instead, boiling up into a pounding mess of tunnel vision, reacting before he could think. As viable as that reaction might be from an evolutionary point of view, brains were the only thing going for him. It was well beyond time to get them back online before something else happened.

Fitz breathed in, breathed out. This exact kind of nonsense right here was the reason for SHIELD’s anti-fraternization policy. Not that that rule technically applied to scientists, or that they were supposed to even be out on ops in the first place, or SHIELD was even a thing anymore. There was still a reason.

Of course, it was also the same reason medical personnel weren’t supposed to treat life-threatening injuries on people they worked with either, and Simmons hadn’t let that slow her down.

“Simmons?”

“Mm.”

“Sorry, Jemma. I fucked that all up.”

She scooted to sit next to him, bumping shoulders as she did.

“Yeah,” she agreed mildly. Then she crossed her arms firmly over herself and shot him a Look.

“Yeah,” she agreed mildly. Then she crossed her arms firmly over herself and shot him a Look. After a long moment of cold sweat, he realized that she’d wrapped her near hand over her arm to rest between their touching shoulders, and was toggling her fingers in an irregular pattern.

Morse code?

...k though they probably want us alive youd have to try harder than that to change their minds
“Is there any way out of here?” she murmured out loud, lips nearly still. The better to look like she was trying not to be seen by the extensive monitoring system he’d installed. And upgraded. With pride. She’d already know the answer to that question. She’d also know that it would be pointless even if it did work.

“There used to be four. I fixed them, though.” He followed suit in folding his arms over his chest, sliding a hand to fit between where their arms pressed together so they could signal without being seen.

*Did you hear Garretts recruitment speech at the Hub* he tapped out.

She nodded, in response to both his spoken and silent statements. “Well done,” she said aloud.

“Thanks,” he admitted. “It’s very secure.” Then he tapped again

*Three guesses on where were headed*

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“Look at that, Ward-- you weren’t kidding about these two!” Garrett was grinning into the hex room vid feed, watching the scientists try to regroup. “God, is that sappy.”

Raina had evidently seen all she needed. She gave Ward a sideways look as she clipped out of the room.

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*Do you remember Copenhagen* Fitz tapped.

*The city or the play* Simmons signalled back.

*The play about the city* Fitz replied.

*Good play* she answered. *Even though the playwright missed what Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle actually means.*

She paused, nearly shrugged before she stopped herself. *But that’s not the point is it*

It was impossible to keep herself still while talking, even if silently. She needed to talk about something out loud-- anything else-- to account for her apparent need to move. Ward probably knew to be suspicious if the two of them were quiet for more than twenty seconds anyway.

Meanwhile, Fitz pressed on. *Do you feel up to it?*
An ugly thrill pooled in Simmons’s stomach.

“Did you ever wonder why they used to ride horses into battle?” she blurted out in distraction. Her voice sounded conspicuously nervous. It wouldn’t seem suspicious to anybody listening in-- they were in the process of being taken prisoner, so anxiety was only expected. Fitz heard it and knew better. She felt his thumb lift to trace a soft arc where their shoulders met.

“Because it’s faster than walking?” Fitz replied slowly.

We don’t have to he offered silently.

“Well yes, it’s faster than walking,” she admitted. “But you know, they actually used mules for nearly everything. Packing, hauling wagons, even when they rode from battle to battle it was always on a mule. Used them for everything except the actual charge itself.” She paused. “And making more mules and horses, of course.”

“Hm. Do enlighten us, Dr. Foxhunts,” he teased.

“It’s hardly a fault that your people had better things to do than chase down the only wildlife keeping the rats at bay, have them mangled by dogs, and pass out the leftover bits of their feet and faces as souvenirs.” She rolled her eyes, trying to glare at him, and found that she couldn’t. The familiar teasing look on his face was joined by something somber and apprehensive.

Her hands remained still.

Fitz swallowed. It wasn’t often that Jemma was at a loss for words.

When they first met, he’d been even more tongue-tied around her than usual. Everyone had assumed they’d get along naturally and be a taste of home for each other and all that. Not at all. In fact, where all the non-Brits at the academy just saw “Student: Scottish male variant,” someone from home like Simmons had enough context for British life to know exactly how fucking poor he was. He’d been all too aware already that he dressed, talked, carried himself, and probably even smelled like working-class despair. The Academy was terrifying, but a breath of fresh air at the same time because nobody in America knew about any of that. Sure, he still had no friends. But at least he wasn’t housing scheme trash with no friends. The last thing he’d wanted was to be around the only kind of person who could see right through him. Specifically, a pretty girl who wore pearls on a routine basis and pronounced every single one of her t’s and whose parents were actually nagging her to find a stable so she wouldn’t fall behind on her riding, God forbid, but had never learnt how to drive because they had people to do that sort of thing for them.

It only took a couple minutes of her talking to replace the first impression with a second one: God in heaven, she’s disgusting. Talk-about-maggots-and-sewage-whilst-eating-with-very-propermanners disgusting. He actually tried to get her to stop, at first. But at some point soon after he gave up and decided to just enjoy the natural comedy that was Jemma Highbrow Guts Simmons.

Her fingers finally broke his thoughts.
“It’s because mules are too smart for that, Fitz.” He looked at her skeptically. “It’s true! Horses come from these great, rolling steppes where there’s nothing to run into. So there was nothing to stop evolution from favoring... headlong flight at a moment’s notice.”

*What else is there* her fingers continued.

“In the context of domestication, that translates into relatively little independent will. Horses are just... stimulus and response. At least compared to the other equines. If you tell them to charge into certain death, they’ll do it. No questions asked.”

*We can’t fight back we’re surrounded we’ll just get ourselves killed*

“But *Equus asinus* come from deserts. Lots of rocks and gulches and all sorts of ground hazards. An instant right-or-flight response there will get you killed even faster than predators. So if you frighten an ass, or tell it what to do, it’ll stop and think a moment and decide what to do. If you ask one to jump into a melee, they hear the guns and smell the blood and they’ll say ‘Not today, thank you.’ And that’s why nobody ever rode one into a fight. They know better.”

She knew full well how it would sound. Pausing before she went on, Jemma looked up at him, apology on her face.

“We’ve got to be smart about this, Fitz....”

His fidgeting slowed, feeling truly lost on her direction for the first time in a while. Then his eyes began to grow wide, looking down at her in disbelief as he realized where she was preparing to go. She spelled her decision into his arm.

*Copenhagen it is*
They both looked over at the sound of the door opening. There poking his head in was Ward himself.

“Break time,” he announced.

Thank God. Simmons had to visit the loo so badly, she’d been about three minutes away from taking it up with whomever was on monitor duty. This would save a bit of dignity at least.

Fitz watched her get up from his side and totter right to the door. The way she walked, her arse was probably as numb as his from sitting on the floor. Even after the discussion they’d had, they hadn’t had the heart to move apart. After all... maybe they’d want to keep talking about it. That would be good.

“C’mon,” Ward ordered when he didn’t move fast enough. Fitz got up with a huff and followed Simmons out, glaring at Ward as he went.

They were joined by another lackey and were soon standing outside the one head on the Bus, waiting for Simmons to finish her turn.

Moments after the door clicked shut, the sound of retching and gagging rose out over the noise of the engines.

“She alright?” Ward asked in a rather genuinely concerned tone, pointing to the door.

Fitz glared at him.

“She’s not taking it well,” he snapped.

Ward blinked once. “Sounds like she’s adapting okay.”

“The fuck do you know about it?” Fitz bit back.

They eyed each other in silence for several long moments. The gagging inside had settled down—only temporarily, it turned out, as they heard her coughing again.

“She’ll need some water at this point,” Fitz stated testily. Ward nodded to the other guard, who stepped off quickly to the kitchen.

When he returned, Ward nodded to the man to hand the cup to Fitz and knocked on the door.

“Simmons? You’ve got water.”

A teary, muffled “Oh!” issued from inside. When she opened the door, Fitz held the water out for her to take. She met his eyes briefly. Hers were red and puffy from the pressure of dry-heaving.

“Thanks,” she said quietly, took the water, and withdrew back into the loo. Fitz returned to glowering up at Ward.

She emerged a couple minutes later looking mostly better.

“You alright?” Fitz asked, taking her elbow.

“Yeah,” she answered faintly, rubbing her stomach back down and fidgeting at her eyes and trying her everything-is-ok smile.

“C’mon,” Ward said impatiently. Fitz shot him a parting dirty look before heading through the door.

Simmons stared at the floor.
“You alright?” Ward asked, the tone of concern again. Her eyes flicked up briefly to his and back down to her shoes, arms folded tightly across her chest.

She never did give him an answer.

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Minutes later, they were back in the cell, huddled against each other because habits die hard-- and maybe they’d want to keeping talking about this.

“How’re our assets settling in, Ward?” Garrett beamed.

“Not trying to break out anymore. I’d say they’re coming along.”

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“Feels like we’re getting ready to land,” Fitz whispered.

“Think we should strap in then?”

“Yeah. Ward’s landings could use work,” he harrumphed, as they slowly unfolded themselves from the floor. “Unless he’s been faking that too,” he continued, a little louder.

“Fitz....” Simmons started to soothe or shush him, and stopped herself. Right. She was hardly in a position to tell him anything about Ward at this point.

Flipping down one of the hex room’s two jump seats, she sat and silently buckled in next to Fitz. She hazarded a glance over. He was already looking her over with a mournful expression.

They’d yet to reach a consensus on Ward. Fitz was onboard with considering him an enemy for all practical purposes so long as he was actively kidnapping them. It was beyond that that FitzSimmons disagreed-- in the more metaphysical areas of agency and character and other abstract things that were useless for picking locks anyway.

In any case, the subject of former teammates who wound up working for Hydra had just become a much more difficult one to navigate.

Jemma tried to lay a hand on his arm, only to have him pull it away. He looked at her and gave a slow, sad shake of his head, as if in explanation or apology.

“Listen,” she said. “Do you know what’s going to happen when we arrive wherever we’e going?”

“No,” he said glumly, wondering what she and Ward had talked about while he was in the loo.

“No either.”

“Me neither.”

“Oh.”

“There’s no telling what’s coming up for us, Fitz, but we might not see each other... for a while,” she said thickly. “Please.”

He relented, and watched her turn as much as she could in the harness to wrap both her arms around his one; bury her face in his shoulder and press in soundless messages with her hands and lips. His hand hovered uncertainly as she settled in.
“Come on, hey,” he fussed quietly. “You know those aren’t designed to be sat in sideways....”

She didn’t budge. Letting out a sigh, he settled his hand down to rest on her knee. They waited out the descent in silence.
Battue

Two footsoldiers they didn’t recognize came to escort them out.

“Time to get ready,” the lead one said, sounding bored. The second clipped handcuffs over their wrists as the first read off a short list of rules. Then the second guard produced a pair of thick black cloth bags. He made to push them over their heads, starting with Jemma.

“Don’t touch me,” she said frostily, and snatched the bag out of his hands. Drawing herself up as tall as possible, she pulled it open and placed it over her head herself. She tried to look defiant while she was at it but the handcuffs made her motions more clumsy than firm.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, m’lady,” the guard laughed, and slapped her on the ass.

She hadn’t seen it coming thanks to the hood. It was hard enough to make her lurch forward, and she flung an arm out to Fitz for balance and to assure herself that he was still there. Between the stumble, limited motion from the handcuffs, and not being able to see, however, she lost her sense of orientation and missed him completely. A gasp flew off her lips.

Fitz dashed a step forward to catch her, only to have a gun muzzle pressed to his cheek. Somehow a flash of annoyance managed to poke out of the cloud of rage at Jemma being treated like that--

_What is this? They didn’t bring us all the way out here just to shoot us before we even make anything._

Fuming, he stilled himself and straightened up again.

_No outbursts, they’d agreed. No fighting back unless it’s part of an actual plan to break out. No matter what happens._

“That’s right, you get it,” the man grinned. “Now it’s your turn.”

Fitz scowled down at the bag, then back up at the guard. He didn’t move.

“Have it your way,” the guard shrugged. He roughly shoved the hood down over Fitz’s head, scrabbled against his neck for the drawstring, and pulled it much more snug than was necessary.

Fitz went stock-still. The bag reeked. Of blood, among other things. He tried to ignore the wild train of speculation trying to launch in his mind of how exactly a piece that went over your head would manage to acquire so many smells, some of which definitely didn’t come from the head region of the human anatomy. For all he knew they could have smeared things on there on purpose to throw them off. He needed to stay alert to what was happening around them, which was...

The sound of high heels slowly clipping into the room.

“Bills, is it?” came a woman’s voice from the same vicinity as the shoes. Even in just three syllables, it was soft with an odd, detached lilt.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Your technique needs work. If you’d like to get that personal with someone that quickly, you could do well to pay a little more attention to your looks.”

The footsteps continued to an arm’s-reach distance before the scientists.

“Fortunately for you, you are in the right place; we have crews dedicated to reconfiguring body parts to a higher standard than they were born to. Soon to include Dr. Simmons here. Judging by how you two are getting along so far, she may be willing to assist you.”

Beneath the hoods, Fitz and Simmons broke into simultaneous perplexed expressions. Had this woman really just called their guard an ugly bastard, offered to have Jemma personally rearrange his face, or possibly both...?
At the very least, there seemed to be a difference of opinion between the Science and Ops divisions on how things ought to be done. That was familiar enough to nearly make them feel at home.

On the other hand, the whole affair could have been arranged to set them towards liking this woman. They’d seen Skye’s bootleg recording of her own black-bag experience with Coulson and Ward plenty of times-- because they used to think that sort of thing was funny. Jemma had snorted right away when Coulson brought out the ‘truth serum.’ There was no such thing, or she’d have been the one making it.

Here we go, Fitz breathed. Hydra couldn’t have survived all this time by being just steel and flash- - it had nearly lived on mind games alone for seventy years. And here they were in its throat.
Two days later, Fitz locked the door to his tiny almost-dorm-room and collapsed into bed. The robotics team was not his problem. *The robotics team was not his problem.* “Is Simmons alright?” was his primary problem. (Locked in a close tie for second place were “Where the hell is she?” and “What are they making her do?”)

After their first introduction-- the bit with the black bags and abusing Jemma and a back-room search so thorough it had him biting his lip and thinking of Scotland and being told the thing they were injecting into his shoulder was an RFID tracking chip-- working for Hydra had turned out to be disconcertingly... nice.

He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting. It certainly hadn’t been a labful of puppy-faced kids in white coats who looked as if they’d been caught in the middle of a LAN tournament. There was a long silence after his escort signed the necessary papers and left. Momentarily, someone in the back shouted his name and pointed to the next monitor over. “Computer for the new guy! You do play Minecraft, right?”

Bewildered at the sudden turn in events, Fitz had walked to the work station and sat down, feeling fuzzy and disconnected and suddenly unsure if he was really awake.

“Don’t worry,” his new friend whispered. His labcoat said Alvaro. “We have the best output of any lab at Cybertek-- you just gotta-- you know, shake it up sometimes and stay fresh, right?”

Fitz searched the fellow’s eager, open face for some kind of sign of whether he was being serious or if this was supposed to be some kind of covert signal, and came up empty. Then he realized his own befuddled expression was hardly making a professional impression

“Right. Yeah, definitely,” he agreed quickly.

“Hey! Sco’land?” Alvaro bubbled, doing a vague approximation of the accent for... no discernible reason.

“Huh? Um... Scotland. Yeah. Ok. Logging in now.” Fitz turned to the computer, silently thanking it for not being a human.

Fitz soon found that the lab looked and acted just like any other Silicon Valley R&D tank. A couch sitting in the corner always seemed to have someone sleeping on it, some accountants down the hall brought their dogs to work every day, and nobody else in the lab but the supervisor looked-- or behaved-- a day over twenty. After a couple of days of listening to his new labmates gabble on about sweet exploits and friends interning at other companies and their plans after graduation, Fitz was about 90% sure that nobody else here had any idea they were working for Hydra.

On the upside, it made for a much less harrowing experience than he’d been expecting. On the downside, he was starting to wonder if he was crazy.

Slumped over the bed, he crossed a hand up to his shoulder and rubbed idly over the spot where the tracker was hidden. Nope-- not crazy. The lump was still there, itching now rather than stinging like before. He definitely hadn’t imagined it going in. The tracker was something of a blessing in that way. At least there were no worries about having an existential crisis over forgetting how he’d gotten there.

He had to find Simmons. Hopefully she hadn’t been taken to some other facility. This place at least seemed to treat people well, for all its bizarre disconnect with the fact that they were *weaponizing human beings.* You’d think that coming over to Hydra voluntarily would have to buy her some traction, but there was no way to be sure. If they were still treating her like when they first arrived, God so help him--

Feeling his hackles go up again at the memory, Fitz turned onto his belly and tried to focus.
Fussing about it was a far cry from doing something about it. That would take planning. He felt a need to get another plan in place in case the first one didn’t take.

Raj or Brent or somebody had mentioned with annoyance that the surgical department always kicked their designs back with “some kind of flak about designing to avoid biofilms.” Hearing that, Fitz sensed an opportunity to get what he needed. Just a few days ago Jemma had been effusing over some new microtextured surfacings for that very purpose. Fitz mentioned them to the lab boss and managed to sell himself as a good liaison to go over and work that out with Surgical.

He’d been ready to get the room number and run the blueprints down-- and maybe pretend to be more lost than he was so he could poke his head inside every lab in the wing-- before Gary stopped him. There was apparently some kind of intellectual property firewall between bio and robotics. They had to wait until tomorrow when an IP lawyer from each department could be present before designs could be handed over or discussed.

Fitz had to suppress a shout at that point. The craftsman side of him was simply offended that Cybertek chose such a daft way to operate. It was a wonder they ever accomplished anything-- never mind innovating at the rapid clip he and Simmons had seen just in the few months they’d served on the Bus.

He also had much more personal concerns. Firewalls meant that even if Simmons was there, they’d never be assigned to work together. So much for trying that. He’d have to think of something else. The first step was seeing if he could find her at all tomorrow. That may not happen-- which was why he’d better start thinking of another way to track her down.

Think, Fitz, think, he told himself, and tried not to get lost in wondering how she was doing.

A soft knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts. Not that he’d been doing much besides going in circles anyhow. Irritated and not a little suspicious, he crept as quietly as he could to take a look through the peephole.

Bloody hell.

Fitz scrambled to undo the latches, opened the door, and quickly glanced left and right to see if anybody else was present. Not at all. The hallway was completely empty but for her, red-eyed and barefoot, reeking of alcohol and still holding a rather large bottle of it in hand.

“Ma’am?” Simmons nearly whispered, catching her new department head before she went out the door. This late in the afternoon, it might be the last time she was in their lab today.

“It’s Raina,” she corrected, turning around. “What can I help you with?”

“Oh! Ah...” Simmons startled a bit, not expecting to encounter such a benign attitude from the lady in the flower dress. “It’s-- it’s about the, uh, the engineer who came in with me.”

“That’s not my division, but I can try and get any questions answered for you.”

“Do you know if-- is he still working here, or somewhere else?”

The woman slid up an eyebrow and started tabbing through her pad. After a moment, her head came up to give Simmons a round look. “Oh yes, he’s in the building. Cybernetics on floor eight.” She paused. “They put him in the top lab. He must have come in with very strong recommendations.”

Jemma smiled uncertainly. Feeling the urge to fidget, she also very consciously stopped herself from rubbing the itchy spot on her shoulder. There was no good in encouraging an infection just on account of nerves.
“Before you ask,” Raina continued on, “I’m afraid you can’t be assigned to work together. There are... some restrictions on flow of information between some of the areas, which necessarily affects personnel assignments.” She tilted her head, regarding Simmons for a moment. Jemma looked back, reaching nervously for her best pleasant-but-blank look.

“You’re free to see each other outside of work hours, of course. You’re a volunteer, so your badge will let you into any of the residential areas. Let’s take a look...” Raina shifted back to working her pad, satin whispering as her sleeve brushed her side. “Room 231.”

“Oh! Um...” Simmons hadn’t been expecting it to be anywhere near that easy. She’d prepared a whole little speech about how bloody stubborn Fitz was and promises to try and talk him around and ten different flavors of nervous apologies in case it didn’t work.

“Thank you!” she finally settled, after an awkward moment of gaping at Raina.

“Was there anything else you wanted to ask me?” the woman asked softly.

“Ah... no! No. That ought to do it. Now, um, go on, I’m sure you’ve plenty of other things to attend to.”

“I do,” Raina agreed. “But keeping our people in good working order is one of them. You’ll be sure to let me know if anything else comes up?”

“Of course!” Jemma exclaimed, and very quietly and desperately wished Raina would leave already.

Raina gave one brief nod with a little smile, and carried on her way.

_Oh my God_, Simmons thought, awe beginning to dawn on her. I just talked my way into that. Maybe she was actually getting over being rubbish at this whole field agent thing after all....

Wait. No. No, no, no. That was far too easy. Maybe they want us to see each other? That part Simmons was certainly on board with. Why was a much stickier question. She’d been counting on telling them that she could talk him around to seeing things Hydra’s way-- not that it was certain, but she could try. Did they simply have the same idea? Or was something else afoot?

She sighed. Either way, they couldn’t know about the transmitter. She was still one step ahead on that.

Seeing that the lab was empty, Jemma tugged an extra pair of gloves out of the dispenser. Pushing them into a pocket of her trousers, she trundled back to her bench and finished up the day’s work.

Soon after the workday ended, Simmons was back in her room, tucking Trip’s quarter transmitter into her once-again-empty trouser pocket. The little device was now Fitz’s problem. All she had left to do was get it to him.

Room 231. No problem. Raina said her badge would work. It should. It would. Right? Maybe not. Maybe... what if it were a ploy to see if she’d try it? God, if that were true she could get into so much trouble. Easily a downgrade in whatever was the equivalent of a security clearance here-- or more difficulty moving up, since she was probably at the bottom of the stack already. Or worse. Even if the only punishment was professional, she could wind up unable to work on any of the high-level projects, which would entirely defeat the purpose of signing on voluntarily. And-- Fitz. Fitz could be affected as well.

Jemma paced around her room, flexing her fists and trying to think through everything that could go wrong. Too may things. Too many directions; but if she didn’t think through them all now, she knew she’d crash and burn were she to be stopped in the hallway.
Then her eyes fell on the rather large bottle of Grey Goose sitting on the minibar. It was already cracked open, having been pressed into service to sterilize the transmitter after its little jaunt through her GI tract.

Her eyes widened. *There's the ticket.*

She didn’t need to be smooth. She just needed a good excuse *not* to be.

Mind racing ahead, she started plotting the next move. This would be far from the worst thing she’d done to her body the last few days. Swallowing the faux quarter in the Bus bathroom with Ward and another guard standing right outside had seemed extreme enough. Waking up the next morning in a strange hotel room, nauseated and sweating and finding her mouth overrunning with metallic-tasting saliva proved that wrong. Classic signs of nickel poisoning. Unfortunately, there was no way to get medical help without Hydra finding out about her cargo.

Knowing the coin would have already moved out of her stomach and its surface was no longer dissolving into her stomach acid, she’d dragged herself to the shower and just… waited. Spat and spat and spat into the water swirling down the drain, panting and wavering between trying to vomit and trying not to vomit until the feeling went away.

This new bit was easy. All she needed was a flushed and swollen post-crying drunk-girl face. Mindful of any possible cameras or mics in the room, Jemma slid into the closet and slid the door shut to close out the light. Not the strangest vodka-related thing she’d done in there already, by a long shot. Not being able to see what she was doing did complicate the whole recovering-the-transmitter thing a bit. But at least the best Hydra would be able to make of any footage they might have of her in her room was that she had a fondness for drinking vodka out of the bottle by herself inside darkened closets. Strange. Yet unlikely to be the strangest thing ever captured on hotel room surveillance.

Taking a deep breath, she poured out a generous handful and splashed 80-proof vodka into her eyes. It burned horribly. *Perfect.*

Now for her breath. Tears streaming, she tipped the bottle back, took a very small mouthful, and swished it around for several moments before swallowing. All she needed was the smell of inebriation. Actually roaming the halls drunk was not a difficulty level she felt up to playing at the moment.

Once outside in the hallway, she ran into a guard almost immediately. Quickly kicking in to oh-no-I’ve-been-caught panic mode, she produced her badge before he even asked for it.

“Okay, Okay,” he said, first reviewing the badge, then her. She didn’t particularly like the way he was looking at her. “Are you alright?” he said, sounding like he was trying to be gallant but rather failing.

“‘M fine,” Simmons affirmed. Clunkily brushing a piece of hair back from her face, she tried to think of a way to extricate herself from the conversation.

“So… are you new here?”

“I… oh. Oh God. ‘Msorry--!” she blurted, putting a hand to her face as if about to be sick, and bolted down the hall.

*Captain’s log,* a sarcastic node in her brain chimed in as she ran off. *Good progress so far; the natives suspect nothing.*
A couple wrong turns later, Simmons had managed to find 231. She stopped in front of the door and stared at the number for a moment.

*Please don’t let this be some kind of trap...* Showing up looking like a drunken basket case gave a certain plausible deniability to the whole thing. It was not, however, terribly dignified. Especially considering it was only about six o’clock in the evening.

There was a long silence after her first knock. She was nearly ready to try again when the sound of locks being fumbled at started up inside.

All at once the door popped inward and revealed a very concerned-looking Fitz, who checked the hallways for other visitors and quickly hustled her inside by the arm. She squawked a bit at the unexpected tug. Once inside, she waited a few beats to let him get the door locked back up, then fairly jumped at him with open arms for a hug.

“I wasn’t sure you’d really be here,” she explained into his shoulder.

“No, I’m definitely here,” he laughed quietly, cautiously putting his arms around her. She wasn’t just tear-stained and vodka-soaked with makeup running down her face far worse than he’d ever seen it. She was breathing hard like she’d just run from something. The whole thing was very, very off.

“Are you alright?” he pressed. “What’s wrong?”

Simmons chuckled, still amazed that she’d managed to get herself and the transmitter here without incident. This could be the start of a whole new day for Jemma Can’t-Sneak-Around-To-Save-Her-Life Simmons. Wary of saying anything out loud until she’d gotten word from him that he’d checked the room for bugs— a bit of a specialty of his— she drew away from his shoulder a little to say it in his ear.

“I brought you something!” she whispered. Then she did her level best to tuck the quarter, in a discreet fashion, into his front pocket.

“Hey! Whoa, whoa, whoa...” he spluttered, jumping back. Simmons did have a tendency to go in the lovey direction sometimes while under the influence, but reaching right for his jeans was a new one.

“Jemma? Okay. God knows what you’ve been up to, but you are very, very drunk right now.”

“What-- no! I am not!” Simmons looked positively offended.

“Yes,” he said, gently but firmly, and almost to himself as much as her. “You are. Now come here and sit down.” He set his hands on her shoulders, keeping her at arms’ length, and started guiding her to the bed. It was the only thing in the room besides a rather rickety-looking little table.

“I’m really not--” she started to protest, then blushed furiously when she suddenly realized what he must think she’d been trying to do. Admittedly, she could have thought that through a little better....

Suddenly out of words, she just went along with it and let him nudge her down to sit.

“Okay,” she mumbled.

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paint thinner-- not overly tempting in any case.

“Grey Goose, then? Remind me to hail Hydra the next time,” he attempted. She was eyeing him, looking uncomfortably sharp under the congealing mess of makeup and tears slopping out of her eyes. “No. Sorry, that was rude,” he retracted, getting flustered.

You’d think volunteering to switch sides would buy some consideration, and the quality of alcohol was proof that maybe it had-- a bit. But honestly there was no telling what she’d been through the last couple of days. If her current state was any indication it hadn’t been good. This kind of behavior wasn’t like her at all.

Fitz suddenly realized he was pacing. He stopped and rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

“Um... you stay here, Jemma. I’ll get you some water.” Yeah. Water. That was good. Get her dried out first, then ask questions. Good plan.

She watched him hurry off to the little washroom in the back.

They’d been off-balance with each other for a while. At first it had been because they were barely talking at all-- just running from one disaster to the next, either putting out fires or trying to catch up on sleep before the next one, too tired to dig into anything meaningful. Then once they had a chance to catch up, a different kind of tricky appeared as Fitz began awkwardly attempting to court her.

It wasn’t that she minded, precisely. It was more that she simply had no idea how to respond. The Jemma’s-eye view of Fitz’s past relationships could be boiled down to one recollection-- an image of him letting himself be pulled away by the hand from some campfire with friends at three-quarters dusk, smiling shyly, eyes bright and laughing and disappearing eagerly into the dark. She knew what it looked like when he got interested in someone. She’d seen how much his work suffered in the throes of a serious infatuation. But what went on with him when he was actually alone with a girl was a complete mystery.

The other biggest surprise was discovering how much their friendship was based on not dating each other. Once a bit of confusion at the Academy had been sorted out, they knew exactly what to expect from each other. A sounding board; help setting up convoluted experiments; someone to call for 3 am Eurekas!; food; a second pair of eyes for debugging problem bits of code and hardware; tea; introductions to cute friends; someone who’d crack your back out after hunching over a benchtop all day; more food, probably; and no pressure. No questions, even.

Chummy professionalism was the entire point of FitzSimmons. Adding flirtation into the mix wasn’t like spreading frosting onto a cake. It was more like throwing the whole damned pudding into a cement mixer.

That said, watching Fitz bustle around trying to take care of her drunk self was rather adorable. It was kind of selling it for her, to be honest. And since the best way to have an unmonitored conversation at this point was more tapping Morse code onto each other, and it looked like he may not let her get close enough to do that for a while, Simmons elected to settle in a bit and just let it happen.

He emerged shortly and presented her with a paper cup.

“Thanks,” she said, giving a little smile. “I like it when you bring me water.” If it hadn’t been for him arranging to have a cupful passed to her back in the loo on the Bus, she’d never have gotten the quarter down in the first place. Why did they have to put ridges around the edge? It made sense back when the coins were actually made of precious metals to catch grifters at shaving the edges down, but now that they were stamped out of copper it hardly served any purpose other than keeping with tradition.... oh, and making it so people who couldn't see well still could still use currency. There was that. Well. In any case, whoever'd planned the coinage system certainly hadn't planned on the need for swallowing the pieces.

Fitz smiled back, crossing his arms and leaning back on the wall. “Well, I like it when you drink it,” he encouraged. “Go on.”
Jemma did so, watching him over the rim of the cup. She’d been making a special point of staying hydrated to help her kidneys finish moving the nickel and whatever else was in that quarter out of her system anyway.

Feeling mischievous, she looked down and wiggled her toes. “Oh, Fitz! You already took off my shoes!”

“Right,” he agreed skeptically, then leaned forward to check on the water level in the cup. “All done?”

Jemma nodded and held it out for him to refill.

“While you’re in there,” she called out to his back, “Could you bring back a wet washcloth if you have one? I could stand to clean up....” She had the distinct impression she was supposed to stay sitting down rather than go after things herself.

“Oh, one moment.”

When he returned with supplies, Simmons first took the cup and downed it, then took the washcloth and went to work on her face. A few minutes later she was the proud owner of one bare, scrubbed-pink face and one streaky washcloth.

“Better?” she laughed.

Fitz shrugged. He was finding it a little easier to focus now that she wasn’t looking like a grief-stricken raccoon anymore, but didn’t want to say so.

“How are you feeling?” he asked instead.

“Um… fine?” she guessed. Then she gestured silently to ask if he had anything to write with. Curious, his brows drew together, then he produced a pad of graph paper and a pen. Both appeared to be of lab origin.

Jemma frowned and tapped the pen on the paper. Where to start, exactly…?

I’M NOT DRUNK!

she wrote first.

It’s a bit of a costume in case I got stopped in the halls she continued. Then,

I was just trying to put the quarter in your pocket, sorry, I wasn’t thinking came next.

Your virtue is safe with me

She stopped. That could easily come across in a different light than how she’d meant it… Trying not to get caught, she snuck a look up at Fitz, frowned a little, and crossed the last bit out.

Oh, hell. That wasn’t right either. Sighing, she gave up and scribbled in several questions marks and a whatever and carried on. They honestly did not have time for this kind of nonsense.

In any case-- have you had a chance to look around for listening devices?

Fitz watched her write with growing curiosity. It was turning out to be quite the novel, garnished with a guilty look given him partway through.

When she finally handed it over, Fitz read it with his back turned so she wouldn’t see his face. Like a berk. Or like a shy person. Whatever. He could be both.

Once finished, he turned just enough to shoot her a quizzical look before crossing over to switch the fan in the little air conditioning unit to high.

“Room’s clean enough,” he answered quietly. Developing the DWARFs at the Academy had been an unexpected education in spycraft. At first they’d thought Sneezy-- the one that picked out
non-visible EM spectra—was malfunctioning, because it was picking up emissions all over the place where they shouldn’t be. A little sleuthing turned up that the spots in the walls and floors weren’t because of problems with the DWARF. They were microphones and cameras—everywhere. In the dorms, in the cafeteria, in the loos (much to their relief they never found one actually aimed at the toilets themselves), in the fleet vehicles, in the hallways, in the bushes between buildings, in the Boiler Room which was supposedly immune to that kind of thing—everywhere. The co-op running the Boiler Room had wound up offering him $5,000 to either sweep the place clean or promise not to tell anyone. Always practical, he elected to sweep. One could only imagine how many CIA, MI6, NSF, and other miscellaneous national agents on SHIELD monitoring duty they’d managed to disappoint that week.

One interesting bit of trivia gained from that experience was that the most ornate rooms were usually the lousiest with listening devices. There were more places to hide things, and it was less obvious when an extra bit of furnishing or knickknacks were added or went missing. A spare place like this room only had so many spots for a bug to go. The only place left for one would be inside the walls.

“As long as we’ve got the fan on, stay in the middle of the room, and stay quiet, we ought to be alright,” he murmured, arms crossed, returning the few steps to stand in front of her.

Simmons tapped next to her in a very businesslike fashion, indicating for him to sit down. Once he did—arms still crossed—he reached into her pocket, then tapped his knee with closed fingers.

Fitz hesitated. He couldn’t exactly forget where it’d been.

Jemma had a good guess as to his concern.

“It’s clean,” she scoffed very quietly. “That’s where all the vodka went, for one thing. Well. All but about 25 ml’s worth, and most of that went in here, so…” she continued, gesturing to her eyes.

Fitz winced at the mention of liquor in the eyeballs. He turned to look at her, gestured to her face. “I guess that explains the tears, then?”

“These ones, anyway,” Simmons shrugged, staring at the wall before them. She sighed. “You know you’ve arrived to a very special situation in life when you’re actually hoping for a full body-cavity search because otherwise all your hard work is wasted.”

“Jesus, don’t remind me.”

“Oh come on, Fitz, don’t complain to me—you haven’t got nearly as many pockets to go rifling through,” she deadpanned.

Then she risked a sideways look. Seeing him go a dull red, staring at the floor and scratching his nose uncomfortably, Jemma spluttered from somewhere deep in her throat before she could stop herself. Then she clamped a hand over mouth. Looking at him again with an almost-apology in her eyes, she breached containment a second time.

“You know…” He shrugged helplessly, shaking his head at the wall. “That’s a very good point…you win this round, Simmons.”

The last good bout of the very popular Make Fitz Blush game involved Skye and Simmons plotting how best to enlist May’s help in making compromising Jell-O molds of one Special Agent Grant Ward. That had been right before the train mission in Italy. Nobody’d had much heart for joking around since. Chagrined as he was, it was good to see her laugh at something.

Now lost to peals of laughter, she tried to hold herself up with elbows on her knees. That nearly ended with her sliding right off the chintzy bedspread. She wound up having to scramble to stay on.

“Whoops!” she squawked—right as Fitz thought she’ll be getting stuck in a feedback loop in 3…2…
--and snorted, and rolled back onto the bed to fall balled-up on her side in a fit of giggles, and Fitz couldn’t not laugh anymore when the very professional Jemma Simmons was cackling so hard she had to snort just to get a breath in.

Later, catching their breath and wiping their eyes, they both felt much of the anxiety of the past two days lift away. Granted they still had no idea how they’d get out of this. There was still no way to know how safe they really were. But so long as they could still see and laugh at each other, things couldn’t be too grim.

Which could be the entire point, come to think of it. It would be in keeping with Hydra’s apparent dedication to employee complacency so far. At least in his department. Keep the workers trapped, but keep them happy. Then they’d only be willing to go so far to leave or be disruptive.

“Your little face!” Simmons laughed, pulling him out of his reverie. He parroted her inelegant snort back at her one more time, provoking another little bout of titters.

Once she had stilled, Fitz looked down at her, his hand hovering over the crown of her head where it smushed into his leg. Ultimately he decided against it and scratched at his knee instead.

“I’m serious, though,” he said quietly. “Are they treating you alright? They’re not....” He trailed off, uncertain.

“No, no!” she said quickly. Jemma turned onto her back, the better to face him. “If anything everyone’s oddly nice at the lab. ‘I wonder how different the Academy would have been if everyone had been that nice’ nice. Her expression wrinkled at the recollection of their rather traumatic entry. “You?”

“Yeah, same,” he agreed.

She gave a short laugh, head bumping him where it now barely-touched his knee after she’d moved. “You think maybe that was just a standard SciTech versus Ops situation, then?”

“It makes you wonder, doesn’t it?” he mused. “I don’t suppose you could hide in SHIELD for seventy years without picking up some habits.” Simmons flashed a grin at that. It somehow managed to do things to him even when viewed upside-down like this.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Fitz grumbled in mock disapproval, before spluttering into laughter as well.

Their chances of getting out-- and bringing back quality intelligence about what Hydra was up to-- were best if one of them played along and mostly did as Hydra asked, and the other were more openly displeased about working there. If there were other disgruntled scientists working there under duress, the more belligerent of them would have a much easier time making contact and cooking up intrigues. Meanwhile, an obedient scientist would be better positioned to gather
information on what Hydra was up to.

Here’s where it got complicated. It went without saying that Fitz’s personality didn’t lend itself well to compliance. At the same time, he hadn’t exactly felt comfortable asking Simmons to do it. Her skills in the improvisational arena were... legendary, and not in a good way. Not that the ‘bad cop’ role was much better. That one actually stood a much better chance of disciplinary action and he definitely didn’t want to ask her to do that.

So it came as quite a relief when she had a strong preference for the nice-scientist role. Her argument was sound: it wasn’t just an issue of personality. Engineering was relatively straightforward. You’re asked to build something, you build something, and they found out relatively quickly whether it worked or not. There wasn’t a lot of room to hide. An engineer trying to sabotage would be found out fairly quickly. If one of them had to be overt about it, better it be the engineer.

Biology-- especially the razor’s-edge, highly experimental variety that Hydra preferred-- was a different matter. Discovery work was all interpretation and hunches and “Let’s try that again.” You didn’t have to be particularly good at misdirection to lead someone on a wild goose chase with that.

And, as she reminded him, it wasn’t that she was terrible at lying per se; she just got flustered easily when out of her element. To prove her point she spun him a tall tale on the spot about how GH-325 worked that sounded quite plausible-- exactly like the theory she’d been working on all along, in fact-- but which she assured him would lead nowhere.

The fact that she was personally quite charming probably wouldn’t hurt either.

“Well, you know what they say,” Jemma laughed softly, then quietly hummed out the snatchlet of a song that went “Nice is different than good.”

“Is that... Little Red Riding Hood?”

“Mm-hm.”

Fitz shook his head. If he was recalling it correctly, the version of the story in that song ended with Little Red wearing the wolf’s skin as a coat.
Smother the Scent

Still wary of cameras-- any devices remaining in the walls wouldn’t be able to hear them, but they could still see, including lip-reading-- he tried to figure out where to touch her for a message from this angle that wouldn’t come off looking odd or suspicious.

Jemma felt her heart tick up as he looked her over, eyes soft, as he’d been doing lately. There’d been a couple weeks where he’d been behaving like a three-year-old and doing the googly eyes and she’d been damn near ready to throw something at him. Words were eventually exchanged. Lots of them. On multiple occasions.

The upshot was he’d been all ears, which explained a large percentage of why he was still alive today. Simmons had decided she could work with that. She had, in fact, only just taken him off of flirting probation before Hydra had so rudely intervened.

It wasn’t long before he noticed he’d been caught. Flushing again, he glanced away immediately by reflex, then turned back after a moment. She was looking up at him with a knowing little smile and her arms officiously folded over her chest. One of her eyebrows lifted into a long-familiar Yes, hmm?

Fitz gave a defeated, if good-natured sigh. Putting up with him the last few weeks had entitled her to be a bit of a brat if she wanted.

*Be careful* he finally wrote into her shoulder. *It's ok to go slow*

Her face scrunched. *What?*

*In the lab. Take your time. Get situated before you try anything...* He paused, searching for the right word. *Outrageous.* She had a tendency to leap right into the harness. It was a fantastic trait in a coworker. Less so in a double agent whose main priority ought to be staying alive.

Simmons almost nodded before stopping herself. Tentatively, she reached up to her shoulder and tucked her fingers under his wrist, palm-up.

*Of course* came her reply. It was soft and tickly against his pulse. Meanwhile, her gaze dropped to the side, away from him.

Fitz frowned and leaned back, scooting his hands behind him to prop himself up. Shit. That’d been too much. The demands of clandestine communication aside, they’d still just barely started really talking to each other again. He’d been a little insulated from the situation by the fact that he was sitting up, but lying in bed sharing tender words with him was unlikely to be on her to-do list at this point.

“How’s your lab?” she asked, once settled.

“Oh? Same, really,” he shrugged. “Bunch of twerpy little interns and recent grads who just know they’re the best thing that ever happened to science. But they’re happy about it. So, overall, nice place.”

Simmons snickered at his description of his coworkers. “Fitz! Does that make you the old man in the lab, then?”


“‘Halrigh’, I’m Leopold Fitz!” she scowled. “‘An’ all you li-le schoolboys ha’ be’er lis’en up t'
“Ugh. Simmons... no....”

“‘Now one a’ you go an’ ge’ me a Google!’”

“What? That doesn’ even make any sense.”

“Of course not! Fitz, that’s the joke.”

“Oh. Ok. A-ha? Ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Simmons reached way over, grabbed a pillow, and halfheartedly chucked it at him. He picked it up and shifted to sit hugging it, elbows leaning on his drawn-up knees.

“Thanks, I was sort of starting to want one of these.” As if to prove the point, he idly nuzzled the topmost corner where it was sticking up into his face. It emitted a scratchy sound from late-in-the-day stubble rasping against the cloth.

“Hm. You’re welcome,” she said loftily. “And what does this lab do?”

Fitz took a break from sanding the pillow down with his face to break out a devilish grin. “I’m afraid I can’t say,” he replied.

“What? Come on, Fitz, we both work for the same evil—“ She stopped short, remembering they weren’t 100% alone. “—uationarily progressive company.”

“Honestly though,” Fitz went on smoothly, trying not to make her last-minute save any more obvious than it already was. “There’s some kind of IP firewall between my area and yours and we’re not to discuss it with people outside the lab. Other than we make cyborg parts, that’s common knowledge. Probably the sum total of all the detail they want getting about, too.”

“Hmm. Some sort of cell setup, then?” Simmons proposed. Standard secrecy procedure; that would avoid incriminating the entirety of their science operations if one part were to be compromised.

“Sure,” Fitz whispered. “Except... you know, they were talking about bringing some blueprints down to the bio section for approval and we had to wait for a lawyer before we could hand it over. Not a higher-ranked officer.”

“Mm. So just an actual IP boundaries issue then?”

“That would be in keeping with the general—“ Fitz adopted a fussy, high-pitched voice and bobbed his head back and forth—“Oh, we’re just a normal company doing normal company things’ attitude,” Fitz agreed. “Probably less work and liability than trying to keep everything covert.”

Simmons let out a humph. “Path of least resistance. Why not?”

“Yeah,” Fitz said absently, scratching at his shoulder.

Simmons didn’t miss a thing. “Is the tracker bothering you?”

“No, it’s mostly just itchy at this point,” he shrugged.

“That can be a bad sign too,” she pointed out, frowning. “Can I take a look?”

“I checked on it this morning, it’s fine!”

“It’s not fine, mine doesn’t itch at all.”

“What!?”

“Mine isn’t having any problems, so—”

“No, that’s-- they gave you one!?” he hissed, looking as if he’d just been slapped in the face. “I
thought it was just for-- you volunteered and they still put a tag on you?”

“Apparently, yes,” she answered tightly.

Anyway, now that she was looking--

“Is it this right here?” she asked, tapping gently at a faint, washed-out orangeish spot bleeding through the dark cotton of his buttondown.

“Hey--” he blurted at her touch, then sagged through the shoulders. “Yeah, that’s it, why?”

“Because you’re oo-o-oozing,” she told him in a singsong voice, looking back at him smugly as she climbed off the bed.

“Eugh.”

“I’m going to the loo,” she announced, walking towards the back of the room. “Get yourself ready, I’ll take a look at it when I get back.”

Simmons stayed in the loo a little longer than necessary. It’d be good to make sure Fitz had plenty of time to get himself arranged, for one thing. There was no way to push a collared shirt like his aside enough to get a look; it had to come off at least partway.

Deep in thought, she ran her hands over her face and sighed. Routine wound check: this should be very simple. It would not be. No. It would be a train wreck. Fitz had already been self-conscious back when they only ever saw other scientists-- never mind after six months of living with a certain routinely-topless specialist who would not be named. And their current... nebulous situation on top of that.

There were times that she unable to explain how the two of them could actually be fully-grown human beings allowed to go places without adult supervision. This was one of them.

Realizing she would soon have been in the loo for what her mother would have termed an inelegant length of time, she sighed, finished up the necessities, and went out to wash her hands.

Humming nervously, she rinsed, grabbed the bottle off the counter where Fitz had left it, and washed it as she’d be handling it quite a bit the next few minutes. Then she scrubbed her hands down down a second time for good measure. Ducking back into the loo, she made a couple little pads of toilet paper-- a fully-stocked clinic this was not-- and braced herself to turn the corner.

Fitz was perched on the corner of the bed, having pulled a blanket over his head and sealed it around himself so tightly that only his eyes were showing. They tracked her as she crossed the room, practically dancing from being so pleased with himself.

“This is what you were looking for, right?” His voice was muffled by layers of blanket.

Simmons chuckled, then found herself actually scrambling a bit for a response. Well thank heavens, Fitz, she thought. At first I was worried you were going to be weird about it.

“Yes, that is... perfect,” she replied, a shy grin slipping out.

Fitz watched as she walked up to the edge of the bed. It looked like she wanted to stand and have him seated, so he shifted around to put his back at the edge of the bed.

“Hold this?” she said once he was situated, holding out the bottle and paper. Fitz stuck an arm out of his cocoon to take the items, then shuffled the blanket down on one side to let out the shoulder in question.

“Oh. You’re sure that doesn’t hurt?” he heard her say behind him.

“...I was before you said that?” he answered.

“Hmm. Chalk it up to low nerve density, I suppose.” The injection site was surrounded by a dull red halo. In fact, it didn’t really look so much like an injection site as it ought-- it was more of a small gash than a puncture, oozing pale orange. Infected for sure.
“Paper?” she said. Fitz handed it back, and felt cool fingers and flat, dry paper working the area. Come to tell it, it was rather sore now that it was being poked and prodded.

“Aaaand... put some disinfectant on the next one,” she said. Fitz drizzled the next bit of paper with vodka and handed it back.

“A little more?” she edited.

“Hmph. She wants more,” he mock-grumbled, tipping the bottle to paper again.

“I do! I already did all the blotting. This is for carpet-bombing the area with ethanol now. Although... never mind I said that...” Once she leaned in for a closer look, there looked to be a pocket of material under the surface. Generally speaking that sort of thing ought to come out.

“Oh! I found more pus. Another dry paper?” Fitz complied, giving a rather forlorn sigh. Regardless of how much Jemma might love pus, her smushing it out of his own pasty skin was rather the exact opposite of what he was looking for in their time together. Oh well. The only thing to do was just get through this without acting like a baby, so they could be done with it.

“Thanks. This may not feel good, so apologies in advance,” she announced. Fitz nodded.

“Yeah. Just... let’s have it done with?” he said uncomfortably.

“Alright, here we go,” Simmons continued in a singsong voice. She started with a light amount of pressure to see what would happen first. Nothing. Alright, a little more this time....

Fitz focused on just staying still and not fussing. It was all just nondescript pain until suddenly, there was a sharp stab and a skin-crawling *pop!* sensation.

“Shit!” he heard Jemma peep, suddenly frozen behind him. That was when he became truly alarmed.

“Jemma? The fuck was that?” he asked, quiet and steady as he could.

“Oh. Um, I’m just going to need more paper-- is all,” she said, voice suddenly airy. “Hold this.” She pressed her last bit of tissue into his hands, folded. It fell open as she bounded away.

Inside, sitting on a blot of blood, was his RFID chip. Fitz’s eyes went wide.

*Jailbreak.*

Simmons came dashing back with the whole roll of tissue in hand. It wasn’t bleeding much now, but it would be once she’d gotten it better disinfected. Ethanol was quite the anticoagulant.

More to the point, she’d just removed his chip by complete accident-- and far from being a joyous occasion, it could cause serious problems if that were discovered.

With him still seated on the floor, she settled behind him on the bed and tore off a piece of paper. First step, stop the trickle going down his back before it could touch the blanket. The fewer awkward questions from anyone-- including laundry staff-- the better.

Now, time to cover.

“The bad news is it was starting to abscess, since the injection site was... rough,” she mostly-truthed cheerfully. “The good news, it ought to be all clear now. Looks like you might have gotten the new guy,” she finished, attempting a joke.

“Yeah, must have been.”

Not at all. He’d tried. He’d really tried. But being slapped around and probed up and shouted at...
had a way of getting him jumpy. One thing led to another, and by the time they’d gotten to the bit with the tracker, he’d been re-handcuffed and bent over a steel table face-down with one wiry ops guy holding the tagging gun and a beefy one with an elbow slammed onto his neck to keep him down. He’d still managed to fidget quite a bit. Eventually they simply got sick of trying to line up a perfect shot and just fired the tag in.

Simmons was right about saving serious ruckus for a breakout attempt. But on the other hand, if he was too easygoing they might start to wonder what he was up to. Petty disruptions were necessary. And sometimes they led to some useful side-effects, like RFIDs put in so haphazardly that they slipped right back out again.

Interrupting his reverie, he realized that Simmons was trying to message him as she worked on him.

--nsmit biometrics or location only?

The surprise in her voice had made it clear that she hadn’t taken the tag out on purpose. She was probably looking for some reassurance that she hadn’t set them up for more trouble by removing it.

Fortunately, the chip was an ordinary radio frequency ID tag-- basically a bar code. There must be scanners at strategic locations around the building. Simmons was probably concerned that it might be the type that recorded and transmitting biometric data. That type of device would be able to alert a handler that it had been removed-- or that its owner had somehow died and cooled to room temperature in a matter of several seconds. They were also extremely expensive. The enhanced soldiers would almost certainly have them. Apparently scientists didn’t merit the expense.

Jemma suddenly realized she’d asked him a question and given him no way to answer back. She shifted around to put her left leg over the edge of the bed, knee beside his free shoulder.

Wary of spooking her again, Fitz craned his head up to check in before taking up her offer. She gave a little nod, bouncing her knee up and down almost impatiently. Alright. Good. Fitz added another entry to the vast logs of unwritten FitzSimmons operating procedures: check before messaging. So long as they were still struggling to figure out where they wanted their new boundaries to be, it was probably best not to assume anything-- even collegial, formerly-safe zones.

He picked up his arm, laid it over with the elbow resting on the mattress, and tuck his hand over her knee to reply.

No transmissions just a bar code for scanners

Location only then? she queried back.

Yes

Thank God. She paused, her relaxation tangible behind him. But keep it with you until you’re ready for real mischief ok?

Of course he replied, imitating her earlier words to him. He felt her silent laugh, softly, through the weight of her hands.

Satisfied that she’d gotten the faint trickle of bleeding under control, Simmons was ready to disinfect.

“Can I get another with ethanol, please?” she spoke behind him. “A lot-- you can be liberal with it.”

Fitz complied. He managed not to flinch when she laid it down on the wound. He’d never admit it to anyone, but he was very, very proud of that.

“Alright... now just to deal with the last bit of new bleeding, and you should be clear to go.”

“How long d’you think that’ll take?”
“Oh, a little while yet,” she shrugged. “We don’t usually put ethanol on wounds for a reason. I’m not sure whether it’s the protein denaturation or some other thing, but it slows down clotting quite a bit. That’s why I wanted to get it stopped as much as possible before making cocktails on it.”

“Thanks, i’s appreciated,” he laughed quietly, trying not to move and disturb her work.

“New recipes for the Boiler Room,” she suggested. “Number one: the Bloody Fitz.”

“Eugh, no thank you,” he grumbled.

But hear me out, she tapped against his shoulder, beginning to lapse into shorthand. Step one, break into Hydra facility. Two, have friend pretend to be Hydra to get key to good liquor cabinet. Three, burn Hydra down and run. Four, apply alcohol liberally to friends.

“It’s just that I don’t particularly like being the bloody thing in the bloody drink,” he continued, attempting to fill the silence as she outlined her recipe. He couldn’t laugh at the joke aloud, but he hoped a squeeze from the hand on her knee conveyed his appreciation.

“Mm. That makes two of us,” she agreed softly. “But here we are anyhow.”

The strangeness of their current situation sat uncomfortably in their thoughts, like a poorly-balanced wedge. They hadn’t exactly learned to live with acute danger in their time on the Bus, but they’d at least managed to developed a dodgy rhythm around it. Go out; get shot at; go home; patch up; rest; repeat. So long as they made it back home to each other, everything was alright till the next go-round.

Here, there was no safe home to go back to. No breaks.

On top of that, Simmons reflected, the constant monitoring was making communication difficult. A bit of idle chatting while they waited for Fitz to stop leaking was one thing. But if they couldn’t find it in them to start exchanging real information-- faster than fiddling out messages in Morse seemed to permit-- their plan wouldn’t work. They’d be stuck here by their own incompetence.

Add to that her complete lack of access to any medical supplies-- they didn’t even have a bandaid to put on him when they were done-- and the fact that if it became any more infected he’d get awfully sick, and as soon as he got proper medical attention they’d find out his chip was gone, and then who even knew what kind of trouble they could get in....

Nope. She couldn’t afford to get lost in that kind of spiral right now.

How about you? she pressed into his shoulder, turning the paper to get a fresh area over the bleeding. Hydra treating you ok? Technically she’d already asked about his lab, but there could be other factors at play.

Surprisingly good. Really, he replied. Nobody’s shooting at us, no alien viruses, we’re always in the same time zone, all the Hydra goons are clearly labeled

He paused a moment.

It’s better than the Bus!
Simmons had to work very, very hard not to laugh. She settled for digging her toes into his middle until he yelped and jumped. Then she let herself laugh, and scolded him to stay still.

“I’ll stay still when you get your freezing-cold toes ou’ of my personal space, thank you,” he shot back, trying to sound aggrieved.

“They’re out! They’re out!” she conceded, holding her foot out at a generous distance. “Now I’m coming back-- in peace-- no sudden moves....”

_I’m sorry about that_ she wrote. _The Bus never really worked for you did it?_

_Don’t be sorry_, he replied with a firm touch. _If we’d been at Sci-Ops or the Academy we’d be working for Hydra already, awaiting trial at Gitmo, or dead. That Bus is the best thing that ever happened for us._

Simmons looked up from her work, surprised. She hadn’t thought of it that way before. Her thoughts had run more in the direction of being glad they’d been out in the field to see what they’d _seen_; the GH-325 alone had been worth it a million times over. The joys of pushing the boundaries of the possible had, of course, gone rather sour now that it was Hydra wanting her to do it for God-knows what purpose. They hadn’t directly asked her about GH-325 yet but that seemed only a matter of time.

_Thanks for coming to get me_, she replied. _Paused. Skye seems to think it was your idea._

_His scoff was silent but palpable._ _You know Coulson doesn’t take orders from me._

All the same, Simmons had a front-row view to watch his ears and neck go fervent pink. Knowing he couldn’t see her, Jemma tipped a little smile.

_Fitz could be an awful git sometimes._ Enough so that when he’d begun silently crushing on her a few months back-- which she had seen coming from a mile away, thank you-- she’d elected to save them both some dignity and ignore it. Personal insecurity and jealousy made little difference in the lab or a friendship, but damned if she was going to _date_ it. Life was enough trouble already without borrowing more.

She couldn’t say whether it was a confidence boost from finally starting to hit his stride in the field, being whipped a bit into shape by May and Coulson, greater self-awareness, or simply making a decision to grow up and live like an adult. Maybe some of each. Whatever the cause, his self-doubt seemed to be withdrawing to a more appropriate place in the background. That left behind what she’d always thought of as his underlying personality-- gawky, sure, but generous and clever and sweet-- to stand on its own.

_It was taking some time to get used to, but Jemma liked it. She liked it a lot._

_Thanks for dragging my stubborn arse out of the lab_, he said.

_Thanks for coming with me_ she answered. Then she caved to the mushy feeling building in her chest and ruffled his hair, gently.

_He tensed for a moment, which she’d half-expected. She’d done the same to him plenty of times. But after he took a moment to tug the blanket more snugly around himself, Jemma felt him relax and lean into her touch. She smiled and carried on, grazing gently with her nails and feeling wiry curls and the tips of his ears, still pink and warm with his flush._

_Can you imagine me trying to pull off the last six months on my own?_ she drawled, slowed by trying to do two things at once. _That would not have worked._

_You need to give yourself more credit_, he pushed back.

_No, I’m quite certain the only reason I’ve lived this long is having good people with me_ she
responded.

Well that’s true for all of us.

Simmons didn’t know what to say to that. She kept her fingers moving, and gave a pleased little chuckle when he turned his head to soak up a particularly good spot of scritches.

The he ducked his head down, withdrawing a little.

*I mean it though,* he wrote gently, drawing back to an earlier conversation a few days back. *I was being a great bloody prat and you and Trip in particular should get an award for putting up with me.*

Simmons waited a moment to make sure he was done. He’d already apologized-- profusely-- to her and Trip both, but it was clearly still bothering him.

*You were a prat,* she agreed, punctuating it with a little extra pressure-- both from the hand still pressing on his wound and speaking, and the one scratching over his scalp. *But you seem to be pulling out of it, so...* Simmons shrugged and trailed off.

Fitz seemed to accept this and mull it over. Then he rolled back with something else.

*Throwing an actual fit in the kitchen, though? Who does that, Jemma?*

Simmons thought for a while before answering. She’d spent a lot of time thinking about that too, to be honest.

*Somebody who... had worked really hard to make friends with someone and actually wanted their approval for once,* she ventured. *I don’t know. You were practically in the clouds after that Ossetia mission. You started feeling like you could handle being out here because of him. And then look what happened.*

He rubbed randomly at her knee, considering her thoughts.

*Ok, you’re spooky good.*

She scoffed quietly. *I was only there the entire time,* she reminded him. *And in any case,* she went on, *That’s the one time you’ve resorted to throwing things. Imagine how nice the Academy would have been if everyone were limited to one good fit per lifetime.*

Fitz sat silent and thoughtful for a spell. Here they were again-- him mucking something up and her talking him down. It was like home for them. She was always right, of course, which was both fantastic and somehow maddening. He should be able to do that for her. The only problem was... Simmons didn’t make mistakes. She didn’t need this sort of thing.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the glorious head-scratching he was receiving rather than the stinging in his shoulder. He also focused on not reading anything into it. As reserved as she normally was, she also tended to go rather hands-on whenever she decided he needed fixing. It was a bedside manner thing. The exact opposite of romantic interest. So scratch that; Simmons did make some mistakes, mostly revolving around an excess of kindness. It wasn’t exactly her fault that anytime she laid a hand on him it was like being given a handful of water from a great clear pool after crawling out of an oven, and all he wanted to do was splash in and never come out. Nope. Time to not get ahead of himself and just take it for what it was.

Simmons went still aside from her hands, trying to pick out which of several lines of thought to pursue next. First she needed to check something.

*You’re moping, aren’t you.* It didn’t sound like a question, even silent.

He shook his head. Simmons tipped hers to the side, not quite believing him. She decided to see if she could make him laugh. Simmons believed strongly in the importance of talking things through-- almost as much as she believed in moving on.

*You know the one great reason I can’t be overly concerned about you, Fitz?* She felt the skepticism in his shoulders without him having to say or tap out anything.

*Because the people to watch out for are the ones who manage to only break other peoples’ things.*
They usually find some way to avoid cleaning up the mess too. She ran her fingers against the grain of his hair, making it stand up, and smoothed it back down. Whereas you knocked your own Tim-Tams into a pot of dirty dishwater.

I guess I did, he agreed. It was a right shame too. They were the one thing he’d managed to take off the Bus before Ward went and flew off with the rest of his snacks, the wanker.

If there’s any way to be sure that you were genuinely out of your mind, that’s got to be it, Simmons concluded.

Fitz gave a short laugh, and didn’t say anything.

Weren’t those Ward’s dirty dishes in the sink, too? Simmons queried.

Once Koenig’s body was cleared out, Fitz had taken it upon himself to put the kitchen back in order. The rest of them were only too happy let him, while Trip and Simmons stalked off to scrub down the pantry. Halfway through that, Coulson interrupted to inform them of a convenient gap in satellite coverage. Trip took the body out back along with a mouse-hole device for the permafrost. Fitz had managed to finish up in the kitchen just in time to help him get the late Agent Koenig situated in his new abode. He and Trip pushed dirt, then fresh snow over the spot. Simmons was stowing the mop and setting a fan to dry the now-shining kitchen floor by the time they returned.

Later, their bloody clothing all went in a fireplace.

Yeah, Fitz confirmed. Scrambled eggs. Murder takes a lot of protein, evidently. Fitz was probably still the person with the highest hopes for Ward’s soul, but even he’d soured on the man since personally being kidnapped himself.

Even so, neither one of them was quite ready to talk all the way through the events of the last few days. They’d probably just keep joking about it until one of them started crying.

I’m still-- I don’t know, irrationally upset about the dirty dishes. Fitz grinned. She would be.

He had a timetable, Fitz shrugged. We’d only be out ‘risking our lives trying to do the right thing’ for so long. A double agent’s got to get a move-on.

I know. It’s just-- He felt her hands jump about for a moment in frustration-- in case killing Koenig wasn’t enough, he wanted to leave an extra soupçon of ‘fie on you all’ to make sure we got the message. So he used... scrambled eggs?

Fitz snorted. Simmons would incorporate ‘fie’ and ‘soupçon’ into her gallows humor. That’s what being descended from several generations of very civilized military gentlemen was for.

Skye likes scrambled eggs, he pointed out. Maybe he needed them to lure her onto the Bus.

Was he trying to woo her with breakfast? Jemma fluttered into his shoulder, snickering silently. He’d better hope it worked-- I’m certain that was his last chance.

Fitz gave a good, sour-faced shudder at the once-normal idea of Ward making passes at Skye-- specifically, what she’d do to him if there were a next time. He’d never have thought one could be so proud to find out that a friend was a natural born backstabbing man-eater. He’d been so, so wrong.

You reckon this means we both lost our bets? Fitz ventured. Simmons had been privy to Skye’s interest in Ward fairly early on. Out of courtesy, she did wait until Fitz’s interest in the new girl had waned before proposing a wager-- which had since expanded into a complicated mechanism of projected dates for various relationship milestones, over/unders, and stochastic fudge factors that would make a hedge fund manager blush.

Indeed, Simmons admitted. Hard to believe neither of us thought to include a “crush aborted due to Hydra” clause.

Simmons pulled up her makeshift gauze to see how things were coming along. The bleeding had slowed to a bare trickle.
“Nearly there,” she announced. Morse worked, but slowly, and was proving to be such a pain that they eagerly switched to speaking out loud for anything not of strategic importance.

Just then, her middle gave a hungry rumble.

Fitz looked up. “Aren’t they feeding you, Jemma?”

Her voice came back, not embarrassed in the slightest. “Sorry. Somebody’s been distracting me from dinner with their need for medical attention.”

Suddenly reminded that time was a thing that passed, Fitz ignored her ribbing and looked at the clock. “Good thing it’s almost done-- canteen closes at 7:30.”

“What? No, it’s open until ten.”

“Really?” Fitz frowned. He definitely remembered staying at the canteen until closing in the hopes of seeing Simmons and being shooed out promptly at half-past seven. “What did they have last night?”

“I don’t know, a few things-- I had the fish and some rice and a salad.”

“The fish’!?” He recalled a gluey substance that was allegedly chili, studded with what he was fairly certain wasn’t even meat. “I think we may be looking at another two-tier situation here, Jemma.”

“Oh. We should get you finished up, then,” she concluded. “So your canteen isn’t the one on the ground floor?”

“No, it’s on this one. Think I’m not even technically allowed on the ground floor.”

“Ah. Then you haven’t run across the daycare down there,” she remarked carefully.

“The wha’?”

“Part of the employee benefits package,” she shrugged. Or a hostage situation. Or possibly both. Something to keep in mind as we work our way out of here. You know, ‘don’t blow up the first floor.’

“Tha’s... awfully generous for the United States. We are in the US, righ’?”

“Probably. One can’t exactly go about the lab asking where to find the SYBR green and the well plates and by the way, which country am I in again?”

Southeastern US, she added in Morse. I’ve got a window-- can hear birds in the morning. Also, we’re probably near water but not the coast.

Fitz shook his head, grinning. He reached over to catch her ankle and was about to tap out a comment about her being the world’s best field scientist when she twitched it away.

“Ohh, you don’t want to do that,” she murmured, remembering the barefoot run to his room. “There are some dodgy-looking spots in that hallway....”

Ok, he wrote. Mulled over how to frame his next question.

But you’ll let me return the favor-- he leaned into where she was still brushing lightly through his hair-- sometime?

Of course, came the reply.

Fitz felt his heartbeat tick up. Her agreeing to do this again sometime with roles reversed was a much, much bigger deal than the present situation. Don’t freak out, he ordered himself. Don’t freak out. Do not freak out.

Too late. I’m freaking out.
But I’d better say something.

He started tapping her knee. *Um...* Nope. He smudged his palm over the spot as if to erase it.

This was the damn thing about their partnership. The rest of the Bus crew was under the impression that they had some sort of mind-reading situation going on-- when the reality was that they simply had the same job, saw the world the same way, and had been doing it together the same way for several years. It was like May and Ward (dammit, Ward) just knowing how to split up and take a building without plotting it out. They didn’t read each other’s minds. They just knew the drill, was all.

And the problem with a partnership based on knowing the drill was that you never actually learned how to communicate.

*I don’t want you to be uncomfortable,* he ventured. *If you don’t want me to do something, definitely don’t do it to me.* Wow. That managed to be uselessly vague and creepy. *Did that make sense? Sorry.*

*It makes sense,* she replied. *So if I didn’t want you to flick my ear, I shouldn’t do this?* And he felt a little *plink* on his ear.

*Nooooooooo,* he answered, shaking his head and drawing out an endless train of *dah-dah-dah* O’s on her knee.

His stomach flopped when she laughed at his joke-- and again as she combed her fingers up and down the back of his head, her touch gentle and warm.
As soon as he was patched up, they worked out their next plan to meet up-- tore up Simmons’s note about not being drunk and flushed it down the loo-- and fairly ran down to their respective halls to eat. Fitz in particular couldn’t afford to be caught out in the halls during off-hours. Once fed, he returned to his room for a quick shower and change. They’d both generally gotten into the habit of showering for the day between the end of work and supper-- both their specialties tended to leave them with smudges and smells that were best not allowed too far out of the lab.

He was just getting his tracker chip settled deep in a pocket when Simmons knocked, ready to walk him to her room. The odds were that it was loaded up with surveillance as well. They needed to get it out of there, or at least find out which corners and angles were watched heavily and which were not. And since it was probably bugged severely enough that they’d be able to tell which of the scientists was snooping, Simmons couldn’t do any of it without compromising her role as willing collaborator. That was perfect by Fitz. As nice as it was to have Jemma’s undivided attention, the fact that it was because of him needing something from her-- fussing over for an injury that was just bad enough to be disgusting (at least in his book, if not necessarily hers) and far too minor to actually qualify as badass-- left him feeling flat-footed and lame. Again. Not that he wanted to be badly hurt, ever. That was idiot thinking. Just that being fuzzed over for little things was....

The point was, he was chomping at the bit to get back to being useful. Countersurveillance was definitely useful. Then once her room was secure, maybe they could actually talk. Put their heads together and make some plans about getting out of there alive with useful information. And after that maybe they could talk about something else. Anything else. Just spend some time together, if he could be so presumptuous as to get his hopes up. Which he really shouldn’t. Jemma was kind to a fault. The last thing either of them needed right now was for him to turn into another one of those guys who mistook any kind of give from her as actual interest.

Several minutes later-- and two nervous, fumbling episodes of Simmons flashing her badge to get Fitz past guards in the hallway-- they made it back to her room.

“Oh! Fitz, I brought you some things,” Simmons pointed out, once they were inside. Her room was significantly larger and better-appointed than his. For one thing, there was a desk. On this desk was a mess tray with well over a full dinner’s worth of food-- a large plate of roasted vegetables, another of some kind of pilaf and what appeared to be an actual steak, a tall slice of chocolate cake, and a small pyramid of granola bars and other snacks.

“It’s still early-- I thought we’d both probably feel hungry later,” she amended a moment later, managing to sound both airily unconcerned and sheepish. Fitz’s face wore a by-now familiar Simmons! No! look.

The fact of the matter was she’d probably want snacks later; he would for certain; and hungry Fitz was no fun to have around. When they were both low on blood sugar things got ridiculous-- she’d pester him for things he was working on even when she knew they couldn’t possibly be ready yet, he’d lose what little tolerance he had for her own messy works in progress, and with both of them too testy to cope with the other’s sudden persnicketiness they’d spiral into completely dysfunctional bickering. FitzSimmons required proper care and feeding to function: end of story.

Since it cost her absolutely nothing to bring extras from the mess, she was going to make sure they didn’t lack for food. Maybe take a little extra effort and see to it that Fitz got something decent in him, since that might not be happening at his own mess. He may not like it right now. However, Simmons was quite confident that the wisdom of bringing up extras would become clear by 10:00.

Fitz relaxed visibly on hearing it was for both of them.

“Ah. Good look-out thinking ahead,” he agreed, nodding.

Simmons saw his eyes drifting around the room, lingering on the smoke detector and other electronics.

“I think so,” she admitted with some pride. “I’m going to get washed up then. Try not to break
I think so,” she admitted with some pride. “I’m going to get washed up then. Try not to break anything while I’m gone?”

Fitz nodded again, wishing Jemma could try to be a little more subtle. Although— that aside, she’d actually been doing brilliantly today. He watched carefully as she walked away. When he sighed, it was quiet so she wouldn’t hear.

There was a part of him that cringed at watching her cobble up a new version of Jemma Simmons— one that watched over her shoulder and doubled back and told lies, even if she could only hold together little ones. Then there was the rest of him that sternly told the sentimental part to sit down and stuff it, because life was about learning new things. Particularly things that 1. kept her alive, 2. kept him alive, and 3. helped put Hydra away for good this time.

He heard her lock the door, a useful habit to get into when sharing one tiny airplane-sized bathroom with five other people. Time to get started.

First on the agenda was a quick look-around. The question wasn’t whether the room was being monitored, but how. His own room’s complement of bugs had been fairly simple; other than a possible ceiling or wall camera or two (which he’d get to tomorrow) he’d managed to take them all out. While it was certainly possible that there were more sophisticated devices in there, the level of miniaturization it would take to escape his notice would make them very expensive. If they’d bothered to outfit his room with that type of equipment... well. He’d be quite flattered, honestly.

First, he picked up the bedside phone and called the security desk. Asked an inane question about dry cleaning and then listened for a wiretap’s telltale snaps and pops during the hold music— much easier to pick out on an unfamiliar phone that way than in a conversation with some stranger where you had to pay attention to what they were saying. Nothing. He hung up before the clerk made it back on the line. Double-checked its connection to the wall— only the one wire, like it should have. Opened up the handset and looked to find any extra bits and transmitters— nothing in there either. Fair enough. It was highly unlikely they’d give her a phone and not tap it— this just meant they had another way of going about it. Duly noted.

The smoke detector, lamps, alarm clock, television and cable set, remote controls, electric tea kettle, air conditioner, and heater all similarly proved bugless. The electronics, at least, appeared to be clean. Next: tune the radio on the alarm clock to the upper end of the FM band and slowly walk the room; listen for feedback squawks from transmitters. Repeat with lower bands.

Nothing.

Good thing he’d encouraged Simmons to take her time.

She’d managed to bring in both a heavy, solid-feeling metal butter knife and a flimsy disposable plastic one from the cafeteria. The metal one made for an impromptu screwdriver for opening the outlet covers; the plastic one was a better fit for prodding around in the outlet once the cover was off without electrocuting himself. He checked all five outlets. Nothing.

Light switches: clean.

Time to check the furniture. Undersides, legs, and back sides of the desk and various cabineties: clean. He flipped the desk chair upside-down and looked for anything unusual in the joints or screw-holes. Nothing. Ran his fingers over the wood surfaces with the grain, looking for irregularities or anything else that might signal a hole dressed over with putty.

Clean again.

He was on his back under the bed checking out the frame when he heard Simmons shout from the bathroom, then call out his name.

It wasn’t the Oh-Jesus—there’s-a-corpse-in-the-ceiling scream he’d recently become acquainted with, thank God. It was a much more familiar sound: the “I don’t mean to alarm you, but the lab is on fire so please grab your data and make an orderly exit” sound. Still not something you want to hear from somebody by themselves in the loo.

His heart began to thud instantly. As fast as he could, cursing his knee when it caught up in the springs, he made it to the door just as he heard her unlock it on the other side. Suddenly uncertain,
he stalled before reaching for the handle.

“Jemma? What’s wrong?”
Simmons took her time getting the shower on. For one thing, there was no hurry. Rather the opposite-- the more time she could give Fitz to work, the better. For another, she was rather treasuring the quiet time to regroup. Even though she had technically eaten alone in the mess hall, it was a little strange to do the intense staring-into-the-distance that the situation called for in public.

First she sat down on the lid of the closed toilet and pulled the elastic out of her hair. Shaking the ponytail out, she combed through over and over with her fingers until there were no loose hairs left. It was best to take care of whatever had fallen loose during the day before washing it. Otherwise, they just tangled up in her fingers and resulted in a mess of sloppy wet hairballs. As usual, the repetitive quiet motions put her mind to wandering.

Fitz. Oh, Fitz. They’d managed to work their way to being back on good terms again, which was good-- really good. But it wasn’t enough. Now they were avoiding eye contact and hitting abrupt and flustered stops in conversation for entirely different reasons. Under other circumstances it wouldn’t be a problem-- it would probably even be fun. Right now, however, all the tense air between them meant was that it was an uphill climb to talk through anything. Unfortunately, that included trying to make enough sense out of their situation to come up with a viable plan to get out of there and pull it off without dying.

No, she sighed to herself, letting herself actually pout as she worked the knots out of her long hair since there was nobody to see. *We can’t possibly have time for this.*

Granted, the way things were going they probably wouldn’t ever. But that was rather beside the point right now. The last thing they or the anti-Hydra effort in general needed was for them to start off with good intentions about triple-agenting and getting sidetracked into some ridiculous interpersonal scenario instead.

And yet... what they were doing now-- this whole tiptoeing-around-each-other thing-- just resulted in fiascos like her still having the transmitter in her trousers pocket because they were too busy jumping away from each other to handle a simple hand-off.

Seeing she’d run out of loose hairs, Jemma brushed her hands off into the dustbin and got started undoing her shoes.

Ignoring it had mostly worked on the Bus. Then again, on the Bus they were just support crew. Very highly-trained and intelligent support, but still just support. Here they didn’t have the luxury of following a team around. They had to make their own evaluations and decisions; and that took sharp eyes and clear channels of communication. Jemma was starting to realize that wasn’t going to happen until they sat each other down and had a Talk.

She stood up and started working down the buttons on her blouse, blowing out a sigh through pursed lips.

Thing was, she didn’t even know what she’d want to say.

The fact that her first instinct was to run through a list of reasons why doing something about her feelings for him would be a logistical mistake, rather than actually putting a point on what those feelings were, had to be some kind of sign. *What* kind of sign was a whole question unto itself. A casual observer might take it for a signal of insufficient interest on her part. In truth, though, it was just another manifestation of Simmons’s mile-wide practical streak. The same one that had already led, one way or another, to the implosion of every single romantic relationship she’d ever had.

To be honest, it wasn’t even precisely work that came first. She couldn’t possibly care less about promotions. Being able to make new things-- that was what she wanted. And that meant Fitz.

They hadn’t gotten their reputation just by being smart. Everyone at Sci-Ops was smart. The thing that set them apart was was... well, it boiled down to trust, funny enough. If he needed statistical analysis or a report written, she’d drop everything and do it-- knowing that when she needed a piece of equipment made, it would be there when she needed it even if it meant him having to stay
up two days straight to do it. End of story. Dinner plans be damned. Of course, one could only smuggle coffee to one’s partner for so long before you began to notice when what they really needed was sleep and a decent meal. And that your own future also depended on them getting it. And you started getting insistent about making it happen.

That, in short, was the story of how FitzSimmons wound up so far up each others’ business that they were a scientific sensation and couldn’t keep a personal relationship going to save their lives.

It was also why the idea of starting something personal with Fitz was terrifying. If it went sideways, they didn’t both just lose their best friend— not that that wasn’t bad enough. They had to start all over again professionally as well. It wouldn’t be just an uncomfortable life experience. Nope. It would be more the quit your job, move to a new city, and start over with new friends type of life-altering catastrophe. Every time colleagues starting dating, they’d always promise each other ‘We’ll stay friends if it doesn’t work out’— because of course, nobody ever plans on torpedoing their life. But when people broke up it was usually for a good reason. “Going back to friends like before” was a platitude. It wasn’t real.

Jemma shuddered as she pulled out of her blouse, remembering one particular couple from their lab cluster at Sci-Ops. God, what a disaster. They’d been genuinely adorable. Lovely individuals, emotionally well-adjusted, all the signs pointed to what should have been a successful relationship. It was. All until a year and a half on when things in the lab were jumpy and odd for a couple weeks and then one day Leticia went home early in tears and wasn’t seen for two days. Then the entire rest of the lab had to live through six weeks of weird, tense hell and rumorous undercurrents before one day Rashid came in just long enough to gather his things in a box and never came back.

Not only that, but Simmons herself had wound up spending four months of ridiculous overtime to finish Rashid’s project in his absence. Section 17 didn’t technically apply to scientists— the Curies’ existence effectively rendered all objections about mixing personal life and science moot— but dating your colleagues was still a terrible idea. Rude to everyone involved. The only possible exception was if you were extremely confident you were going to make it all the way to Curie status and make it a permanent thing.

Simmons stepped out of her trousers and folded them up carefully, making sure the pocket with the transmitter was on the inside so that it couldn’t easily fall out.

Funny enough, she’d already thought about it. On the one hand it felt rather verboten to think of him that way. Not to mention laughable, since the first time it’d occurred to her that they could end up spending their lives together had been years ago. At the time neither one of them was at a point maturity-wise where that could be a serious thought.

On the other hand, it made a little too much sense to forget about completely. There were only so many times you could show up on each other’s doorstep at two in the morning at the rescue— usually with data, or other work files, sometimes medicine and soup, or sometimes ice cream and a movie after yet another work-related breakup— but usually data— before you got to wondering.

She sighed, sliding off the rest of her things and putting on the hot water. To take him up on what he was clearly offering— there was only one good way out. It was playing for keeps.

He had to know that. And know that she knew it. And it didn’t seem to be slowing him down at all.

Simmons couldn’t quite figure out if that was encouraging or terrifying. Some of both. She absolutely had a soft spot for that boy. His feelings for her, meanwhile, clearly extended beyond basic fondness territory. The fact that he had no illusions about what he was getting into, who she was and what she was like, and still wanted to make a go of it anyway was more than a little overwhelming.

It was also comforting. Grumpiness aside, he had a pretty good head on his shoulders. He’d certainly known enough to have reservations about running off to the field, where all she saw in that kind of future was seeing new places and poking about at fun samples. He did have good judgment going for him.
Not to mention he was actually doing meaningful work right now, while all she was doing was having a neurotic meltdown in the shower.

Correction. She hadn’t even actually made it into the shower yet.

Simmons rubbed her hands over her face, grumbling, and stepped in.

One thing Hydra did well: the water was deliciously hot. Another thing: when the quartermaster came to get her list of things she’d need, Simmons had started off with basics.

Then it occurred on her that every dollar Hydra was spending on her room and board was a dollar that wasn’t going to world domination. Thanks to her mother, Jemma had a fairly well-drawn mental map of the world of high-end clothing and personal care products. Her eyebrows slowly climbed higher and higher into her hairline as she named off item after item and... encountered no objections from the quartermaster.

The end result was that Jemma found herself dressing to the nines every day and smelling like a very meticulously-kept Swiss alpine meadow. As much as the original goal was to tie up Hydra resources any way she could, it turned out to work well for her personally as well. After all, if you didn’t dress to convey authority... then you were conveying the other thing.

In the spirit of haute gaspillage, she’d even managed to have some proper underthings brought in. There’d been some insistence on getting measurements and as much as she fought it at the time, she was glad for it now. They were nicer than she’d have ever spent the money for on her own and practically brimmed over with mission souvenir potential for later. For now, odd as it was, there was some satisfaction in having nice things-- especially if it came from raiding the Hydra bankrolls. It brought to mind some apocryphal story she’d heard about Audrey Hepburn wearing a fancy perfume while being covered in grime for a part as a street urchin so she could do her job without getting completely lost in the role.

In any case, she was thinking far too much at the moment. The shower was for not thinking.

There was very good cognitive research to support the idea that much of the lateral and creative work in the human brain actually happened when you were thinking about something else, or nothing in particular. Daydreaming was an important part of coming up with original ideas and solutions-- which perhaps explained why so many sudden flashes of insight seemed to happen in the shower or bath. It wasn’t as if she couldn’t use a Eureka! moment or two right about now....

Doing her best to remain inaudible outside the washroom, Simmons hummed a little song, lifted her hair up, and turned under the spray to get it wet down to the roots. She was about to slather herself up and down with the tears of Hydra accountants, and darned if she wasn’t going to enjoy how good it smelled.

After several minutes, hair washed and conditioned and skin scrubbed pink all over, she started looking through her little basket of goodies for more ways to kill time. Three different kinds of exfoliating scrubs... didn’t need those anymore. Nail treatment... what was that doing in the shower basket? She set it on the side of the tub to take to the sink later. Extra-clarifying shampoo, nope. Finally she fished out some kind of deep-conditioning thing for hair. Sniffed it-- sweet peas, that was nice. Said to leave in for seven minutes. Perfect. She didn’t have a very good sense of how long seven minutes was, other than that was probably about how long it took to sing through two or three songs.

Five minutes later, relaxed and loopy under the hot water, Jemma was bouncing through both parts of the duet from Dr. Horrible. Her eyes loosely passed over the tiles on the wall, small squares in a few different shades of soft green. Whoever’d put them in had done a good job-- very regular. Probably one of those prefabricated jobs, on second thought, with the roll of coarse backing cloth pre-set with tiles to keep things simple during installation.

Which was why those two tiles in the corner just below eye level kept catching her notice. They were both just a little off-vertical. Now that she consciously noticed it, they were going to drive her crazy.

Idly, she poked at the seam between them to see if they had gone loose--
--and the grouting between them fell right out.

Jemma sighed and gingerly picked it up, thinking to stuff it back into place. Spare bits of bathroom wall couldn’t be trusted to be clean. At least she was already in the shower with all the soap one person could ever want.

Grout strip in hand, she shifted down to get a look at the crack. She’d like to at least get an idea of how well the piece would stay in once replaced.

Inside the wall, beneath the level of the tiles, was a tiny, glassy reflection of herself looking back at her. Jemma’s eyes flew wide in shock, while her hands scrambled to pull the curtain between herself and the camera.

“FITZ!”
Blind

Remembering after a moment that he’d have no way in, Simmons bounced out to unlock the door.

“Jemma? What’s wrong?” Fitz’s anxious voice was right outside. Wow. He’d gotten there much more quickly than she’d thought he would.

“Wait, wait, wait!” she called out, skipping back in and pulling the curtain around herself. It was a standard American tub/shower, and she drew back to the faucet side to get away from the camera where it rested on the far end. That should also give him room to work if he decided to... chisel it out or something. She didn’t know exactly what was supposed to happen after this.

“Alright. Now come in.”

At her word, Fitz popped the door open and leaned his head in, trying to get an idea of what was happening before going in. Simmons had collected herself into the far end of the shower with the white curtain clutched to her shoulders. She’d originally had it tucked up to her chin before she remembered that she wasn’t a wimple-wearing nun at a convent and that Fitz and everyone else had already seen her neck in any case. Balling up would hardly help anything at this point, so she forced herself to stand up straight like an adult.

“I think there’s a bug in here,” she said quietly, eyes darting to the offending corner. Fitz carefully looked at the shower walls and not her.

In spite of everything, it took Fitz a moment to get her meaning. Removing spiders and bugs from the lab and later the Bus was Simmons’s uncontested domain. There was usually some cooing involved and a stern admonition to stay out of the building where it could get squashed by awful, terrible humans from now on. Unless they were in midair on a transcontinental flight and the bug in question posed an invasive species threat to their next location. Those were eliminated with a swift and somewhat terrifying lack of remorse. Simmons had done enough hunting of little flying things for various projects that her hands-- be it with a protective container or a rolled-up stack of papers-- struck with an accuracy and speed that he’d never had cause to develop in his line of work.

Which was why it made no sense that she’d want his help. Or that her manner bore an odd admixture of disgust, annoyance, and fright, unless--

Oh.

It seemed to take Fitz a moment to process what she said. She could see the instant it sunk in-- suddenly he was clearly seeing red.

“One moment?” he asked. He looked to her for a response, expression softening. When she gave her little nod, he stepped out, drawing the door mostly shut behind him. She was about to get cold enough standing there wet without him letting all the steamy air out of the room.

Fitz ground his teeth and forced himself to focus on the technical side of the situation. Camera. He’d want to know more about it, which meant getting it out intact if possible. Okay. Gathering his makeshift tools, Fitz returned and gave a quick tap on the door before entering.

Simmons watched him come in and saw where he was about to step-- right onto her neatly-folded stack of clothes on the floor, transmitter still tucked inside. She didn’t know for sure but she was going to assume it was too delicate to be stepped on.

“Oh! Watch out for the--” she blurted, catching up short when his eyes found her clothes. Alas, her methodical ways had left them in full order of removal. Reasonable enough for a workday but still a step up from her usual thing, the frothy cream silk of her bra was resting atop the pile.

“Sorry, I wasn’t-- planning on you having to come in here,” she cringed. She could feel a nervous ramble coming on and elected instead to just stop talking.

To her relief, Fitz didn’t even seem to register it. “Where is it?”
She stuck out a still-dripping arm to point at the crack in the corner. “Under the missing bit of grout, I think.”

Fitz jumbled a couple items about in his arms before coming up with the radio that had been on her bedside table. He could feel Simmons watching him and trying not to fidget and probably wondering what the hell a clock radio had to do with it.

Holding it up to the spot, he frowned. Nothing there. He thumbed the dial to put it on the top end of the FM band and tried again.

The quiet ring of feedback rose quickly into a squawk before Fitz pulled it back from the wall. Simmons jumped and winced at the sound. He’d forgotten that he’d put the volume all the way up earlier in his efforts to catch something out in the main room.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “But yeah, there’s definitely something in there.” He stepped away to set the radio down and came back with the most menacing deconstruction tool at their disposal: the metal butterknife.

“Um... I’m going to have to come in to get a look,” he said sheepishly, glancing over to seek permission.

Simmons nodded quickly. Part of her wanted to make a wisecrack about how in that case she’d have to change her mind and just live with the camera. In general, though, she was loathe to say anything, knowing that someone could easily still be watching. For one thing, they’d already seen her bouncing around singing in the shower and she just wasn’t interested in giving up any more of herself, thank you. Further-- anything she said could wind up incriminating. This was especially problematic since she was supposed to be a willing Hydra participant. Simmons was starting to wonder if removing the camera were even the right thing to do. There might have been a better way to deal with it-- covering it up, showering in Fitz's room, something. But, in her panic she'd already tipped their entire hand so they might as well finish the job. At this point she was more than happy to just let Fitz take over.

He stepped in and turned his back to her, and started by chipping the rest of the grout out with the knife. That didn't take long. Next he probed around to try and get an idea of how big the device was. If it was too big, he'd have to take out a tile or two to remove it in one piece.

After a bit of poking around, it seemed to be a cube a little larger than a game die-- too large to get through the crack between tiles. That would explain why the tiles to the side of it were a little off-kilter. Whoever’d put it in had had to take them off and glue them back in.

So whatever they were looking at was probably an off-the-shelf device, judging by its relatively large size and the fact that it transmitted in the far FM bands like a cheap piece of garbage. Whoever’d put it in was determined, certainly, but extremely amateurish. It stood in such sharp contrast with what he was finding in the main room that he was starting to think it had to be significant.

Now that he was looking, the grouting around the edges of the tiles was rather chipped and weakened. It should be fairly quick work to chisel the rest of it out and pop one of the tiles off.

After a bit of scraping and scratching around, Fitz closed his fist around the end of the handle to give himself a better striking surface. Then he set the point of the knife to the now-exposed bottom edge of a tile and gave it a good blow with the heel of his other hand. Two more, and it clattered noisily to the floor of the shower.

“There we go,” Fitz murmured. “And now what I wouldn’t give for a good pair of forceps....”

“If you think tweezers would work, there should be some out on the counter,” Simmons suggested. Fitz nodded-- retrieved them-- and gladly returned to probe about in the wall with something that could actually pull the damned thing out. He kept his eyes adamantly on the job the whole time, only dropping a quick glance to her to check in when he entered and left. Jemma was glad for it. She would have watched his hands to see what was going on if she could, but with his back to her everything he was doing was covered. So she zoned out, regarding the floor instead. It wasn’t as if he needed her eyes boring into the back of his head.
“There it is,” he declared after a moment, carefully regarding the device as he held it up for her to see. His face suddenly fell. “Gah, that’s disgusting,” he added.

“What?” she asked, a note of alarm in her voice.

“Oh.” His voice was apologetic. “Just that whoever put this in decided to fasten it onto the wall stud with chewing gum.” Well. That explained the blob on the bottom.

“Oh. Sorry. I thought it was going to be something… genuinely nasty…” Simmons said, her voice trailing off as she heard herself ramble.

“That is genuinely nasty!”

Unable to think of anything else to say, the two of them stood there for a moment. Simmons was clinging onto the curtain and Fitz holding his catch, while both gazed determinedly at the floor.

“Well. Um, I’m not quite done in here,” Simmons said, thumbing behind her towards the showerhead. She chuckled nervously and sing-songed out, “Got a few things left to do!” Really, Simmons? She bit her tongue.

“Yeah,” Fitz agreed immediately, stepping out. “How much-- how much time do you need?”

“Five minutes? No. Five with the water on. Ten total.” At times like this it was as if she could still hear Skye’s voice. Stop talking. Stop.

“It’s okay-- take your time, Jemma,” he said, eyes to the floor, backing through the door and closing it.

Simmons flung the curtain back into place and shot the hot water back on. She let out a deep breath as her skin slowly went unpuckered again.

They definitely needed to talk. We cannot keep doing this….

With Jemma squared away, Fitz returned to the main room fuming.

Unless Simmons had a habit of reciting classified info to herself in sign language in the shower, there was zero strategic value to visuals from a shower stall. This device had to be purely... well, “recreational” was the only way to put it.

He tried to get his tight throat to relax. The sight of her in there-- bedraggled, pink, and vulnerable-- wasn’t leaving him.

As much as he wanted to wonder what kind of tosser got off on watching a girl unawares like that, he knew exactly. Lots of them. A small but significant percentage of their cohort at the Academy and Sci-Tech would have put their tech skills to that kind of use if it hadn’t been against vigorously enforced rules. Only here, apparently there wasn’t enough adult supervision to keep the creeps out of everybody else’s business.

Fitz scratched the back of his neck hard in frustration, pacing at the foot of the bed. They need a bug-free place to work-- a sterile zone, as they called it-- but the devices in her room were sophisticated and well-hidden. He’d still be able to find them, but it would take a couple days. He had ten minutes.

Turning on his heels, Fitz moved to the bed and started tearing off the sheets.

Simmons was stuck between wanting to get herself composed before facing Fitz again and a strong desire to get the hell out of that washroom. Sense of unease growing, she looked over the rest of the walls. Everything else looked alright but she wouldn’t feel sure until Fitz cleared it. Needless to say that wouldn’t be happening with her still standing in there au naturel.

At first she tried to flood the conditioner out of her hair. It was thick and mucilaginous and clung against the force of the water. Soon, she began resorting to clawing through her scalp and wringing her hair in a great big hank in an attempt to force it out. Simmons was starting to admit to
herself that her hands and legs were shaking and her stomach felt sick.

Unable to stop as ever, her mind started trying to divide out why she was reacting so strongly. It wasn’t as if she’d been hurt, or if there was any direct mechanism whereby it could lead to that happening. She felt invaded, certainly. Angered that signing on voluntarily was supposed to involve some kind of protection, yet obviously it hadn’t stopped this from occurring-- so what was the point? What else was going to happen?

And yet, that wasn’t it. Those things weren’t alright, but they were strategic issues. They weren’t fundamentally any different from anything else they’d been dealing with since being taken in.

The truest thing she could sound on was... she was feeling humiliated. In front of Fitz. It was absolutely stupid. But as she rolled it over in her mind she felt the pressure of tears wanting to force their way out, which was usually the mark of something hitting home.

Once she had nailed down what was happening, she refused. There was nothing wrong with feeling embarrassed in front of a friend-- or whatever-- but Fitz could deal with it. Even if he didn’t, that feeling was not going to be her guide on how to respond to an important tactical event.

Simmons made a very conscious decision to get angry instead.

When she emerged from the washroom, mostly dry and clad in a t-shirt and long flannel bottoms with the bundle of her old clothes held tightly to her chest, the room was in an impressive state of disarray. The television was on, set to something with terrible reception. Most of the bedclothes were removed from the bed, the mattress slightly askew, and what appeared to be a blanket fort stretched over the desk to a pair of chairs moved to the middle of the room. It took a moment to locate the engineer responsible.

“...Fitz?”

The blanket structure wobbled a bit. Then his head popped out from the new setpiece in the room.

“Um-- thought some... camping might be in order,” he attempted, eyes shifting, and trailed off. “Come on in,” he said with renewed effort.

Simmons stared sideways at the fort after he disappeared inside again, wondering what on earth he could be on about. After pulling the transmitter out of her old trousers pocket for what she swore would be the last time and putting the clothes away, she dropped down to her heels and scooted in.

Fitz held the bit of blanket comprising the door open for her as she came in. She carefully avoided his eyes as he scooted over to make room for her. He obliged, focusing on fishing the remote out of a pile of pillows and putting up the volume on the telly a little louder to cover their voices.

“It’ll take a couple days to check the room all the way over,” he explained quietly once the blanket forming the wall was back in place. “This is the bes’ way to get some cover in the meantime.”

“Mm. A pillow fort?” Simmons looked up from where she sat, knees drawn up, elbows resting atop them and hands fidgeting at her neck, a flicker of amusement poking through her obvious tension.

Deep down all Jemma wanted to do was climb up on his lap and have a cry. It would be nice. He’d be all for it; he’d hold her as long as she wanted and probably pet her hair while he was at it. But she couldn’t. First off, if she did they wouldn’t get anything else done that night. They couldn’t afford to lose that kind of time. And second, it would be wrong. Poor Fitz was tightly wound up about her as it was. To snuggle up on him with no explanation and no idea what to expect tomorrow would be no good at all. They needed to talk first. Period.

“A field-improvised security blind,” Fitz huffed back, not really offended. “A lot of intelligence people take expo tents on the road with them so they can set up a spot in their rooms out of range of cameras. Since we haven’t got one, we’ll just have to make do.”
It was a relief to see her come out a little bit, although she was much calmer about it than he imagined he could be in a similar situation. She’d never been the type to fly off the handle. He’d been worried that she’d cry, or more likely simply shut down. She wasn’t much of a crier but had every right to at this point. This place kept finding creative ways to treat her like shite in between showy displays of good will. It had him knotting his jaw and plotting out seeds on how best to return the favor. In the immediate present, though, the only way he knew to help when she was scared was pull her in close and what if that wasn’t what she wanted right now and he was shit with words and then what was he going to do?

“No, that’s-- this is perfect. Thank you for putting this up,” Simmons said, fiddling at her neck and hair again. She took a deep breath. Fitz was giving off the feel of someone waiting for direction. Plus she was already wading in embarrassment up to her ears, so she might as well go for it. Rip off the band-aid as it were.

“I’m thinking we should compare notes and work on our strategy. Starting with this, uh, latest thing.” She glanced sideways at the ground, running her fingers over her hair nervously. “And then we should probably talk about some other things. Things with-- um-- us...?”

Fitz had been nodding in agreement at the first part. Then he froze. Simmons winced, a seed of sympathetic panic blossoming in her chest.

And that’s how you know you’re already in too deep, she thought.

“Don’t worry, I don’t think I have bad news!” she blurted out softly, waving her hands, trying to hedge her statement. “But let’s get the-- potential life-or-death emergency squared away first, don’t you think?” She tried not to cringe visibly at the rubbish tumbling out of her mouth, lest he somehow think it was about him.

“Yeah, I think tha’s a good idea,” Fitz agreed. He swallowed nervously. “Um... I put the kettle on. Tea?”

Jemma nodded gladly amidst her nerves. “That would be perfect. There should be some chamomile up in there somewhere.”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” Fitz nodded back, silently cursing his incoherence as he ducked out again to get things ready.

Among the many wonders of Simmons’s well-equipped quarters was an electric plug-in tea kettle. Once he’d checked it for bugs, he’d filled it up at the tap and set it up in contact with the window to start heating. The steam coming off the kettle would create a randomly shifting zone of hot glass and condensation that would alter the window’s resonance properties, and the water’s boiling would rattle the glass. On the off-chance there was a laser mic trained on the window, those two things would make it impossible to make out any conversation. It probably wasn’t necessary with the static he’d built into the TV signal. Fitz did it anyway just to fuck with them.

Hot water for tea was a pleasant bonus.

Fitz tried to focus on what was right in front of him, tabbing through the little packets of tea to find chamomile or something else suitable for this late at night. Simmons’s reassurances had gotten lost in the pounding of his blood the second he heard “we need to talk about us.”

He was definitely not panicking. They were professionals. They had a job to do and they were going to figure out how to get data and get out of here. The “getting out of here” bit may have to come sooner than anticipated, at least on Jemma’s part. They’d figure it out. And now Jemma said she wanted to Talk and there was really no good way to defer it anymore. He was definitely not panicking.

He fumbled and dropped the tray. Dozens of little tea packets now littered the ground. Fitz looked down glumly, then got on his knees and sorted them into little stacks by type before dropping them back onto the tray. Well. At least now he could find the chamomile.

Next was warming the mugs. The air conditioning tended to be rather overdone here-- perhaps a symptom of their US southeast location, if Jemma was right. The tea’d go cold sooner than you could drink it if poured straight into the mugs at room temp, which rather defeated the purpose of tea for someone like Simmons who seemed to need perpetual warming up. Fitz poured a mug full
of hot water-- there wasn’t quite enough in the kettle to do both their mugs plus the actual brewing-- and let it sit for a minute to heat the ceramic. That done, he emptied it into the sink, filled both mugs with the rest of the hot water in the kettle, topped up the kettle again, and set it back in its place by the window.

After another moment of prep, Fitz made his way carefully back toward the little makeshift door. He took a deep breath and ducked inside.
For all her outward calm, Simmons's head was in a rapid blur of indignation and embarrassment and a nameless dread. She was doing her best to cope by trying to drily focus on the tactical issues at play in the hopes that having a plan and getting answers could put some of those concerns to rest. Still, her traitorous mind kept coming up with new ramifications for what had happened.

Years of ballet at her mum’s insistence had left her with itchy legs and a bit of a compulsive stretching habit anytime she was off-duty. Having a bit of personal space to spread out was one of her favorite things about nights they got to spend on the ground in a hotel. Right now, this little bubble was the closest thing she had to a good sprawling spot. She decided to get the ungainlier ones out of the way while Fitz was gone. The hip flexors and adductors, for instance, were best done without an audience.

The funny thing was, she’d always rather hated ballet. Though she’d never quite been able to verbalize it at the time, it had seemed silly to sweat so hard and build up that much strength only to use it to the effect of a delicate little fairy-like thing that barely had to expend any effort at all. Training hard for sports, or a powerful performance like gymnasts and acrobats— that made sense. With ballet she respected the skill involved but could never quite see the point. When her feet and knees showed signs of giving out and her teacher insisted she find something else to do, her mum had been heartbroken. Jemma had been secretly relieved. Still, a few good habits from that time remained.

There’d been time to build a few new ones as well. Within moments of arriving at her new apartment at the Academy, one of her soon-to-be roommates— a terra cotta-skinned woman from French Polynesia with corkscrew curls and a plush hourglass figure scaled to suit a person of six feet in height— asked her if she danced ballet. Surprised, she’d answered in the affirmative. The woman gave a hearty chuckle and introduced herself as Nui, then dropped her voice and said “One dancer to another-- someday you might have an ass. Do you want to be sad about it or delighted?”

And that was Simmons’s introduction to ‘aparima, hula, haka, and tamure. At first she just humored Nui and went along with it as a cultural experience. Then it turned out to be... really fun. That wasn’t something Simmons had previously associated with dancing. Even when Nui laughed at the remnant accents of ballet technique stamped into her body-- spread fingers, stiff middle, weight forward on her toes and chin held high, all of which apparently looked hilarious transposed into the other forms-- it wasn’t mean-spirited. Just the honest appreciation of something that looked silly. It took most of that school year to learn to loosen up, to figure out how to move her arms in something approaching a soft wave rather than stretched arcs, and keep her shoulders still while her feet moved. But in the end Nui was right. She’d grown into herself and put on some curves since then. If ballet was still all she’d known, it would have felt like a terrible loss of her earlier ‘dancer’s figure’-- which, in reality, was probably just her being a scrawny teenager. With Nui’s tutelage, filling out was an outright delight.

The other nice thing about about Nui’s school of dance was that it lent itself well to living in confined spaces. For ballet, with all its leaping around, you need a large and specialized studio. The others were contained enough that you could work on them in the shower, were that all the private space you had. And it was. So she did.

And this is how my life as a useful person ends, she fretted. Not with the erasure of her identity— though difficult, that could technically be restored. If transmissions from the camera were recorded, on the other hand, it could potentially go anywhere. The realization sent the blood draining from her face. Good going Simmons, she scolded herself. You couldn’t be happy just getting clean and warmed up. No. You had to sing and dance and shimmy around, you utter twit.

If she hadn’t already been planning on mutiny, this would have done it.

Hearing Fitz approach, Simmons shook her head clear and shifted into a more company-appropriate reaching-for-the-toes stretch. For all the shock of thinking of more uses for the footage, she was feeling a bit more confident after moving around and opening up her posture. She made a door for him by picking up the blanket, then found him holding out both mugs to her.
so he could have his hands free to scoot in.

“Oh! Thank you,” she said gently, taking the mugs. Once he was settled, not knowing which one was supposed to be hers, she offered both and waited for him to take his.

“Here, I’ll even trade you,” she said lightly, offering the quarter transmitter. “Don’t worry, it’s clean— that’s where the rest of the vodka went,” she added, making a little face at his hesitation. Fitz tucked it into a pocket, making sure to put it in a different one than his RFID chip. He wasn’t sure exactly how, but putting them together just seemed like a recipe for trouble.

“So about that camera and how it fits into the rest of the surveillance picture here,” Fitz started gesturing around the room. “There’s a couple things that don’t add up.”

Simmons sat up again, hugging her knees and chin resting atop. “How so?”

“Whatever surveillance they’ve set up in here-- and we’d be daft to think they haven’t-- it’s top of the line. Very small devices. High-end. And whoever put them in place knows how to keep it from being obvious.”

Fitz didn’t believe there was such a thing as a listening device that couldn’t be found. There were only so many viable places to hide one; and if Hydra had managed to invent nano-sized devices that couldn’t be seen with the naked eye, they wouldn’t have had to get their intelligence on SHIELD from the so-called Clairvoyant. He was confident he could get the room cleared. It was just a matter of putting in the time, and staying ahead of any possible replants. Until then they’d have to make do with the little island of security afforded by the blind.

It had taken a bit of doing to put together. To Fitz’s dismay, the carpet was a multicolored, bumpy affair designed to hide stains and wear. Since finding mics in carpets hinged on looking for bumps, slits, and discolored areas, he’d probably have to actually cut the carpet out to be sure. Covering the floor of the fort-- the blind-- with pillows to muffle sound was their best bet for now. He’s spent most of Simmons’s last few minutes in the shower clearing the pillows. That meant stripping them out of their covers and holding them up across the light, looking over the grain of the cloth and stitching at the seams for signs of a tiny snip where a chip could have been inserted.

The puffy comforter on the bed was extremely suspect. They didn’t tend to get laundered very often, so stayed in the room long-term. The down inside was generous enough for a device to go undetected without being so deep that sounds would be muffled before reaching the mic. He’d packed it down into the closet, awaiting some time when he could give it a thorough check.

There was a second blanket, one of those standard hotel jobs with the texture of peach fuzz. Anything hidden on or in it would alter the nap enough to be seen. Fitz spread it out on the bed one half at a time, moving the lamp flush with its surface to throw shadows on any irregularities. Clear.

The sheets were easiest of all. Too thin to conceal much of anything, Fitz held them up to the light anyhow to flush out any dark spots that could be a device. Nothing. They went into the “clean” pile with the pillows and fuzzy blanket. Now with plenty of materials, Fitz switched to building the blind.

“Whereas the camera back in there looks like it was set up by someone they pulled off the back door of McDonald’s during smoke break.” Fitz got a pained look just thinking about it. “The camera’s a thirty-dollar off-the-shelf piece of trash”-- he’d double-checked it to make sure it wasn’t concealing a mic before putting it in his pocket, as well as forcibly retiring it by painting over the lens with the darkest of the nail polishes sitting on the bathroom counter-- “and they did a shite job of hiding it. Not to mention it was actually held onto the wall with gum. With all the steam it probably would’ve fallen off on its own in another couple of days....”

Seeing a kicked-puppy look fall over Jemma’s face, Fitz realized how far he’d put his foot in his mouth. The “shite job of hiding it” had worked on her for two whole days.

“I mean, you managed to spot it and you weren’t even looking,” he clarified. “So tha’ts a good eye on you, and a great bloody shame on whoever put it there.”

Simmons smirked faintly at his attempt at recovery.
“So what do you think was the purpose here? Do you think they were trying to get material for blackmail...?” she trailed off, seeing Fitz shaking his head.

“I don’t think so-- usually with blackmail it only works if they catch you at something you shouldn’t be doing. So unless you were running a gambling den in there...?”

Simmons pulled a face. “Nope. No very soggy games of blackjack for me, I’m afraid.”

“Ah, there. So you shouldn’t have to worry about tha’, at least. Plus if that’s what they were after, they would have used a higher-quality setup and hidden it better. This one probably doesn’t even give enough picture quality to identify who’s in it.”

“Really?” Simmons looked up, sounding hopeful for the first time since finding the thing. “That’s great news.”

“Yeah... that’s the good news,” Fitz agreed, trying not to put a damper on things. The fact of the matter was that at the angle it was installed, it probably hadn’t gotten much of her face anyway. That just wasn’t what the installer was after.

“The bad news is, whoever put this in obviously has access to your room, so... there’s that to consider.”

“Oh,” Simmons said, laying her head back down. Oh. And since the camera wasn’t for intelligence and it wasn’t for blackmail, it was definitely for the other thing.

“I’m... sorry,” he said, unsure what else to do.

She cut a look over to him and shrugged. “You didn’t do it. You’d have done a much better job of installation, for one thing.”

His face fell. Now he definitely didn’t know what to say. “What?”

“What? No. Oh God, I’m sorry. I know you don’t creep on people in the loo, Fitz.” She scrubbed her hands over her face. “I’m freaking out and tired and I’m trying to be funny and crazy talk comes out instead. Sorry. I’m-- I’m going to just lie down and think for a bit, yeah?”

Truth be told, she’d already been planning on asking him to stay the night. Even if for no other reason than she’d be terribly sleepy by the time they finished talking, and wouldn’t be in the mood to be escorting anybody back to their room or walking back by herself. But that was one of those things best covered once they’d had a chance to talk about other things first. Best to save on confusion for everyone.

“No, it’s ok,” he shook his head. “Just try and make sure the pillows stay flat on the floor so we still get the sound coverage.”

“Yeah, no problem.” Jemma shifted around, trying to find a position in the small space where the valleys and peaks in the pillows didn’t conflict with her own. Also, trying not to spill her tea.

Once she was finally settled, curled on her side around her mug, Simmons looked up to see Fitz looking over the quarter transmitter.

“Next item of business, is it?” she said, smiling a little at his intense scrutiny of the object.

“Yeah,” he said absently, gazing down at her briefly before going back to the transmitter. He dropped his voice to a near-whisper to make sure it didn’t escape the blind. “Little bit of pitting, but otherwise in good shape. Reckon maybe it was designed with swallowing in mind?”

Jemma’s eyes widened incredulously. “Ah, no. Definitely not.”

Fitz frowned. “You’re right. It wasn’t all that user-friendly on the way down, was i’?”

“No,” she whispered emphatically. “More to the point is the nickel poisoning, which wouldn’t have happened if someone on the design team had thought to cover it in some kind of varnish. But they didn’t.”
“What?” he said.

“The pitting is where the nickel dissolved, and then it wound up in my bloodstream,” she grumbled quietly. “It’s ok though. I got some pharmaceuticals-grade EDTA out of the lab and drank it and it should be just about gone now. The nickel, I mean.” Remembering the urgency of staying hydrated, she wiggled up on her elbows and took a long sip of chamomile.

Fitz’s hands had stopped, clenching in the blanket. He regarded her incredulously over his knees.

“The camera may have gotten some quality footage of me curled up in the shower trying not to be sick, so I hope the audience appreciates that sort of thing.”

“Jemma! That doesn’t have any kind of long-term effects, does it?”

“Not if you take EDTA and pass it out, it doesn’t,” Simmons replied, looking up at him over her mug with an arched eyebrow. Then, holding his eyes as long as he’d meet them, she took another long sip. His gaze dropped, then returned, dancing over her as if to make sure she were still all there. Simmons gave him a nonchalant shrug. It wasn’t the worst thing in the world if Fitz wanted to fret, but she expected some respect for her back-alley self-medicating skills first.

“The point is,” she continued, raising her mug for emphasis, “Engineers and biologists need to talk to each other if they’re to get anything done without mucking it all up.”

Fitz gave a little laugh and looked down at the transmitter in his hands. “Well, this engineer needs to get a good look inside this thing so he can figure out what kind of amplifier to build, since I doubt a walkie-talkie’s going to have the range we need to call the Bus.”

Simmons grinned into her mug. She’d only given him an opening about a mile wide and he’d missed it. It was adorable.

“True,” she agreed.

“And anyway, don’t let Hydra hear you talking like that. They might get ideas about how to run an efficient research program and actually start getting somewhere with their implants again,” he said snarkily, peering closely at the transmitter. He was probably trying to figure out how to open it up without breaking it.

“Right. I will be sure to hide out in a pillow fort where nobody can hear me.”

“There’s the spirit,” he agreed, scrutinizing all around the edge of the quarter. Then he scowled suddenly, as if only just hearing what she’d said. “Security blind,” he insisted.

Simmons nearly did a spit-take into her mug. Then she grinned up. “You’re listening!” she cooed.

He sighed and scratched at the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, Jemma, I was jus’--”

“No, no,” she stopped him, waving her hands. “That is exactly what we should be doing and I need to stop derailing you. Would it be alright if I thought out loud at you about the IP firewall? I feel like there’s something important there but I can’t quite lay a finger on what it is.”

“Yeah, of course,” he shrugged, looking up at her to let her know he wasn’t quite in mindless “Uh-huh, sure” territory yet.

“Great. Here we go.” Simmons downed the rest of her tea before it had a chance to cool further and settled back down to curl up on the pillows.

“If I remember correctly-- Ian Quinn owns some percentage of Cybertek, right?”

“Think so,” Fitz shrugged.

“And he’s a tech capitalist. They like to nurse new technologies up till they’re fat and sell them.”

“Mm-hm.”

Simmons yawned.
“But nobody will buy a tech company from you unless they’re sure you’ve actually got defensible ownership or at least clear license rights to your technologies.”

“Yeah.”

“What was it that Garrett said? ‘Blah blah blah, I’m not really a true believer but blah blah blah Hail Hydra’?”

Fitz snorted. “Pretty much.”

Simmons lobbed out one thought after another, trying to get pieces to fit together. Gradually her questions grew more murmur-y and further apart as—taxed by a couple nights of fitful sleep but relaxing now that Fitz was there, and full of hot chamomile tea—she dropped off to sleep.

Fitz had finally managed to get on a good track with the transmitter. He didn’t notice her going groggy until he reached a good stopping point and asked her a question. Looking up after a moment to see if she had heard, he found her curled up and peacefully asleep.

With her asleep, he was relieved of the need to be confident for her sake. Fitz looked at her with a growing feeling of apprehension in his chest. Somehow, in spite of everything, she’d still managed to bear the brunt of their captivity. He considered for a moment whether things might have gone better for her had their roles been reversed and he volunteered; but somehow, he didn’t think so. With that at least he was satisfied they’d made the right decision.

Still, the idea of her staying on here was beginning to look more and more daft. The only problem was that Hydra probably had critical information about GH-325 and who knew what else from their serum program. Simmons was a tenacious little beast. If she thought she had a viable chance of lifting any intelligence out of there, it’d be a tough sell to get her to leave before then.

For all her grit, at the moment her body was slack, her face swept clear of concern. Fitz watched her shoulders rise and fall for a few moments. When her knee gave a sleepy twitch, he shook his head and decided it was time to get her moved on to bed.

“Jemma?”

No response. That was about right. She was a light sleeper in the mornings, but for at least the first few hours of the night she was dead to the world.

“Hey. Jemma,” he said softly, reaching out to brush her elbow with his knuckles. He went gently at first, gradually increasing pressure until her arm started to straighten out and scoot towards her face.

“C’mon, sleepy.” She finally started to stir. Her face scrunched up for a moment before she flung her arm up to block out the light.

“Jemma. Do you want to stay down here or sleep on the bed?”

She gave a long-suffering sigh as if considering the matter deeply, and fell right back asleep.

“Jemma.”

She gave a surly moan. “Hmmm?”

“Stay here or bed?”

“I said bed,” she slurried.

“Okay,” he said, trying not to laugh. “Are you going to get up then, or...?”

“Shhhh!”

“C’mon, Jemma. I’m not picking you up,” he admonished. No response. “...Or maybe I am.”

With a sigh, he stood up and threw the blanket off the blind and onto the bed. Then he carefully stepped behind her and slid his arms behind her shoulders and knees, gingerly keeping his hands...
in neutral and respectful locales. In a moment he had her up. She grimaced and turned away from the light, hiding her face in his shirt. Feeling rather pleased even though he knew it was ridiculous, he tried not to smile too much.

A moment later she was settled in bed.

“Mmf. Fitz.” He folded the overlarge blanket in half and laid it over her.

“Yeah?”

“Th’nks.”

“Yeah. Sleep hard, Simmons.”

“Mm.”

Without an escort, he couldn’t be out in the halls at this hour. He’d be staying the night then. That was just as well by him-- not that he was trying to get in with Jemma-- and not that that would be terrible, just-- anyway, he just felt better knowing she didn’t have to be there by herself when the room was clearly not secure. The sofa in her room was conveniently situated between the bed and the door. That would do nicely.

Stretching up and giving a yawn, Fitz set about to finish up his evening and head to bed.
Jemma rubbed her face weakly and rolled over, groaning when she saw the grey early daylight peeking through the window. She’d spent most of the night phasing in and out of wakefulness. Her body’d been too cold to stay properly asleep, and too tired to wake up enough for her brain to kick in and decide to do something about it.

The light snoring coming from the sofa hadn’t helped either.

On the plus side, at least it meant not being startled on finding him in the morning. She should have been expecting him to be there from the fact that she’d fallen asleep on him before she could walk him back to his room, but her brain was creaky enough while still trying to exit a poor night’s sleep that she could easily forget.

She checked the clock. 6:04 AM. Impressively early, considering they had zero commute to get to work. Jemma could tell that she wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep, though, so she set about to quietly get ready for the day. There was no telling how late Fitz had finished his work on the transmitter. Even during the odd stretches where they turned in around the same time, Fitz tended to sleep later than she did. It was possibly a side effect of having a metabolism determined to turn crisps into body heat as rapidly as possible.

First order of business was obviously tea. She’d need it not just for caffeine but to get warmed up. Regretfully sliding out of bed, Jemma found the kettle propped up against the windowsill— which was an odd place to leave it— and nearly boiled dry. She frowned briefly before shuffling off to refill it. Fitz must be awfully tired or distracted, or both, then. It wasn’t like him to just forget and leave something on like that.

On the first mug, Simmons sat on the bed wrapped in the blanket staring out the window, waiting for her brain to boot up. In her bleary state she heard the birds outside— blue jay, mockingbird, osprey, ibis, great blue heron— and Fitz’s breathing and the water running through the pipes as their neighbors went through their morning routines in crisp detail. As receptive as they were to stimuli, though, her neurons were resisting any attempt at processing information into a useful form.

By the second mug her limbs had warmed up enough to let her walk around without shivering. Simmons decided to work on the hair and face part of the morning preparations first. Hopefully the activity with her hands would trick her brain into gear. Plus, it was no good changing out of pajamas sooner than absolutely necessary.

Another forty-five minutes later, she had herself configured into something that hopefully looked more thirty-two-year-old-midlevel-scientist than twenty-two-year-old-assistant. Other than the pajamas, of course. She’d have to wait for some grey hairs and crows’-feet to even try and touch the senior scientist level. Naturally, getting to that stage did depend on getting out of this in one piece. Fortunately she’d been able to work out some ideas on that while getting her hair straightened and whatnot. She wanted to pass them by Fitz for a bit of proofreading before running with it.

It was about time for him to get up at this point anyhow. He normally relied on an alarm (a series of alarms, really) on his phone and probably had something similar set up in his own room. However, he was out of range of his usual wake-up systems at the moment. He could theoretically sleep almost indefinitely.

Jemma walked up to the sofa where he slept and tried to figure out the least disruptive way of waking him up. The fact that she’d had to do so as many times as she had over the years and still wasn’t sure what a “least disruptive” way to do it was significant. It worked out alright sometimes, but had a lot more to do with where he was in his light/deep/REM cycle than what you did. In any case, she’d better get on with it before he somehow woke up on his own to find her staring at him like the neighborhood creeper.

Simmons smirked. She had an idea.

“Fitz?” she said quietly. No response. He had just the jeans and jumper he’d changed into the
night before to keep him warm, but seemed to do alright with it. He was on his back with one hand on his chest, the other flung up behind his head and falling off the end of the sofa. Nearby on the end table was the plate that had formerly held the steak and mashed potatoes, empty and scoured. Simmons felt a brief moment of triumph over having brought it to the room.

“We’ve got to be at work in an hour, Fitz.” She rubbed his arm gently in an effort to get his attention. It worked. Sort of. He scowled sleepily, shifting to lay on his side facing the back of the sofa.

Between morning breath, knowing she’d probably laugh at how his hair was likely matted and going sideways, and nature’s bylaws about being a male in the morning, Fitz wasn’t particularly thrilled about facing Jemma before he’d had a chance to assemble himself. Plus, he was in fact quite groggy. The longer he could plead the still-sleeping defense the better.

Simmons smiled. Fitz was awake now, if only by technicality. He only needed twenty minutes to be ready and didn’t typically see the point of getting up much before that.

Well, he’d been warned.

“Hey,” she went on, sitting down with a scant half of her backside on the sofa, brushing his ribs with her hip.

“Hmm?” he mumbled, eyes opening a little. She wasn’t going to let him alone after all. “What’s up?”

“Oh? Nothing’s up, just-- thanks for putting me to bed last night. I’m sorry I passed out on you. I know we still had a lot of... I don’t know, ground to cover.”

Fitz shrugged. “You said you wanted to be on the bed.”

“Really?” She had no recollection of that conversation whatsoever. It seemed plausible though. Most nights she’d put socks on before going to bed, only to find them crumpled up next to her pillow in the morning. They’d be there in the same exact spot every morning without any memory of having taken them off. Except for the odd morning where there was only one sock by the pillow and one still on her foot. Those were the nights her half-awake three-in-the-morning self decided to get wild and crazy, apparently.

“Huh. Well, since I don’t remember that I can only imagine I wasn’t much help in the matter. So thanks again.”

“Mm.”

“Can I get you some tea?”

“Sure, but i’s no big hurry,” he mumbled groggily.

“It’s no trouble either,” Simmons answered, and hopped up to top up the kettle and let it get heating again. In a moment she settled back onto the sofa.

Fitz grumbled, turning again to face outward this time with his knees as tucked-in to his chest as they could get with Jemma in the way. Simmons normally left him alone when he was half-asleep, unless there was something that needed doing.

“Urrnmff, Jemma, what d’you want?” Then he rubbed his eyes and sighed. “Sorry...” That had come out a lot gruffer than he’d meant.

Simmons took it in stride. He had, in fact, asked her what was up and she’d said “Nothing” and continued to pester him while sleepy, so it’d be daft to expect any other kind of reaction than what she got.

“I had some more thoughts about the camera from last night. Wanted to run them by you.”

“Oh?” He turned his head to look up at her and blinked, ready to pay as much attention as his fuzzy brain could.
“It looks like it might have been set up by someone outside the normal surveillance program, do you think? A bit of extracurricular activity?”

“Yeah,” he agreed, though wincing a little at her choice of words. “If I had to guess, I’d say it’s either not technically supposed to be there, or it’s set up to look like it’s not supposed to be there.”

“Right,” Simmons nodded. “And either way, it’s probably alright to bring it up with a supervisor.”

“Probably?” he guessed. “I don’t know, I suppose that depends on who the supervisor is.”

“Well, I don’t think Winters-- he’s my PI-- deals with that sort of thing. He’s just a scientist. But Raina’s his boss, and I think she deals more with personnel.” Simmons paused. “She’s the one who told me where to find you,” she added.

Fitz looked up at her with a start, eyes still a little glassy from sleep. “The Raina?!”

“Same Raina. I think she’s over the biology section in general. Certainly she’s still doing the recruiting-slash-human-resources bit,” Simmons replied. They both still had vivid memories about Raina being the ‘good cop’ in their induction experiences. Which still had only horrifying implications for what the bad cops were like.

Fitz put his fingers to his lips, thinking for a moment.

“Well, I suppose the worst that could happen if you bring it up is they know you can find badly-concealed cameras,” he said. “I mean, if Raina doesn’t already know about the camera. If she does then she already knows you found it just from the footage. Shouldn’t be too risky.”

He shifted a little, then snuck the hand of the arm he was laying on about her knee.

Tell her you think I destroyed the camera he wrote. If they ask for it let’s break it and then give it to them. Then they have to use records of radio transmissions to find out who did it, when, etc. Then we get an idea of how much transmitting we can get away with.

Simmons raised her eyebrows, liking this train of thought very much. She slid a hand over his.

Fair enough, she responded.

Fitz tried not to stare at their hands, lapped over each other on her knee. He really did.

Unfortunately, her knee was right in front of his face. Looking anywhere else from where he was risked meeting her eyes-- God forbid-- and she’d probably stare right through his soul and then they’d both be real uncomfortable. So he settled for giving her knee a little squeeze and letting his hand drift back down to the cushion, hoping they were done and settling in for a little more shut-eye before having to get up. It wasn’t Jemma’s fault for being a little more on the affectionate side and thinking nothing of little things like that that set his heart thudding. A giant source of confusion in his heretofore short and stupid life, but not her fault.

Simmons watched him nestle back in with a slight but very real frown. She’d been trying to figure out how to give him a little encouragement that’d make it through that thick head of his. There wasn’t time to get into it this morning-- not with work to get to-- but having given him notice that she wanted to talk things over, she didn’t want him going around all day on tenterhooks wondering what she was going to say. The idea of just grabbing him and snogging away was starting to sound relatively straightforward compared to everything else she’d tried so far. The main thing stopping her was the worry that it might actually work. If the way she caught him looking at her when he thought she wasn’t looking was any indication, that was a good way to get in over her head real fast.

She picked up her hand and started combing through his hair again. Propping her other elbow up on a knee, she leaned down to rest her chin closer down to his level.

“C’mon, Jemma, stop that,” Fitz grumbled, weakly pretending to bat her hand away.

She shrugged. “Well, maybe I like doing this,” she said lightly.

Fitz sighed, shutting his eyes against a sudden and unbidden montage of things he thought he might like to do. For such a brief moment, it was impressively comprehensive. The whole garnut
was there, from accidentally bumping noses while kissing her to actually kissing her to giving her
a passionate but gentlemanly fuck against the wall.

“Well... jus’ because you like something doesn’ always mean you should do i’,” he pointed out,
sounding somehow defensive.

Genuinely confused by now, Simmons withdrew. She chalked his touchiness up to lingering
sleepiness... probably. This. This right here is why we need to talk, she told herself.

In the meantime there were plenty of other things to worry about outside the touchy-feely sphere.
The shower-cam; figuring out where Raina fit into the whole structure of the facility and if she
could or would do anything about said shower-cam; more urgent big-picture issues like finding
out whether her labwork was related to GH-325, as she suspected it was; and whatever was going
on in Fitz’s lab. They had very real problems that weren’t going to solve themselves.

“Tea?” she asked, getting up after a moment to set something steeping.

Fitz finally sat up, rubbing his face as he set his feet on the floor. “Sorry, Jemma. Still waking up.”
He looked down, screwing his eyes open and shut in an attempt to clear the sleep away. “Have
you go’ anything for breakfast? I can get i’ ready while you finish up,” he said, glancing at her still
in her pajamas.

“Mmhm,” she answered, pointing to a paper bag on the kitchenette counter. “They’re a day old,
but there’s some decent bakery in there.”

With a bit of bumping about, they managed to get both of themselves ready to launch for the
morning.

“See you at six, six-thirty?” Simmons guessed. She’d come by his room and pick him up for
another evening of scientific subterfuge and-- knowing them-- pristine, unblemished
awkwardness.

“Yeah, should be done by then,” he agreed.

“Alright, Fitz. See you tonight,” she said, hoisting up her bag and leaning in to bump her shoulder
to his. She paused before going, feeling him give a little tug at her elbow.

“Be safe,” he said.

She smiled. “No accidentally giving myself diseases today, I shouldn’t think. Not bad for a day in
the field.”

And with that they stepped out, aiming to get the day over with as soon as possible.
When Gary asked for volunteers to help run an armature over to the fabrication shop for duplication, Fitz practically jumped out of his seat. He’d managed to get a good idea of who was who in the lab, and was ready to get out and expand his map any way possible.

The fab shop had a little waiting area in front of the consult offices, which all overlooked a yawning warehouse floor. Once they’d handed their designs to the receptionist and were asked to wait for the next build technician, Fitz gravitated to the window overlooking the shop floor like a moth to a light.

Aside from a few areas covered in isolation tenting-- whether to keep what was inside clean and safe from outside contamination or prevent whatever was within from contaminating the rest of the room was unclear-- the whole floor was open to view: ceramic kilns, laser cutters, tig welders, stamp presses, drill presses, die-cut machines, lathes, 3-D printers, forges, resin mix vats, injection molding, and a number of things Fitz couldn’t even identify.

He had to consciously shut his mouth from hanging open when he noticed Thompson, who’d come with him from the lab, walking up beside him.

“It’s insane, isn’t it?” Thompson laughed. “They literally designed this shop so that if an engineer could think of it, they could build it.”

Fitz nodded. “Oh, it’s amazing alright.”

Once he managed to catch his breath, the mere thought of how many millions-- billions?-- of dollars’ worth of equipment and software had to be out there was sobering. The rapid pace of innovation coming out of Cybertek was starting to make sense now.

“Oh-- watch this! They’re pulling a load of ceramics out of the press kiln,” Thompson advised, pointing to a garage-like door just starting to crack open. A bright yellow-red glow showed around the edges of the door. Standing a respectful distance away was a worker in a bulky heat-reflective suit, working the controls. Once the door yawned open all the way, the glow from inside lit the surrounding shop floor with a sunset russet color. The worker hit a set of controls to get the finished ceramics moving out of the kiln’s belly, yellow ingots glowing so hot they left purple spots on the eyes even from this distance. Fitz watched the corners and then edges of the finished ceramic pieces go dark as they cooled. If they were what he thought they were, they’d be safe to pick up by the corners even as the rest of the blocks and tiles still glowed with heat.

Fitz took in the rest of the floor again, remembering to have a critical eye this time instead of drooling at it like a kid who just woke up for Christmas.

Yes. The entire wall to his left was, in fact, occupied by die-stamp machines. Some of them were quite large. The line of rather impressively-sized engine blocks in various stages of construction didn’t escape his notice either.

If he had to guess, all the miniaturized and nano-scale work his own lab was putting out could easily be produced in a shop 1/20th the size of this one. This plant was much, much too large to only be putting out cybernetics.

“Well, we’ve got a while to wait,” Thompson shrugged once the ceramics show was done. He sauntered away to sit as they waited.

Fitz looked over his shoulder to note where Thompson was headed, and felt a wave of surprise hit him like cold water at a familiar face entering the room.

There, looking speechless as ever, was Donnie Gill.

***
Simmons’s lab had her extracting RNA-- an infamously tedious job.

Extracting DNA wasn’t so bad. It took an entire day, but it was nearly guaranteed to work. The double-helix structure of the DNA molecules meant that the two sides locked together and tended to protect the vulnerable base pairs between them, rather like the teeth on a closed zipper. It meant DNA was stable. It was a molecule that could last years out in the environment, enclosed in bones, or waiting in hair follicles and smears on the wall. You didn’t have to worry much with DNA.

RNA on the other hand was a disaster waiting to happen. Unless you had a freak sequence that managed to fold over and bond onto itself-- which presented its own set of problems-- RNA floated around as a single strand with its base pairs wide open to the outside world, practically inviting trouble.

Further complicating affairs was the fact that human skin was loaded with RNA-shearing enzymes as part of its innate anti-viral defense systems. That meant that every single piece of glassware, pipette tip, and glove you used to work with RNA had to be either fresh out of a specially designed RNAse-free factory package or swabbed down with anti-anti-RNA-cleaving compounds. RNA extraction was one of those lab procedures where you wore gloves to protect the experiment from you, rather than the other way around.

All in all, it made for a tedious piece of grunt work that had to be done with a high level of skill and attention-- even moreso than usual wet lab work. Probably only about a quarter of lab technicians could get it to work consistently. Seeing that her samples were rather nonsense for Hydra’s goals-- they had her clipping off bits of leaf from a pet tomato plant in the lab to run for extraction-- she had to assume this was a test run to see if she was one of the twenty-five percent.

Simmons knew perfectly well she was in the happy number of people who could get an RNA extraction to turn out. That wasn’t the question. More at issue was whether or not she wanted them to know that. If they were having her do it, RNA extraction may be a major roadblock in their work... why help them fix it? It’d be easy enough to flub it and pass herself off as one more otherwise useful lab tech who was good for everything but RNA.

On the other hand... she was supposed to be a volunteer.

Plus Hydra could perfectly easily look into her publication record and find that she had, in fact, successfully done multiple projects with RNA extraction. And if they were working with RNA, that probably meant they were looking at gene expression. Which was exactly where she’d wanted to go with the GH-325 work, but they hadn’t had the capabilities for it on the Bus.

Compliance it was. For today, at least.

Having something to show for herself would only help when it came to approaching Raina, anyhow.

* 

“Winters said you wanted to have a word.”

Simmons jumped, the words having come from somewhere unexpectedly close to her ear. She spun around to see Raina standing there, in a trim long-sleeved black dress with red flowers.

“Yes,” she said, attempting to recover quickly. “Is your office close by?”

“It’s a bit down the way, but we can talk as we walk,” Raina replied.

Simmons was rather stretched for small talk topics, and though her heart was pounding with anxiety over the upcoming discussion, she was relieved to get settled in Raina’s office. It was well-lit with rather insistently clean-lined furniture. The one exception was a series of jars
containing oddball human biological specimens on the bookshelf behind the desk. They looked like they belonged in a crumbling post-Soviet abortion clinic. But in defiance of all aesthetic laws known to humanity, they were sitting rather pretty on a bookshelf behind Raina’s desk that looked straight out of a Swedish design loft.

Suddenly, the features in one of the rather larger jars clicked into something she recognized.

“Is that cyclopia?” Simmons asked, nodding her chin towards the specimen and feeling suddenly embarrassed at her inability to contain her enthusiasm.

Raina raised an eyebrow and looked back towards the shelf with a little smile, her odd lilt carrying through even in her body language.

“These aren’t the most informative instances of epigenetics in the human population, or otherwise we’d have them in the lab,” Raina allowed. “But they are thought-provoking.”

“Well, there’s still so much about gene expression that we don’t know,” Simmons said. She had some hope that that might lead Raina to say something revealing. RNA extraction was mostly done to study gene expression, after all. It was a very detailed piece of biology, quite a bit beyond simply sequencing a genome. A genome merely told you what the genetic code was. It was quite another thing to know how much of that genome actually got used-- in which tissues, under which circumstances, and how often. It was fairly certain that’s what they were after, if they were extracting RNA.

“Certainly true,” Raina agreed.

Simmons quickly realized that no further information would be forthcoming. Her nerves-- perversely calmed by a quick chat over hideous birth defects-- quickly returned.

_Come on, Simmons. You only went over this a thousand times in your head this morning._

She took a deep breath and plunged in.

“I was led to believe that volunteering would lead to certain privileges,” she began. “And that has primarily been the case, I am certainly much better taken care of than my friend who did not volunteer.” She hesitated. “And-- by the way-- thank you for letting me know how to find him yesterday, that is appreciated.”

While she struggled over her next words, Raina chimed in.

“I hear a ‘but’ coming.”

Simmons pressed her lips together and nodded firmly.

“Why was there a camera in my shower?”

Raina looked taken aback, tilting her head with an askance eyebrow.

“Excuse me?”

Simmons started to panic. She’d definitely stepped in it this time. This was how she was going to die.

“There-- I found it last night,” she blurted out. “It wasn’t even that well-hidden.” Simmons found herself glancing down at the floor, and forced herself to look back up. “Is that a standard procedure to spy on your employees in that way, or did I meet a special exemption?”

“Do you have the device?” Raina asked firmly.

“I-- no, the fellow that I came in with pulled it out of the wall. I think it’s broken now.”

Raina seemed to weigh a few things, and then come to a decision. She abruptly stood up, strode over to the window, and clicked the blinds shut. Still ajitter, Simmons made a motion to stand when Raina did.
“No, it’s alright,” Raina soothed. Returning to her desk, she clicked a button on a bit of electronics to her left. Simmons saw a little green LED light on the device turn off.

“Listen,” Raina began quietly, leaning forward in her chair, hands laced together and elbows resting on her desk.

“If absolute loyalty to Hydra were really a prerequisite, hardly any of us would be here.” Raina gave a judicious pause. “The scientists, the soldiers-- you and the engineer-- we’re all here for our own reasons.”

Simmons blinked, trying to be sure she was really hearing this.

“Yes?” she replied cautiously.

“And I think it’s safe to say that at least a few of them came because they thought this would be a great place to engage in behavior that civilized people won’t tolerate.”

Simmons tried to keep the sarcastic look off of her face-- she really did-- but it didn’t quite take.

“I wonder where they could have gotten that idea,” she said, thinking of the Triskelion.

Raina did not look amused.

“In any case,” she continued, “we do due diligence to monitor our employees and make sure nothing inappropriate is going on. However, considering that we have a rather high number of people trained in espionage, we can’t always catch everything on our own. So first of all, thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

“Er... you’re welcome?”

Raina and Simmons continued their conversation for several more minutes, Raina looking for details on how Simmons wanted to address it and Simmons looking for indications from Raina of what they logistically could do. In the end Raina had her agree to bring in the device so they could take a look. Well, she and Fitz had already figured out how to handle that. No problem.

*

Once alone in her office again, Raina picked up the phone. There was a shiny new edge on her axe to grind with Ops.
Fitz left the lab as soon as humanly possible, trying not to burst too obviously out the door once he finished sketching up the day’s modifications at 5:48 on the nose. Not that he’d been watching the clock.

_The hell am I going to say to Simmons?_ he fretted. He’d spent the whole day fighting to keep his head from getting lost up his arse worrying about that when he should be working on getting the two of them out of there in one piece. Two-- two pieces. _Oh, fuck._ There went another mental image nobody needed.

He stopped short at the door to his room, running his fingers over the surface between the knob and the jamb. Finding nothing, he tried again until he was sure-- it was gone.

When they’d left his room the previous night, Fitz mentioned they’d need some way to monitor the door. Simmons volunteered a strand of hair that turned out to be long enough to just barely loop over the knob and a piece of the latch on the inside jamb. Then they’d joked that if they’d really planned ahead, they’d have brought some long blond hair in the mix somewhere instead of one head of long dark hair and one of short blond-- the better to go unseen against the light beige paint of the doors.

In any case... somebody had gone into his room. Could still be in there, doing God-knows-what.

Fitz promptly changed his mind about dropping things off in his room before dinner. He was halfway down the hall before he remembered that Simmons would be knocking on that door in just a few minutes.

_Shit._

Whatever it was, he’d better deal with it. The odds were good it was just a relatively innocent surveillance crew re-installing whatever devices he’d taken out. Nothing to worry about. Probably.

Fitz looked up and down the hallway, then put an ear to the door, trying to see if there were still activity going on in there. No sound. That was good... probably.

Next he turned the key in the lock and coasted the door open, standing well to the side to avoid anything that might be triggered by opening it. Nothing happened-- no sound or falling objects or anything else to indicate the door was somehow rigged for damage. Fitz exhaled, smacking his head a little on the wall. _Paranoid much, Fitz?_

It was on entering the room that it became clear what had happened.

His tiny room was in as much chaos as it could hold-- clothes dumped out and strewn over the floor, bedclothes stripped off and wadded up in a corner, the mattress leaned up against the wall instead of on the bed, and the rickety little table upside down with a leg broken out of joint.

“Oh, bloody hell,” he muttered to himself.

Fitz’s response was probably more annoyed and less terrified than what they were going for. Trashing rooms was a fairly routine intimidation tactic-- and probably would have worked better had he had anything to actually be broken. Within seconds he was too busy puzzling out exactly which of the things he’d done this was supposed to be retaliation for to be properly frightened.

He started gathering up clothes and dumping them back in their proper boxes-- because that’s what they gave him to keep things in, cardboard boxes-- hoping to find some clues or at least keep his hands busy while his brain worked things out. At the very least he could get this cleaned up so that Jemma didn’t start worrying. Now that he thought about it, it wouldn’t be out of character for Hydra to try to motivate one captive employee by threatening another. In that case, the best thing he could do was clean up and make it a non-issue. If they wanted to try and use him to get Simmons to do their dirty work they’d have to put more effort into it than this.
Within minutes he had the place re-settled. All except for the little table, that is, which was held together only by gravity at this point. Fitz was looking at the clock and trying to decide if he had enough time for a shower when a knock sounded on the door.

He checked the peephole and-- seeing it was Jemma-- quickly let her in. She looked tired, but beamed on seeing him and came in for a quick hug.

“Hey, Fitz!”

“Hi Jemma,” he answered softly over her shoulder.

There was a brief struggle of indecision akin to that of encountering someone coming the other way down the hall and you both wound up dancing left and right a bit before making it past each other feeling like badly-choreographed idiots. They couldn’t quite figure out how long to hold the hug, leading to awkward slow-motion flailing much closer to one another than either was completely comfortable with. Fitz decided to make the best of it and give her a quiet update.

“Looks like someone’s been in here. Best to assume it’s bugged again,” he advised, leaning down to whisper in her ear. His hot flush of embarrassment eased for a moment, only to be replaced by a different sort as her fingers tightened into his shoulder at the news.

“Right,” she whispered back, and broke off. She put her bag down and gave him a weary look.

“Can I ask you a favor?”

“Yeah,” he said in an of-course tone.

“Crack my back?” she asked quietly. The hopeful, puppyish look on her face was in such stark contrast to the crisp tone of her clothes and hair and makeup that he couldn’t help the quick laugh that escaped him.

“Here, come around,” he said with a little smile. Simmons eagerly followed his lead, turning to face away from him and wrapping her arms tightly around her chest. He put his own arms over hers, waited for her breath to go out, and lifted up. A series of pops rang out, half-heard and half-felt against his chest.

“Christ, Jemma, what have you been doing?” he choked, setting her down. He already knew the answer to that, honestly. Her back only got that way from a full day hunched over a lab bench doing pipetting. (Fitz was 95% confident that the only thing biologists ever did was pipette identical colorless solutions around, and saw it as a miracle that they could keep any their identical-looking experiments in identical little tubes straight. When he’d said as much to her she just sighed and said “That’s why we label them, Fitz.”) He tried not to look too pleased with himself when she flopped down on the bed, curled up on her side, afterwards with a great sigh and a blatant smile of relief.

Simmons relaxed as much as possible, doing her best to ignore the instinct to stiffen when somebody picked you up from behind. This only worked if you let yourself go loose like a fish, and she was so miserable-- the whole curve of her upper back had been sore and stinging since before lunch-- that she was very, very invested in it working.

As soon as it was done the pain immediately lifted. A kind of euphoria tended to take its place, and she hopped right to the bed to enjoy her newfound ability to relax-- to sit and just enjoy not being in pain anymore, really.

“A lady never tells, Fitz,” she laughed, scolding him lightly in response to his question. She’d come back from the lab laden with juicy information, as it turned out. But if he thought the room was back to being monitored again, it was best not to get into it now.

Then she added, “But thank you. I’ve only been looking forward to that for... seven hours now?”

Then she gave him what he could have sworn was a saucy grin, looking up at him upside-down from where she was curled up at the foot of the bed. Fitz blushed and turned away a little, feeling a wish to give her a little space. She often went a little punch-drunk after getting cracked. He wasn’t sure what the fuss was all about-- he’d never had it done to him but for when an
enthusiastically tipsy Simmons tried it on him a couple times in Boiler Room incidents involving feats of strength. The effect apparently wasn’t quite the same when it was done by a someone who was much shorter than you who could barely get you off the ground.

“I didn’t get a chance to shower,” he admitted, trying to change the subject. “Do you want to just meet up again after dinner, or...?

“Mm,” she considered. “You can just do it at my place,” she suggested, stretching like a three-year-old waking up from a nap in her crisp blouse and trousers. “If you don’t mind an audience.”

Her eyes flew open immediately when she realized what she’d said. She shrank herself into a ball and furiously tried to backtrack.

“Oh dear! I meant with the-- the incident from last night with-- the thing, in the shower...”

Fitz snorted and fell back against the wall, laughing into his knuckles as she dug herself deeper into a hole.

“I’m just making it worse, aren’t I?” she peeped, stopping herself.

“Yeah,” he grinned, behind folded arms and a fist pressed to his mouth. “You’re onto something though. If we wanted to find whoever’d put it in there, we should’ve just left it-- and then in I go, and we can just listen for the gagging sound.”

Jemma made an odd sort of pout.

“Well-- don’t sell yourself short, Fitz,” she admonished. Then scrambled for a second-- couldn’t just leave that statement hanging. “Surely you’re some creepy voyeur’s type.”

Nope, that didn’t make it better. _Drat_, she cursed her tongue quietly.

Fitz nodded somberly, mulling it over. “That would make a great second line on a resume,” he agreed. “‘Design engineer with nine years in technology innovation, 17 patents. Surely some creepy voyeur’s type.’”

Simmons, still curled up on her side, put a hand in a gesture of reasonable agreement. “You see? There’s someone out there for everyone, Fitz!”

“Thanks, Simmons. You make a good point. I’m feeling a lot better.”

She chuckled. “But seriously. I was going to ask you if you wanted to stay the night anyhow, so if you want to just shower over at my room that’s no skin off anybody’s nose.”

“Might be a good idea, considering,” he agreed, trying to keep his tone casual. Yes, Jemma was inviting him to stay the night with her. And yes, it was out of an all-too-rational sense of caution about living in a building run by creeps. Overall it wasn’t much of a cause for celebration.

“Mmhmm,” Jemma hummed up at him from the bed. “Pack your bags, Fitz! You’re going to sleepaway camp!”

He scowled at her and got to work.

*  

Fitz didn’t actually have a bag, as it turned out. He hadn’t told Jemma about it, but the quartermaster’s attention to him had consisted of simply bringing him to a room full of boxes and telling him to make sure he had at least two of everything. There’d been plenty of clothes to pick through that looked like they’d come straight out of a secondhand store-- but no bags.

Simmons was standing by the door doing her best to look off into the distance, trying to give him
some privacy as he pulled together some fresh shorts and whatnot for tomorrow. He soon gave up on finding any other way to carry his things, assembled them into a tight roll, and tapped at the flap on Jemma’s bag to get her attention.

“Mm? Oh,” she said, understanding what he was looking for. She opened it to let him slip his things in. Seeing they were about done, Jemma reached up and drew her hand along her ponytail in what Fitz was now recognizing as a bid for a loose hair to use as a tamper-proof seal on the door.

“Don’t worry about it, Jemma, there’s not much point now,” Fitz said quietly.

She nodded and slid a hand into the crook of his elbow.

How long do you need? she tapped, then looked up at him for an answer. Standing there close to his side, the soft and strangely cautious look she gave him sent his stomach into somersaults.

Thirty minutes he signaled back as he swallowed, brushed over the back of her hand. Then he stepped out of her touch and opened the door.

They walked in a companionable silence, passing guards with a nod and a flash of Simmons’s badge. On arriving at her room Fitz held his breath as he checked her door for a single dark strand--

--and let out a sigh of relief when it caught against his fingertips. He nudged Simmons silently and pointed it out for her to see. She nodded and put her key into the door, letting them in to their newly shared, moderately-safe zone.

Fitz immediately busied himself looking around. He was trying to reassure himself that the room hadn’t somehow been entered without disturbing their tell at the door. Even when they were trying to be discreet, bugging crews usually left the room with a mussed-around feel-- pieces of furniture left a quarter of an inch out of place, things like that. They were the kind of things where you could sense something was off but you couldn’t quite place your finger on why.

“Fitz?” Simmons sounded concerned.

“Yeah?” he answered, snapping out of it to look at her.

She took his elbow again, standing to his side. Is something wrong?

Simmons had searched his body language carefully before asking. The moment they stepped in the door, Fitz had gone all funny-- the stiffness he wore lately like a skin disappeared. That should have been a good thing. Only, in its place was the exact same sort of distant intensity that he got when there was a funny engine noise (that she couldn’t even make out most of the time) and he was trying to figure out what it was. Funny engine noises were never a good thing... and that had to go double for whatever he was after at the moment.

Does the room seem off to you? he returned, still looking about the room.

Maybe? she returned, nerves going on edge as she began to look around as well. What’s wrong?

He shrugged, and finally back at her. His stomach dropped when he saw the rising alarm in her face. Jemma must have taken him to mean there was something afoot and was looking appropriately worried.

“Sorry!” he blurted quickly, shaking his head with an earnest look, putting the backs of his fingers to his lips. “No, I meant--”

Once he regained control of himself he signaled her again.

I haven’t lived here long enough to notice if anything’s out of sorts. Do you see anything or does it look good?

She gave him a bit of the patented Simmons What? look, and turned to glance around the room. She was feeling keyed-up and jittery, but that was from soaking up how Fitz had been acting-- not from seeing anything out of sorts herself.
Good, she tapped out with a shrug, hand still on his arm. And don’t scare me like that!

Fitz grimaced. Sorry, he told her again. Just-- not putting anything past them at this point, he explained.

He felt her give a little squeeze at his elbow to go with her nearly imperceptible nod. Then, shifting her weight, she seemed moved to a new topic.

“I’ll be back in about half an hour?” Simmons proposed. She felt the need to double-check what he’d said about only needing thirty minutes. That hardly seemed like enough time to work over a whole room the way he’d been talking about.

“Yeah, that sounds great,” he agreed. Picked up something at work that should help, he added over her knuckles. It wouldn't take long to sniff things out with the sensor he smuggled out in his pocket, and he’d even be able to distinguish sound from camera devices.

“Oh! Alright,” Jemma exclaimed, and bit her tongue. They’d managed to do alright so far-- by some miracle-- but Simmons was still plagued by a constant worry that they’d somehow be caught at Morse code-ing each other. Or more likely, she’d go blurtng out a response to something he’d never actually said, and that wasn’t suspicious at all....

“See you in a bit, then?”

“Yeah!” she nodded, a little nervously. Between the adrenaline thrill from Fitz’s false alarm and the fact that she’d been holding onto him for some time now, she was actually starting to feel a little bit flustered.

That, and the way he kept looking at her. Whatever he was thinking about in the rapidly-expanding tense silence between them was putting a very serious expression on his face. An adorable one, at that. Which she could never tell him about because he’d probably take offense.

“I keep wanting to say ‘be careful’ but I suppose things can only go so wrong between here and the mess hall,” Fitz said, attempting to break the moment with a joke.

Simmons laughed a little and looked down. “That’s some wishful thinking, Fitz,” she admitted.

Their second day at SciTech-- not the first, mind you, because she had managed to find it just find the first day-- Simmons fell prey to a classic case of absent-minded scientist and wandered the wrong floor in search of the cafeteria for twenty minutes. So determined had she been to find it on her own that it wasn’t until a bewildered Fitz called her mobile wondering where she’d gone that she finally admitted her problem and asked him for directions.

“Oh, but it’s day five by now, yeah?” he smiled.

Jemma rolled her eyes and flicked the backs of her fingers against his arm. “That would count for something, if I weren’t so distracted!” she replied.

Simmons was most of the way out the door by the time she realized what it sounded like she’d said. What was she supposed to do now? Stick her head back through the door and amend it with “I meant by Hydra!”?

Part of her couldn’t stop blushing and kicking herself. Another part was sort of just satisfied that since she clearly couldn’t flirt properly on purpose, she could do worse than to capitalize on accidents.

Maybe just let that one go.... she decided.
Fitz flushed so red at her last statement, he could practically feel the pressure of the blood slamming into his cheeks. He kept staring at the door for a good long moment after she’d gone.

There’d been a few times lately when he’d tried putting on a bit of what meager charm he had for her, without much result. Nothing that was unambiguously more than friendly, anyway. Meanwhile Fitz had been around to witness each and every time Simmons had had a crush on somebody in the last nine years—so many—and he had a pretty good idea of what it looked like when she was interested in somebody. It wasn’t terribly subtle, to say the least.

It actually sort of looked like... whatever had just happened.

Shaking his head roughly to clear it, Fitz reminded himself to focus on his job. The EM spectral emissions sensor he’d snagged off the lab bench would make it much faster— but only if he was paying attention.

His constantly-derailing mind made it difficult, but he managed to finish the room before she came back. Fitz had just begun pulling things off the bed to set the blind back up when she came back in, announcing herself with a soft knock.

“Coming!” he answered, bounding to open the door and just barely remembering to check through the peephole before opening. Sure enough, there was Jemma with a fully-armed cafeteria tray.

Fitz undid the locks and let her in.

“Did you get a chance to eat something yourself?” he asked, eyeing the tray that appeared to be holding dinner for three.

“Not yet!” Simmons chirped, scuttling to the desk and setting the tray down. “I ran into some toxicologists from the lab down the hall, actually. I thought, alright, it’s always nice to make new friends. By the time I made it to the mess it was nearly time to come back.”

“Really?” said Fitz, taking the chair and setting it in place to hold up part of the blind. “Chatty bunch, were they?”

“They were,” Simmons said nonchalantly, making a flapping-mouth sign with her hand as she stared at the pillows she’d set on the floor. “Is this how they ought to go?”

“Ehm... I was thinking maybe over there this time,” he said, pointing to the window. He’d been able to locate the room’s complement of listening devices with the help of the EM scanner— but hadn’t had time yet (or the tools) to remove them. Taking them out wasn’t always the best idea anyway— that just tipped people off that you’d found them. In any case, there was definitely something in the floor right under where they’d been last night. The pillows would have muffled it enough that they didn’t need to worry, and it could just be noise from utilities in the subfloor anyway. But the area by the window was the quietest spot in the room, in terms of EM emissions.

That meant they didn’t technically need the pillows this time, but Jemma’d seemed to like having them there last night.

“And then we just need a sheet, or a blanket, over the top and we’re in business,” he announced.

“Oh, let’s do the sheet for the top,” she replied. “That’s right by the air conditioner so it’ll be a bit cold, I think.” She’d be wanting the blanket once they were inside.

Simmons finished setting the pillows down right as Fitz got to work pulling the bedding apart. His back was turned, and she stopped working a moment to thoughtfully study the lines of his shoulders. And whatnot.
In that brief break from work, Simmons took a moment to contemplate the near future. Her expression went from thoughtful to a brief flash of something that could only be described as a mischievous smirk. She was absolutely, 100% taking that boy to bed with her tonight, and he had no idea.

That being said, Simmons was actually rather anxious about getting in over her head. With everything that was going on-- never mind several years’ accumulated effort towards staying platonic-- it was a little difficult to wrap her head around the idea of kissing him or anything past that at the moment. An evening of snuggling up and getting his arms around her, on the other hand, sounded--

“Hey, Jemma?”

“Oh?” She snapped out of her reverie and (she was fairly sure) managed to get her face back under control before he turned around to finish his question.

“Catch this?” He was holding up a balled-up heap of blankets, ready to throw it.

“Mhm!” she answered brightly, arms ready.

A few minutes later they had a functional little blind. Simmons crawled in and held a bit of sheet aside as Fitz came in with the tray.

“There we are!” Simmons lilted once they were settled, side-by-side, cross-legged with knees bumping one another as they faced off against the tray. As before, they kept their voices down to just be heard over the whirring of the air conditioner at their backs.

“Alright, what’s yours?” Fitz asked. “Don’t let me go and take it if you’ve got your eye on it.”

Simmons shrugged. “No, it should be easy enough, I just got two of everything this time.”

“That you did,” Fitz said, eyeing the two large salads occupying much of the acreage of the tray. Nestled in among them were a couple helpings of some kind of roast with crusty bread, which looked infinitely more interesting. If he didn’t at least make decent inroads into the vegetables, though... Simmons wouldn’t exactly hold it against him, but he’d be hearing a lot of enthusiastic praise during dinner about the benefits of lutein and nitrates and whatever else it was that biochemists saw in greens, because that was what Simmons trying to be subtle sounded like.

With a little more scooting around to make room so they could eat without elbowing some critical part of the blind and taking the whole thing down, they soon fell mostly silent between bites of dinner. Spending most of the day on their feet had left them both feeling rather drained. A good meal was just the ticket to feeling normal again.

Out of nowhere, Simmons suddenly reached up and gently nudged the collar of Fitz’s shirt, a bit under his ear.

“Is that engine grease?” she asked softly a moment later, after swallowing her bite of salad. Her eyebrow was raised as if she’d caught him at something.

Fitz found himself trying to crane his neck to look at it, a bit of a futile exercise when it came to collar stains.

“Could be,” he admitted.

“‘Cybernetics,’ hm?” she mock-scolded him. “Likely story. Come here, let me see.”

“I’s a funny story, we went down to the fabrication shop and--”

“No no no no no! I’ll bet I can guess what happened. Give me a second.” She put her plate down and got up on her knees. Leaning in to get a better look, Simmons scrutinized the fabric to see if it was a surface blotch or a pressed-in substance that indicated heavier pressure.

Fitz froze, feeling her breath curl over his neck. His stomach swooped in spite of himself, and he turned his face away from her, hoping she was honestly too distracted by a spot of grease to notice
him go red yet again.

“C’mon, Simmons, what are you doing?” he murmured, trying to sound gruff and failing miserably.

“Science, Fitz!” she bubbled. “I can hardly do any worthwhile deductions without getting a good look fir--”

“Okay, but tha’s not what I meant,” he said, shying away from Jemma’s touch as she withdrew on her own. She sank back down on her heels, an opaque little frown in her eyes.

Fitz had been putting this off for-- what? probably months now-- uncertain about anything at all other than that she probably had better things to worry about than the fact that he’d gone all moony. But now, in trouble and cut off from everybody else that they knew and knowing that she wanted to talk anyway and going up the wall from her hands on him and not knowing how or even if she wanted him to respond, it all came spilling out.

“It’s not that I mind you touching me, really, Jemma. Just that... if you don’t mean anything by it... I wish you wouldn’t.”

If she hadn’t been planning something already, the puppy-like apologetic look on his face alone might have sold it for her.

Fitz looked down at his hands, working his fingers around each other in a silence that probably only lasted a second or two but seemed to go on for far too long. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Jemma sit back, knees to her chest and hands on her neck, and murmur something uncertain-sounding.

Well, shite. Here it was. The reason he’d never said anything. Exhibit A.

Even so, they’d already gotten through so many potentially life-altering disasters together that it was a reflex (when faced with a smoldering crater) to make sure he’d heard her right.

“What was that?” he asked quietly, risking a quick look. She was nervously tapping her fingers against her neck and met his eyes in a furtive glance. It was clearly an accident for both of them. Two sets of eyes quickly darted away other as soon as they’d encountered one another.

“I said... I was wondering-- would it be alright...?” Simmons stumbled over her words. Could you sleep with me tonight? No, that wasn’t it. Come to bed with me? Please? That was still more open-ended than she liked. Suddenly, like walking out of a canyon to view a wide green valley spread below, Simmons had a breathtaking split-second vision of the fact that the English language was sorely lacking to convey in a single question what she was after. Until they managed to put some more reserved people in charge of the colloquialisms department, she was simply going to have to suffer through this one.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to come up in the bed tonight,” she blurted. Oh. That wasn’t too bad? she thought, breathing a great sigh of relief.

“What?”

Simmons sighed again. She’d gotten lucky with that phrasing, and lightning was nearly guaranteed not to strike twice. If she had to say it again--


It seemed to have done the trick though. Simmons watched her words sink in, closely followed by the telltale signs of Fitz desperately trying not to act flustered in front of a girl.

“Oh. Yeah, sure. That’s okay,” he stuttered. “I mean, if you want--”

“I do!” Simmons affirmed. In spite of everything, she somehow managed to sound prim about it.
Fitz let out a sigh of relief, feeling it turn into a chuckle in spite of himself.

“Sorry,” he said, shaking his head with a shy little grin. “That’s just... not how I imagined that conversation going.”

Simmons gave a little scoff as she settled back to sitting where she’d been before, cross-legged with a knee half pressed against, half underneath his. “Yes. Well, at least you weren’t reduced to speaking in Tarzan.”

“Sorry about that.” Fitz gave a nervous scratch behind his ear. “I really didn’t think I’d heard you right.”

“No, it’s alright. The-- er-- invitation did rather come out of nowhere. Perfectly understandable.”

Simmons found herself repeatedly trying to fork a piece of salad-- any piece-- and repeatedly failing. Her hands were moving more out of a need to keep moving than any real concerted attempt to eat, and the floppy bits of kale and spinach needed more direction than she could give them to stay on the fork.

“Everything alright over there?” Fitz asked.

Simmons wibbled over her response, murmuring indistinctly until words finally came out. The first thing her mind had come up with was Sometimes even though you know it’s a good idea to make the big jump, it still takes a moment to get up and do it. Though that probably wasn’t the best way to phrase it, all past events considered....

“I think I’m nervous?” she admitted quietly, punctuated by a couple more futile attempts to pick up salad.

“Oh, and I can’t imagine why,” Fitz scoffed quietly. “You’ve only just tried to set yourself up with SHIELD’s greatest, daftest git--”

“Hydra’s greatest--” she corrected with a smirk, then caught up to the rest of his statement. “Oh. Fitz!”

“--and now you’re a little bit nervous?”

It was Fitz’s turn to start stabbing at his food awkwardly. “‘M good on the couch. Honestly,” he reassured her. Inwardly, he was pleading that she wouldn’t change her mind. It was no good at all if she didn’t want him there-- but good grief, he hoped that she did.

“Well, I’m not good with you on the sofa,” she said loftily. “It’s cold! Ever since somebody took a look at the comforter and decided it’s microphone-laden contraband--”

“It definitely is, I finally found the mic in it about twenty minutes ago.”

“See? I’m going to freeze, I honestly didn’t sleep well at all last night because of it.”

“Well, then, if it’s a logistical concern--” Fitz stopped, seeing that he’d managed to get a bit of salad onto the fork by dumb luck.

“Hey. Here you go,” he offered.

Taking things that Fitz handed her was such an unquestioned habit that she she soon found herself trading forks with him and munching away on its cargo.

“Oh! Thank you,” Simmons replied. Soon, she was eyeing his collar again.

“Honestly, though, I give up. What happened there?” she asked, flicking gently at the smudge.

Her timing was magnificently off, the question coming right as Fitz took his first bite of roast. Simmons found herself running at the mouth a little-- half to fill the air and take the pressure off
him to respond right away, and half out of her own buzzing nerves.

“To be sure, I’m more than happy to circle back around to the delightfully awkward conversation we’ve been having, but there’s still so much in the day-to-day ‘living at Hydra’ docket left unaddressed,” she explained.

Fitz nodded along as if this were one of the most reasonable things he’d ever heard.

“For example, ‘What nefarious activities are afoot when an engineer who claims to work in cybernetics turns up with clear evidence of a day spent in general mechanics?’” Simmons asked, switching to a light teasing voice with an eyebrow raised high.

Fitz shook his head with a No-there’s-a-perfectly-reasonable-explanation look on his face.

Simmons went on.

“Aww. Fitz, did you meet a lady who wears engine grease for lipstick? Was she nice?”

At that, he made a face that looked like he’d just bit into a lemon. He finally managed to get the food down, trying not to laugh.

“Jemma! No, but I did run into Donnie Gill. He’s here.”

“Donnie Gill from the Academy?”

“Yeah-- well, Donnie Gill from the Sandbox now, I suppose. Which has all kinds of important tactical questions written all over it, but now that’s all being overpowered by this mental image of Donnie with engine grease all over his--”

Simmons burst out laughing, covering her eyes in an attempt to ward off the image.

“And he doesn’t like it very much, I’ll have you know, it’s a very unpleasant experience. Engine grease in the face.”

“I’m sorry, Donnie,” Simmons giggled, apologizing into the distance. “That was unnecessary and rude.”

“Anyway, he didn’t seem too keen on talking. Which I guess makes sense considering last time we saw him,” Fitz continued, growing somber.

“Yeah,” Simmons agreed softly. “Any idea how he’s doing?”

“Hard to say.” Fitz shrugged. “Bit of a strange thing, though-- he asked how long ago I’d transferred here.”

“He what? What did you say?”

“Told him the truth, basically. ‘Only been here a few days.’ Then his supervisor came on up and shooed him back to the lab.”

“Hmm,” Simmons replied. “They gave you the bit during orientation about how we’re not to discuss the ‘terms of our employment’ with anyone else, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Fitz nodded. “I think Donnie might think he’s still working for SHIELD.”

Chapter End Notes

In honor of the engine grease I was seriously considering naming this chapter something about lubricants but decided against it. Time will show the wisdom of this choice.
“Oh dear,” she murmured, in response to his deduction about Donnie thinking he was still working for SHIELD. “Could be any number of people like that, really. Depending on how their facility was taken.”

“Mmhm. If Hydra had to fight for the facility, then it’d be obvious something was up. But if enough of the administrators were Hydra, then…”

“There’d be no difference,” Simmons finished. “That’d explain why they’re so strict about keeping track of where we go and with whom we talk. Above and beyond the normal security clearance-type protocols, I mean.”

“Speaking of Donnie,” Fitz mentioned, brushing at his collar. “It sounds like he does a lot of runs down to the shop. Knows a guy there who runs a stamp-press. He asked if I wanted to see it, and it’s a chance to get a look around so of course I say yes. Next thing I know the guy’s got the side panel off and we’ve all got our heads inside checking out the power train.”

“Mm?” Simmons nodded around a bite of dinner.

“Only thing is, partway through I realize— there’s not lockout/tagout going on. It wasn’t even turned off, he’d just hit pause. Piece of s*it could have restarted at any moment with us all still half in there.”

“What!”?

Lockout/tagout was a standard industrial design element where any piece of machinery large enough to put an arm or head into could not be opened without turning the equipment all the way off—shutting off the power supply, etc. This innovation had come along after several dozen workers too many—many of them children, since they were small enough to get further into machinery—had been sent into machines to fix a jam and never come out again.

“So just… keep an eye out at work, yeah?” he said, turning his head to her. “Since they’re not too keen on looking out for us.”

“You got out of there in a hurry, mm?” Simmons murmured, reaching up to the smudge under his ear.

“Tha’s actually just from leaning in to take a look,” he admitted. “But yeah, once you figure out there’s nothing but one fuse between yourself and certain crushing death you sort of start backing your way out.”

“But why wouldn’t they use LOTO? That makes no sense. Not to mention, isn’t it illegal not to in the US?” She paused. “We are in the States, don’t you think?” She looked to Fitz uncertainly.

“No, I think you’re right,” he said, recalling her pinning them as being somewhere in the US southeast. And how apologetic she was that she couldn’t be any more exact with only the sounds of birds in the morning to go by.

“Most of the staff seem to be American,” he continued. “But once we had that experience with the stamp-press, I started looking around a little closer.” He shook his head. “They have enough face masks and gloves on the floor workers to look good on the first glance, but other than that… there’s a lot of really risky business going on down there.”

Simmons frowned, considering for a moment. Then she smirked.

“Hm,” she said. “Well if all this clandestine warfare business doesn’t work out, what say we simply report them to whatever their version is of a labor ministry over here?”

Seeing the bright grin break out on his face at her joke, Jemma felt herself warm a little.
“There we go,” Fitz agreed. He nudged her shoulder with a pointer finger. “‘Hydra leadership indicted on several assassinations, attempting t’ overthrow multiple national governments, and three counts of failure to separate oily rags from miscellaneous combustible waste.’”

“Mhm!” Jemma nodded, trying not to laugh too hard around the last bite of dinner. Once she had a chance to swallow, she turned to her side to face him and continued.

“We could have saved ourselves so much fretting. If only we’d known it were that easy.” Her knee bounced a little, still partly wedged under his knee as they both sat cross-legged to eat on the floor of the blind.

“Honestly, though,” Fitz admitted, “The concrete on the floor looks to be at least a couple years old-- if they were going to be hit with an inspection, it would’ve happened by now.”

“Hmm. What do you think?” Jemma had a suspicion of what that meant, but wanted to see if he saw any other possibilities.

“Means they’ve been around inspections somehow, in spite of everything,” he shrugged. “They’re paying out to the audit office in exchange for a free pass, something like that.”

Simmons nodded. That’s about what she’d thought.

“Oily rags, though?” she asked, eyebrows furrowed. “Isn’t that asking for a fire?”

“Yup,” Fitz answered, closing in on another forkful of food. Oils-- if they weren’t locked up in a bottle or drum-- tended to react with oxygen in the air and heat up. Put enough oil-soaked cotton or paper towels together in a pile, and fwoosh.

“But they’ve got them all there in a great big bin with all the cardboard waste,” he went on incredulously. As if the cotton from the rags they came in on weren’t enough fuel to be going on.

“That’s... hard to believe somebody could miss that.” She lowered her voice and leaned towards him, trying her best conspiratorial murmur. “You don’t think maybe someone’s doing this on purpose, do you?”

“A very patient arsonist?” Fitz laughed quietly. “Who knows, Jemma? Maybe you’ve got company in the double agent departmen’.”

“Hm,” she considered, then frowned. “They’d have to be very patient. Otherwise they’d be throwing in oxidizers just to get it over with.”

Fitz gave her a questioning look.

“You know,” she elaborated, winding her fork in the air. “Little bit of hypochlorite, peroxides, that sort of thing to get it going.”

Fitz nodded, trying to hold a thoughtful expression.

“You don’t think so?” she frowned. She couldn’t quite make out his expression. It didn’t look like any “yes” that she recognized, but it certainly didn’t look like a “no” either.

“That’s alright,” she forged on. “I can’t really imagine any scenario where one could just casually throw enough permanganate into a paper bin to reach spontaneous ignition without somebody noticing.”

Fitz blinked, urgently trying to control his face as he came to an extremely poorly-timed realization. Her voice may have been all curiosity and speculation, but the fact of the matter was Jemma was thoughtfully plotting out how best to torch Hydra’s R&D shop to the ground and make it look like an accident. As much as he’d thought he couldn’t be more attracted to her than he already was, he’d been wrong. So, so wrong.

“Unless maybe if it were in a paper bag or box?” She looked away, tugging the ends of her ponytail over her shoulder. “It’d have to be able to fall out and make contact with the oils for that to work....”
“Well,” Fitz said carefully after a long moment, sitting back and drawing his knees up to his chest. “I think it’s safe to say it’s a good thing your mum and dad kept you busy growing up.”

Jemma gave a short, humorless laugh. “You think so? I don’t know, I don’t feel that I’ve been up to much of anything useful,” she admitted. “You-- you’ve been fixing up the room, getting an eye on the shop floor situation, you found Donnie... I’m just pipetting who-knows-what all day like they tell me to.”

Fitz had crossed his arms over his knees, and set his head down over them. He turned a little to look at her quietly before deciding what to say.

“Well... that was the plan,” he said quietly. “It wouldn’t do to have you running about wrecking all the thermocyclers. Not very subtle. Do that and they’d have you figured out in... a week at least.”

Jemma smiled at his joke, though it didn’t reach her eyes.

“I know,” she answered softly.

She looked as if she were about to say more. But didn’t. Her eyes were downcast. Even so, and with everything that had already happened in their short time there, she didn’t look sad so much as just... tired.

“Hey,” Fitz said quietly, reaching out to nudge her knee with the backs of his fingers. “You’ll get your chance.”

Simmons looked up at him, then down at his hand, and took it without hesitation. She laced her fingers through his, soft and quick before he had a chance to pull away. Then she held on tight.

He pressed back, warm and determined, overcoming his initial surprise to run his thumb over hers.

“I mean it,” he said. “This place hasn’t been good to you, Jemma. We already talked about leaving sooner rather than later if it wasn’t a good situation, yeah?”

She nodded, not meeting his eyes.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “And even if you, or we, somehow managed to leave tonight, we’ve already got plenty of information to have made it worthwhile. Rough location, we have a good idea of at least a few of the projects they’re working on--”

Jemma felt herself shaking her head.

“No, that was for if… torture, doing procedures on people who obviously don’t want to be there… dire straits. Until that happens I still think we’re better off just observing until the team comes by. Or at least if we do try to go, we make sure we’re good and prepared before we do. We’re impressively outgunned here,” she pointed out.

Fitz pressed his lips together and made himself let her finish before speaking his mind.

“I don’t... they’re not treating you well, Jemma,” he said. She heard him deliberately stilling his voice, and the heat that came through anyhow.

“Hmph,” she murmured. “No they’re not, but going off half-cocked isn’t going to help.”

Christian reaches for the buoy, she squeezed into his hand.

“Christian reaches for the buoy,” she murmured. “No they’re not, but going off half-cocked isn’t going to help.”

Christian reaches for the buoy, she squeezed into his hand.

Fitz looked sharply over and searched her for a moment. He’d remember that, of course. From Copenhagen-- the play, not the city. Bohr and Heisenberg going round and round in circles about what could be. Or what could have been. How no matter how many times Bohr reimagined a day of taking his family boating on the water, how many times he second-guessed about swimming out to reach his son Christian, neither could think of a way things could have gone differently. Where the boy had come home living and warm, instead of succumbing to the water in his lungs-- being lost himself a rescue attempt-- leaving the rest of his family adrift on the water with no way to get home.
That there was a crucial difference between heroism and suicide. To wit: whether or not it worked. That sometimes it was impossible to tell beforehand which it might be. And that other times yet, the line was clear; and if you wanted to live to be good for something another day, all you could do was sit and watch. And how Heisenberg might have seen that of himself-- watching his country sink into its lunacy, the salty taste of futile heroics a sting and a bitterness on his lips.

Fitz eased his hold on her hand, shifted it, and held fast again.

*Another draft then,* he said in return.
“I talked to Raina today,” Simmons mentioned.

“You managed to get ahold of her? How’d it go then?” Fitz settled back in to listen.

There was a bit of a jumble as he set his knee down to rest cross-legged again. He couldn’t quite believe that she was actually holding his hand on purpose. So as he picked it up to let his knee under, he let it fall open and loose so Jemma could pull back if she liked.

She stayed with him, though. And threaded her fingers further through his when they came to a rest, and shot him a mock-annoyed sideways look. Funny enough, that look was when Fitz knew that she meant it. Feeling his whole face and neck go red again-- and honestly, it was about time he stopped that because a dozen-plus rounds of changing the tension on your capillaries in one day couldn’t be good for them, could it?-- he stifled something that might have turned into a ridiculous and out-of-character giggle, and scratched absently at his jaw in an attempt at dignity.

“Fitz, honestly,” Jemma sighed, shaking her head. She couldn’t stop the grin that broke out right after, though. Or the stupid butterflies in her stomach from seeing him get flustered.

Realizing that she was seriously at risk of being distracted, Simmons cleared her throat and steered herself back to the very serious conversation they’d been having before they started giggling at one another like schoolchildren. The mental image of the jars on Raina’s shelves were more than sufficient to get her mind back on track.

“Alright, ah, three things,” she said, clearing her throat. Fitz turned to listen.

“First, yes, she wants the camera from the-- last night.”

“No problem,” Fitz replied, reaching across himself with his left hand into his right pocket so that he didn’t have to let go of her hand. After a big of contorting, he produced the die-sized device and held it up for her to see. Jemma put her hand out for him to drop it in.

“There you go,” he said quietly. “See if you can’t get it good and wet and keep it that way overnight. Bonus points if it’s in something believably shower-related and corrosive.”

Jemma nodded, following his logic. They needed it to be broken when Simmons handed it over to Raina, such that Hydra would have to depend on recordings of radio transmissions to locate when it was installed and start narrowing it down to who did it. If Hydra managed to do that, then they knew for sure that using the quarter transmitter was a recipe for being found out. And as satisfying as it would be to crush the camera to bits, something that looked a little more like a benign-- like corrosion and short-circuiting following naturally from its being located in the shower-- would take a lot of suspicion off of Simmons.

“Second,” Jemma continued. “She said the strangest thing. Something about how ‘If it were really necessary to be loyal to Hydra, hardly anyone would be here.’ That’s an odd thing for a supervisor to say, don’t you think?”

“She said that?” Fitz asked, more than a little incredulous.

They speculated back and forth a bit about where Raina might have been going with that. The simplest reading was simply that she and most everyone else were working Hydra for cynical reasons of their own. Not implausible, given the whole Garrett scenario; and that that was the personnel situation in many a given scientific or military institution anyhow.

More arcane readings ranged from that it was some kind of veiled warning to Simmons about her own loyalties, or conversely, that Raina was secretly leading some kind of resistance within
Hydra. Which seemed very unlikely, given her history, and thus was relegated to the back burner of possible considerations.

“Bottom line, Jemma, keep an eye on that one,” Fitz concluded.

“Mm. Yes. Thank you, Dr. Fitz, for that deduction,” Simmons smirked, knocking their joined hands into his knee.

“Oh, alright,” he harrumphed, grinning back.

Then she realized he’d kept talking and she hadn’t caught it.

“Hmm?” she asked, suddenly embarrassed. She had… not been listening, on account of the way he looked at her now was having a much greater effect on her than she’d anticipated. He just looked so bloody earnest, it almost broke your heart.

Somewhere in the back of her head it registered that it was a damn good thing she’d waited on encouraging him in any real way until she was certain. Poor thing still had no sense of caution whatsoever. Not that she was doing any better—completely losing her train of thought from watching him, honestly.

“What was that third thing, then?” he repeated

“Oh!” she remembered. “Right. I’m supposed to be trying to recruit you, obviously. She encouraged me to try harder because apparently you’re not being very cooperative,” Jemma reported, leaning in conspiratorially on the last bit.

“Yeah? Is that the rumor?” he grinned.

“Evidently. So, in the vein of trying harder: Fitz, would you like to join Hydra today?” She had to stop herself from giggling; it wasn’t a sentence she could get out with a straight face.

“Oh No?” He shook his head, narrowing his eyes down at her.

“Please?”

“I’m going to have to go with ‘Still a no,’” he said apologetically.

“Hm. Fitz, you’re a tough one to crack. God knows I tried,” she said mock-sadly, turning away as if looking about the room.

“C’mon, Jemma, don’t go,” he cajoled mildly, twitching their joined hands toward him. When she looked back to him, there was a note of mischief in his expression.

“We can still be friends, yeah?”

“Probably,” she smirked, with no hesitation whatsoever. Jemma followed his little tug to nudge her shoulder into his, bumping away at first and then settling in a little more purposefully. He was warm and laughing, which was a rare treat, and reaching out to her with gentle tugs and openings that would have been easy to let go had she not wanted them. But she was finding herself wanting to follow him in.

Well—within reason, of course. Being in this place had her so on edge, she was quite sure she wouldn’t fully relax again until they were out. And nine years of strict professional boundaries didn’t just melt away at the drop of a hat.

She was more than ready to get started chipping away on them, though.

Fitz felt a warm rush hit him when she settled into his side. His arm, actually—which was now in the way. Giving her hand a squeeze before dropping it, he skimmed his arm over her shoulders and around her side. Once his hand had settled lightly to her waist, he gave another little tug for her to lean in. He couldn’t help the smile that came when Jemma followed readily, snuggling into
him and ducking her head into his shoulder.

Jemma almost frowned into Fitz’s warm, wool-scratchy shoulder when she felt the tension in him, as if he wasn’t quite sure he was allowed to do this. She shifted a bit to reach better and slid her arms around him, wrapping her fingers together over his ribs. His relaxation under her touch felt like taking the excess torsion out of a spring. Still humming with energy, but relaxed and pliant-- a long ways off from the bony wreck of a boy she’d gotten to know him as.

Fitz followed her turn inward into him, tucking his face down to drop a quiet kiss on the crown of her head. Drawing a deep breath, he then stopped cold at the unfamiliar scent on her hair. It was sweet and floral and very English, and-- wasn’t completely new. Right. The shower. That’s where he’d smelled it before; she must have been in the middle of using whatever it was that smelled that way when she’d found the camera.

Recalling a sour vigilance, Fitz wound his arm tighter around her. He was already deep in thought when she began to shake and rattle in his arms. Quiet sounds like sobs, or hiccups, were coming from her throat. Fitz looked down, all concern and ready to lift up her chin to see her face.

“Jemma? Wha’s wrong?”

It struck Simmons that this sort of thing-- trying to find some relief in your best friend’s arms while imprisoned in an enemy work camp-- really oughtn’t be so funny. But on the other hand, no matter how you sliced it, she was still snuggling up with a colleague in a blanket fort. It felt more than a little bit ridiculous.

Not that a little ridiculousness was the worst thing ever. As much as they needed their wits about them and couldn’t afford to be distracted, they couldn’t be on guard 24/7 either. Hypervigilance broke you if it went on too long. There was no telling how long they’d be there, and they were both all too aware of the very human need to take breaks before you snapped.

And as far as breaks went, this one was more than lovely. Fitz was brilliant, and wouldn’t let her down, and was gently pulling her in, and it was going to be an adjustment being close with him like this, but damned if it wasn’t nice. She could feel his heart ease down-- just a little-- under her temple as they settled in together. And since he’d never been much for cologne and whatnot in the first place, being taken away from their home didn’t matter. He still smelled like himself, like wool and cotton and shop floor, as if nothing had happened. Jemma was taking deep breaths of him and trying to forget where they were when she felt his lips, then his warm breath against her hair.

Shaken loose from her reverie, Jemma jolted and remembered where exactly she was. The absurdity of the whole scenario swelled into view and burst open. Suddenly, Jemma felt herself needing to hold back a chuckle. And another. Somehow the tension of the last few days-- never mind the last month or so, which had never really been resolved-- and the gallows humor of their situation, and the fact that not only were they grown adults hiding from the bad guys in a blanket fort, and also that it was actually a very effective piece of improvised anti-espionage gear-- she couldn’t keep it down anymore.

“Jemma? What’s wrong?”

“No, sorry,” she sputtered, taking a hand away to wave off his concern. She leaned back, other hand trailing over his back, so that he could see he amusement crinkling her eyes and nose-- not tears or… indigestion… or whatever he’d been worried about.

“It’s-- I’m just--” Jemma tried to explain, and cut herself off with a sort of drawn-out snort.

Fitz registered her attitude with relief, and then amusement of his own. Oh, she was laughing now? This would be good. He sat back, propping himself up with his hands behind him.

“What’s that, Jemma?” he prodded-- part in honest concern, and part teasing her for this very unprofessional behavior. “Is there something about this that’s funny?” He cast his gaze around the blind to indicate their general situation.

“No, nothing at all! We’re only hiding from Hydra in a blanket tent--”
And about to start snogging out of sheer boredom, she almost added before managing to stop herself. She wasn’t actually sure about that. Either the snogging, or it being due to boredom. No. Yes? Results inconclusive. Best left alone altogether at the moment, that one.

“Successfully, I might point out,” he noted.

“--and it’s actually working,” she agreed. “Which is both fantastic and slightly ridiculous if you think about it. And….”

And this damned place had her on edge in general. And she’d barely slept since they’d gotten there, and the same probably went for him too. And the low-grade panic from being in Raina’s office six hours ago was still lingering. And she was starting to get a feel for her coworkers but not enough yet to know which ones were safe to ask questions of, or how. And she still had so many questions about what exactly they had her working on, and her patience for the “sit tight and watch” phase was growing thin. And then there was this whole thing with Fitz, which was a world of trouble unto itself.

“...I’m a hot mess,” Jemma managed to get out. Then she raised her eyes to meet his. And tried not to snicker. And failed. “I’m sorry,” she spluttered. “There are so many things that could go wrong right now I can’t even”-- her hands left her neck to scrub over her head-- “keep track of them all, which--” She burst into another fit of giggles.

Fitz just watched silently. Simmons was brilliant under pressure... until it kept her from sleeping for a week. Then she tended to crack from sheer distraction. The upside of Fitz turning into a surly dustbin when tired was that he could sleep anytime, anywhere, and used that to frequent advantage during crises to avoid murdering his teammates. Meanwhile, Simmons was so used to playing team morale officer that she tended to forget that he could help when she was down.

“-sorry! Speaks volumes about my ability to handle them, doesn’t it?”

Fitz shrugged. You sort of had to work your way up to it when giving Simmons a pep talk or she’d just start arguing with you.

“Well,” he said in a near-whisper to be absolutely sure he couldn’t be heard, “There’s this,” he said, fishing the transmitter from his pocket. “Which you smuggled in like a pro despite not having any previous experience…” His brow furrowed. “That I know about or want to,” he amended.

Simmons snorted and looked away, shaking her head.

“And,” he added, “You had Grant bloody ‘Better-Than-Romanoff, Beat-the-Unbeatable-Polygraph’ Ward believing you. He wouldn’t have let them give you water otherwise,” he pointed out.

“That wasn’t acting,” she countered. “Nothing simulates the sound of vomiting like vomiting.”

Fitz nodded and kept going.

“You had me thinking you were drunk for-- what, multiple minutes in a row? And just today you got some interesting information out of Raina,” he continued.

“Interesting circumstantial information,” Simmons insisted.

“Point is, Jemma Simmons, you are getting better a’ this. Whether you like it or not,” he said, with a little smile. Then he rounded on her and started wagging a finger.

“You have a very believable face and you’re growing the soul of a devious little bastard and it’s beautiful. You should give yourself credit.”

She crinkled her nose at him in bewilderment, eyes dancing over his face, then broke a little smile.

“Aww, Fitz,” she said. “That was sweet.”
And she started giggling again.

Fitz’s eyes flickered up to the ceiling-- well, the blanket directly over them-- and back to her. He bit his lip, watching her crack up again for a brief moment.

“So here’s what I’m thinking, and you can tell me how it sounds.”

“Mm?” An eyebrow shot up in interest.

“You tell me about this talk that you had with the toxicologists, because that sounds like it may have been significant. And then we send you to bed, because you only get despondent when you’re worn out. It’s basically a law of nature.”

She dropped her eyes down for a moment to think, and looked back up at him, smiling tightly.

“You’ll stay?”

“Yeah.”

Jemma nodded. “Good plan,” she agreed.

Seeing how she was still sitting hunched over, Fitz reached to close the small space between them and ran a thumb firmly along the back of her shoulder.

“Is that helping, or...?” he asked. He’d guessed right-- it wasn’t just her spine that was suffering from all the bench work. For all the give in her muscles, they may as well have been a block of wood.

Jemma’s eyes went wide at the touch, feeling the tension under her skin practically resonate at the pressure.

“Mhm,” she answered simply, sliding her eyes shut and accepting his touch with a tight nod.

“Yeah, c’mere then,” he said quietly, signaling for her to scoot back with a light tug on the point of her shoulder.

Jemma gladly followed. They had a long-running habit of one of them taking over when the other was clearly out of sorts. She was more than ready to turn the keys over to him for a little while.

“I was just walking by,” she said, adjusting herself to get within reach and put her back to him.

“There were three of them just standing in the hall talking shop, as one does,” Jemma went on. She drew her ponytail over her shoulder to keep it out of the way, and tried not to shiver under his touch. He wasn’t using much pressure yet-- just flat sweeps of his hands, warming the skin underneath. It felt good in the cold of the room.

“Yeah?” he answered absentely. First things first-- Fitz did a little reconnaissance to find out where the knotted-up trouble spots were. The answer was not unexpected: everywhere.

“And it sounded like they were talking about Raina, so I thought-- ‘Clearly there’s a common interest, let’s go see what they have to say!’”

Fitz let out an amused hmph at the way Simmons worded her espionage efforts.

“Anything good?” he asked, starting to press a little with his thumbs into a knot above her shoulderblade.

“Well,” Jemma chuckled, “not precisely. Seems they don’t feel that Raina’s really equipped for the job.”

“Oh?”
“Well, they’re toxicologists and she’s cell bio, apparently, so—” She stopped short and took in a quick hiss of air.

“Not good?” Fitz asked, drawing his hands back.

“No, it’s alright,” she affirmed, glancing over her shoulder to him. “Just knotted up, is all.”

Simmons drew her knees up and hugged her arms under them, trying to get herself in a stable enough position that she wouldn’t be fighting to sit up against the pressure. Fitz started up again once she was settled. Chills danced out over her skin at first, until it managed to register that he was in the very practical and somewhat painful business of stamping out knots.

“So the usual interdisciplinary head-butting, is it?” he prompted her when she didn’t speak for a few moments.


“Anyway, from the way they were talking, it all sounds like this place came together out of a series of mergers that happened sometime in the last few months and nobody’s used to working together yet.”

“Yeah,” Fitz agreed. “I think that might be true on the hardware side as well. There’s two other labs in the cluster where the guys in charge seem to know each other, and the fab shop. Outside of that, it’s all ‘Let’s call the lawyers’ and ‘I don’ know, can we really tell them?’”

“Right!” Simmons agreed. “This place feels all… new and cobbled-together, doesn’t it?”

Then she winced, hoping the knot Fitz was working would have the good grace to let go sometime soon. It ached terribly, and she was having to push back so hard to keep from toppling over that it wasn’t at all certain whether this was helping in the long run.

“Mmhm,” Fitz agreed. “And losing about a year’s worth of progress while they figure ou’ how to live together. Cybertek, Centipede, and who knows what else all trying to figure out how to keep their new bosses happy and play nice.”

Fitz and Simmons were all too familiar with the problems of getting situated with new people when the job was all about knowing how each other’s minds worked. After all, there was a reason they’d stuck together. Even when Fitz was confronted with the choice to either go gallivanting around the world, or waste a year of his life trying to get settled with somebody new, a life of jet lag actually sounded downright cozy. Wrapping your head around new people was the absolute worst. And it would explain why even though most of her coworkers didn’t seem to know they were working for Hydra, her lab still had an openly fidgety, cranky air.

“Out of the darkness, into the light, and who do you think you are and what are you doing in my lab!?” Jemma laughed.

“Right,” Fitz smirked. Well, it was good news for SHIELD if this were true. As long as the various departments in Hydra’s research and tech division were too busy defending their own turf to work together, new inventions would be ground to a virtual halt. Which was giving him some interesting ideas….

“Anyway, they were also complaining that Raina’s publication record just stops about three years ago. ‘How can she possibly be in charge of the entire biology division? She’s just been sitting on her thumbs.’”

“Well, that’s probably when she started working for Hydra,” Fitz reasoned.

“Exactly! She wasn’t backpacking Europe, she was doing illegal human trials; so no wonder it’s
not published. I’m thinking if we can get an idea of if and how Centipede’s work changed about three years ago, plus knowing now that she’s from cell bio, that might give me some ideas as to how she operates.”

Jemma turned to give him a look.

“And I think it’s safe to assume those poor toxicologists have no idea what we’re really doing here,” she added.

“Yeah. Sounds like they’ve been sold a story, doesn’t it?” he replied, shifting to follow her as her shoulders moved.

Jemma winced; Fitz was patiently pressing on and on, and the knot wasn’t going anywhere.

“Let’s try something different; these mechanics are all wrong,” she proposed.

Then she steadfastly ignored the blush rising up in her cheeks once she heard herself say it. Darned if that didn’t sound all kinds of randier than she’d meant it.

“I was about to say,” Fitz agreed. “It doesn’t really seem to be working.” He would have said something earlier, if only he had any likelier ideas than--

Simmons turned, took up a pillow, tugged it over Fitz’s lap, and practically flopped down.

“There!” she said matter-of-factly at him. “Can’t fall over this way.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey lovely readers, shoutout to you all for sticking with it this far! I'm a little in the dark as to how this is playing out for y'all... do feel free to drop a note, it'll give me some feel for what's going well/might need work and also would basically make my day. :3
Fitz stared down at her for a moment, eyes wider than he would have liked, hands shot up to his sides in a startle reflex.

It wasn’t that he minded. He just hadn’t seen it coming. Though in retrospect that may have been foolish. The fact that Simmons was direct was one of the things that he’d always liked about working with her: she may be kind about it, but you never really wondered what she was thinking.

Yet somehow he’d never quite connected that to… personal behavior. Had sort of made a point of trying not to make those connections, actually.

“Glad one of us is thinking,” he agreed, keeping his voice light, once he’d found it again. She wasn’t wrong-- having her sitting up made it impossible to put any kind of meaningful pressure into it.

“More just ‘tired,’ really. But if you’d like to chalk it up to advanced insight, that’s certainly permitted,” Jemma said up at him brightly.

Fitz gave a small, proud smile at her tone. Getting her settled back on track with the multitude of things she was doing right-- and a little personal attention-- seemed to be working. There was nothing in the world worse than a sad Jemma Simmons. Now that she was getting sorted, he was feeling a good deal better himself.

“Here,” he said, tipping her head and shoulders up with a gentle nudge, and gave himself a quarter-turn in the little blind so that she was laid out in front of him.

Once Fitz stilled, she shifted and squirmed in his lap to try and get comfortable again. And as he’d suspected from the moment she’d lain down, the pillow was turning out to be a necessary intervention. The notion of Jemma being comfortable enough with him to lay her head down on him, along with the friction and warmth of her actually doing so, met with a ready response as blood rushed south.

He also had to wonder if she hadn’t just put it there for her own benefit. That would be vintage Jemma, honestly. He hadn’t been born yesterday, but she was by far the more seasoned of the two of them and they both knew it. And considerate to a fault. It was completely plausible that she’d have thought ahead a little bit and decided to spare him some self-consciousness.

Caught in an odd place between embarrassed and charmed, Fitz settled for a quick, soft sigh while Jemma got herself situated.

“How’s that?” he asked quietly, once she’d stopped moving around.

Jemma let out a pleased little hum and a satisfied wave of the shoulders as her eyes fell closed.

He’d started out on the usual knotty areas in the shoulders, which was working much better now that he could put in solid pressure without pushing her away. Before too long though, he’d moved his attention to the muscles that ran up each side of the spine, like cables. Jemma gave an amused little smile as he did. It was so like an engineer, really. Not that she was about to complain. The warmth and full press of his hands was very nice, with one of them cupped under the nape of her neck and the other drawing firm little circles down each side of her spine…

...scratch that, it was marvelous. Jemma had never run into this exact thing before personally, but she recognized a neurochemical rush when she felt it. It was just occurring to her that she’d heard something about the lines along the spine being considered energy meridians or somesuch, and that somebody really ought to look into that from a neurochemistry lens, when she found herself
floating and not particularly caring what was going on or how.

Her thoughts trickled slowly, punctuated by little changes in direction and rhythm over her skin. This was good. She’d been needing some kind of release, badly. And if this managed to do it, far better this than some embarrassing crying fit or locking herself in the shower for an incriminating length of time.

Oh God, the shower.

Jolted out of her reverie by the thought, Jemma grumbled and rubbed a hand over her eyes and mentally kicked herself. If she was going to keep functioning, she needed to relax. Not relive nasty and by-now irrelevant memories.

Fitz had set to work, tentatively at first, then finding a good rhythm as knots started to give way. Within a few minutes the major offenders were vanquished, and… she still seemed a little jumpy. And to be perfectly honest, he rather liked having her here. Wouldn’t mind trying to give her a reason to stay. His always-restless hands fidgeted over her shoulders a moment before locking on to a new thought.

Her breathing-- which had hitched up every time he went after a knot-- soon went steady and slow as he gently worked the back of her neck. It was a little tough to make out her expression from this angle, but he could feel her weight going soft and relaxed over him.

It wasn’t long before he’d given her nape all the attention that could be reasonably useful. Which begged a meaningful question: to move up into her hair, or follow the spine down? Fitz blushed deeply at the thought. It wasn’t actually much of a question-- she’d been running her hands all over his head yesterday, whereas the fabric of her blouse was so crisp that there was no hope of getting any pressure down to the skin and infrastructure beneath so long as it was there. And he really needed to stop thinking about that, before--

Jemma shifted and picked her head up a bit, fussing and grumbling quietly.

“Sorry,” he blurted, drawing his hands back to fold over his middle. Of course she’d noticed. And if she were actually looking for that, she wouldn’t have dropped the pillow down like she had, so….

“No, ’s okay, I’m sorry,” she murmured sleepily. “Started ‘thinking’ again. But I’m done now.”

Fitz blinked, trying to catch up with what was going on.

“Mm,” she said quietly. “Where’d you learn to do that, though? Feels nice.” Fitz was about to answer when she nestled in again, pressing against him until he felt his knees go soft and a coil of heat start winding in his belly.

“Hang on,” he said as politely as possible. He nudged her to hold her head up a bit while he shifted again, facing the way he’d been before. Now he had his feet out in front of him and Jemma laying out to his side, draped sleepily over his thighs rather closer to his knees than she’d been before.

“First year at Sci-Ops, you remember Eric from my flat? He was dating--”

“--Oh, the massage therapy student,” Jemma finished.

“Yeah, and somebody cleared off Saturday nights for going out,” he looked meaningfully down at Jemma. “So she’d come over to see Eric and half the time he’d be locked up with a paper and couldn’ do anything. And she had all these practice hours she had to log and I was always home weekend nigh’s anyway, and i’ was either guinea pig or play ‘Minecraft’, so…”

Jemma snorted.

“Oh, and I bet you hated it!” she laughed.
“It was rough going at first,” he insisted. “Student, remember?”

“Well, you learned a useful skill. All I got out of weekend nights that year was… hmm.” Jemma shifted and pulled a face. “Practice at killing time, I think.”

Fitz’s social life had been stymied for years by the fact that they were always at work, where everyone had a PhD, which meant the age bracket bottomed out around 24. There weren’t all that many women interesting in dating a boy upwards of five years their junior.

The number of men willing to try and make a go of it with a nineteen-year-old girl, on the other hand, was actually rather alarming in hindsight. And funny enough, the men who were game for dating that far down in age and those who were actually worthwhile company did not often intersect. It led to an awful lot of late-night conversations when Simmons would stop by his flat after a night out hoping to prove to herself that her brain was still intact. When she did come home at night, that is.

Fitz did his best to look dubious.

“Is that all? I seem to remember a lot of enthusiasm for going out, from someone who says she wasn’t enjoying herself.”

She made a dismissive noise.

“The things that are entertaining at nineteen and the things that seem worthwhile in hindsight at twenty-seven don’t always intersect, Fitz,” she said up at him. A little smirk of self-deprecation showed itself in the corners of her eyes.

Fitz bit back an *I told you so* that he may or may not have been holding onto for nearly ten years. It hadn’t really been his business at the time, and then he’d gone and made a green-eyed ass of himself on the Bus, and now that it was just the two of them it didn’t even feel interesting to say anymore. There’d been a lot of people and a lot of things in and out of their lives since then. And it wouldn’t have been anything she wasn’t saying to herself already.

“Hey,” he said instead, flicking her shoulder gently. “You were always good at meeting new people. That’s not a bad thing.”

Jemma made a little *hmph*, cut her eyes up to him without moving her head, and looked away.

“Well. That may be.” She paused. “You were always better at staying with them, though. That’s not nothing, either,” she finished.

Fitz looked down with a question in his face and saw that she was still looking a bit off into the distance.

“What’s that?” he said, curiosity showing through the quiet tone of his voice.

“You know,” she sighed lightly, appealing to his memory. “Nothing’s ever really gone well, right? Or obviously I’d still be with…” She rolled her eyes. “Well, somebody.”

Fitz’s eyes narrowed a little, trying to figure out where she was going with this.

“The point is, Fitz, I don’t…” She sighed, closed her eyes, and looked up at him. “If we were to get close and then it were to not work out for whatever reason, what—? I don’t even know what I would do.”

He let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding, and traced a careful finger down her upper arm.

“Yeah,” he agreed quietly. “Me neither.”

After several beats of silence, Jemma spoke up again, hands gesticulating furiously.
“I mean, Skye and Trip are wonderful, but they don’t know our breakup routines,” she said.

“That’s right,” Fitz agreed. “I’d put money down that Skye doesn’t even know what Tim Tams are, never mind where to find them.”

“Precisely! And while we still have yet to find something Trip isn’t good at, the fact that you need someone to come by your flat by day three to make you put trousers on and go outside might possibly elude him.”

Fitz looked a little chagrined at that, which she should have expected, but was rather caught up in the moment. She patted his arm in apology.

“We have to be mindful of these things,” she tried to explain, blushing a little.

“No, you have a point,” he shrugged. “The question of who’s going to hold your hair back after--”

“Ohhh, no no no no no. No,” Simmons laughed, waving her hands. “There will be no repeats of the cranberry vodka incident.”

“Alright, alright,” he grinned at her reaction.

“This is a much older and wiser Jemma Simmons than th--” she went on.

“That’s good. Honestly, I’d prefer it if you didn’t.”

“This we agree on,” she replied, eyes widened, and decided to tease him a little. “Not even for you.”

“Especially not for me,” he nodded pointedly down at her.

“Hm-mm,” Jemma murmured softly. She took a deep breath and picked her way carefully through her words.

“In any case. I’m sorry. I don’t want to be flighty on you. I’m just… nervous, Fitz, and it’s not because I don’t like you. Yeah?”

Fitz had gone back to running his fingers up and down the back of her neck—half to reassure her, and half to occupy his own fidgeting nerves. Then her words sent a white hot bolt of hope running through him, and honestly he wasn’t quite sure what to do with it.

“Yes,” he agreed quietly. “I know what you mean.”

They stayed that way for a long, hushed moment.

“For what it’s worth,” he said, breaking the silence. “Don’t let it bother you that nothing ever worked out. They weren’t good enough for you anyway, is all.”

She let out a little laugh.

“Oh, is that it, then? And you’re the answer?” she teased him, not knowing what else to say.

“No, I was just trying to be reassuring.” Not exactly feeling qualified to answer her next question, Fitz settled for teasing her back. “And that’s your puzzle to solve, I’m afraid,” he said lightly. Then he remembered something.

“In the meantime…” he said.

“Mm?”

“Great existential questions aside, you don’t want to get to bed hungry. Have you eaten anything at all besides the salad?”
Jemma paused, trying to think back. She’d been a little distracted.

“I suppose not?”

“Jemma,” he said with great mock-disappointment, shaking his head at her. “C’mon,” he offered, nudging her shoulder to get her to go onto her side, facing away from him.

“What?” Jemma half-sat up, confused.

“Well, at least ea’ one of the rolls or something,” he said.

“Lying down?”

Fitz put his hands up in a don’t-shoot gesture.

“You don’t have to,” admitted, “but if it’s alright with you, I had a bit more of that in mind and you’re going to fall asleep soon no matter what and… you know, dinner…” Fitz trailed off, starting to look a little sheepish.

“Are you going for efficiency? Is that it?” Jemma probed, leaning away to get a better look at him, an eyebrow rising up in amusement.

Fitz shrugged.

“No, it’s alright. You know what? I’m sold,” she said through lips that didn’t quite cooperate from the pull of her smile.

*

It turned out to be impossible not to feel a little bit debauched and silly when a gentleman friend was stroking your scalp while you worked through bites of roast pork and figs. Simmons was doubly thankful for the pillow by this point. In addition to keeping Fitz’s bony knees and whatnot out of her face, it meant she didn’t have to worry about bumping and bouncing around on him with her jaw from chewing either. Granted it wasn’t against any specific rule of etiquette she’d ever covered, but it didn’t seem terribly graceful.

Turned away where he couldn’t see, she allowed herself a grin and tried not to laugh. Both of them got grouchy when they were hungry, but Fitz would generally take it as a sign to break whereas she usually tried to plow through it. Then he’d tease her that you had to be a special kind of stupid to forget about lunch— “Some kind they invented in England, no doubt.” Then she tried to remember the last time he’d given her that particular kind of flak-- or any kind, really-- and realized that she couldn’t.

The dish was heavy enough that it didn’t take long to feel satisfied. Taking up one of the rolls, Jemma shifted to her back and held it up at Fitz.

“Still hungry?”

Fitz had been rather enjoying the fact that this plan meant he could hold onto her, but didn’t have to worry about making conversation.

“Mm?” he murmured.

“You barely ate anything either, Fitz,” Jemma elaborated. She wiggled the roll in an effort to make it look enticing.

“That’s okay, I’ll catch up,” he shrugged.

“Such indifference!” Jemma gasped in mock shock. She dropped the roll back onto a plate. Then she lifted an eyebrow and gave her best effort at a sly smile.
“Is it because your hands are busy?”

Fitz looked down, brow furrowed, at the saucy look she was giving him and his fingers sliding over and under her chestnut hair. The ponytail holder had been eased out some time ago.

“Yes, Jemma, yes it is,” he answered, very seriously. She laughed at him, and he laughed back, grinning ear to ear.

Jemma blushed and found herself placing a hand over her eyes—there not being anywhere convenient to duck except further into his lap. Given how he’d placed her last time he’d had to move it seemed like that might not be appreciated.

“Oh. And see, now look what you’ve done,” he said, voice gently chiding.

“What?” she asked, peering through loosened fingers.

“Making a mess, is what you’re doing,” Fitz said, brushing a thumb over her forehead where a few crumbs had landed.

“Right. Sorry,” she replied, a little embarrassed, and reached up to flick away any remainders.

“No, they’re gone,” he said lightly. With that, he kept on lightly brushing his fingers over her brow and into her hairline.

“That okay?” he asked quietly. Jemma nodded and leaned softly into his touch, feeling herself go loose and warm under the attention.

Fitz tipped his head to watch her, drawing long, loose patterns up her temples and into her hair as if he could smooth away the worry she’d been holding onto. It could have even been working; she went quiet and lax and still like before, eyes sliding shut before long. Fitz was feeling beyond pleased with himself—to get Jemma from the near-frantic state she’d been in to nearly asleep was much better than he’d been hoping for, to be honest. That she was going warm and molten in his own lap was completely unexpected. But welcome.

He’d seen her sleep before, of course. Usually face-down at a desk. Slowly fading out unguarded right in front of him like this was new. And, he had to admit, beautiful. Not that that wasn’t true of everything she did in his opinion. But there was a lot of trust there for her to just sink away like that, and he thought long and hard on that as he touched her.

Jemma slipped back into her fuzzed-out state from earlier, briefly hoping she’d manage not to start snoring before losing track of conscious thought almost completely. It seemed impossible not be lulled into a sleep by the almost-reverent way he touched her.

She roused a little on hearing her name, and felt him palm her cheek. It was warm and dry and wide and a little rough, thumb passing in gentle movements over her cheekbone.

“Mm?” she murmured, eyes blinking open against the light. And then they went wide, seeing his gone intent and soft and drifting to her mouth.

“Oh!” she fairly yelped in surprise, before she could stop herself, and tried to recover by turning into his hand, placing hers over it and dropping a kiss into his palm.

She’d never seen someone’s pupils snap shut before, but there was a first time for everything. She was already trying to apologize as it hit him, face turning equal parts crestfallen and mortified as he realized what had just happened.

*  

Simmons was more than willing to believe Fitz’s stammering, red-faced admission that while he certainly may have been thinking about kissing her, he wasn’t about to just up and do it on a unilateral basis. It sounded more than plausible. He’d only just asked permission to touch her
sodding forehead, after all.

On her end, Jemma was more concerned with the fact that while she may be jumpy in general, she didn’t want to take it out on him. She’d only been practically purring in his lap. You could hardly hold it against someone for their mind wandering in that particular situation.

And it wasn’t that she didn’t want to, even. Just needed some time to switch gears. Get used to being close to him, first of all. Otherwise it was going to be like… well, like kissing your lab partner. They both deserved a little better than that.

It soon became apparent that this was going to be another one of those scenarios where they were both upset for rather unnecessary reasons but still needed some time to themselves to settle down. Nothing to worry about in the long run. They already had subroutines for that, which she had to suppose was one of the perks of trying to court somebody with whom you’d already had more communications misfires than you could count.

They’d been in so much of a hurry to see each other earlier that they hadn’t gotten around to washing up after work like usual. And, as luck would have it, the loo was about the only place they could go to get away from each other without running the gauntlet in the hall.

Fitz was so busy kicking himself that when Simmons suggested taking a break to wash up, he tried to be a gentleman and insist that she go first. It wasn’t until she pointed out (a little uncomfortably) that it’d be nice if he could give it a thorough check before she went in there again that he agreed. Sheepishly.

Once Fitz had gotten his things together and sent himself to the loo, Simmons sighed and sat down on the bed. She was already jumpy and now he was jumpy and this was probably not going to play out quite how she’d been envisioning. Time to make some edits. Time to figure out, among many other things, what exactly one wore to bed for this sort of occasion.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this update took so long-- been on the road and misc. work-related insanity.
False Starts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fitz managed to shuffle in and get the water started before being hit by a significant urge to knock his head into the wall. Repeatedly.

For God’s sake. It was already bad enough she was already having to deal with that kind of treatment from freelance creeps at Hydra. She sure as hell didn’t need it from him.

He wasn’t going to find anything new in the shower. If there was anything else in there, the EM scanner would have picked it up earlier. Not that he could tell her that. They were still aiming for plausible deniability-- if anyone ever asked-- that he was running countersurveillance without her knowledge. As such, they kept talk about it to an absolute minimum.

More worrying was the fact that it was still bothering her enough that she wanted him to run another check. It wasn’t that surprising, really. But worrying. Fitz got himself washed up mostly on autopilot, frowning and chewing on his lip and completely at a loss for how to account to her.

* *

Once he’d gotten dried off and dressed again, they managed to switch out and get Jemma started in the shower without incident. Handoff of the shower facilities complete, Fitz slowly took the blind apart and re-made the bed. He was methodical about it-- between showering and dressing and getting her hair dried he knew Jemma’d be a while, and it was something to keep his hands busy. Once that was done, he went back through his things and pulled out the quarter transmitter. With the other things he’d lifted from work today, he ought to be able to get it modified it to accept an amplifier tonight.

Jemma stepped out of the washroom, sleepy and warm and altogether ready to get this over with. She’d decided to just wear the same t-shirt and bottoms she’d had on the night before. It was the best approximation of ratty old pyjamas she could do in the circumstances.

Fitz was on the sofa, knees to chest, fiddling with something small and deep in concentration. She cleared her throat to remind him she was there, and out of the corner of her eye she saw him quickly put it away. It was definitely one of the things she wasn’t supposed to know about, then.

Wandering over to the bed, Jemma lifted up the covers and tried to slide in-- and was prevented by the very tight hospital corners on the sheets.

“Oh, Fitz,” she whispered quietly to herself. She pulled out the sheet, releasing it from its tight hold so she could get in under it, and plopped in. After wigglng and fussing around to get comfortable-- which was nearly impossible, the sheets were cold and she could tell she’d be shivering in a minute or two-- she spared a glance at the sofa and its occupant.

“Fitz,” she stage-whispered. He looked up, expression unreadable. Jemma waved her arm for him to come over, then made a tapping-fingers gesture that she hoped got across the idea that she wanted to say something in Morse code. It was the most secure way to communicate, now that the blind was down. She was getting an idea….

He shuffled over, still looking entirely too sheepish, and stooped down next to her with a question on his face. Jemma reached out to his shoulder.

Don’t make me come over there.

Then she tried-- unsuccessfully-- not to laugh at her own joke, or the Really? look Fitz was giving her. Instead she reached behind her and pulled up the covers, making a space for him to climb in, and tried to ask him with her eyes as politely as possible. He looked about to say something. Then
the first real chill hit, and she shivered.

“You weren’t kidding, then?” he said softly, standing up and crossing to the other side.

“No!” Jemma whispered, shifting around to face him as he clambered in. It was a queen—so the size of maybe three of their bunks on the Bus put together—and it took him a moment to get scooted over to where she was. He stopped about a hand’s-breadth away and waited for some indication from her on how to proceed.

“Could you get the light, please?” she said quietly. The one remaining light was next to his side, and he reached out and put the room into darkness. Their eyes would adjust quickly to the streaks of orangeish street lamp from the parking lot leaking in around the edges of the curtains, but at the moment Jemma had to rely on other senses to tell her he’d drawn back to her side. Fitz stopped a little short of her again, as she’d rather expected he would.

“Come here,” she said gently. Reaching out for his shoulder, she followed it down to his hand, and picked it up over her as she turned over and snuggled into his chest. Instantly warmer with her back pressed into him, Jemma felt herself relax out of the tight, shivery ball she’d been been about to turn into. She let out a long sigh and worked her fingers in between his, tucking their hands under her ribs.

Sorry again she tapped. I wasn’t really awake.

You’re not sorry I’m sorry he countered.

Jemma rolled her eyes—just a little—and let out a little hmph. I know she pressed into his hand, and considered her next phrase. Morse took a long time and didn’t really lend itself well to extended, emotional conversations. Which could be frustrating sometimes, and maybe a bit of a relief at others.

Think we can go back to before? she continued.

He nodded a yes behind her and pulled her tight, snuggling her into him with the arm crossing over her belly. Jemma took a deep breath and let it out with a sleepy hum, eyes sliding closed.

Fitz felt her hum through his chest, and shifted his head around on his curled-up bottom arm, trying to keep her hair from tickling his nose. Then he thought better of it and decided he might be better off focusing on that, than the fact that she’d helped herself to snuggling her arse flush up against his hips. The slow, heated coil in his belly from earlier was back. There, at least, it seemed maybe Jemma’d gotten her wish. Except now there was no buffer between them whatsoever.

He thought he’d landed on a pretty good coping mechanism when Jemma interrupted.

Fitz she signed.

Yeah he tapped back.

Is that the song from Mario Kart

He paused. Sadly, humming under your breath was not terribly subtle when somebody else’s ears were only a decimeter away from your face.

Maybe he replied.

He felt as much as heard her groan, and ducked as she lazily snaked an arm back to swipe over his face in retaliation.

“Rude,” he hissed quietly, batting her hand away.

“Shhhh!” she shot back, trying not to laugh.
You are a terrible secret agent she teased, rapid-fire, into his arm once she’d gotten it wrapped back over her. Before he could retort, though, she went on in halting fits and starts.

And

in the vein of compulsive truth-telling

for your information

I do want to kiss you Fitz

just need time to wrap my head around it first

She stopped for a moment and wondered how much of this she’d have been able to get out, if weren’t for the fact that Morse code conveniently channeled fidgeting directly into the awkward confessions that fidgeting usually helped to avoid.

I just want it to be honest

if that makes any sense

maybe not

I’m really tired sorry

Jemma realized she was rambling through her fingertips and stopped.

Ok. I’m done talking now she signed, trying to convince the tension in her shoulders and limbs that it had no reason to be there.

Fitz listened, and held down a chuckle. That was classic Simmons right there: trying to say something reassuring that came out a little... otherwise. Never mind that to be going on like that, she had to be flustered, and flustered Jemma happened to be one of Fitz’s favorite things. She’d probably hate it if he ever brought it up, but it was adorable. Overcome with a treacly rush of affection and in no mood to fight it, Fitz dropped a kiss to her shoulder.

Never you mind he told her, unable to think of anything else coherent to say. Go to sleep. Tomorrow’s a big day. Lots of sneaking around to do.

He wound his fingers back in with hers and arced his thumb back and forth over hers to let her know he was done talking. Jemma curled further into him as she nodded agreement.

Knowing he wouldn’t be likely to fall asleep for at least another hour or two, Fitz tuckled his nose into her shoulder and settled in to the feeling of her breath rising and falling against his. Being allowed to fill his arms with a warm, sleepy Jemma, and having placed himself between her and the dubious security of the door, he finally began to relax for the first time in what felt like months.

That-- along with not being able to forget what she’d said about wanting to kiss him, and her warmth pressed against him from chest to belly to hips-- had him miserably hard within minutes.

Fitz decided to scoot back a little to give them both some breathing room. He tried not to jostle Jemma, hoping she was already far enough gone not to take note. But the groggy, disappointed murmur she let out shot his hopes down in short order.

“C’me back,” she breathed. “’S cold.” Jemma had absolutely noticed him bloom hot and start digging into her arse, and couldn’t be bothered to be squeamish about it. As far as she was concerned it was a biological inevitability that just meant more of the warmth she was looking for.

He gave a short shake of his head, knowing she’d be able to pick up on the motion at this close range.
“Don’t care,” she murmured. “See?”

And with that, to prove the point, she nestled back into him and pulled a slow, sinuous S-curve right over him. Fitz had not seen this turn of events coming and froze for a split second, frantically trying not to notice how her flesh yielded to his pressure.

“Jemma, stop!” he managed to choke out, flinging a hand out to still her.

Jemma’s eyes flew open, the hiss against the nape of her neck and heel of his hand staying her hip jolting her out of sleep. She was about to ask “What?” when she realized what she’d been doing. Her suddenly-awake nervous system seemed conflicted about whether to go for a full-body blush or blanche, and settled for a horrified rushing in her ears as a compromise.

“Oh, God,” she mumbled, quickly sitting up. “Fitz, I’m so sorry.”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and had her arms crossed over her chest, looking down in the vicinity of her toes. A quick glance showed Fitz sitting up as well, bent over and scrubbing his hands over his face. He made a “mnnf” sound.

“A… are you okay?” she whispered, tentatively.

“Yes,” he shot back, sounding hot and irritated, and immediately retracted. “Sorry.” It sounded like he was about to say something else, but he stopped.

“I wasn’t awake,” Jemma stammered. “It made more sense in my head….”

“Yeah, I know,” he nodded. She heard him take and let out a deep breath. “Listen, I don’t want to say ‘don’t do that,’ but—”

“Yes.” She took his meaning. Bad timing. Terrible, really.

They sat there in indeterminate silence for several beats before he heard her take one of her pre-statement breaths.

“You just seemed so embarrassed, Fitz, and I don’t mind. That’s all. Wasn’t a terribly constructive way to express that, granted….”

Fitz gave an indeterminate shrug, and risked a look over. In the faint orangeish light there was a just-barely-visible scrunch to her nose that told him more was coming.

“Considering the circumstances, if it hadn’t happened I think I might have been offended.” Her tone changed to worried as she tipped her head. “Or concerned…?”

“Oh, my God,” he sighed, looking away.

“Right. Sorry. I’m stopping now.” Announcement made, Jemma slunk back down, curled up on the edge of the bed, and hauled her pillow tightly over her head.

Fitz watched her out of the corner of his eye, only a little warily. The poor thing looked rather miserable about her misstep. He sighed. It probably wouldn’t help to dwell on this at the moment, but he made a mental note sometime to puzzle out how it was possible for one person as formal as Simmons to turn out to be that forward, and then slide right back to chagrined.

“Come on, Jemma, ‘s okay,” he whispered. “Maybe we’ll just call it even?”

A muffled “Sure” made it out through the pillow.

“You still cold?”

“No.” The motion of her shaking her head was clearly visible under the pillow.

Fitz gave a frown. That seemed unlikely, given that she was curled up into a tight ball. Or the faint
on-and-off tremor that was reaching him through the stuffing of the mattress.

“C’mere,” he said finally, nudging her to turn over with fingertips on her shoulder. She came out from hiding under the pillow to try and figure out what he was on about.

Now that he had her attention, Fitz lay down as well, facing in the same direction and tugging her elbow over him.

*There* he tapped out. *Problem solved.*

Behind him where he couldn’t see, Jemma raised an eyebrow.

If that’s what he thought…

Not that this was a good time to remind him that her subconscious was unruly. But extrapolating from past experience, Jemma figured there was about a twelve percent chance that they’d both wake up with her hand dipped into his trousers. Those were small but significant odds. Not that it had ever happened in this particular position… the angle was a little awkward. They’d probably be alright.

Probably.

And this was a considerable part of why she’d wanted to be sure about Fitz before pushing the professional and friendship boundaries. Among other things, she couldn’t be completely sure either of them were ready for Fitz to see her from this particular vantage point.

Jemma gave a soft, nervous chuckle and wound her fingers into his, and he readily took them up. It was sweet, and just a bit of a precaution.

*OK.*

A moment later Fitz was certain he was hearing quiet *beeps* and *boops* coming from behind him.

*Is that you Jemma* he tapped.

*Have we not decided the big spoon is in charge of the soundtrack* she answered.

She felt, more than saw, him try not to laugh and shake his head.

*Jemma*, he responded. *Go to sleep.*

Chapter End Notes

Alternate title: WTF Is Wrong With You Two

Mega thanks to notapepper/typhanni and bravejem for intensively beta-ing this section. : )
Simmons woke up with a deep breath, blinking in the grey light of morning. She’d gotten up before the alarm clock again. Normally a source of frustration, this time it meant a chance to enjoy a few peaceful minutes together. Fitz was evidently also much less inhibited in his sleep, and they’d wound up tangled back together with her cozied against his front, pressed flush up against him in a fashion that she realized he might not be pleased to wake up in. His breath was tickling her neck, as well. It seemed likely that’s what had woken her up in the first place.

She shifted to her back, careful not to stray too far as she moved. Canting her hips away to give him the bit of space he seemed more at ease with at the moment, she wound an arm around the one he’d draped over her and stroked his bicep gently. She didn’t want to wake him too much. Just enough that when she got up to get ready, he wouldn’t worry that she’d bolted.

“Morning,” she hummed quietly.

No reaction. Nose crinkling in a smile, she lifted her head up to get a look at his face. Cold air seeped in around her chest and shoulders from the shift. Tugging the blanket up to her neck, she snuggled in closer, propped herself up, and laid increasingly insistent caresses and pokes into his shoulder in an effort to rouse him.

“Hmmmf…” he grumbled eventually, and cracked open one eye to find out what the fuss was.

Jemma looked down at him with a little half-smile and an upraised eyebrow. Groggy, his reply was slow in coming. Jemma recognized a tension-breaking moment when she saw one.

Clearing her throat, she dropped her voice into her best approximation of the baritone register.

“Hello, beautiful,” she burst out, a deliberately rakish grin on her face.

Fitz stared with his one open eye.

“That’s quite the morning voice you’ve got there.”

“This is my normal voice!” Jemma insisted, trying to sound offended, still an octave and a half down from normal. Then she coughed.

Fitz laughed and sleepily tried to toss a pillow at her, but didn’t quite make it. Jemma caught it and tugged it under her head, settling back in.

“All right, that’s the spirit,” he mumbled encouragingly, out loud.

Jemma tsked in annoyance and swatted gently at his ear.

On that note, I’m getting up now she announced.

Fitz reached out to tug her back and just missed her, flopping down onto his face with an arm outstretched into the bed. He let out a grumble and stayed there, turning his head to give her a sad look. Jemma’s expression was apologetic as she slipped out of bed.

“We can’t be late,” she explained unnecessarily.

Fitz shrugged. He could honestly admit that he didn’t want to work for Hydra anyway, so coming in a little late worked for him just fine. Not to mention he hardly had to do anything to get ready.
Simmons emerged from the washroom dressed and groomed a good twenty or thirty minutes later. Fitz was in the same position she’d left him in, sound asleep again.

She tipped her head and took a good look at him. He looked a little silly, arm still stretched out to latch onto someone who was no longer there. He was also clearly too warm and sleepy to care. Simmons walked around the bed and sat down, hip against his shoulders, and ran her fingers from the back of his neck upwards into his hair.

“T minus thirty minutes,” she said quietly.

Fitz felt the bed dip behind him as she sat down, then scrunched his shoulders against the tickling of her fingers on his neck. When she gave the thirty-minute warning, he blearily decided he could stay there for at least a good minute or two without running into trouble.

Letting out a sleepy mumble, Fitz turned to face her and draped an arm over her lap, doing his best to block out the growing light from the window by burying his face in the outside of her knee.

Jemma grew a mischievous smile when it appeared that tickling the back of his neck could get a reaction out of him, even mostly-asleep. Once he turned over, she got back to it, and mindlessly found herself humming a little tune as she drew him out of sleep. Even half-hidden in her leg, she could see (and feel) a quizzical expression grow on his face.

*Is that... Bad Horse?* he stroked slowly into the back of her knee.

Simmons stopped and frowned.

*I suppose it is* she answered.

*You’re not sure? You arrived at Bad Horse subconsciously?* His one free eye cracked open to look up at her askance.

She let out a theatrical exasperated sigh.

*Doing evil doesn’t come naturally to everyone* she explained patiently. *I need to prepare. Mentally.*

He let out a lazy, one-syllable chuckle into the outside of her leg, eyes sliding shut as he nuzzled in sleepily. *Thoroughbred of Sin. That’s your new code name.*

She let out an unimpressed hmph.

*Speaking of our subconscious wandering* she told him, punctuating it with a gentle, scolding flick to his ear. *And anyway I’m a Hanoverian at the least. Know your horses, Fitz.*

Fitz turned his best sheepish I-just-told-a-joke-and-hope-you-think-it’s-funny look up at her, only to find find a sharp eyebrow arched at him, playfully stern. Giving what he hoped was a conciliatory pat to her knee, he decided to sit up.

And failed.

*Nope, too tired* he told her, dropping back down against her lap.

Jemma only rolled her eyes a little bit. Meeting sleepy, openly affectionate Fitz was a bit like discovering a new coastline on an old continent. Indeed. Probably after scaling some kind of arduous mountain range and finally being able to look down the other side… and now the metaphor was starting to get away from her.

“Come on, Fitz!” she laughed quietly. “It’s getting late.” Then Jemma tapped into his shoulder.

*The Evil League of Evil* is watching so beware
and hummed her tune again. Fitz laughed and caught her hand and pulled her in for a quiet admonition to give ’em hell.

*

At fifteen till eight o’clock, the two of them parted ways with a hug and quick pecks on the cheek. Then they were off and out the door, with a bit of the air of footballers bracing before a match and running onto the field.

They’d managed to put together a plan for each of them: Fitz to see if he could track down Donnie again and find out what he knew, and Simmons to chat up her labmates and see what she could draw out of them about their work. It didn’t sound like much. In terms of scientific espionage, however, they were excellent leads to follow.

Simmons walked with him until they got to a no-badge-required hallway. Then he was off, and Jemma turned back through the double doors towards the pungent disinfectant smell of the bio wing.
FitzSimmons's Worst Day At Work Ever

Chapter Notes

This was outlined way back before season 2 started, so Donnie Gill's story is a little different. This and the next few chapters dedicated to Donnie Gill, who is definitely hanging out on a farm somewhere unmolested with a book and a blanket and a nice dog, amen.

Fitz was first to volunteer when the lab boss asked for people to run the day’s draft plans down to the fabrication floor. He got away with it because one of the guys brought birthday cake to share during break and nobody else wanted to leave. The cake looked good… but espionage was better.

He also still remembered what Simmons had said about there being talk of him not being very cooperative. It suggested that it could come back to bite her in some way if he didn’t look alive at least every once in a while. Which made a lot of sense for Hydra, come to think of it. Thank God he hadn’t done anything openly antagonistic in the lab… yet. Just not terribly productive; enough for someone who knew his work to see that he wasn’t trying very hard.

It led one to wonder if there was anyone they’d worked under at Sci-Ops or the Academy spying on him now.

Donnie was down at the fabrication shop as usual. He still looked surprised to see Fitz, but relaxed rather earlier into the conversation than he had yesterday. Chatting about this and that, Donnie stopped short when Fitz dropped a joke about how lucky he was that they let him out of the lab to get some fresh air, trying to sniff out how exactly he’d wound up in his apparent shop liaison position. Donnie shrugged tightly and looked at the floor.

“They just needed a guy who’d done the design and the actual physical manufacturing. A bilingual, I guess. And thanks to… the thing….’ He looked up and around the room, eyes briefly flicking to Fitz’s on the way.

“Yeah. That’ll do it,” Fitz agreed grimly. Then he shifted his weight, trying to interrupt Donnie’s efforts to avoid his gaze.

“Listen,” Fitz said. “Seth didn’t know what he was getting into. You didn’t know what you were getting into. You can’t beat yourself up like it’s something you did on purpose.”

Fitz paused, setting his hands on his hips and studying a piece of floor next to the piece Donnie was investigating. Donnie clearly didn’t want to talk about this, so Fitz tried to tie it up.

“Sometimes we wind up getting caught up in things that are a lot bigger than we are, Donnie. And it’s not because of anything we did. It’s science, we’re-- we’re useless without tools and materials and a place to work. And that makes us very, very easy to pull us around.”

He looked up to see how Donnie was responding. Now the younger engineer looked a little speechless-- but in the ‘what you’re saying is hitting the spot so hard I’m a little flummoxed’ kind of way. There was a solid spark of recognition in his eyes.

Encouraged, Fitz went on, voice low so as not to be overheard.

“Does anything about this place seem off to you, Donnie?”

Donnie stared at him and didn’t say a thing. But he nervously tipped his head for Fitz to follow him.

*
Simmons had just managed to get her RNA extractions to a good stopping point and was considering going on break when two of her labmates--Mitra and Alex, if she remembered correctly--were headed out the door, gloves and lab coats doffed. Mitra was short, only a little over Simmons's height with glowing dark skin and very professional bearing and a long black braid down her back. Alex was a little taller and gangly and pink-faced, with a Batman t-shirt clearly visible through her lab coat.

“Oh? Going down the hall for a bit of coffee?” Simmons chirped, tossing her own gloves into a bright red trash can with Biohazard stenciled conspicuously over it.

“Yeah, you coming?” Alex asked.

A few minutes later they were installed in the breakroom, mugs of coffee in hand, having an intent discussion about Davis the technician’s ass.

“I heard he used to be a gymnast,” Mitra hissed over her mug, eyes flashing back and forth between Simmons and Alex.

“That would explain a couple of things,” Simmons agreed. “Nobody comes out that nicely-formed by mere accident.”

The other two guffawed.

“It sounds so classy when you say it!” Alex snorted.

“It’s an observation,” Simmons said honestly. “What exactly does he do in the lab?” she continued. It was all well and good to build relationships over an earnest discussion of coworkers’ gluteal mass, but the whole point of it was to get useful information.

“This and that, you know, knocks test tubes around,” Mitra replied. “Extra hand on deck for whatever project’s on a big sample run.” She shrugged. “Life of a reformed jock, I guess.”

Simmons raised an eyebrow. If that were the case, Davis might have a fairly good idea of who in the lab was up to what. She filed away a mental note for later.

“Well, I’d say he’s more than welcome to join us,” she smirked playfully. They laughed.

“God, we’re so gross,” Alex said, palming her face. She tried out her best “greasy lunch lady” voice. “Welcome to the lab, boyssss!”

Simmons and Mitra did their best not to lose any coffee through their noses.

“So what are you two doing? Anything that requires a good deal of technician’s assistance?” Simmons recovered, putting up a saucy eyebrow.

Alex snorted.

“Well, no… not in the lab,” she snickered. Then grimaced. “Sorry. There I go again.”

“Keep it in your pants, Alex,” Mitra muttered, flashing a side-eye at her friend, followed by a grin. “Her filter needs work,” she explained for Simmons’s benefit.

“Mitra!” Alex practically yelped. “Please don’t say anything,” she begged Simmons with wide eyes. “We are professionals. At least some of the time.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” Simmons demurred, holding up her hands as if to ward off worry. Internally, she wished they’d managed to keep going with the technical line of inquiry.

“And sorry,” Alex continued. “Can’t really talk about my project because,” she waved her hands around agitatedly, “none of us can, which is crap because-- let’s be honest-- my project is so cool.”
“My project is cooler,” Mitra objected, side-eyeing over her cup of coffee.

“You can’t know that,” Alex shot back with a laugh. “You don’t even know what my project is!”

“You don’t know what my project is either,” Mitra retorted.

“You don’t know my life!” Alex giggled. “Anyway,” she continued, turning back to Simmons, “Ugh-- we can’t talk about it and it’s driving me crazy because not talking about science is not my strong suit, but rules are rules.” Alex shrugged and mumbled, looking at the table. “So I’m working on my redirecting…” she admitted.

Simmons felt a genuine smile come on. Poor Alex. She knew the feeling.


“With ass!” Alex confirmed, making a toasting motion with her mug and slapping a chagrined hand over her face.

Simmons kept smiling. They were genuinely likable, which was nice. She wondered if it would be possible to invite them over for drinks some time. They were so chatty and enthused about their work, there couldn’t be more than a couple of servings of alcohol between them and spilling everything they knew. Which Simmons knew because… well, there were reasons she didn’t go drinking without adult supervision in the form of Fitz’s liver. Working in a classified lab was not without its complications, and she said as much to the two women.

Having them over would be a bit tricky with Fitz, speaking of complications. She’d probably have to shoo him out for the night. And make sure the bugs were taken care of; at this point she was fairly sure he’d only located them, not disposed of them. That would be an ongoing process since one couldn’t let on that one was exactly onto them. It had to look at least a little accidental when you destroyed them or, more likely, placed a pillow or a book or something else that blocked their camera or mic.

A few moments later Simmons realized she’d stopped listening to the conversation and tried to shake herself back. She wished she could say it was a case of simple woolgathering, but her mind was going somewhere very specific-- the lingering, phantom sensation of Fitz stroking the back of her knee earlier that morning.

She’d been too focused on what he was saying at the time to respond to the touch itself, but apparently she’d caught on to it more than she’d noticed. It kept resurfacing up in odd moments. To be honest, her focus had been a bit off that morning and she was more than a little anxious to see how the samples she’d processed would check out. The idle thought that perhaps he’d done it on purpose crossed her mind. She was about to disregard it without a second thought when she remembered his pranking streak nearly jolted in her seat. The devious little--

Simmons felt a bright, red, helpless blush flood over her. Fortunately Mitra and Alex were too busy chatting about their favorite janitors to notice.

A few short moments later, a boy from their lab (honestly, he couldn’t have been any more than a graduate student on internship) whose name Simmons was shamefully blank on ran into the breakroom.

“Hey guys, sorry to interrupt-- they’re having us back in the infirmary,” he panted, and ran back down the hallway.

“For the love of crêpes,” Alex groaned.

“God!” Mitra sputtered. “If I wanted to work on live people, would I have gone into forensics!?” The two women downed their remaining coffee and got up.

“You ever done clinical?” Alex queried, tapping Simmons on the elbow. Jemma nodded, eyes wide with uncertainty.
“Oh, that’s good. That’ll help,” Mitra said cheerfully, then continued in a steamed-up grumble. “Give me a nice cold dead corpse any day, those you can’t fuck up any worse than they already are…”

With no idea what was going on, Simmons followed her labmates as they started running down the hall to a part of the building she’d never seen before.

“Where are we going?” Simmons called out, trying to keep up as the other two raced through the hall.

“Triage,” Mitra huffed, long black braid twitching as she burst a door open and held it back for the other two. She continued a puffley explanation as she chased after them.

“Lot of the contractors come back from missions and they’ve got this weird souped-up physiology, so they wouldn’t know where to start with them at a normal hospital.”

“So they pull us in for the bottom level of triage, which means we get to dig the gravel out of their super-duper quick-healing asses,” Alex continued.

“Hope you’re not squeamish!” Mitra said, sounding genuinely hopeful about it.

“Not a problem,” Simmons informed them.

“And fair warning,” Alex added as they turned a corner, Alex in the lead. “Thanks to the metabolic changes, local anesthesia on these guys is a little hit-or-miss.”

“What do you mean, ‘hit-or-miss’!!?”

“Means most of ‘em are ok, but we’ve had people get thrown across the room before,” Mitra said. “Bottom line, don’t be afraid to ask for help holding somebody down if you need it.”

“Right…” Simmons acknowledged.

The hallways had become noticeably busier as they neared their destination. It was now filled with large, sour-faced men and a few women in various states of assembly-- some standing, most sitting, all well splashed or soaked in blood, and a few lying on stretchers with gaping wounds or, in one case, clutching a detached arm in their good hand as if to make sure it didn’t get lost in the shuffle.

“Charge!” Mitra called out to the charge medic over the din. “Where to?”

“Bay three!” the woman pointed down the hall. “And if you see that new Dr. Simmons from your lab, tell her to head to bay two!”

“Oh. She’s right here!” Alex pointed helpfully.

“Great! Bay two!” The medic was clearly too busy sorting through the people lying down to be bothered with introductions.

“Where’s that?” she asked her coworkers, never having been in this area before.

“Right here!” Mitra pointed, then gave Simmons a look of renewed assessment. “You’ve done serum work before, then?” Before Simmons could respond, Mitra shook her head as if to say never mind and hurried the new scientist off to her destination.

“Remind us to pick your brain later!” she called to Simmons’s retreating back.
Donnie and Fitz wandered the cavernous warehouse-like shop, stopping every so often for a bit of shop talk with somebody Donnie recognized. Between stations, Donnie had quietly mentioned something about there being loads of questionable decisions on the shop floor.

“I know what you mean,” Fitz said. “At least, I think so…the kind that’s really tempting because it’s less work, but is also liable to kill somebody one of these days?”

Donnie blinked and nodded. “And that’s just the top layer,” he said. “Come on.”

They stopped at a vacant die-press machine, with Donnie looking to the next station over. “You recognize that equipment?” he asked, suddenly with the casually eager tone of a tour guide.

“Um… no?”

“ Took me the longest time to figure out. It’s nothing exotic, really, that was the problem.” He nodded his chin at the also-vacant station. “Exothermic welding.”

“Really?” Fitz looked over at Donnie, a little incredulous. Exothermic welding was great… at joining railroad ties. Maybe building skyscrapers and bridges. Someone around the turn of the century figured out that if you got powdered aluminum and powdered rust close together and got them enough heat to get started, the aluminum metal would burn—so hot that the iron came out white-hot and so molten that it flowed like water. Given the right mold, it would flow right into the joints of a weld and the lighter aluminum slag would float away on top, making for a nice join. If you happened to need to weld giant pieces of iron together. It made no sense for a workshop making small-ish high-tech things that went elsewhere.

“That’s very steampunk of them,” Fitz scoffed, crossing his arms. They looked out over the factory floor in front of them, taking in the activity and sounds.

“Yeah, that must be it,” Donnie agreed. “Or it’s on stock for somewhere else.”

“Do you ever see them using this station, then?” Fitz asked. “Or does it just sit there?”

“Mostly just sits there. Seen a guy on it once or twice. But I’ve been keeping an eye on it, and they ship a couple pallets of something in and out of this station about once a week.”

Fitz hmphed. “That’s irregular.”

“And it’s definitely thermite they’re bringing in and out. At least if the hazmat tags are any indication.”

“Which they may or may not be,” Fitz pointed out.

“True,” Donnie agreed.

“That why you keep coming down here? The thrill of death-defying working conditions?” Fitz snarked.

“Submariner’s motto,” Donnie grumbled right back.

Fitz gave a humorless laugh. Loads of people from Sci-Tech wound up working on submarines tending the reactors. It took a certain attitude to live with the constant threat of instantaneous implosion—hence the submariner’s motto: “At least you go quick.”

“And that’s not the only thing, either,” Donnie continued.

Fitz shook his head. “No, it’s not.” He took a deep breath and plunged. “Donnie, who runs this facility?”

“Cybertek’s the contractor,” Donnie replied easily. “They’re about like I remember,” he said, an unmistakeable note of bitterness in his voice.
“Mm. Yeah. And who owns Cybertek, then?”

“Ian Quinn,” Donnie replied, a sharp descent in his tone.

“Well, sort of. A little bit of it-- never mind. Who are the contracts for?”


Fitz shook his head, slowly at first, then sharply enough to cut Donnie off.

“That’s not what happened, Donnie. The tech we’re making up in cybernetics-- S.H.I.E.L.D. has no use for those kinds of things. Never has and never will. Implants with a bomb in them that go in people’s eyes and tell them what to do and if they don’t do it, they--” Fitz mimicked an explosion with his hands-- “We spent six months trying to chase down the bastards who were making those things and putting them in people, Donnie, and it was Hydra.”

Fitz took a moment to make sure he hadn’t lost Donnie, and catch his own breath.

“They were in S.H.I.E.L.D. the whole time. The Sandbox was so full of them there was never even a fight-- that’s how you got ‘transferred’ here. There was one on our team, even. That’s how we wound up here,” Fitz explained.

Donnie was staring at him like he’d grown a second head, which was understandable.

“Wait-- it wasn’t-- was it?” he started after a moment.

“No, no no no,” Fitz answered, scratching at his neck. “Simmons is here too, but it wasn’t her.”

“Oh. That’s good. I mean it’s not good, but... “

“No, it’s ok,” Fitz shrugged, crossing his arms. “This place is-- everything about it’s messy.”

“Yeah,” Donnie scoffed, nodding at the trails of dark-silvery-reddish powdered metal that he’d just spotted trailing from a couple of leaky containers.

Fitz walked over, dabbed his fingers to pick up a bit, and looked at it closely. It was powdered metal; about half the particles were silvery-white, and the other half a dark red.

“Fuck,” Fitz whispered, jaw dropping, looking back at the tall stacks of containers it was coming from. “That’s thermit, alright.”

The first thing Simmons noticed was that this wasn’t triage proper. Triage technically meant sorting out people whose life or death depended on medical treatment, and shunting out those who were already practically certain to live-- or die-- regardless of what you did for them.

With serum-enhanced soldiers, the situation was a little different. They were nearly impossible to kill-- by design. For them, triage was about sorting out what kind of attention each one needed to get back to working order as soon as possible. The senior medical staff made those calls, directing traffic as men came through.

Simmons was directed to a curtained-off exam room with two other staff in white coats-- an sweet-faced older woman with short, white popcorn hair and dark skin, and a pale and heavyset, slightly balding man closer to her own age.

The woman’s expression went sharp as soon as Simmons entered, with a “Who are you and what are you doing in my exam room?” look.

“Jemma Simmons,” she introduced herself, not bothering to hold out a hand-- the two of them
were already gloved up.

“Dr. Branfield. You ever work with serum-enhanced soldiers?” the woman asked over the top of her bifocals.

“A bit,” Simmons nodded eagerly. “Limited to monitoring healthy individuals I’m afraid. But I’m familiar with the metabolic and other physiological changes.”

“Alright, you have a seat over there with Terry and I hope your lunch knows how to stay parked. Hopefully they already told you, but this is the ‘do we keep the limb or take it off and start over?’ booth.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Simmons said, bellying up to the sink to scrub down and steel herself for the ride.

“Gloves?” she said quietly, looking at Terry. He pointed with his eyes at a shelf above her.

“Thanks,” she nodded, and just got her gloves snapped on when the first ashen-faced patient was helped through the curtain.

* Raina watched the last of her lab staff leave, and pulled up the facility’s Ops director in her phone. She didn’t bother with pleasantries when the other end picked up.

“I’m not certain how you expect us to accomplish anything if you’re constantly calling us off the job to clean up your messes for you,” she said coolly.

“Raina. For the last goddamn time,” the voice on the end of the line shot back, “we are not taking on a full medical staff just to have them sit around ninety percent of the time. Your science projects exist because of these guys. And they continue without interference because of them. Patching them up every so often is a small price to pay, don’t you think?”

“It would be, if we weren’t losing irreplaceable, one-of-a-kind cell cultures on a weekly basis because there’s nobody around to feed them.” Raina answered frostily. “If they were scheduled interruptions, we could find ways to work around it. But you’re committed to a more free-spirited rhythm. I’m afraid that’s something that we cannot ‘just work around.’”

“Cry me a river, lady,” he replied. “You know HQ considers unhindered tactical operations to be top priority right now.”

“People always do,” Raina smiled. “Until their enemy comes up with an atom bomb and they have no answer to it because they’ve been too busy playing with pop-guns.” She took a crisp, thoughtful breath. “Do you want to go down in history as the man who sunk Hydra’s long-term strategic aims because you were trying to save on payroll?”

The line went dead. He’d hung up.

Sounds like a yes, she thought.

Raina clicked out of the room and headed down to the medical bays. Might as well make the best of a bad situation. Not always, but sometimes the triage discard pile had good testing material.

* It wasn’t the blood or the crater-like wounds or the butcher-block stumps that turned her stomach. It was knowing that they all needed a continual infusion of painkillers to keep up with their metabolism, and Hydra considered that too much of a luxury to just give out. They saved it for soldiers who were “exhibiting disruptive behavior.”

The end result? Every single one “exhibited disruptive behavior” until they got it. The soldiers were already in severe pain when they got to triage, meaning it was the one place where discipline
via implant-induced migraine broke down. Add that to the fact that a good proportion of them-- if Ms. Amador and Mr. Peterson were any indication-- didn’t even want to be there in the first place. It made for a hell of a clinical working environment.

Terry was in charge of keeping the IVs going, Dr. Branfield took notes, and Jemma for the most part acted as her hands probing around the wounds so that Dr. Branfield could get an idea of the damage. It did not escape Jemma’s notice that this happened to put her, the new addition to the trio, in the position most likely to be swatted across the room if something went wrong.

She made eye contact with each one and smiled and made sure nothing went wrong.

Donnie and Fitz silently walked away from the empty weld station, hands in their pockets and heads full of questions. Donnie had one more stop on his usual rounds through the fabrication shop: the machining area for engine blocks that Fitz had seen far off, in the offices overlooking the floor the day before.

From that distance, the size alone had given them away as being for aircraft. Up close they were-- breathtaking, to be honest. They were almost as tall as the machinists putting them together. Walking up to one of the half-finished models, Fitz almost felt as if he were looking someone in the eye.

Walking all the casing until he found an open side, Fitz’s eyes went wide on seeing the crankshaft-- surrounded by a great triangular rotary piece instead of pistons. He grinned until he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the foreman of the line glaring at him.

“‘Der Wankelmotor ist der beste Motor für Flugzeuge,’” Fitz managed to get out. There weren’t a lot of people who knew how to make Wankel engines. Fewer still who could do it on a small-scale, nearly artisanal basis like this. It was a bit of a fraternity. It was one Fitz knew pretty well. He still had somewhere, in fact, a t-shirt with that exact phrase on it-- a quote from one of its early inventors-- left over from an aeronautics conference from before joining S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Technically it’s a Paschke, but yeah.” The foreman didn’t smile, but he sort of scowled a little less, so that was something.

He, Donnie, and Fitz talked shop. Fitz didn’t pry, but made mental notes-- the size of the motors, the number of different models, the fact that Hydra apparently paid for this this fellow to go to the Experimental Aviation Association convention every year, and the fact that he looked exactly like every slovenly middle-aged man that he’d never noticed at EAA until he’d talked Simmons into going that one time, and their flock of greasy eyes crawled up and down and around her, and she didn’t say anything but he could tell by the way she held herself that she saw it too. She’d excused herself the next day on a last-minute call to a biotech lab in Madison. He’d helped her pack.

The three of them were deep in discussion about the options for high-temperature valve materials when shouting burst out near the other end of the line.

Fitz saw a bright white flash, heard the hiss, and had already jumped a few steps away by the time he made out what was going on. A waste barrel full of waste chips and powder from the solid magnesium engine blocks had caught fire. Bright white flames shot out of the barrel, lighting flyweight chips of burning metal into the air like a confused meteor shower.

Lab and factory accidents were a terrible place for heroism-- if you didn’t know exactly what was there, and have the equipment to deal with it, your job was to get the hell out of the way so as to spare whoever did from the extra work of having to drag your corpse off the site before getting started. Donnie was way ahead of him, and Fitz felt him dragging him by his arm to a greater distance.

Things seemed almost under control for a moment-- the flames weren’t dying down, but they weren’t getting worse either. Then someone burst out of the commotion near the front of the line with a fire extinguisher, running towards the barrel.
Fitz swore he could hear about a dozen people yelling “No!” or “Stop!” or some variant thereon in unison, but to no avail. All you could do with magnesium was bugger off and let it burn itself out. Whether it was foam, water, a flame retardant, or carbon dioxide, the end result of an extinguisher would be the same--

Donnie pulled him behind the last of the engine blocks at the end of the production line, a good thirty feet away from the fire at the start of it. Little chips and powder weren’t hard to set off, but solid blocks would at least take a moment to get going. Good enough shelter in a flash.

The wall opposite them flared bright, reflected white as the barrel went into overdrive. The shouting intensified-- taking on a panicked tone. Fitz and Donnie glanced at each other and scooted to look out from behind their shelter and see how bad it was--

“Don’t look right at the flames!” Fitz warned--

and their jaws dropped as they saw a meteor of flaming magnesium-- illuminating the smoke trails of several predecessors as it went-- and kissed right into a falling rivulet of powdery thermite, streaming from its container out of a tiny hole burned out by an earlier magnesium ember.

“Oh, no,” Donnie breathed, and Fitz was too horrified to remember words.

No longer worried about the magnesium fire, Fitz and Donnie sprinted to put as much distance as possible between them and what was about to be a splashing river of white-hot molten iron.
Jemma looked up at their next victim-- patient-- and gave her a little smile. Enough to say hello, not so much as to be obviously fake. She hoped.

“Hello, what’s your name?” she asked.

“Dominguez,” the woman gritted as she settled into the bed, IV trailing.

“Alright. Ms. Dominguez, let’s take a look,” Jemma said, quickly purging her mental map of the last wound-- an apparent landmine to the foot where the only real question was how high up to cut-- and preparing to start over.

Dr. Branfield took over, giving directions on where to poke and how deep to prod. This Dominguez was a trooper. Some of the soldiers would cry out when you probed the wound. Not that you could blame them. The said the painkillers took the edge off, but that was about all they did.

They sounds when you went into them weren’t helpless, pained cries, but more like the sharp grunts of a weightlifter trying to convince himself he could get the bar all the way up. Jemma couldn’t say if it helped or not, but she could say with authority that being in a room full of people doing it made for difficult concentration. Dominguez would just close her eyes and breathe in and out, hard and fast through her nose, and flex her good foot up and down in a kind of nervous tic. Between directions, Jemma surreptitiously kept track of the injuries-- and other anomalies-- she’d seen. Lots of landmines and/or IEDs-- ghastly wounds to the lower body indicated that. The wounds looked to be a couple hours old, which gave some scant indication of where the op had been; somewhere in the western hemisphere, quite possibly the Caribbean or northern Latin America.

That was all she could tell about their most recent mission. Some other things of interest, though, were written into their bodies and skins.

There were callosities on their bones, where she could feel or see them, that looked like the result of repeated stress fractures. General inflammation and a much higher-than-normal incidence of ringworm-- and some other exotic-looking skin infections that appeared fungal-- spoke to what had to be immune system irregularities. Simmons had never been so thankful for gloves. These people were not in good shape, and they had the contagious skin conditions to prove it. She’d heard a couple people mention “the purple piss” once or twice in passing and had her ears perked up to catch another snippet of it outside the curtains when they picked up something else.

A dampened, but very noticeable, *boom*.

It was felt more than heard. And from the way the entire medical bay suddenly went silent, she hadn’t just imagined it.

When the lights stayed on and no sirens went off, everyone returned to their jobs. That was what doctors did-- you couldn’t afford to be thrown off your game by the fact that you were working in a state of emergency, or you’d never be help to anyone.

Not a few seconds later, Raina burst through the doors, footsteps clicking furiously through the bay as she scowled into her phone.

“I told you this would happen,” she hissed. Rage was clearly written on her face. Not that Simmons or most of the other staff could see it, curtained up around their exam tables as they were. But the sound of her steps, and the heat and vindication in her words, were unmistakable.
Simmons cast a questioning glance up at Dr. Branfield. The older woman just shrugged and kept making her notes. Simmons flushed, a little abashed at having gotten distracted, and tried to focus on their groaning patient and not whatever had just made that sound or the fact that even as a double agent she still seemed bent on having her supervisor be happy with her.

The moment the patient had left, though, Dr. Branfield arranged her bifocals and peered down at Jemma over them.

“The defense contractors that run this place are shit with workplace safety— we get a lot of garden-variety accidents— and everybody knows it. Raina’s been on them to tighten up a lot of things, but they always struck me as the kind of people who need to have a major incident before they’ll use common sense. Today might be the day.”

Terry gave a peevish *hrmph* of agreement.

“Didn’t want to get into it in front of a patient, is all,” the doctor explained.

“Right,” Simmons accepted. “Where do you think it— was it one of the labs? Fabrication?” she began to stammer.

Dr. Branfield began what was clearly going to be an “I have no idea” type of response, but clammed up as the next patient limped in.

They’d just gotten started with him when a voice that Simmons recognized as the charge medic’s came in on a megaphone. The room hushed silent.

“At any rate, there has been an incident. Details are still coming in. All we know at this point is to be prepared for burn and possibly crush injuries. Triage will be adjusting your patient flow accordingly and staff are coming around with burn carts.

“If you have any life-or-death questions, page me,” Charge continued. “If you have any other questions, stuff it. Carry on.”

The entire medical bay shared a grim snicker and hummed back into life.

* * *

“There!” Fitz gasped as they ran, pointing Donnie towards a glowing green exit sign. Klaxons were sounding by now. Donnie came right along, sprinting pell-mell, and risked a glance behind them. His eyes went wide at the sight.

The thermite containers at the top of the stack had ignited first. The top one was now beginning to melt away with tight, flare-like, white-orange flames shooting out the top. Runny white-hot thermite dripped and gobbed out of the top container. When it hit the floor, it broke into bouncing, almost joyous-looking white-hot marbles. They bounded with alarming speed across the floor, splattering and igniting fuel as they went.

Meanwhile the tower of thermite containers itself was melting apart. A growing waterfall swelled out, accelerating as molten iron ignited the powder below it as it cascaded down. Soon it was likely to--

“There’s still time,” Donnie shouted. He wanted to reassure him that it wasn’t as dire as it looked—not for them, anyway— but there wasn’t time to talk about it. “Climb on up!” he shouted again as Fitz reached the metal steps to the emergency exit. And tried not to crash into him as he scrambled up the stairs himself. Fitz grabbed the handle and--

“It’s locked!” Fitz shouted, eyes wide with alarm. His hands were diving into his pockets to look for something— anything— some kind of spare tool to get them through the door.
“I can get it open!” Donnie barked out over the sound of the fire and sirens. “You keep an eye on it, Fitz!”

The two of them crowded up on the top step, Donnie hunched down over the handle. Fitz pressed himself to the door, watching as the tower dribbled fire-- then quivered-- then collapsed, raising a furious splash that hit the rafters with gobbets of molten metal and surged out to cover the floor. He watched in horror, unable to tear his eyes away as the initial splash flattened out and began to run-- sputtering and bursting heavily where it flowed over fuel barrels, sparkling where it flowed around the perfect engine blocks and burned them alive, racing to cover the whole shop floor under its own weight-- it flowed and splashed, bright as the sun and heavy as iron.

“Donnie? Donnie!” Fitz urged. “It--”

“It’s fine!” Donnie snarled, spinning to face him and throwing out an arm. Fitz stared, briefly unable to compute how he could just stop like that when there was a flood of bloody iron on its way.

Until he saw what had happened. Instead of yellowing, runny iron streaming at them like the rise of tide, a formation of solid iron-- granted, still glowing cherry red-- was thrown up like it’d been splashed back by cold water and frozen there, damming back the burning river behind it. It looked for all the world like a postindustrial version of the dragon’s teeth formed where lava ran into the sea, and froze solid in a wall where the waves pounded it cold.

“Stop staring, let’s go!” Donnie yelled, striking the handle clean off the door and bursting through.

“Yeah, good,” Fitz muttered as he followed.

Once outside, they didn’t stop running until they’d crossed the parking lot and rushed right into the underbrush surrounding the compound. Hidden, they slouched to the ground and tried to catch their breath.

“You might want to keep going,” Fitz suggested after a few moments. “That… uh… that thing you did’ll be tough to explain away.”

“Yeah,” Donnie agreed.

“Want me to tell them you got caught in the fire?” Fitz offered. “There’s no way security footage made it through that.”

“You’re staying?” Donnie asked, sounding incredulous. “You know who they are.”

“Yeah, I’ve got--” Fitz stopped. He’d got what? A Simmons to think about? He couldn’t just leave her here. Especially not without warning during an industrial disaster of epic proportions. She deserved to know he’d made it, that was for certain.

“…a job to do,” Fitz finished.

Donnie gave him a look that clearly spelled questionable judgment, but nodded.

“Suit yourself,” he agreed. “And yeah. If you could forget to mention to everyone that I’m not dead, that would be great.”

“It’s a deal.”

Donnie collected himself and stood up, eyeing what looked like a small streambed in the middle distance.

“And Donnie?”

“Yeah?”
“Stay away from police. At least the locals. They’re probably on the payroll.”

Soon Donnie was off and Fitz wandered back out, looking for one of the inevitable knots of people that tended to gather after evacuations. To his relief, there was a largish crowd gathered around one rather burly fellow with a cutting torch. A rough hole was visible nearby in the side of the building.

*Somebody’s going to be bought their bodyweight in beer tonight*, Fitz thought.

*  

Simmons didn’t even bother stopping by her room before going to Fitz’s. Between patching up supersoldiers, being interrupted by a number of burn victims who (in an odd way) were at least fortunate enough to have third-degree burns that were past the point of feeling anything, finishing up the remainder of the supersoldiers, and then running back to the lab to finish essential tasks and cleanup-- it was ten o’clock at night after a full day on her feet, with nothing to eat since lunch, and she felt like it.

She had also been consciously putting off worrying about Fitz all day. He might have been on the shop floor when it went up. Or maybe not. Well. It wasn’t as if she could do anything, he was either alright or not. And if he weren’t-- if the worst had happened-- there was a part of her that was glad to be too busy to think about it. To take that line dividing her life into “with Fitz” and “without” and kick it as far down the road as possible.

There was no answer at his door.

“Fitz?” she said, lifting her voice up to be heard through the door and knocking again. Still no response.  

*He’s not on the casualties list*, she reminded herself. There was no way to know where he was, and it might be something innocent. Cleaning up the damage or salvaging work out of the shop. That would be like him, honestly-- Fitz and his pathological need to be useful….

There was also a part of her that knew full well that you could only get on the casualty list if they could identify your remains. With what had happened down there...

Simmons clenched her hands, paced back and forth a little bit, and resolutely headed down to the cafeterias. They were open late tonight, and seemed as good a place to look for a Fitz as any.

*  

She returned half an hour later, empty-handed. Almost. She did have a tray with two peoples’ worth of dinner. And a butter knife suitable for popping open the cheap lock on Fitz’s door. He didn’t have clearance for her hallway. If she were to wait up somewhere for him, this would be it.

Time ground by slowly in his tiny, windowless room. Jemma picked at the food and found she couldn’t stand the thought of swallowing. Eventually she decided, a little numbly, that all else being equal she’d feel better if she got cleaned up. The hospital smell had stuck to her, all disinfectant and nervous sweat and fumes.

After making a quick run down to her room to pick up some things, she knocked on his door again-- just in case-- and slunk back inside. A distant part of her thought it’d be nice to have a change of scene for cleaning up-- she’d never tried not to throw up from nickel poisoning or been filmed unawares in this shower before.

Once the water started going, it wasn’t long before her throat began to seize up, painfully, and hot tears pressed into her eyes. She told herself it was for everyone. The soldiers who didn’t want to be there, whose enhancements kept pain medication from working but didn’t keep their legs from being blown off. The shop floor workers-- any number of whom could have been just like her and Fitz, put to work against their will or knowledge at a place that treated their lives casually.
The medical staff, a high proportion of whom were kinder and more competent than you’d expect, and seemed to have resorted to Hydra out of a complicated relationship with either student debt or prescription narcotics and the resulting effects on their career options. And Fitz, who’d happened to go missing in the middle of a catastrophic accident. Who hadn’t returned home, long after any search and rescue or salvage operation would have finished.

The reports were quite clear: a fire so hot, the steel beams spanning the roof had gone a glowing, taffy-soft red and sagged and dropped the whole building down. The rescue crews had mentioned a flat layer of cast iron over the factory floor, several inches deep, studded by the sagging remains of tooling equipment and hard, charred, burnt-up clinkers shaped ominously like bones.

*Who are you kidding,* she berated herself, fighting back tears. *You can put two and two together.*

*The tears had drawn out tentatively at first, almost as if she were trying it on for size. But soon exhaustion caught up with her.*

There was too much wrong. This whole place, for starters. Nobody seemed to really want to be there but it crept on anyway, some kind of unstoppable juggernaut filled with passengers who didn’t want to reach its destination. And she’d gone and pulled Fitz into it. Into the whole thing, really, with the field and all; and so what if he didn’t hold it against her? She’d still done it. And now this.

She couldn’t be sure what happened to him, but she could guess.

Jemma found herself having to lean down to breathe around the grip in her throat. She couldn’t get air through without dragging over her vocal cords, pulling out a gasping sound when she inhaled that sounded pathetic even to herself. She dropped to sit on her heels, trying to rest her forehead on her knees and gain herself some breathing room.

And as she did, she thought she heard something over the hiss over the water.

After spinning her wheels for a second, Jemma shot up a hand to shut off the water.

She hadn’t imagined it-- there was somebody fumbling at the lock. The sound went on for several seconds. That wasn’t somebody with a key; that was somebody trying to pick a lock. Badly. The amateurish quality of it was not entirely unlike the camera setup in her room had been; and she’d long suspected that the people who worked here well aware of exactly where their people were at all times.

Suddenly furious, Jemma stepped out and dug through her trousers pocket. She’d taken to carrying a spare scalpel around… just in case.

Racing whoever was scrabbling at the lock, Jemma dashed the short distance to the door and pulled the cap off the blade with her teeth, waiting. One good stick under the corner of the jaw-- that was all she needed. And she felt quite certain she could get it.

The lock finally tumbled. Time slowed and drew out, and Jemma could feel the powerful thud of blood in her arteries burn away her awareness of the now-cold water dribbling down her bare skin. As the knob turned, she raised her hand up to her best guess at throat-level on the intruder.

When the door opened to reveal none other than the engineer himself, Simmons felt her last nerve give out. Startled and mortified, she squawked out loud and dropped the scalpel.

Within a split second Fitz-- who apparently hadn’t seen her there, stumbling into the room as he was-- was screaming too, and jumped to put his hands up as if to defend himself, and Simmons jumped and wrapped her arms around herself in a desperate effort to hold onto some kind of decorum. After some long, gasping and flustered split-seconds she finally turned and ran, thighs
and arse wobbling as if to better kiss off what might have been left of her dignity, back to the loo.

“Simmons!” Fitz gaped. “Is that you!?”

“No!” she yelled back from behind the door, red-faced and shaking and nearly crying again, but this time out of a bizarre mix of embarrassment and relief. It wasn’t that she was ashamed of her body, but… she had not been prepared for that. “Somebody thought it would be fun to send in a body double. That was definitely not me you just saw bare-arsed naked about to stab you with a scalpel.”

“What?”

Simmons rolled her eyes. He sounded genuinely confused.

“It’s me, Fitz!” she hollered back, louder, in case volume was a problem. Sticking her head out the door, she continued. “Um. I had just gotten in the shower… can I tie it up and then we finish this conversation, only I’ll be dressed?”

“What?” This time it was quieter. Jemma let a soft sound that was half-sigh and half-wail and turned the water back on.

*

She hurried her way through cleaning up, and emerged from the small shower-and-toilet room freshly scrubbed and dressed in pajamas a few minutes later. She found Fitz standing at the sink, splashing water onto his face.

“Sorry about that,” she mumbled. “Be right back.” With that, Jemma returned to the door to pick up the scalpel she’d so composedly dropped to the floor. When she returned it, capped, to her little stack of belongings, she noticed that Fitz was still holding his face in his hands over the sink.

“Are you alright?” she asked

“No,” he admitted quietly, leaning down to rest groggily over the sink on his elbows, practically pouring his slurred words into the drain. “I got out ok, but they took a bunch of us in for questioning. They gave me an IV and I blacked out and I still can’t see right and--

He looked up at her, eyes despairing and red.

“I think I might have told them everything, Jemma.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the delay in posting! We went on a family road trip to visit IRL friends… sorry, not sorry. :) BUT. Because it’s Christmas, there’s another chapter is going up tomorrow.

***

Fun fact: “singe” both means “to burn a little” in English and is also French for "monkey."
A long, taut silence stretched out between them. Simmons desperately wanted to know more about that. But she was also aware that with the room having been empty for a couple of days since the last time Fitz checked it for devices, there could have easily been more planted since then. No matter what Fitz thought he’d done, the two of them being recorded talking about it would definitely still make it worse.

“Never mind about that for now, Fitz. Let’s get you taken care of and then worry about it, yeah?”

He looked at her dubiously-- inasmuch as he could, with his eyes pressed nearly shut against the light. Now that he’d stopped splashing his face for a moment, she could see tear tracks starting again down his cheeks.

“Let’s start with those eyes, shall we?” she suggested gently. A little to her surprise, he didn’t fight it. He seemed to have shut down, for the most part only acting when prompted to do something.

Looking around the room, Simmons quickly decided the best lighting was over the washroom sink-- where they were already standing. She nudged him over to wash her hands.

“Alright, Fitz,” she said over the hissing tap. “I’m going to take a look at them. How do they feel? Does the light hurt?”

Fitz squinted, trying to get the purple botches covering up most of his vision to dissipate. They stubbornly stayed put.

“Yeah. Feels like there’s something in there,” he answered. Some of the syllables were taking a little too long to come out. If she didn’t know better, she’d swear he was drunk. Well. That gave her a few ideas as to what they’d injected him with. And what to expect.

“Alright, well… here. Let’s get you in where I can see.” Jemma hopped up to sit on the counter and reached out with her feet, bracketing his knees with her toes and nudging him to scoot closer. Now that she was slightly above him, she could tip his chin up and actually see into his eyes.

“This probably isn’t going to feel good,” she apologized, “But I need you to stay still for a second.” Gingerly, she started to open the lids of his left eye--

--and he flinched, pulling away with a “Bloody Christ!”

“Fitz! What did I say?” she chided mildly.

“Sorry, s-sorry,” he slurred.

Jemma sighed. Fitz wasn’t a fan of poking and prodding, but normally was able to hold himself still. The poor thing was clearly addled.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said on impulse. Before she could change her mind, she dropped a soft kiss right in front of his ear.

“No. If you’re good, I’ll even it up on the other side,” she promised. Fitz had a bit of a fidget with liking for things to be even. A bit of a thing for being kissed by her too, if she had to guess, and she wasn’t above using that against him. Particularly when “using it against him” meant getting a diagnosis and working towards figuring out exactly what a drugged-up Fitz meant by “I think I told them everything.”

Through the haze, Fitz felt himself go a little crestfallen. He didn’t need bribes to behave... right? And weren’t they supposed to at least try and not be overheard?
A wnas dkrjsns he wrote into her arm.

Simmons’s eyes slid to his hand. Was he just twitching, or--? Oh. No, he was definitely trying to do Morse code.

“Better stick to English,” she murmured, trying not to move her lips-- or show visible amusement at his befuddled attempts to communicate. It was like getting a drunk text from someone wearing mittens.

“Oh. I was going to be good,” he replied sullenly into her shoulder, the words feeling lame on his tongue.

Simmons nodded graciously. “Let’s try again.”

With only a little fussing, Fitz managed to keep still and follow her directions, irritated tears streaming from his eyes in response to the light.

“There’s nothing in there,” she concluded. Then, following up on her promise, Jemma pulled him in gently by the shoulder for a kiss on the other ear. He’d managed to stay still just fine with the right prompting. That was another bit of diagnostic work on Simmons’s part, actually. For all the stumbling, he could still follow through on a set task. That was good.

Dazed and blinking, Fitz sagged and leaned his head on her shoulder. Jemma let out a little hum and decided to go with it. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him in and he shakily planted his palms down on the counter to either side of her.

Burying her face in his hair and smelling metal fumes, she was well aware of how drunkenly devastated he was feeling. That she needed to figure out what an intoxicated Fitz meant by “I told them everything.” That huddling together like this was probably the safest way to talk-- letting them keep their voices quiet and lips hidden from prying. How lucky they both were that he was alive and mostly well.

Also that he was leaning heavily on the insides of her thighs and it felt very, very nice. God, he was warm…. But this was the worst possible time to be thinking about that, so Simmons merely made a mental note and scooted back so he was leaning on the counter instead. Then she carefully cleared her throat and continued.

“You’ve just got a lot of irritation, is all. Feeling like there’s something in them can be a side effect of that.”

Fitz nodded silently.

Simmons paused, trying to think of the possible explanations for eyes being that bloodshot and gritty-feeling.

“Do you remember them doing anything to your eyes, then?”

“No,” Fitz shook his head. “It must’ve happened while I was out.”

“Or you were exposed to something during the fire,” she said, the acrid smell on his hair and clothes filling her airways. “Was there anything like that? Bit of chlorine, tear gas canisters bursting, anything like that?”

“Huh-uh,” he shook his head again. “Would remember that.”

“Were you welding without eye protection?” Simmons asked, in a voice that was clearly starting to grasp at straws. “Or watching somebody else do it?”

“Yeah, that’s what-- that one,” Fitz stammered. That was the story: he got out thanks to the torch-cutter guy with everyone else. Couldn’t give Donnie away.
No? That wasn’t right.

He turned his face, shifting against her shoulder, second-guessing himself. Shite. Everything was garbled and he was struggling to remember what Jemma Simmons was supposed to know. He’d just spent the last three hours of consciousness lying through his teeth and couldn’t remember if it was okay to stop yet.

It had already been hard enough to keep his head straight during ordinary questioning. They asked him a lot of questions about Simmons, and a lot of questions about why he was there. (That had been easy: “You kidnapped me and now I’m here, you great fucking idiots.”)

They didn’t even ask anything about Donnie, which helped. But then the IV got involved and everything started getting mixed around. The best he could figure to do was just grit his teeth and keep himself thinking about what’d happen to Jemma if she was found out. That tended to keep things centered. Ultimately though, as time wore on and they asked him the same questions over and over, it got to be like trying to pick up a big slippery rock with one hand and he couldn’t even remember what he’d said anymore.

Soon after that he’d started feeling fuzzed out and sleepy. At one point he was so dead tired he decided to fuck it all and go to sleep. Somebody yelled something about “the little bitch passed out.” Then he woke up strapped down in a cot in a clinic with lots of other people and a surprisingly disinterested medical team. They’d let him go as soon as he’d stopped yelling, and now he was here.

Fitz screwed up his eyes, trying to concentrate, and winced as it burned. Now that he knew there wasn’t anything there to abrade his eyes, he flew a hand up to rub at them and try and get some relief.

Jemma caught his wrist and gently, but firmly, moved it down into her lap away from his eyes. She laced her fingers through his.

“Don’t touch them, Fitz. It’ll make it worse in the long run,” she said quietly into his hair. “So you looked at a welding arc without UV goggles? Is that what happened?”

Fitz felt himself sweat for a moment, still uncertain. Well. Better safe than sorry, his intoxicated mind decided.

“Yeah,” he nodded into her shoulder. “The emergency exits were all locked so we couldn’t get out. Somebody had to make a hole in the garage bay door with a cutting torch. ‘S how most of the people who made it out got out,” he said, reciting the account he’d developed after talking up a few of the folks in the crowd around the fellow with the torch, piggybacking his story onto theirs.

Jemma circled her fingers gently through his hair.

“Oh, Fitz,” she said, sounding more sympathetic than upset. “You know better than to look at a torch in use without goggles. Arc eye is no fun. But you’ll be alright in a day or two.”

“What?” he mumbled.

“Arc eye. You’ve got sunburn on your corneas from UV radiation coming out from the torch.”

“But that’s not—” he blurted, before stopping himself. He reached way back to a kernel of something he remembered from earlier. “Would you get it from a magnesium fire too?”

“Yes, you would.” She paused, and pulled back just enough to frown at him even though he was still looking down, avoiding the light. “Did you do that as well? Fitz. You’re a catalogue of risky behaviors. No wonder you feel terrible.”

“Yeah, alright,” he agreed. “So it’s not from the… whatever they put in me?”

“I doubt it,” she said, brushing a thumb along his eyebrow. “It just takes a few hours for it to set in like any other sunburn, so you didn’t notice until after you woke up.”
“Right,” Fitz nodded, feeling rather stupid. Arc eye was something he knew well enough about, normally.

“After they put the IV in you-- did you get a garlic or rotting-onions taste in your mouth?”

He gave a short, wobbly laugh, and with how heavily he was leaning on Jemma, she struggled a little bit to stay upright.

“Yeah, and I said ‘The fuck are you giving me onions for?’ and he said–” She felt him wobble his head from side to side, imitating a self-important inquisitor– “‘Shut up, I’m asking the questions.’ It was very reassuring.”

“Oh, it is, actually,” Simmons said quietly, making smoothing passes with her fingers from his temple to his neck as the pieces clicked into place. “Means they gave you sodium thiopental.”

He looked up at her sharply, eyes nearly pressed shut, a question on his face.

“Isn’t that the–”

“Truth serum?” she murmured, trying not to laugh. “Come here,” she said, opening her arms in invitation for him to come back and lean on her again. He did, and she put her arms over his shoulders and rested her cheek over one of them, speaking quietly into his ear where her lips couldn’t be read.

“It’s the closest thing anybody’s got, unless you believe a couple of defectors about the KGB’s program.” Which Simmons didn’t, because something that effective with that few side effects sounded far too good to be true. And even if the KGB drug was real, Hydra clearly didn’t have access to it. Either way, that could be useful intel.

“You know how they came up with using barbiturates as a ‘truth serum,’ right?” she asked.

“Um… not really my department,” he answered uncomfortably.

“Well, no, but I didn’t want to insult your intelligence by telling you something you already knew,” Simmons replied. “Anyhow. It came out of obstetrics, actually. They started using barbiturates for pain relief during labor-- called it ‘twilight sleep.’ Practitioners started to notice that all these very prim housewives were unusually candid in their response if you asked them questions while they were under the influence.”

Barbiturates were a general depressant, very similar to how alcohol worked on the nervous system. That was why people on barbiturates tended to be more honest than usual-- it was the same sort of muddling and general lowering of inhibitions that you got with alcohol. It was the same reason that barbs and alcohol together were a very toxic combination.

“The intelligence community got wind of it soon enough. A few years after that they gave up on it when they realized anybody who can lie drunk can lie on barbiturates if they want to, and that’s nearly everyone.”

“Wait. Really?”

“Yes, really,” Simmons confirmed. “And the fact that they kept upping the dosage until you passed out-- they wouldn’t have done that if you’d been talking, Fitz.”

Barbiturates had a very fine line between unconsciousness and a lethal dose. Leaving aside for the moment how angry she was that somebody was pumping Fitz full of dangerous levels of potentially-lethal drugs-- the fact that they wanted to take that risk meant the lower doses weren’t getting the results they wanted.

“You really think so?” he asked, muffled voice drifting up from her shoulder.

“I know so!” she scoffed lightly. “It’s my job.” Then she paused, hedging a little. “Well, not the
part about performing narcointerrogation, but the rest of it. And do you know what the other problem with sodium thiopental is?” she asked.

*Other than lethality owing to its low therapeutic index,* she fumed silently.

Fitz simply shook his head where it rested on her collarbone.

“It interferes with memory formation. People tend to come out of it thinking they’ve said a lot more than they really did,” Jemma answered. She drew a hand to rest at the back of his neck, thumb brushing over the skin under his ear, and pressed a kiss to his temple.

“I think you made it, Fitz,” she said quietly.

*

She let him rest a few minutes, soaking in the relief that seeped out of him as he leaned on her in long, ragged breaths.

Before long, though, Jemma maxed out on the amount of time that she could hold both of them upright. She ran her hands down his arms, laid her palms over his hands, and leaned back to see him. Fitz stumbled forward a little without her support. One he'd stopped himself, he tried to look up at her apologetically but soon had to duck down again because of the light. Even so, Simmons could see the heavy tear tracks welling out of his eyes— that if pressed, he would likely swear were absolutely due only to corneal irritation. Definitely not from trying to process the aftermath of outrunning a fire that left twenty-plus people unaccounted for and a deep round of narcointerrogation… all while still intoxicated. Nope.

“Let’s get you taken care of, yeah?” Jemma said, shifting between his arms to run a washcloth under the tap.

*

Fitz was too drugged and blind to notice the grimness with which Jemma walked him to the bed, a cold cloth over his eyes. Her hands and voice were soft as she drew him over, and the sandwich she handed him was— well, not a Simmons sandwich, but it was good. Some odd thing, like a panini made out of French bread with ingredients that shouldn’t have worked together but did—ham and Swiss and mayonnaise and pickles, and a smaller one with turkey and guava jelly and cream cheese.

“Thirsty?” she said when they’d both eaten, mouth pressed into a tight line that he couldn’t see. Fitz was half-lying down, half sitting up in bed, slightly slumped over and very disheveled-looking. But he’d managed to get dinner into himself without losing the cold cloth over his eyes more than a couple times, which was no small victory.

“God, yeah,” he agreed. Simmons bumped his near hand with a glass of water, and he took it and drained in one long grateful draw.

“I think I could feel the one with the ham drawing the water out of my toes,” she murmured understandingly, getting up to refill the glass.

“Glad it was something lying-down-while-visually-impaired-friendly,” Fitz slurred, shrugging. “God help us if it’d been soup.”

Simmons cracked a smile. She had a feeling that if it meant getting to eat, even blotto Fitz could figure it out.

Returning with a full glass, she nudged him with it again. Fitz drank about a third of it and held it back out for her to take back. Jemma quickly downed the rest of the glass and looked him over. It had been a long day; even without the burnt edges and smell of fumes clinging to him, he was long overdue for a shower and change. The logistics of that could be... interesting.
“Do you think you can handle getting cleaned up?” she asked, and her voice was definitely not at all nervous.

Chapter End Notes

ps. Those are Cuban sandwiches, if anybody's wondering. Because of reasons.

Ongoing thanks to notapepper/typhanni for most excellent beta support.

And MERRY CHRISTMAS to you fabulous readers and if you don't do the Christmas then HAPPY DAY OFF FOR GLORIOUS FIC-READING AND GENERAL LOAFING PURPOSES

Please leave comments, questions, etc because it totally makes my day and I love hearing from you! Mwah!
Simmons was sitting on the floor in the doorway to the washroom, back to the shower, on call in case of... gravity-related complications. She had her arms wrapped around her knees, staring through the tall glass of water in her hands.

For his part, Fitz seemed to have perked right up along with his blood sugar. He was energetically humming something she could barely make out over the water. Fitz was sketchy enough when it came to carrying a tune while sober. But the real problem was that given how animated it sounded, and with the squeaking sounds of his feet, he had to be bouncing around in there like a ping-pong ball in a clothes dryer.

It was fairly adorable, how delighted he was to still be alive. Jemma was just anxious to make sure he stayed that way.

“Fitz,” she called out warily over her shoulder. “You’re not... jumping around in there, are you?”

There was an incriminating pause.

“No?” he replied meekly.

“Good,” she said with a slight warning tone. “Every last medical staffer’s worn-out and seeing cross-eyed-- not a good time for a trip down to the clinic.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Just get yourself cleaned up, yeah? Celebrating can wait a bit,” she suggested.

Fitz stopped, a contrite look on his face even though she wouldn’t see it. Jemma was right. Bad time to get carried away. He’d been drugged for so long it was hard to tell anymore, but Fitz thought he might still be a little tipsy and possibly overprone to wobbling. But he wasn’t dead and Hydra’s evil workshop would take at least six weeks and untold millions to get back off the ground and the hot water felt amazing and Donnie and the anonymous workman with the cutting torch were big damn heroes and granted nobody was too clear on the details at the moment, but Jemma liked him back. Things were going well for once. Wouldn’t want to ruin all that with an unnecessary head injury from knocking himself over. Best to rein it in.

Simmons was doing her best to not pay any attention to Fitz beyond what was medically necessary. The poor thing was alive, boisterous, naked, and very, very intoxicated.

She quickly became lost in thought. What is life? she wondered. Human beings-- any organism, really-- were just great bumbling collections of chemical reactions, when you came right down to it. Somehow some of these chemical reactions became best friends with other chemical reactions. Went into a panic (releasing the appropriate cascade of cortisol and other stress hormones into the mix) when they thought their favorite fellow chemical reactions had ceased reacting. Made their favorite chemical reactions sit down and ingest enough reagents to keep going.

And suffered through the godawful singing when their fellow chemical reactions’ equilibrium had been disturbed by the addition of barbiturates.

Simmons blinked as the sounds slowly came into focus.

“Fitz.”

“Ye-e-es?” he responded, deigning to stop the concert to take her question.

“Are you singing Mariah Carey right now?”
“Not right now. You made me stop,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Good point. I can rephrase. Did I just hear ‘Hero’ coming out of your mouth?”

“Well I hope so! That’s what I’ve been singing, so it means the air is working.” At transmitting vibrations, that was to say.

Fitz was feeling a little bad at not being around to buy a beer for either his actual lifeline Donnie or his fictional one, the figure rapidly becoming known in his mind as Blowtorch Man. It only seemed fitting to offer them some kind of tribute, even if they never got to hear about it.

Jemma gave a long-suffering sigh. Every once in a rare while some concrete evidence popped up of Fitz’s childhood having been heavily influenced by his girl cousins. And of all the times to be without her phone or any other method of sound-recording technology...

Simmons was also a little perturbed at his ability to be so chipper when a couple dozen of their coworkers had just been incinerated. But then, he’d had longer to get over the shock than she had. And hadn’t just spent an hour with perfectly good reason to believe she was among the casualties. And was very, very under the influence.

In any case, it wasn’t as if mourning was any help to the dead. Sure, it made the living feel better; but the deceased weren’t exactly around to be offended if you didn’t. Maybe Fitz had a point.

“I was just thinking it might be more fun if you did something we both know,” she said lightly, tipping her head as she looked at the wall.

“Any dolt with half a brain… C’mon Simmons, I know you know that one,” Fitz grinned under the water, immensely pleased with himself. His tendency to become musical when intoxicated was showing itself.

“You heard that!?”

She may have been blasting through the duet from Dr. Horrible right before noticing the camera in her own room’s shower two days before. Entirely to help keep track of time, of course. She’d had no idea Fitz could hear it. Note to self: thin walls in this complex.

When the only reply Fitz gave was a good laugh from behind the curtain, Simmons rolled her eyes and plowed ahead.

“Can see that humankind has gone insane,” she continued.

“Wait wait, no, that’s still Dr. Horrible. There’s the other part.”

Simmons snorted. “What? I don’t want to be Penny.”

“Why not? Penny’s nice.”

“She dies, Fitz!”

“Oh. Right.”

“In a completely unnecessary, refrigerator-like fashion,” Simmons went on, crossing her arms over her chest.

“What other part would you do, then?” Fitz queried.

“I don’t know, hasn’t ‘A Man’s Gotta Do’ have parts for Horrible and Hammer? You can do the Horrible part....”

There was a long pause from the shower.
“What?” Simmons inquired.

“So the hammer is… your…?”

Simmons snorted and grinned. “It’s just a song, Fitz.”

A noncomittal noise ensued from the shower.

“So, this is why there need to be better storylines for women in media, Fitz,” she said, tone factual. “Maybe I’d like to just sing a funny song without having to worry that I’m setting myself up with some sort of horrible foreshadowing.”

“Yes, Hermione.”

“Harry Potter is not a musical!” She thunked her head back against the door frame.

Fitz nodded in comprehension. This wasn’t turning out as fun as he’d hoped. Time to try a different angle.

An idea came to him. There was a song that was the perfect song for their situation. It even included blanket forts. And was innocent enough, as long as you kept in mind that the song was about his feelings for his number-one favorite food group. Definitely not anything inappropriate. And Simmons knew that, because Simmons knew everything. It was a fact.

Jemma was puzzling out how a “You’re A Wizard, Harry” overture might work when she heard it. Just over the hissing of the water, a quiet falsetto was warbling out--

Her eyes went wide, half in horror and half in anticipation of Oh, this is going to be good. And Fitz’s familiarity with this artist was far too recent to blame on his cousins.

“Wow. Fitz. I just want you to know that as soon as you get out of there, we’re putting you directly to be-- sleep,” she said over her laughter.

“Simmons! Don’t go getting any wild ideas,” he objected. “This song is about bacon. With which I am in a very loving, long-term relationship and I don’t appreciate you making fun.”

“Your teenage dream was bacon?”

“How can you even ask that? You were there,” he squawked, sounded positively offended.

“I… yes. It’s accurate.”

“Thank you,” Fitz said officiously. “And now you don’t have to join, but if you could mind not interrupting….”?

It didn’t take Simmons, still sitting in the doorway with her back to him, too long to decide to just go with it. Soon they were both belting out the chorus because… it had been a long day and why the hell not, was why.

* * *

“My-- heart-- stops-- when you look at me!” the two of them practically shouted.

_How about that?_ Simmons thought idly over the din, _This song is clearly about bacon._

“Just-- one-- touch-- now baby I believe!”

She threw her hands over her face, unable to believe this was really happening.

“Fitz!” she called out over him, suspicious at a sound she’d heard. “No jumping in there, remember?”

“Right, sorry,” he mumbled quickly, and dove right back in. “--run away and--”
Jemma shook her head, laughing at the wall. “Don’t ever look back!”

Just then there was a loud pounding on the wall. Jemma and Fitz froze and heard a muffled SHUT UP! coming from the other side.

“Sorry!” Fitz shouted, rather counterproductively.

“Sorry!” Simmons echoed, a little softer. Then she remembered where they were and that they’d just been not only singing loud, but something about running off.

“Hail Hydra!” she blurted.

Fitz cracked up. “Did you just--?”

“Oh honestly Fitz, as if you’re in any position to criticize,” she mumbled, blushing in embarrassment.

She could hear Fitz shrug before he carried on singing-- notching down his volume, but still. Grumpy neighbors were apparently no match for his current mood.

“How close are you to done?” she asked cautiously. She’d be lying if she said she wasn’t wondering how much he was actually washing up in there, as opposed to throwing himself a drunk water party.

“Oh! Close to done,” he lied, and tried to find the soap.

“Alright! Um, maybe focus on that for a moment? Since we’re on neighbor-imposed musical lockdown,” she suggested.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jemma!” he scowled. “I’m having the most fun anybody can have in a shower alone. Let me have this!”

Simmons dragged her hands over her face. My God, she thought, It’s like bathing a two-year-old.

“That’s possibly true,” she said noncommittally.

“And I hardly think you’d come in and stop me,” he added.

“Are you jumping again?”

“What makes you think I’m jumping?” he said suspiciously, bouncing up and down on his toes.

Simmons’s hands seemed to have taken up permanent residence over her eyes, just in case.

“Because I’m certain I’m hearing a slapping sound, Fitz, and physics and materials science suggest--”

“Fine,” he grumbled, “You’re right, I’m done.”

Simmons got up to leave, but the water stayed on. Apparently by “done” he meant only with the jumping. And the singing started up again; something about “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

“Back to Doctor Horrible, are we?”

“Yeah, but in retrospect something called ‘My Eyes’ seemed in poor taste all things considered so--”

“Alright--”

“You’re Captain Hammer, right?” Fitz checked.
“Uh… sure?”

“It’s a sing-along blog, Simmons! If you don’t sing along I’m coming out—”

“How about we focus on the bathing and then Doctor Horrible later,” Simmons counter-offered, running over his words, until her brain managed to process what he’d said.

“—it’s only fair.”

Standing leaned against the doorway, Simmons glanced left and right trying to figure out if he was making any sense.

Oh.

“I thought you said you hadn’t seen anything,” she said, eyebrow approaching her hairline, remembering her unintentional streaking incident from earlier. A solid note of amusement ran through her voice.

She heard a quiet “Shite” issue from the shower.

You giant lying liar, she thought, pleased well beyond what she’d normally have any right to be at a discovery like that.

“It was… only… maybe twenty-five percent? There’s a big purple blob in the middle of my field of vision,” he hedged nervously.

Simmons didn’t let go. He’d been making an awful pest of himself the last ten minutes or so, so it was only fitting. This would be fun.

“And which twenty-five percent was that, Fitz?”

“Em… you know. The ‘back of your head’ twenty-five percent.”

“Fitz. That’s maybe ten percent. How do you account for the other fifteen?”

There was a brief but noticeable pause.

“Feet.”

“Feet? Really? Fitz, that’s only another five.”

“You know, and the-- back of the-- knee parts. Down. That’s fifteen. All accounted for. I’m done.”

“A full north-to-south sweep that failed to capture in anything in the middle? That’s impressively poor use of available instrumentation,” she needled him.

“Giant purple blob.”

“Ah yes, the corneal damage. Fair enough.”

Simmons was willing to let him off the hook. For now.

Chapter End Notes

Props to notapepper/typhanni for extensive beta-ing of this section. Friends don’t let friends write crack’y interludes in the middle of serious!fics without an excellent beta.

; )
Also, I don't know at which point one considers oneself to have a "serious problem" with the urge to write shower scenes, but for anybody keeping count I think this is the fourth. I don't even know.

/Author's log: day 108. Characters still at Camp Hydra. No relief in sight and I've completely lost count of how many shower scenes are in this fic. Supplies running low; if anybody's reading this, please send help/
With both of them fed and cleaned up and the clock approaching midnight, Simmons led Fitz down the hall to her room. It seemed a little odd to wander the corridors in pyjamas, but she hardly thought it would register after everything else that had gone on today. He could see enough to get about mostly without incident-- he’d made it back to his room on his own, after all. Nonetheless she reached for his elbow, and he followed along readily, the two of them falling into step before they were five meters down the hall.

As soon as they were inside, Jemma nudged Fitz towards the bed. He took the hint and tumbled in, managing to stop just enough to take his shoes off before burrowing under the blankets.

Meanwhile, Jemma dug out ibuprofen and prepped up another cool washcloth while watching him out of the corner of her eye. She couldn’t help but notice that he’d once again taken the side of the bed nearest the door. He might be half-blind and drugged out of his gourd, but darned if he wasn’t trying to take charge anyway.

When she had everything ready and brought to the bed, Jemma crawled in next to him, nudging his arm so she could fit in against his side. Once there she pulled the coverlet up to her neck and tried to relax into his warmth. But Fitz let out a quiet hum and tugged the cover up over their heads, pinning it rather high up on the headboard with an arm thrown behind his head.

“Hmm?” Jemma asked, uncertain as to what he was doing. The light shone dully through the blanket, and Fitz showed no signs of sitting up or changing position.

“Oh. Just… for the record, I don’t think the fire was an accident,” Fitz said quietly.

Ah. He wanted to talk about this without being seen or heard, was all. Jemma turned partly onto her stomach, crossing her arms over Fitz’s chest and resting her chin down on her hands to look at him. He curled his arm up to lay a hand between her shoulderblades and drew small circles there on her back.

“How do you figure?”

“Well, not completely, anyway. It’s like that whole thing we were talking about with the oily rags,” he said. Now he was in full Drunk Engineer mode-- speaking in a whisper, but otherwise loose and expansive with his words. “The initial fire itself-- I saw the whole thing start, that looked like a normal shop mishap. Some magnesium shavings lit up. Not a serious problem in and of itself.”

Simmons nodded. “Oh, then you saw it all get started. Is that how you managed to get enough time to get away?”

Fitz mulled it over for a moment. “I suppose so. But, not the point. Right now.” He was still struggling a little with what was alright to tell her about Donnie, and he found the confusion a little embarrassing in addition to being a potential security problem. He decided to just dodge the question completely.

“Point is, they had a stockpile of thermite on the shop floor. In thin sheet-metal containers, which is unheard of in itself. Right next to an assembly line working magnesium, which is the only thing that burns hot enough to ignite thermite. And the only thing that’ll stop a magnesium fire is dry sand, but they didn’t have any on hand-- just a fire extinguisher, which--

“Only makes it worse,” Jemma finished.

“Yeah,” He laughed shortly. “I mean, who does that? It’s such shiteballs planning, it almost has to be on purpose.”

“Hm.” Simmons mulled it over for a moment, and remembered something.
“You know something? I don’t know exactly which part it was, but we heard this boom—” she splayed her fingers out for emphasis— “all the way from the medical bays, and within… I don’t know, half a minute, Raina came through chewing somebody out on the phone. She said ‘I told you this would happen.’ Sounded very upset.”

“Yeah!” Fitz practically lit up, even under the washcloth. “That was the iron flow hitting a bank of acetylene tanks. That was something else,” he said, a look of appreciative reminiscence flitting over his face.

Simmons laughed quietly. “Ah. Sorry I missed it. Rather busy patching up five-centimeter-deep molten iron burns.”

“Oh, Christ. Yeah. It was awful. Sorry.”

“Not at all,” she shrugged. “Third-degrees don’t hurt much. In fact apparently when they happen in foundries, the burned workers think they’re ok and don’t even wind up going to the hospital until three or four weeks later when they realize it’s not healing up right.”

Fitz’s wince was visible. “Ugh. And I feel like we’re getting off-track here. There was… Raina?”

“Right. I’ve no idea what she was talking about, but she’s rather high up in facility administration. If I had to guess, I’d say maybe she’s butted heads with whoever’s in charge of the shop floor about some of those hazard issues. The workplace safety on the bio side that she’s over… seems to be fine. There could be some differences of opinion going on over how to handle the labs.”

“Yeah. So somebody high up enough on the engineering side to be planning facility space allocation was either super-incompetent, or secretly batting for S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Fitz guessed. “I don’t know, I’d give about 50-50 odds on that.”

“Right,” Simmons said, nose crinkling. “And it sounds like whatever was happening, Raina might have known about it. And not approved.”

“Well, she’s certainly not secretly working for S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“That’d be some impressively deep cover,” Simmons agreed. “There was something else, too. Apparently Ops feels free to just call on the bio research department as nursing aides every time soldiers come in of an op, which is how I wound up in the med bays. That’s another thing Raina’s upset about. We’re dragged off the job once or twice a week without warning, evidently, and it’s causing problems with keeping experiments running. Maintaining all of our cultures and whatnot.”

“Yeah, I can see how that would be a source of interdepartmental friction,” Fitz said, without a single note of self-consciousness, tracing fingers over her shoulderblades. Jemma responded by closing her eyes and laid her head down drowsily on his chest.

“You sleepy?” he said. Of course, he hadn’t been able to see her drooping eyelids earlier.

“Exhausted,” she nodded into him. “But the comp’ny’s good.”

“Hm,” he said softly. “Well, looks like our ‘take them out through poor safety procedures’ plan worked. I’d say you can get a night off.”

Simmons let out a soft laugh, sleepily holding up a hand for a congratulatory high-five. It was a moment before Fitz noticed it.

“Oh!” he mumbled, meeting her hand. Their fingers tangled on the way down.

“What next, then?” she mumbled into his shirt.


“Wait! Patent infringement!” she burst out groggily, head down on his chest and one finger pointing up excitedly.

“Oh?”
“The dendrotoxin grenades, Fitz,” she said. “Aren’t we 99% sure they stole those from us?” She pointed back and forth to indicate— not S.H.I.E.L.D., but the two of us.

“Well-- only the formula, so technically they only stole it from you.” Not that Fitz was bitter about Hydra thinking they could develop cartridges that were better than his, or anything.

“Oh. Well then. Your royalties are safe. I, on the other hand, am experiencing legally significant amounts of damage to my livelihood from this case of infringement.”

“Other than being imprisoned, you mean?” Fitz grumbled.

Jemma nodded. “In addition to that, yes.”

“It’s settled. Next time we see Coulson we’ll pitch it to him. ‘Sir, I know you’ve got the next ten million dollars of funding already earmarked for bases and materiel, but hear us out.” Fitz picked his hands up and spread them out a little as if to indicate a vast and promising panorama. “Lawsuits.”

“No, no, no, wait,” Jemma insisted. “If they’re using the dendrotoxin, it means they’re not using real grenades and bullets. Infringe away. Please. By all means. I’m so pleased they prefer my technology to lead. All I ask is that they document how much they’re using so that after S.H.I.E.L.D. cleans this up, then we can assess appropriate damages.”

“That is some high-quality strategic thinking, Dr. Simmons,” Fitz said. He smoothed his hand up to the back of her head, passing over where it hung in a wet braid, to make sure he had his bearings before dropping a kiss to her forehead.


Fitz’s eyebrows managed to visibly furrow under the washcloth.

“Sobriety. Fitz. My secret weapon. I’m just--”

“Oh. Right. I get it now. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jemma yawned and laid her head back down, eyes drooping shut. Fitz’s hand drifted up to play with her ear. She leaned into it at first, basking in the affection that was clear in his touch. Before long, though, it devolved into him folding the top of her ear down and making sound effects under his breath when he let go to let it spring back. The fact that he couldn’t actually see what he was doing didn’t seem to hold him back any.

Simmons’s eyebrows worked their way up her forehead as she realized what he was doing. God, he is so intoxicated right now. Jemma was finding it rather adorable, if perhaps a little disappointing, that he was playing landmines with her ears instead of the myriad of other handsy things he could be up to. In any case he was extremely lucky that she wasn’t self-conscious about the way her ears stuck out... anymore.

After a particularly enthusiastic series of explosion noises, Jemma remembered something else from earlier in the day. And seeing as his train of thought could use an assistant conductor right now anyway…

“Speaking of fun with the structural properties of cartilage,” she ventured.

“Yeah?” he said, pausing his activities to listen. Jemma had to try not to laugh. It was not appropriate, considering the news she was about to convey.

“After they give the soldiers whatever serum they’ve been using, the results aren’t actually instantaneous. They grow quite a bit right away, yes, but it takes time for the bones to fully ossify and the cardiovascular and general metabolic systems to catch up and…” She caught herself rambling.

“They may look imposing, Fitz, but they’re all in terrible shape.” In addition to the odd skin infections and overuse injuries, there were bone deformities that she’d never seen in humans
before. Only a couple times in foals that were trained too hard, too young, when their bones were still soft and couldn't take the stress.

“The moral of the story, I suppose,” she continued, “is-- remember that year or so that Steve Rogers spent on light duty singing and dancing in the USO and hating it the whole time?”

Fitz let out a laugh. “Those newsreels are hard to forget. Prob'ly part of the problem.”

“Mm,” Jemma agreed. “Well, yes. But I’m starting to think it saved his life.” She sighed. “Even with the very primitive Erskine serum, he’s in much better shape than Hydra’s current recruits. And I can’t help but think how much of that is in how they’re being taken care of.”

Fitz tried to wrap his head around how a place like Hydra could misuse-- not just their staff in general, but their centerpiece technology-- in that way. He couldn’t. And he couldn’t figure out if that was because of the drugs or because it just didn’t make sense, period.

Fitz shrugged it off and turned his attention to the lovely woman right in front of him. He couldn’t see her, but he could feel Jemma puddled over his chest, sleepily mumbling something about ossification processes. It was undoubtedly very intelligent mumbling but he couldn’t make heads nor tails of it. He let out a little smile and ran his fingers up over her hair, tracing from her forehead down to her neck, completely unable to stop thinking about what a lucky bastard he was to be alive for this.

He tried to fight nodding off for a long time. Eventually though, even Fitz could tell it was a losing battle. Letting out a heavy sigh, he tried to settle without disturbing Jemma.

It didn’t quite work. He felt her take a deep breath, stretch, and let out a soft hum, sinking back into him with languid limbs.

“Hey there,” Fitz said quietly, mild surprise evident in his voice. It wasn’t like her to pop back up right after dropping off.

“I think my brain’s locked in emergency mode,” she said, voice a mixture of frustration and dark amusement. “Don’t suppose I could sleep more than a few hours if I wanted to.”

“Which you do,” he more-than-guessed.

“Mm-hm,” she sighed, nodding against his chest, and Fitz swore he could feel the force of her pout.

That would not do at all. He sat up, gingerly scooting back so as not to disturb her too much, and motioned for her to settle over his legs. He’d meant for another round of working knots away. It had seemed to put her right out last time. But she must have misunderstood him, or had a different idea, because she had definitely just slipped into his lap, sideways across him with her right side slumped against his front. Fitz looked down, cold compress over his eyes completely forgotten, to see the crown of her head settling into his chest as she curled into him.

“You okay?” he murmured, dropping a kiss onto the crown of her head. His arms drew around her to lace his fingers over her arm just above her elbow. Jemma nestled in further, trying to relax and not quite succeeding.

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“Not really,” she said finally, quietly into the otherwise empty room. Not looking at him, she continued. “I thought you had to be dead,” she whispered harshly into his shirt, voice giving way at the end.

Fitz gave a humorless laugh. “Yeah, me too,” he admitted.

Who are we kidding, he thought grimly. It was going to be a very late night. If there was one thing he’d learned from his few runs in the field, it was that at the end of some days you started to think you’d never be able to sleep again.

“But we made it,” he said aloud, softly in the dim lamplight. She nodded against him, her ribs pressing into his with a deep breath in and out.

Fitz was at a loss for any more words than that. Instead, he smoothed a hand up to the back of her
“Oh…” Jemma said quietly. There was the recognizable tone of ‘this is nice but you really don’t have to’ in her voice.

He pulled his hand away. “Not good?” he frowned.

“Oh. No no, it’s very nice, just-- sorry. Never mind. Carry on.”

She tipped her head back, eyes closed, an absurd little smirk on her face as she tried to locate his hand again using nothing but the back of her neck. The warm press of her hip set flush into his was already setting off a pleasant and familiar rush through him. Her shifting around, and the silly look of amusement at her own little joke, sent him tumbling. He couldn’t help but laugh; and they stood out, it seemed, a strike of brightness against the dark hold of the day.

“Alright, alright, here you go,” he teased her, mock-scolding her impatience. Taking his task back up again, he did his best to draw her tension down. Jemma grinned, eyes still shut. Then she sighed out softly and fidgeted a little, as if trying to find a posture that best opened her sinews to his hands.

Before long, she was making pleased little humming sounds and leaning into him again rather than hold herself up.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep on me now,” he chided, gently tapping under her chin. Fitz shrugged.

“Unless you want to. It is very late.”

Jemma’s head tipped back easily, following his touch. Then she laughed at his words, eyes and nose crinkling for a moment, and stilled. Her expression seemed soft and open and somehow hopeful as her eyes flickered over his face. Fitz felt something in himself give way. Sense of caution now irrelevant, he bowed his head and kissed her. His lips were earnest and careful, as if coming clean with a long-guarded story.

She wasted no time kissing him back. Even with the ready look she’d given him, it hit like a revelation. Raising his hands to cradle her jaw, he brushed his tongue softly over her lower lip. It was something caught between swearing an oath and a plea.

The next thing he knew, Jemma was winding her hands behind his neck and pressing up into him. Her wriggling in his lap threw away any thought he may have had of sleep. He mostly managed to swallow the groan his throat let out from the heady mix of arousal and long-awaited relief at being able to hold her close, to kiss her, taste her, and maybe to finally spell out to her what he might not ever have words for. She parted her lips for him with a soft sound of her own, and he sank into her.

Fitz wasn’t sure how, but at some point she’d dropped back against the bed, drawing him down with her. He followed, all eagerness, and hauled her into him with an arm wrapped around her waist. Time seemed to lie still as they lay there exchanging slow, heated kisses. At long last when they broke apart, Fitz brushed his fingers over her cheek and looked up at her, almost shyly.

“You know I love you, right?” he breathed, his voice all reverence and awe.

A welcome smile bloomed over her face, and she reached to kiss him again.

It felt like a slap of cold water to the face.

Disoriented and gasping, Fitz sat bolt upright as the room crashed into darkness.

“Jemma!” he gulped, throwing a hand out to find her again. He had to find her; whatever was happening was-- not good.

“Fitz. Fitz! I’m right here,” he heard her say. “Sorry… sorry, that can’t have been a pleasant way to wake up,” she said. Now that he had his bearings, he could see her reach for something next to him on the bed. It was the washcloth she’d soaked with cold water for his eyes.

Reality started to snap back into focus for him, and Fitz groaned and dropped back down to the
bed, curled up on his side with his back to her in a bid to downplay his desperate state of arousal. At least he didn’t need to change this time, thank God.

“Here,” she said, pressing the washcloth into his hands. Fitz mutely accepted it and put it back over his eyes with a heavy sigh. A cold compress would, in fact, come in quite handy right about now. Just not on his eyes. Although now that he was awake, the sensation of having hot sand trapped in them was coming back full force.

“Are you alright?” she asked, voice filled with solicitous concern. “It sounded like you were having quite the nightmare. I didn’t know how to wake you…” Whatever it was, it’d had him tossing and turning and fussing to the point where she’d woken up from the disturbance. He’d been hard to raise, too— no amount of shaking his arm or saying his name seemed to make a difference. His compress had fallen off and gone half-dry in the night anyway, so she’d gotten up and freshened it up and put it back over his face. She figured that whether it woke him up or not, it’d give his eyes the help they needed.

“Mmff,” he muttered, trying to cover it with a yawn. “’m okay.”

Jemma reached out to his shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Hm-mm.” He shook his head vigorously, ducking away from her touch. Poor thing thought she was helping.

Shaking his head had nearly dislodged the compress, and Jemma slid up behind him to put it back. She sighed.

“You really need to lie on your back if this is to stay in place,” she admonished. Gently sliding her hand up his arm, she tugged on his shoulder to get him to turn over. Fitz grumbled and shook her off, redoubling his efforts to curl up in a ball and stay that way for approximately forever.

There was a significant pause behind him.

“You’re sure you’re alright?” she said cautiously.

“Yes!” he spat. Instantly regretting it, he groaned and rubbed at his face before remembering that his eyes hurt like hell.


“Oh,” she said softly. “No, that’s understandable. Do you need a little more space?” Jemma sat up, making to go lie down on the couch. She was in that wild-eyed headspace one tended to get into when awoken suddenly on a night where sleep was shaky anyway-- wide awake but with a rather sloppy sense of judgment. He didn’t seem to want to be touched, and certainly space had been an issue before….

“What? No no no no-- Jemma, come back,” he murmured, flipping over and catching her wrist in a loose grip before she could run off. “It’s not that bad, just--” He stopped and let go, not really sure how to explain how much he wanted her there. Just needed some breathing room.

“--You need a bubble?” she finished, half-jokingly.

“Yeah, actually,” he answered, lying back down with a flop.

“Sort of a zone defense situation?” she said, mock-seriously.

“Yeah. Something like that,” he allowed.

“Ah. Fair enough,” she agreed, and settled back down with her back turned to him and a clear empty stretch down the middle of the bed. Now that she could make sense of what he was looking for, it didn’t much bother her.

Moments later, Jemma could hear him half-humming something behind her. She could just barely make out the tune.

Dream the impossible dream
Really? she thought, scrunching her nose. *A time like this and he goes for The Man of La Mancha?*

Fitz had to stop, laughing silently at his own joke. The only reason he knew the song in the first place was that Simmons had made him a motivational song mix for doing laundry back at the Academy as a joke, headlined by Don Quixote’s declaration of reckless valor. She damn well knew what that song was.

Jemma reached over to tap him one the shoulder with one finger.

*Fitz no*

“Yes,” he whispered impishly.

*There are no impossible dreams here* she tapped furiously. *Don Quixote is the polar opposite of what we’re doing.*

“Bubble,” he reminded her, in a deliberately snooty tone.

Jemma made a nonplussed face at his back in the dark and flicked his shoulder. Hard. Then, hauling the covers over herself, she rolled over and tried to go back to sleep.

Fitz chuckled, and then sighed under the sound of her blankets shifting so she wouldn’t hear.

Chapter End Notes

Well, the last one seemed to make people really happy so I'm doing this update a little early. Happy New Year. ; )

(Disclaimer: normally I hate hate HATE "it was just a dream" storylines, so this one is not just to jerk readers around-- there's a point to it which will be gotten to later. Promise!)
The alarm Jemma’d set for herself went off only a couple hours later. She hadn’t slept well and woke with a start, scrambling to shut the sound off before it broke something in her skull.

Fitz had wound up with his arm slumped over her. In her haste she managed to kick him in the thigh, and he let out a startled grunt.

“Oh!” she hissed, turning to him with a sorry look. “I didn’t--?”

Fitz shook his head, hauling the covers over his head against the lamp she’d switched on right after hitting the alarm. “No critical systems damaged in the attack,” she heard, mumbled out from somewhere in the blankets.

“Ah. Good then,” she answered, throwing an amused glance at him wadded up under the bedclothes in spite of her buzzing head. He looked and sounded about like she felt-- groggy and wanting to cocoon up in the blankets and never come out.

Jemma fetched the washcloth off the pillows and dampened it again at the tap. Sitting down at Fitz’s shoulder, she gave him a nudge.

“Here. Just keep this wet enough that it’s cool and keep it on today, yeah?” she said gently, tugging his hand out from under the covers and putting the damp cloth in it.

The handful of cold, wet cotton woke him up a little, and he sat up with a groan. It wasn’t exactly a hangover, but a day of running for his life followed by drugged interrogation and a short, restless night hadn’t left him feeling chipper about morning.

Which was unfortunate, because this was going to be a great day for intelligence-gathering. Nobody would be in a mood to work. They’d be more interested in passing rumors, and a few of them might even turn out to be true. If he spent the day in bed recuperating, he was going to miss it all.

“Hm-mm,” he shook his head.

“Fitz, you can’t--”

He took her elbow, trying to quietly stop her before she said too much else.

*People will be talking I have to go to work* he insisted.

He felt more than saw her frustrated sigh.

*You can’t even look at a computer screen* she countered.

*Doesn’t matter I don’t need to*  

Jemma sighed again, thinking it over.

*I’ll come check on you at lunch. Your room 12:30.* Without access to his lab, it was the best she could do to keep tabs on him.

*Ok* he agreed without further discussion. It was a good enough compromise.
Fitz made it to his station on time, only to have the lab’s second-in-command corner him almost immediately when he kept walking into things.

“So help me, if you come into work drunk or hung over again—” she began. Sheila was tall and blonde and stood well over him, with the kind of deep-southern American accent that lent a certain twangy finality to her words.

“Oh. No, no, no,” he blurted. “I was on the shop floor when it went up yesterday. Still not quite up to speed.”

“Oh.” Sheila looked down at him, reconsidering his blundering gait and half-closed, reddened eyes. “What happened down there?” she hissed, folding her arms and dropping her voice by half. “We can’t get a straight answer out of anybody upstairs.”

Fitz scratched at the back of his neck— he’d barely talked to the woman other than her bit of the orientation they’d given him—and told her the part that he knew. He’d seen a simple magnesium fire that happened to be poorly controlled and also positioned right next to a stockpile of loose thermite.

“The thing I can’t figure out,” he concluded, “is who in their right mind would put thermite and magnesium of all things right next to each other?” He put on his best innocent expression—which he was good at, and damn well knew it—and an aggravated edge to his voice, which wasn’t hard considering his eyes felt like they were full of sawdust.

“Hmph. Somebody who wanted it to burn down, is who,” she grumbled sarcastically, looking into the distance over his head, arms still tightly folded.

“Say what?” Fitz turned to her, trying not to look too eager about that line of inquiry. She looked back down at him.

“Well. I mean it’s tempting to think it’s sabotage, but that’d be giving the floor bosses a lot of credit. They couldn’t find their own asses if you gave them a road map, so…” She made an irked noise and shrugged.

“Hm. Yeah. Well went I went down there the day before yesterday, it was safety violations all over the place— they weren’t storing any of the waste right, weren’t using lockout/tagout, all sorts of things.”

Sheila had a distinctly unimpressed look. “That does not surprise me at all,” she muttered. “Bunch of idiots…”

Fitz couldn’t be 100% sure, but Sheila was sounding more like disgruntled employee who wasn’t happy with how world domination was being handled than someone who had a problem with the goal itself. Fitz decided to pick at it a little bit.

“Do you think anyone would actually do something like that on purpose?”

She shrugged again. “I mean, they do security checks for a reason-- they’re supposed to weed all those people out. Plus, Hanlon’s razor.”

Fitz nodded. *Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.* The unspoken corollary to that was still *But don’t rule out malice completely.*

It was an odd quandary. Sheila was nice enough, but wasn’t under any illusions about whom she worked for. And yet at the same time, if she thought there weren’t any malcontents kicking around… well, she didn’t know him. And may not have had any awareness at all about the amount of forced labor going on at the facility. The way information flowed at this place was… intriguing.

It wasn’t long before Fitz found himself at the center of an impromptu lab meeting trying to figure out what exactly had happened and what it meant for everyone’s projects. It was more high-profile
than he’d been planning to go for the day. Soon, eyes burning under the light and shifting under the attention, Fitz elected to cut the theater and actually behave as sick as he was feeling. It wasn’t hard. All he had to do was stop blotting at his eyes and soon they were welling down his face. A few apologies about arc burn, and Sheila soon decided to send him home.

Fitz wasn’t actually in much of a hurry to get back to his cell-like room. He wandered down the hall to the washroom where someone walked in on him in midstream and started talking at him. Fitz didn’t even try to hide his annoyance.

“...heard you were on the shop floor yesterday,” the guy said. He was tall and pale and gawky like a beanpole. Fitz ignored him, initially out of irritation and then out of a growing sense of alarm that he was being questioned.

“Pretty wild, huh?” the newcomer continued. Fitz made a stinkeye at nothing in particular. The guy was trying to use a fratty, cool-guy tone of voice and definitely not pulling it off. He finished up and wandered over to wash his hands.

To Fitz’s further annoyance and growing alarm, the scarecrow followed him over to the taps. Once the water was running he started talking again.

“Look, word is that you’re not too thrilled about your new job,” the guy said just loud enough to be heard over the water.

Fitz carefully did not look over at him. This could be the moment he’d been waiting for. Or a lifespan-limiting trap.

“’Course not, they put me in cybernetics and then they don’t let us talk to the people who know the biology half,” he groused into the sink. “What kind of a plan is that?”

Beanpole gave a short, barking laugh that sounded genuinely if awkwardly amused.

“Probably the same one that puts iron and aluminum shavings next to the only thing that burns hot enough to light them,” the fellow said, doing a piss-poor job of concealing his glee.

Fitz finally looked up, deciding it might be worth it to be able to recognize his face later.

“So either an idiot or a pyromaniacal genius,” Fitz muttered.

“Well you don’t technically have to choose, but yeah.”

Finished, Fitz shut off the tap and went for the paper towels. His new acquaintance pointedly turned another faucet on and began to wash his hands even though he hadn’t actually availed himself of the loo. Fitz recognized anti-surveillance behavior when he saw it and felt himself listening more closely.

“Word of caution, though,” the guy said.

Fitz waited for it. When the newcomer saw no answer was in the offing, he plowed ahead.

“That Hydra whore of yours? Better keep an eye o--”

“No, no, no, dude, that’s just what we call them,” Beanpole backpedalled.

“Them’?” Fitz returned hotly.

“It’s what they do!” the guy hissed, apparently trying to get the conversation back to a decibel
level capable of being masked by a running tap.

Fitz glared at him through slitted lids. Scarecrow gaped back.

“No, by all means continue. This sounds rich,” Fitz spat, arms folded over his chest.

Scarecrow gave a long-suffering sigh. “Hydra,” he said carefully, as if explaining the situation to an eight-year-old. “It’s a variant on the incentives program, yeah? There’s a bunch of couples here where they both come in at the same time, and one of them volunteers, trying keep the heat off the other one. Works great for a while. Till they get their hooks in ‘em. They start acting funny and pretty soon, the volunteer one is Lady Macbeth-ing the one who’s not to the point where there’s really no difference.”

Fitz listened to the words coming out of the guy’s mouth, feeling his face go redder by the second.

“Listen,” Fitz scowled, fumbling to open a second tap for good measure and walking slowly towards the man. “I don’t know how you fucking dare but you listen to me. They were stealing her work since before we ever got here. It doesn’t even matter whether she ‘volunteered’ or not, got it? It doesn’t change a thing! And they haven’t exactly been treating her well either, so if you think—”

Fitz stopped himself, realizing he’d better clap it shut before he said something incriminating. He also saw that he’d walked the man right into the wall, where he was now leaning awkwardly against one of the urinals.

“Your ‘we’re the good guys’ speech needs work,” he spat, and stormed out.

*

Simmons was practically bouncing on her heels when she knocked on his door at 12:30, on the dot, as agreed.

“S unlocked,” she heard from inside. Pursing her lips, she stepped in to see Fitz sitting against his headboard with a wet sock across his face. He reached up and lifted the toe to peer out at her. His eyes weren’t as bad as they’d been the night before, but they still didn’t much like being used.

“Oh good, I was hoping it was you.”

“They didn’t give you any flannels?” she said with surprise.

“What do I need those for? I’ve got all these perfectly good clean socks,” he said, gesturing out to the socks and other things littering the floor. He hadn’t bothered to go back and neaten up the room since Hydra’d come and knocked it around.

Simmons gave a little hmph sound.

“Well, anyhow,” she continued. “I brought some lunch. Want to head to my room? There’s a little more room to spread out.” Not to mention a much lower density of listening devices, she added silently.

“Yeah, let’s go,” he agreed, peeling the sock off his face and dropping it unceremoniously onto the floor. “What is it today, then?”

“Fish tacos,” she answered primly.

“Oh! And I was worried it’d be something messy,” Fitz scowled. Great. Fitz’s inability to eat tacos without dropping something all over himself was slightly legendary. At least this time he’d have being half-blind as an excuse.
Chapter End Notes

Heh... I'm running out of chapter names and am just recycling Bivouac ("campsite") and Reveille ("waking up") as appropriate. :P

On the plus side, the next Reveille's gonna be fun. So there's that.

Props to typhanni/notapepper, beta extraordinaire!
Unlike their usual treks from his room to hers, Simmons insisted on carrying the tray. Fitz needed to focus on seeing where he was going. As the tray took both hands, she wasn’t able to tell him--out loud or by Morse--about what had happened at work until they got settled in her room. With the tray laid out in front of them, both sitting cross-legged on the bed, she reached out and nudged his elbow. He looked over with curiosity on his closed-eyed face. Talking over yesterday with the rest of his lab, not to mention what’s-his-name in the bathroom, had led him to developing a number of hypotheses that he wanted to talk over. And questions.

*Big day in the lab* she wrote.

Fitz nodded as he tucked into lunch.

*Raina wants me to find a model organism for PTGS* she continued.

Fitz nodded again. He had no idea what PTGS was, but the rest--it sounded like Hydra was looking at doing animal testing of some kind. That suggested they were closing in on some kind of drug. Or basic biochemical research. Well, that still narrowed it down.

He wanted to ask if it was GH-325, but she was on his right side and his right hand was full of drippy, barely-holding-together taco.

He also wanted to tell her he was glad that she was able to move things forward on her end. After all, he might have just blown his chance to link up with whatever anti-Hydra resistance there was at this facility. On account of her.

On second thought, maybe he’d better keep working that angle before bringing it up. Even if Fitz didn’t exactly regret what he’d said, it could be a serious problem. If Jemma found out before he’d had a chance to fix it--‘upset’ wouldn’t even begin to cover it.

Fitz decided that news could wait until he had more details.

Meanwhile, Jemma went on, apparently too caught up in her train of thought to notice Fitz’s reticence. That was fine by him.

*Mice would work but they want something smaller and lower-maintenance if possible. Maybe insects.*

Fitz nodded again. As much as scientists got hassled over the barbaric aspects of animal testing, it wasn’t as if scientists wanted to do it either. In addition to being rough on the conscience, research animal colonies were messy; expensive to take care of; messy; laborious; a right pain in the arse; messy; and required specially designed rooms with ventilation to keep them from starting to smell…not to mention messy. It wasn’t hard to see why even a place like Hydra would want to avoid them if possible.

“*Yum,*” Fitz offered sarcastically around a bite of lunch.

Jemma chuckled at his attempt to keep up with the conversation and lunch at the same time. Fitz looked over just in time to see her lick a bit of sauce off her upper lip, and somehow pulled it off in a genteel fashion as Simmons was wont to do.

He tried to look away. But he was now sitting close enough to realize that of all the freckles dusting her face, one rested lightly just inside the edge her lip where she’d worried it, on the soft curve sloping down from the center of her lips. Fitz had already been fighting an active interest in Jemma’s lips for some time. Now, as things were slowly changing between them, the faint spot seemed to be taunting him from its perch.
He blinked and shook his head and hoped it wasn’t obvious that he’d been staring. Jemma was right. They needed to focus. And for crying out loud, she was in the middle of eating lunch. He was pretty sure that lusting after a mouth that was actively chewing on lunch was a new low, even for him.

*Don’t worry I’ll just talk at you while you eat* Jemma told him. She’d missed Fitz’s fluster too, consumed with her preoccupation over this significant new responsibility. Largely this was because it meant her cover was working and she was gaining access to more of Hydra’s research agenda.

In some small part, though, this was simply how the Simmons psyche worked. She thrived on having her prowess validated. Fitz knew this perfectly well. It was part of why they’d decided to have her be the one to volunteer in the first place. The inside role was a better match for her personality.

And as much as he hated it-- after that conversation with that beanpole in the bathroom, that simple fact took on a new and ominous tone. Fitz looked over at Jemma, who was practically humming with good humor from this new development, and tried not to let the small but growing uncertainty show on his face.

*Hydra aside, if we can find a better model organism for PTGS in humans, it could be a major advance for science in general,* she carried on. *Leave the poor mice out of it.*

*

After tucking Fitz in for an afternoon of much-needed rest-- apparently his supervisors had sent him home early, which Jemma was entirely too pleased with because people with burns on their corneas should not be messing about on computers, or anywhere else really-- Simmons bobbed down the corridors to return to her lab.

Plopping back down at her desk and humming under her breath, Jemma made a quick list. It was the sum total, as far as she was aware, of small creatures that were easy to raise en masse and didn’t make a terrible stink.

*C. elegans*
Mealworms
Aphids
Spider mites
Earthworms
Cockroaches
Mosquitoes

Bees were right out on account of stingers. Crickets smelled bad. And mosquitoes were only a maybe, since a few of them always managed to escape and she didn’t particularly care to put her head on the chopping block to be blamed for *that*. Simmons rolled her eyes and logged onto her computer.

*Well then.* Time to find out if science happened to already know anything about PTGS in any of those species. For *C. elegans* and mosquitoes, almost certainly. Post-transcriptional gene silencing-- cells slicing up any pieces of RNA inside them that came from DNA that didn’t belong to the organism itself-- was an ancient form of defense against viruses shared by all life forms on earth. Since every life form on the planet used it, it had been discovered simultaneously by a few different research groups. The zoologists working with *C. elegans* had called it RNA interference, or RNAi; the virologists who found it named it post-transcriptional gene silencing, or PTGS; mycologists found it in fungi and called it quelling; and genetic engineers frustrated by their inability to get plants to use the genes they were inserting into them dubbed it co-suppression.

It had taken all these different groups of scientists years to discover they were all working on the same thing. Science could be funny like that sometimes.

*Anyhow, the bottom line was that having four different names for the same thing made it a living*
hell to find it on a search engine. Jemma’d just gotten her search terms pinned down when Raina clipped into the lab. In the middle of work as she was, Simmons only half-noticed Raina’s presence until she was standing at her shoulder.

“Yes?” Jemma said, looking up at her arch-supervisor.

“Question related your project,” Raina mentioned. “Come with me. This,” she said, looking over Jemma’s screen, “is non-perishable.”

Jemma’s eyebrows furrowed behind Raina’s back as they went out the door. Non-perishable? Descriptive enough, but an odd choice of words.

Simmons followed Raina’s slim figure, wrapped in a trim flower-print satin, down the hall through a door conspicuously marked well above her clearance level as they went to Raina’s office.

“I’m told that you once administered GH-325 to a patient. Is that correct?” Raina asked over her shoulder as she turned the lock.

Startled, Simmons stammered and answered in the affirmative. Not that it would do any good to try and lie-- Garrett or Ward must have been Raina’s source for that, and they’d been there to witness it.

“And that your patient suffered no ill side effects. Is that the case?”

“Well-’” Simmons stammered. “To be perfectly honest, there’s no way to be sure--”

Raina carefully didn’t smile. Ill effects from GH-325 and its experimental counterparts weren’t exactly subtle. If the scientist was insisting “there was no way to be sure,” that was a clear no.

“Any signs of psychosis?”

“N-- none that I could see, but I haven’t been in contact with the patient for some time now,” Simmons stumbled. That was not a question she’d expected.

“Hypergraphia?” Raina pushed on.

“No, but again--”

“How did you deliver it?”

Simmons blinked. Haphazardly shooting Skye up with an unknown quantity of an unknown drug with unknown side effects and unknown route of administration was far from a proud moment. All other things being equal, she would have been happy to never speak of it again.

“Intramuscular injection. It was a wild guess-- could have been designed for oral or transdermal or some other route for all I knew, but it seemed to work.”

“Were there other reactions?”

Simmons carefully kept her face neutral, trying to keep the consternation she felt from showing.

“Such as?”

“Blisters. Abscesses.”

“No…? I’m not recalling anything like that.”

Raina gave a small hm as she opened a drawer, pulled out a flash drive, and held it out for Simmons to take.

“Anyhow, here are those PTGS files I was telling you about this morning. They should help you with narrowing down candidates.”
Simmons frowned.

“Is there something about this GH-325 that I should know about?”

Raina tilted her chin and lifted an eyebrow. Time to close off the scientist’s line of thought as gently as possible. “There are things we’d all like to know. Which is why we’re studying it,” she allowed. “Speaking of which: I understand it’s still early, but is there any progress on the model organism front?”

Now, Raina watched as the girl went from closed-off to-- if not quite eager, certainly much more relaxed.

“Yes! I’ve got a list of candidates and am pulling out what’s known of their PTGS enzymatic systems and how well they compare to their human analogues-- these files should go a long way towards finding a good match….”

Raina put on her best ‘I’m listening’ face as the scientist rattled off her progress. She’d already gotten what she needed out of the interrogation; but it was best not to let that on. And with any luck, Dr. Simmons was starting to feel more like one of the team now.

*

Shortly after, Raina walked up to the observation window on a surgical suite.

The head surgeon nodded in greeting. From the look of their garb-- a modest amount of blood on their hands, only slight smears elsewhere, most of which was still red and fresh-- they had only just gotten started.

Raina tapped the intercom.

“I’ve got good news for Bybee,” she said, nodding towards one of the assistant operators. “Source says they found positive results with intramuscular injection.”

The one who must be Bybee gave a bloody-gloved fist pump and pointed at a colleague over their patient’s motionless form. “Somebody owes me barbecue,” he gloated.

With that done, Raina made her way back down the hall with a carefully controlled smile. It was a good day for progress.

*

Fitz sank down in the blankets on Jemma’s bed, trying to sleep. She’d insisted that he get some proper rest during his time off; and after yesterday, he definitely needed it.

He sighed and turned yet again. It had bothered him a little this morning, and he thought he'd put it away. But now that he was alone with his thoughts again he couldn’t get it out of his mind.

What if she is playing me? On purpose or not?

The fact that he was even considering it was probably a symptom of how badly he needed to sleep. Jemma, she wouldn’t-- he’d even actually asked her about it once, in a moment of panic, and she told him no to his face. Jemma couldn’t pull off that level of deceit-- not even now, he thought, and certainly not back then. He really needed to stop being a head case and get some rest.

And yet… Jemma had never shown the slightest bit of interest in him. Until they’d gotten here.

Don’t be stupid, he scolded himself. There was plenty of blame on him for that.
There was something she’d said, though, a day or two ago late at night when people tended to lose their ability to censor themselves. Something about how she wanted to kiss him but, and wanted to wait until it could be honest. That hadn’t meant anything to him at the time. He’d been half-asleep and half-beside himself at being able to hold her at last; it wasn’t his finest hour for critical thinking.

*Was she trying to tell me something?* Maybe. Although she had probably talking about something else. Something about them. If it were something… mission-related, she would have made herself more clear. *Right?*

Fitz scowled and rubbed his face and rolled over, trying to get his brain to quiet down so he could sleep.

It was no good. Now that the tracks were laid, his train of thought kept speeding down to places he had no answers for.

Hydra hadn’t survived seventy years inside an organization made of spies by being foolish. Surely, deep inside it somewhere, it still remembered the sly, quiet ways of getting what it wanted. And not simply by crude threats and hostage-holding-- as useful as it clearly found those to be on occasion.

Raina was still taking in “volunteer” after “volunteer” by getting under people’s skin, finding what they were hungry for, and dangling it in front of them. Ward had threaded his way through their entire team by promising them a sense of safety and accomplishment. After all, he’d started with a gruff façade so that when he’d let them crack it and see another mirage underneath-- this one good-humored and vulnerable and tinged with approval-- they clung to it like a prize. And oh, Fitz had fallen for it head over heels.

Hydra didn’t have to use threats. Sometimes they just gave you what you wanted.

And there wasn’t a thing in the world he wanted but Jemma Simmons.

Who’d just been handed the opportunity of a lifetime-- overseeing a project that actually had a good chance of cutting down the general amount of misery in the world. Jemma wasn’t near foolish enough to switch loyalties over it, but… at the end of the day, it was what she wanted. Hydra already knew her that well and knew what to give her. That was the frightening part. For all their logistical incompetence, Hydra had people down to a craft.

Fitz sat up, heart thudding in his chest, a new depth of realization of how much trouble they could be in hitting him like a wave of icy water. Everything could be fine… or he and she both could be in so far over their heads they couldn’t even see out.

They needed to talk. Today. Alone.

Fitz climbed out of bed, dropped the cool cloth that Jemma had made for him aside, and began to pace the room.

After a couple of turns, he drew himself a glass of water and mixed in two heaping spoons of salt from the kitchenette. Then he walked to the couch and dumped it into one of the cushions. One recording device down. Six to go.

Several seemingly-random acts of petty vandalism later, Fitz went back to bed. He quickly fell into a sound sleep, feeling a weight he hadn’t even known was there lifting away now that he was finally, truly, alone.

Chapter End Notes

Word to notapepper/typhanni, SUPER-BETA.
Fresh Tracks

Chapter Summary

Simmons begins to learn more about the project Hydra assigned her to. The results are unsettling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jemma made her way back to the lab, stopping in the break room to fix up a cup of mid-afternoon tea. She usually started to droop around this time of day. That was no good-- she’d better make a good showing with this model organism project, and that pile of work on her desk was only getting taller.

The breakroom was connected to the main hallway by a short, twisty corridor thanks to several rounds of remodeling. She’d nearly rounded the last corner when she heard a pair of hushed voices around the turn that clearly sounded as if they were best left undisturbed.

“I’m not ‘imagining’ anything,” a woman’s voice came through, a firm, lightly-accented whisper. “Forensic pathologist, remember? Discovering how people died is literally my job. Well, it was before we came out here.”

“You wanted to come here!” a man's voice came up, American accent, with a defensive don’t-look-at-me tone.

Simmons’s eyes widened. With the forensic pathology and the accent, that was almost certainly Mitra. She sounded very upset. And was in entirely the wrong part of the building for their labs.

And having a bit of domestic, by the sound of it? She’d mentioned her husband worked somewhere in the facility as well. Simmons listened to the distinctive sound of someone scooting out of a chair and pacing around the break room. Great. Now there was no way to back out of the corridor without being seen. Uncertain of what to do, Simmons froze and sat tight. Which was unfortunate, because overhearing colleagues’ relationship squabbles occupied a firm place on her not-to-do list.

“No, you wanted to come here for the network architecture job,” Mitra shot back. “And I thought ‘Well, ok, it’ll work.’” The sound of a huffed objection was quickly run over by Mitra’s ongoing train of thought, which apparently stopped for no one.

“Plus nobody puts out this sort of thing in their headhunting materials. How would they advertise it? ‘Come for the benefits, stay for the human experimentation’?”

There was a wild-eyed, sarcastic sound to her voice by now, and he actually laughed at that.

“Well, it beats ‘Come for the diabetes, stay because we took your foot,’” he admitted. Mitra gave a soft, bitter chuckle. Behind the wall, Simmons’s face crinkled into a What? expression. It had the tone of a long-running spousal inside joke. Hopefully.

“I’m dead serious though. Arun,” Mitra went on, winding down but still adamant. “At first it was just ‘This man died in the line of duty, and since you’re the closest thing we have to a medical examiner, can you please process the paperwork?’” She paused. Simmons imagined there must be some nodding taking place. And now that the situation seemed somewhat defused, she found herself consumed by curiosity about Mitra’s story. Still uncertain about how to extricate herself without being seen, Simmons quietly elected to stay put. Well. Not just out of concern over a social faux pas. Technically she was supposed to be spying anyhow. Really this was just part of her job.
“And there aren’t many fatalities to start with because serum patients are tough, you know, and of course most of the wounds look like standard combat trauma. ‘Yay, combat trauma, my favorite!’” Mitra took a high, breathy sardonic tone before sliding back into her normal speaking voice.

“Around then Elis you know Elisa in Medical, right?”

“Yeah, she’s the one with the--”

“--the thing,” Mitra finished. “Right. Elisa going ‘Wow, we’re starting to get a lot of serious injuries that look self-inflicted,’ which unfortunately is pretty common with military and other… what, contractors or whatever it is they do here. So she’s trying to alert the superiors that we have a suicide problem here, and what are we going to do about it? And they-- give her the brush-off,” Mitra wound incredulously.

“Right, you mentioned that…”

“Yes!”

“I mean it sounds like maybe one of those standard things where the bosses don’t want to admit they have a problem because it’s embarrassing,” Arun postulated.

“And that’s what I thought! And it was bullshit already!” Mitra returned. “But it gets better,” she hissed. “All the sudden Elisa’s not seeing these injuries anymore. But I’m still getting them on my table,” she said carefully.

“Okay… how do you mean?”

“First of all, it’s still going on-- but either Natalia’s been cut out of the loop, or-- well. She’s a live-people doctor, right? She fixes people up. I only see them when they’re dead. Yeah? So either they’ve scooted her away from the whole situation and are sending these infantrymen to somebody else, or none of them are surviving their attempts anymore.”

There was a heavy pause.

“I used to think it was the first one, because Natalia was insistent about suicide prevention and that can get you marked as a troublemaker very quickly.”

Simmons could practically hear Mitra’s eyeroll. She still wasn’t sure where exactly this was going, other than she was pretty sure she was rooting for Mitra.

“But it’s become even stranger after that, Arun.”

“Oh, now’s when it gets weird?”

“Yes! Most of the cadavers they’re giving me now-- they’re dead, and they’ve had trauma that should be fatal based on their records, but that’s not what killed them. They’re healed very well, actually. Admittedly, some to the point of having really bizarre-looking neoplasities and tumors and other things that I still can’t figure out that aren’t even related to the trauma site, so…”

Arun’s voice took a skeptical turn. “You’re sure that’s not just from the serum?”

“Absolutely,” Mitra returned, as firm and cool as a stick in mud. ”I’ve processed a lot of dead serum patients this year, yes? But this is a new syndrome and it only coincides with otherwise-fatal trauma patients. And only starting a few weeks ago. The best I can make of it is they’re working with some kind of experimental drastic measures, but it is not working.”

Simmons’s eyes narrowed. You had to be careful not to try and see everything in the world through the narrow lens of your own projects, but that sounded an awful lot like GH-325. Except for the bit about it not working. Somewhere in there she’d absently pulled a pen from her pocket and was fidgeting it. Realizing what she was doing, she stilled her hands and focused on listening.

“And it’s something to do with gene expression, is my best guess, since they’re having me put
tissue samples in an RNase buffer. They want skin, blood, liver, muscle, healed scar tissue, the neoplasities of course, lots of neurological tissue…” She snorted. “For all the good that’ll do them in somebody who’s been dead for more than thirty seconds. You can’t get useable RNA from that.”

“Heh. See what happens when you tell them you need to sample a living subject.”

“I don’t think they’d like that. They’re very cagey about it, and-- I think I can see why?” There was a pause and Simmons heard a chair scoot before Mitra continued, voice lower than before.

“Not all of them, but it’s not uncommon to see… I don’t know how else to say, psychiatric symptoms. And you know what it would take, to have psychosis so extreme that it could actually show up on a cadaver. But with some of them their hair’s pulled out at an angle that suggests it was their own hands, some are raw all over and there’s blood under their nails from scratching--” Her voice dropped to where Simmons could barely make her out. “Two of them had scratched these designs into themselves. Looked pretty similar to each other, so I have to wonder if it’s a characteristic type of neurological damage? But it’s so specific. I don’t know. Anyway, the bottom line is you have to have some pretty extreme psychosis for it to show up on a cadaver. But they’re getting it done.”

In rapt attention, Simmons’s fingers had started fiddling the pen again. Suddenly she fumbled and dropped it. The sharp crack of it on the floor sent a white-hot jolt of panic through her gut. By the time she stood back up from picking it off the floor, Mitra’s husband had rushed to the door to see what the sound was, and was staring at her, looking slightly too frightened to commit to a proper horrified expression. He looked to Mitra, whose mouth fell open and worked silently. Simmons couldn’t think for the life of her what to say. She certainly couldn’t go in and fix up a cup of tea now. And while Simmons knew well enough that she wasn’t about to turn Mitra in, neither she nor her husband knew that; and with Arun’s loyalties rather scantly laid out by that conversation, Simmons wasn’t entirely sure that promising silence was the right thing to do either. Feeling her belly and neck go hot all in a rush, Simmons stammered at the floor-- “Sorry, this break room appears to be full”-- and scooted back out to the hallway.

* 

Simmons was so preoccupied by worrying about having given Mitra that kind of fright-- in her place, Jemma could only imagine the panic over getting into trouble with her employers and/or her own husband-- that she couldn’t focus on her own work at all. She’d just blinked and tried to focus. Upon combing through on the results for “C. elegans RNAi” for the umpteenth time, she saw Mitra re-enter the far end of the lab. The normally-bubbly scientist was practically shuffling, her long braid drooping past the anxious set of shoulders. Oh, God. It was bad. A fresh, cold lump of guilt dropped into Simmons’s stomach and she realized, more than decided, that this could not go on.

How to reassure Mitra without being incriminatingly obvious about it-- that was the question. Simmons fidgeted, casting her eyes this way and that on her desk, before settling on an idea. “Mitra!” Simmons called out softly, picking up a box of fine, slender plastic pieces all arranged in neat rows and walking to Mitra’s bench. “I found them-- those pipette tips you were looking for.”

Mitra looked very uncertain and didn’t say a word.

“The 50 microliter ones? They were in the drawer right where you said, you weren’t imagining it.” Finally arriving to stand next to the other scientist, Simmons she gave Mitra a pointed look. “You’re not crazy.” Then she tapped the plastic box down gently on the benchtop. “Good observation skills. Hallmark of a good scientist.”
Alright Simmons, you’ve probably laid it on thick enough, she hoped. Although you could never be sure. Scientists were a rather literal lot. Heaven only knew how counterintuitive it still felt like to Simmons to participate in anything remotely spycraft-y, and that was after six months of rather intensive on-the-job training on the Bus.

Not willing to say anything more outright, Simmons tried to gauge whether her message was making any sense.

“Thank you,” Mitra said stiffly. “I didn’t even know I was looking for those.”

Simmons breathed a sigh of relief and gave her best scrunch-nosed reassuring smile.

With that, Simmons wafted back to her desk, heart thudding. She was technically getting better at this. Mostly. But that didn’t make it easy.

* 

With that taken care of, Simmons was able to finally concentrate on her work. She needed to talk to Mitra again, obviously. Soon. The pathologist was probably in the same boat as Donnie, not really knowing who it was they were working for. But talking things out with Mitra was best done after she’d had some time to digest the information. That meant getting a chance to talk it over with Fitz first.

The next part of her project was blessedly brainless. She’d just be scanning search results for anything that looked useful. And there was a funny thing about brains, she’d learned, both via research and from personal experience. When it came to connecting seemingly unrelated information, it was nearly useless to try and actively focus on the problem. That kind of lateral thinking worked best at a slow simmer in the background while you were thinking about something else. It was the reason so many “Eureka!” moments happened in the shower.

Which, come to think of it, she’d already managed to get to work for her once on this particular Hydra venture.

Simmons got comfortable, started copying-and-pasting herself a database, and deliberately let her brain run idle. She was already fairly certain there had to be a connection between her new RNAi project and Mitra’s recently being asked to pull RNA samples off her curiously-affected cadavers. Also likely: the RNA expression questions Hydra was pursuing with both projects were both related to GH-325. Garrett had certainly been fascinated by the drug.

But that was where Simmons ran out of data. Garrett’s interest in GH-325 had more of a personal crusade than a professional interest. And while she realized it may have been a function of naiveté on her part, Simmons couldn’t imagine why an organization like Hydra would take such an interest in that kind of biomedical research.

Simmons finished logging entries on “C. elegans RNAi” at about the same time as she emptied her bottle of water. Taking a quick break to refill it at a hallway fountain, humming, Simmons abruptly stopped as she remembered Raina’s questions from earlier that morning.

It hadn’t clicked at first because Raina asked about skin reactions-- abscesses and blistersing and the like-- whereas Mitra noted tumorigenesis. Granted, that could easily be garbled in the great game of Telephone that was research administration. But the other things--

*Psychosis?*

*Hypergraphia?*

Mitra had mentioned those. And they were awfully specific symptoms. A hot, itchy white needle of worry laced itself through Simmons’s insides.
Coulson had received the GH-325 at a specialized facility that had experience working with it, and as part of a vast suite of treatments. Some of them, doubtless, were designed to counteract whatever side effects this drug might have. Whereas she’d given it to Skye alone. With no followup, other than blood tests and keeping an eye on her behavior, and even with those not knowing what to look for.

Simmons had known it was a bad idea-- she hadn’t needed Coulson running up, panting and telling her to stop when it was already late, to know that. And as much as she knew on an intellectual level that Skye would certainly be dead if they hadn’t given the drug a try, Simmons had a sense of unease about her involvement in the whole thing that never really left her.

And now this. One of her greatest worries was now confirmed.

Well, not quite. She needed more data. That would require getting in touch with the team. They’d avoided making contact so far, being relatively secure and wanting to keep it that way. Passing news about Skye would probably be worth the risk of making contact. Still, she’d feel better about it after talking to Fitz. Simmons knew better than to rely completely on her own instincts for covert operations.

Chapter End Notes

High-five to typhanni/notapepper for superior beta-reading dedication and skilz.
Half an hour later, Jemma had managed to convince her adrenal glands that there was nothing that could be done right now. If there was anything wrong with Skye that needed immediate attention, it would probably be too late already. And if it were a longer-term concern, getting a message out by that evening or the next day would work. Panicking was useless. If she wanted to help Skye—or the effort to take down Hydra in general—she needed to get back to work.

Diving back into her task, Simmons queued up the next of her search terms on RNA interference in trusty old *Caenorhabditis elegans*. This one pulled up much the same articles as the last one. She dutifully logged the results, finding it even more mind-numbing than sorting through them the first time. Her mind soon wandered back to GH-325 territory, although without the panic that brought her heart to racing thirty minutes ago.

In a way it made sense that Hydra was using fatal trauma patients to test the drug. After all… that’s exactly what she’d done with Skye. Well, Coulson and the whole team had. But she’d gone along with it well enough.

There was a loose thread in there somewhere. She could feel it. Something about Coulson’s treatment—so painstaking, mind-numbingly complex, and carried out by people who’d been studying it properly for some time. A harsh contrast with Skye’s situation, obviously. That would have to be reckoned with. But more to the point—Hydra’s work was quite at odds with Coulson’s experience too. Hydra’s work with the drug had an improvisational, startup-like flavor to it. It was clear that Hydra’s staff were just getting to know it. It seemed as if they mustn’t have access to the files built up by S.H.I.E.L.D.’s-- well, Fury’s-- program. Although given Hydra’s proactive attitude towards finding volunteers, perhaps it wouldn’t be long before they caught up.

That was all she could guess at this point. Simmons pressed her lips together and once again, deliberately stopped thinking about it. Jemma knew exactly how her mind worked. And much the same way a watched pot never boiled, she rarely managed to actually find answers to open-ended questions by obsessing over them. (It drove Fitz absolutely crazy when she took breaks in the heat of a project—she knew it did—because he rarely had to work on wide-open questions like this. Linearity worked for him. But Jemma’s back-burner approach had saved their bacon enough times that he knew to go along with it when she insisted on popcorn and a film.) The mind had a way of toying with the edges and finding where they fit together.

The damned thing was that you had no control over where or when. All she could do was keep looking for more missing pieces and distract herself and hope it’d pop out at her before too long.

* 

By the end of the day, Simmons had logged all the way through the article catalogues for RNAi in mealworms, aphids, spider mites, earthworms, three genera of the Blattaria, and had nearly finished up on mosquitoes. Not a bad haul for half a day’s work.

She might have been humming under her breath just a little as she finished typing up her notes. It was a Friday, which meant the lab would closed down the next morning for maintenance. She may not even have to come back until Monday. And Simmons knew from sad past experience that she’d lose her train of thought over the weekend. Best to tie up loose ends now, and get right back into it next time.

Simmons was checking over the folder of articles she’d downloaded, checking it against the log to make sure she’d gotten a copy of all the studies she needed. And two-thirds of the way through, she realized something with a start. Well, technically, she’d already known it for some time. But it finally hit bottom in the context of today’s events.
With regard to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s previous work GH-325, the only things Hydra knew would be what Garrett and Ward told them. Which would have been practically nothing--

Simmons shuddered, briefly imagining what it must be like to attempt to craft a research program with nothing but whatever would fit in Ward’s brain to guide you.

That would actually explain a lot about Hydra’s program, come to think of it.

In any case, she felt quite confident that nobody at Hydra ever read Coulson’s treatment file. Not with the ridiculous lengths they’d gone to question the man himself about his treatment, albeit without success, or recklessly pursue things the way they had with Skye. There was only one copy of that file-- a paper one-- and she’d walked back onto the Bus after the incident at the Hub to find that her boss had had it burned rather than risk it being found. Even though that was precisely what protocol called for in case of possible documents breach, Simmons cried a little bit about it later. And given how their current program was going they clearly hadn’t managed to track down any of the scientists from the original Guest House project. Fury had covered his tracks well.

What this meant, Simmons realized, was that-- thanks to their close reading of the file in the wake of Skye’s shooting-- the closest thing Hydra had to a copy of the file… was her and Fitz.

That file contained very specific records as to how they’d managed to alter Coulson’s memory of the events in his treatment.

What they didn’t mention was why.

Simmons had never gotten any information from Coulson on that either. She’d always assumed it had something to do with maintaining secrecy or need for physical reconstruction of neural tissues after it had spent several days... offline. So to speak.

But the fact that the stuff apparently caused psychosis put a different spin on it.

Simmons kicked herself a little. This was why you couldn’t get emotional about things-- she’d been so busy tying herself in knots with impotent worry over Skye that nothing else was registering. They didn’t have time for spinning their wheels in emotional crises, they were--

Oh, for heaven’s sake. Now she was wasting time by worrying about wasting time by worrying. Simmons shook her head briskly and kept cross-checking her files.

The point was, you had to wonder about what kind of trial-and-error it took to finally arrive at the point where you decided that the only solution to psychosis was to go into someone’s head and rewrite their records. Forgetting the creepy invasiveness of it for a moment, it was simply devilishly difficult. A last resort. You’d have to have exhausted every other option with medication, cognitive therapy, electroshock….

Years. The decision to rewrite memories was the kind of Pyrrhic victory that came after years of failure with every other option.

That meant Hydra still had a lot of life-wrecking ahead of them before they learned how to solve GH-325 psychosis.

An ugly thrill slithered over her skin. Simmons finished her work and stiffly wandered towards home, a devil on each shoulder.

*Do I say something?*

Chapter End Notes

I'm not dead! Work is kicking my ass, is all. Props to everyone who's been coming by
to check for updates-- you're adorable. They're still coming. Just a little slow at the moment. : )

#falling behind on writing your fanfiction about nerds who science 24/7 because you're too busy sciencing 24/7 #nerd life
Simmons wandered slowly through the halls towards home, feeling as if she were walking through a thick syrup. The air itself seemed to push back with a resistance that she herself must not have shared.

It was a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t situation.

If she kept this information to herself-- that some kind of memory rewriting kept the GH-325 psychosis at bay-- dozens if not hundreds more people would fall prey to it. And it seemed, by all accounts, a horrible way to die.

If she made it known-- well, she hardly had enough detail to make it work correctly the first time, did she? So who was to say what that research trail would look like? Likely more lives broken, just in a novel way. Her disclosure wouldn’t end abusive human experimentation here by any means.

And all that was assuming it was acceptable for Hydra to have that information in the first place. Simmons wanted to believe Hydra wanted GH-325 for… well, something normal. Patching people up. Obviously even that simple use could go wrong, as seen in Garrett’s ruthless pursuit of it as his own personal fountain of youth. But at least it made a kind of sense.

She couldn’t shake the thought, though, that it couldn’t be that simple. Simmons knew she probably didn’t have the kind of imagination it took to think up the kinds of uses Hydra could, but that didn’t mean those other uses weren’t there. Right? Or was she just winding herself up? Perhaps the lunatic pursuit of immortality was sufficient to explain Hydra’s interest.

Somewhere in the nameless corridors a thought came to her unbidden, like a bubble escaping cloudy water.

What if the test patients... weren’t just test patients, per se? What if they were the end targets for treatment all along?

Mitra had mentioned her other friend-- the trauma doctor-- who’d been putting complaints up the line about a high suicide rate among the recruits, and been rebuffed.

Maybe the brass hadn’t been ignoring it after all.

Simmons made a face. This was easily the most morbid thought she’d ever seriously considered. (Given how much time she’d spent humming under her breath while rummaging through corpses in pursuit of top grades, that was an achievement.)

Simmons tried to reassure herself that this couldn’t possibly be the case. To bring back someone so desperate to escape that they’d resort to self-destruction-- that couldn’t possibly be right, she was missing something--

And then she remembered how she’d gotten here. Kidnapped by a former team member and put to forced labor. For RNA meta-analysis, of all things. It wasn’t as if Hydra were a stranger to measures so extreme, they sauntered off into the ridiculous.

With half of her convinced that the hypothesis was a good one and the other half convinced that the first half was succumbing to an unproductive paranoia, Simmons wandered until she realized she’d overshot the residential wing some time ago. Now she found herself in lonely, half-lit corridors that she wasn’t technically allowed into.

Jemma tried to make a u-turn as casually as possible and make her way back to terra cognita. She had to consciously restrain herself from whistling and stuffing her hands into her pockets as she did so. There were already two successful acts of espionage under belt today-- one of them
Actually deliberate!— and with her mental bandwidth already tied up in a deep dive into Hydra’s GH-325 strategy, now was not a good time to push her luck further.

Fortunately, there was nobody there to see her. Simmons made her way back undetected, passing locked door after locked door.

As she walked, feeling slowed as if plated in lead, other images came unbidden to her mind. Long summer days at her grandparents’ country home, quiet and green, the rare sunny days spent thundering after hounds. The common rainy ones curled high up in a window seat under the portraits of stiff-looking cavalry officers, always reading, overlooking what had seemed like endless hills and downs dotted with waving trees and soggy sheep, dry and cozy herself with the help of fires and down-stuffed comforters and the estate’s own tea blend with roses and cardamom. The pages of one book too many going blurry in her hands—a richly footnoted history of the Empire that must have made its way into the library by mistake. Tea gone cold and grimy in the cup, abandoned days ago. Feeling as if she’d been slapped as the warning to stop asking questions rang in her ears. The view of London fading into the distance below.

And finding, at the terminus of that journey, someone who was almost from home and absolutely not. Fitz had the experience and surly temperament to hate people like her with all the honesty that she wished she could, but had decided she was worth tolerating anyway.

She’d never said it to herself in so many words, but there was a kind of innocence in the way Fitz constantly scowled out at the world. For her own part, she felt awful any time people were out of sorts and sometimes found herself tying herself in knots to keep people pleased—even when their discomfort had no rational basis or even any impact on her own life and projects. It was a terrible habit.

It was a relic of boarding school, probably. One that was serving her quite well in Hydra, as it turned out. She still couldn’t lie outright to save her life, but she could smile and be dependable and defer charmingly until her face ached. It was useful. But there was a worn, tired piece of her that was disappointed at how readily she felt herself slip in to this new place.

The whole idea of boarding schools, after all, was to staff the Commonwealth— with fresh-faced servants of… well, not world domination. That would sound rather megalomaniacal, wouldn’t it? Devotees of civilization and tradition and order. That was more like it.

She thought she’d gotten out of that business. First she’d gone and left home to work at S.H.I.E.L.D. Then S.H.I.E.L.D. had turned out to be rather less than what she’d thought it was—lousy with corruption. So she left that, too. Ran off in a whirlwind with Coulson and the rest. In retrospect it had been less of a conscious decision than finding S.H.I.E.L.D. ’s new management unthinkable, and taking the first flight out.

And yet in spite of everything—an actual lifetime of running far away from everything Hydra represented—here she was. And not only that, but unlike Fitz and his incorruptible sour streak, she was good at it.

Simmons shuddered, folding her arms across her chest to hide the sickened curling of her fingers. Too good by far. She’d thought she was signing up for a bit of intelligence-gathering. See what they could learn while they were here. And what had she done instead? Followed along so nicely that now she was so far down in a cesspool of human experimentation that she couldn’t see out.

It hadn’t even been a week.

Was this to be her whole life, then? Politely sloshing from one horror show to the next?

Jemma scratched sharply at one arm. A thick, slimy feeling coated her skin, as if the verdict slipped out of her own pores against her will. No matter how much she tried, or what she thought she knew—she would always wind up here. Deceived and turned around and used—because that’s what she was good at. Jemma Simmons was born for just this sort of thing, apparently, and she would never—ever—be clean.
Fitz slept soundly most of the afternoon, burrowed soundly under the covers. Consciousness made its way back to him slowly and he half-hummed under his breath, sleepily reaching out for Jemma. Even without her scent lingering in the covers she’d have been the first thing on his mind. Cuddling up with her the last couple of days had been far more pleasant than he felt entirely comfortable admitting to yet, and--

Finding the sheets cold, Fitz realized the bed was empty other than for him. Reality came pounding back. It wasn’t morning-- he’d been sleeping in broad daylight on account of being rather beat-up. The light filtering in through the blinds indicated very late afternoon, without any sign of Jemma having returned. And he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He missed her. But as soon as she came back they needed to have a talk about-- he didn’t even know how to have that conversation.

Don’t do it, Fitz, he warned himself. Just roll over and never wake up. A+ plan. Can’t fail.

“Fffuck,” he gritted instead, and turned to get a look at the clock. He could just make out “5:56” through the fading purple splotches in his vision.

A few minutes later, at a complete loss for what else to do, Fitz put the kettle on to boil and waited.

* *

Simmons made a couple more wrong turns before stumbling upon the proper corridor to get home. None too soon, either. It wasn’t like her to get so caught up in her own head that she could barely navigate. Well, perhaps a little, but beside the point. She needed a reality check. She needed to be away from prying eyes for a while, she needed-- she needed Fitz. Self-reproach building with every turn, hot tears pressed into her lashes and threatened to spill out by the time she arrived at her room.

He’d locked the door after her this time, like she’d asked, so Simmons gave her knock and fidgeted. She didn’t have to wait long-- Fitz sprang the door open almost immediately.

Whatever awkward, half-ready, “we need to talk but I’m going to pretend everything is fine and procrastinate this as long as possible” greeting Fitz might have had died a quick death as soon as he saw her. Even half-blind he could tell something was seriously wrong. It didn’t look like another drunk charade. Some rather dark worries he’d been stuffing down about what Hydra let its employees do to other employees came roaring back.

“Jemma, what--?” Fitz began, then stopped himself short. Never mind that for now.

“C’mere,” he said quickly, and towed her in by the elbow. Jemma followed stiffly. She didn’t resist, but didn’t move all too quickly under her own power either.

Once she was fully inside, he let go and turned to lock the door behind them.

“What happened?”

She shook her head emphatically and shrugged a little.

“Nothing,” she murmured at the floor.

Fitz’s lips pressed into a line. Things that led to Simmons crying generally weren’t ‘nothing.’ Without thinking, he stepped in a little closer to get a better look, ducking his head down to try and get a read of her face.

Then she began to turn away. Sensing he’d trespassed, Fitz halted, hanging back, listening to her
sniff uncomfortably and completely at a loss.

“They didn’t... um... did they hurt you, Jemma?” he tried quietly.

She looked up at him on that one, just long enough to try to smile and say no again and shake her head.

“What is it, then? You can’t tell me there’s nothing wrong, you--”

Simmons looked up and glanced quickly around the room.

“No, no, it’s okay. They can’t hear us anymore,” Fitz reassured her, gesturing around to indicate the listening devices.

Jemma gave a watery smile.

“Can’t leave you anywhere, can I?”

Fitz scratched the back of his head.

“Well-- no, but I feel like we’re getting on a tangent now,” he admitted.

“We need to contact the team,” she said, glancing up at him, and he heard her trying to keep her voice tight so it didn’t shake. “As soon as possible.”

“Oh! Um, good news then.” Fitz fairly lit up, and scrambled to pull a small mess of wires and hardware bits out from under the bed.

“That’s a radio amplifier for the quarter. Picked up a few last bits for it at work this morning. It’s almost done-- should have about a three-thousand mile range once it’s finished.” He held it out for her to hold, and she took it eagerly.

After slipping the quarter transmitter into its slot in the device to show her where it fit, Fitz looked up to see what looked like... adoration? in Simmons’s face. His insides squirmed. But she still had the look of someone about to have a good cry, and a lot of things weren’t sitting right.

“Um. If it’s plugged in,” he clarified.

“Right. Of course,” Simmons nodded. He watched her eyes flickering over the setup he’d made, for what seemed like a couple beats too long.

Right.

“What’s gone on, then?” he asked, turning to her.

Her mouth worked its way into a defined frown above and beyond her already-rough state.

“I’m not exactly sure,” Jemma admitted. “So I wouldn’t know what to say,” she continued, looking pointedly at the transmitter. “But their GH-325 program may be running into problems, and--”

“--you wonder if it’s got something to do with Coulson--”

“--trying to call off our one-patient clinical trial?” Simmons nodded, her voice tight.

“Yeah, there’s quite a lot he wasn’t telling us about,” Fitz grumbled. He shifted his weight and crossed his arms. “What kind of problems, then?”

“Well, this is assuming the conversation I heard was in fact about GH-325, though it’s hard to imagine what else it could have been-- psychiatric, for the most part. And some kind of tumors or lesions on the skin, which has the benefit of being easy to spot, but-- it’s not good, Fitz, they were talking about psychosis. Hypergraphia. Self-destructive behavior, and at least some of the time it’s
“Ugh,” Fitz winced.

Simmons nodded. “That’s good timing with the transmitter, then,” she said delicately, looking down. Fitz watched her look away, and started to get an idea of what was eating at her.

“C’mon, Jemma, you didn’t know,” he insisted gently, his voice suggesting a well-trod conversation. He turned to follow her as she shuffled towards the bed and plunked down on the edge, looking up at him with a bedraggled and miserable set to her shoulders.

“No, I know, it’s not that,” she waved him away, and hoped it would help a swipe at the edge of her eye pass unnoticed. She glanced between him and the floor as he came to sit next to her, a cautious few inches between them.

“Yeah?” he said, and waited for her to keep going.

“Although—” she began. “It’s just-- maybe that’s exactly it,” she mumbled. “I never know what I’m doing, and it always winds up being Hydra-related somehow.” Well. That wasn’t precisely true. She was quite sure she hadn’t been accidentally working for Hydra whilst jumping out of an aeroplane-- such were the joys of working on one’s own initiative-- but that wasn’t exactly something one could just come out and say to Fitz’s face.

“It’s one of the hazards of being in demand,” Fitz admitted. Jemma turned just enough to give him a dubious sideways glance. Then she relented.

“A rocket goes up,” Simmons began.

“Who cares where it comes down?” Fitz continued.

“‘That’s not my department,’ said Wernher von Braun,” they finished together.

“You know, I never actually aspired to be Wernher von Braun, though,” Simmons pointed out.

“Not even the part where he ran off to turn himself in to the Allies?”

“And they didn’t believe he was this awful weapons physicist they’d heard about because he looked like he was thirteen? Fitz, that’s clearly your department.”

Fitz didn’t even try to contest it. He just shrugged.

“It’s just-- I know we knew when we started this that it would make a mess of our heads,” Simmons went on after a moment. “It’s just one thing to know that intellectually, and another to be living it,” she concluded, punctuating the end of the sentence with a sniffle.

Fitz thought right back to the conversation with that nosy scarecrow person from earlier, and had never been so glad he’d been slow to take his advice. If anybody’d know better than to get their head turned like that, it was Simmons.

“Hey,” he said, giving her a nudge with his shoulder. “Foolproof way to know your head’s on right. You may be working for Hydra, but--” he did his best impersonation of Simmons’s voice in ‘stiff upper lip’ mode-- “you’re awfully miserable about it.”

Simmons shot him a begrudging sideways look before bursting out laughing. And then before she knew it she was sobbing. She’d been holding it in all day and everything was so fucked up and she was so, so tired.

Fitz gave a bright grin of relief at seeing her laugh, only to freeze a second later when she started crying.

*What did you do, Fitz?* he kicked himself. *You broke her. Well, you and Hydra. It was a team effort.*
His hand hovered over shoulders for a moment before smoothing down the fabric, pulled tight over her back as she planted her face in her hands and her elbows on her knees. That seemed like the right thing to do. Probably. Being comforting wasn’t exactly his goddamn forte.

“Jemma,” he said quietly after a few long moments. “Hey. Look at me.” A couple fingers lit on her shoulder to draw her up.

Her gaze was shaky, but she met his eyes.

“None of this is on you, okay?” He’d used to tease her, goggles on and droning like a nature documentary, about being a posh southern bird who’d probably got a tiara in her closet somewhere. It had seemed only fair given how she’d boss him around the lab sometimes. Then one time while helping her move, he found a hatbox that made an oddly heavy clunk-- and discovered that for all he’d meant it as a joke, there was a bloody literal tiara in the woman’s closet. Come to find out there were social events where a tiara was an actual part of the dress code, and Simmons’s mother couldn’t let her set sail for the New World without making sure she was properly equipped. Never mind Jemma’s repeated assurances to her mother that heading off to SHIELD was not a secret scheme for tapping a fresh vein of eligible bachelors; and that even if it was, she’d have a tough go of it with the tiara since nobody did that sort of thing at Sci-Tech anyway.

In any case, Simmons’d never said anything. He’d gone on thinking it was all good fun for years. Then he damn well wanted to yell at her for letting him go on like that. But he’d settled for blanching even pastier than usual instead and disappearing for three whole days, too mortified to even answer texts. With minor assistance from Dr. Hall and not-so-minor assistance from alcohol Simmons managed to convince him she wasn’t horribly offended. If anything, the fact that the possibility that it was all true had never crossed his mind was a tremendous relief on her end. But still... once you knew about where she came from, you could see it. And that it wasn’t all sweet peas and roses.

He’d gotten used to being on the receiving end of pity thanks to his mother’s ‘unfortunate situation,’ in the words of the busybody neighbor ladies. But it seemed like there were a lot worse things than having a grand total of one person trying to do their level best for you. Such as, perhaps, none. The hereditary lifestyle didn’t help her out in the feeling-guilty-for-every-damned-thing department either.

Fitz tried to pick his through his next words carefully.

“You’re too smart for that. And you’re-- you-- um. You’re too good. For that.”

She squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze and looked away.

“I mean it. I trust you. With anything. Jemma-- you’re good for it. Okay?”

Keep being who I know you are, because I don’t think I can make it through this if you don’t, he added silently, watching her try not to cry at the floor. With a twisting in his gut, Fitz realized he may have started out trying to reassure her. But he didn’t end that way. He was begging her not to lead him astray.

Simmons was starting to resign herself to the fact that she was going to lose her cool in front of Fitz-- again-- when he started trying to cheer her up. Funny thing was that it was working. Simmons blew a shuddery breath, realizing that this was what she’d been waiting for all day. For him to tell her this lunatic gamble they were making would work. It made no sense-- him saying so obviously didn’t actually affect the outcome, but... she needed to hear it. From him.

Jemma sniffled, and tried to think of an appropriate response to what Fitz was saying about her without starting to cry again. It didn’t work. Instead, a sudden feeling shot through her like dropping a rock into a well and watching it disappear down, down, down.

A week ago, he’d probably felt the same about Ward.

With whom he hadn’t gotten along with at all, until one day he was practically enamored of the man. Who then turned out to be working for the enemy all along. Not unlike the arc of his relationship with her, come to think of it.
Bless his heart, she thought numbly. Needs to trust his gut a little better. Has got tragic taste in people otherwise.

Fitz watched, nervous and dumbfounded, as Jemma suddenly began to cry again in earnest. Then she rose stiffly up off the bed and mumbled some kind of watery apology, stalked to the bathroom, and locked the door.

Oh, good work, Fitz, he thought angrily. You’ve really done it this time.

Chapter End Notes

1. I LIIIIIIIVE

2. And I am SO EXCITED to have this chapter done. Not only have things been crazy busy but I’ve also had the worst writer’s block with getting this part out. I don’t like or “get” writing angst much and pretty much avoid it at all costs. But this bit was rather plot-critical. And it’s DONE. HALLELUJAH.

3. Hat tip to typhanni/notapepper for coming up with the chapter title because by the time I was posting this thing my brain was utter moosh.

4. If you don't know the Wernher von Braun quotes they're pulling out, get your sweet ass right now to this very important cultural and scientific institution.

5. Speaking of Tom Lehrer, go here for a very special preview of how the chapter after next is shaping up. :3
Fitz dropped down to sit on the edge of the mattress. What felt like a solid minute of staring at the door later, he still couldn’t figure out what he’d said wrong.

At all. And it wasn’t like Simmons to keep it to herself when she was brassed off at him. And given that there were only several dozen god-awful things she was dealing with right now, Fitz figured there was a good probability that whatever was bothering her was only tangentially related to him.

Probably.

His chest went up and down with a deep breath, eyes flickering away and back to the door.

“Jemma?” he called out, crossing the room to stand before the door. He gave a couple quiet knocks and waited. No response but sniffling came through.

“Simmons, can you tell me what’s wrong?” he tried again, working very hard to keep from sounding impatient.

“Um,” she warbled, voice muffled by the door but quite clearly tear-choked and miserable. “In a minute,” she finished.

Fitz sighed, leaning his forehead against the doorjamb.

“Yeah, okay,” he agreed. “Let me know if you… um… need anything,” he offered, words feeling so lame on his tongue that it was obvious even to him.

It was alright if she needed a moment. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t anything that needed doing. Fitz picked up the transmitter array and dropped back down onto the edge of the bed, intent on finishing the last of the adjustments.

The apparatus was close enough to complete-- he’d been up and about in the middle of the afternoon some, working on it as long as his eyes had cooperated-- that it only took a few minutes to get it ready to transmit. Just as Fitz was was tightening up the last of the screws and wire wraps, an insistent gurgle issued forth from his middle.

Memory suddenly jogged, he looked over at the clock.

Oh no.

The volunteers’ canteen was open until nine, but Simmons was out of commission and his cafeteria was going to close in four minutes.

Oh no.

*

Simmons was indulging in a good, solitary cry with nobody around to judge her. She briefly considered turning on the shower to cover up the sound, but that wouldn’t be environmentally responsible. Then there’d simply be more self-loathing to deal with, and that was hardly an effective use of solitary catharsis time, was it?

Several minutes later, another knock issued at the door.

“What?” she jumped. Brilliant, that had come out sounding rather cross. Simmons cleared her
throat and tried again.

“Yes?”

Fitz’s muffled voice came in through the door, and she couldn’t make out anything other than him sounding rather frantic. Simmons jumped off the closed toilet where she’d been sitting and jerked the door open.

“What’s wrong?”

Fitz was hiking one thumb towards the room’s front door.

“Just that I’m going to get us something to eat, it closes in-- three minutes,” he said, already moving towards the door.

“What time is it?” she asked, startled that it had somehow gotten that late.

“Almost seven, I’ll be right ba--”

Simmons gave a determined sniff.

“What? No, no, it’s alright--” she was waving her hands in a tight little area right in front of her chest-- “I’ll get it. It’ll be better for both of us,” Simmons insisted.

There was a definite, relaxed drop in Fitz’s shoulders when she offered.

“Not going to argue with you there,” he admitted.

“See you in a few minutes?” Simmons said, putting on her shoes, and looking oddly shy as she did.

Fitz nodded. “I mean, I don’t want to rush you--”

Simmons shook her head. “And I don’t want to eat what comes from your cafeteria,” she replied, not a trace of apology in her voice.

“Nobody does,” he seconded. “Um-- knock on your way in, yeah?”

“Mhm,” she agreed, already on her way out the door.

“Right,” Fitz said to nobody in particular. Then he crossed the room, plugged in the transmitter, and started calling home.

* 

It only took a couple crackles of static before Skye picked up.

“Identify yourself,” her reply came through. It was definitely Skye’s voice, but wary and laser-cut to where it was barely recognizable.

“It’s me!” Fitz blurted despite himself. “Fitz,” he clarified.

“Oh my God!” the transmitter burst. “Okay. Um.” The disembodied Skye cleared its voice and attempted to return to a middling official tone. “I’m going to have to ask you some security questions.”

“Yeah,” Fitz agreed readily. He didn’t think he’d ever be this excited to go through an identity validation protocol.

“Badge ID number,” Skye read out.
“I thought we weren’t using those anymore?”

“Ugh… technically no, but it’s not like we’ve replaced it with any other kind of ID, and it’s still on the protocol.” She paused. “Making a note to update that… now….”


“‘Kay,” Skye returned. “Are you under duress?” she asked. Is somebody holding a gun to your head, listening in, or otherwise interfering with this conversation?

“Oh, fuck,” Fitz muttered. You couldn’t actually say “yes” to that question in a duress situation. Each team had its own protocol; the pattern on the Bus was to respond “No” when under duress, and “Absolutely not” when free to talk.

Or, it had been. Fucking Grant Ward, defecting and making them have to rewrite and re-memorize all their security Q&As. Fitz scratched his neck and tried to remember the new one.

“I don’t know. But I think I’m in the clear,” he said after a moment.

“Nice,” Skye replied, scrawling down a quick note. Transmissions monitored. Then she kept going down the checklist.

“‘Who was the ugliest kid on your block growing up?’ Wow Fitz, that’s quite the security question.”

“Robbie Blackhearst, and you said to make sure it was something we’d never forget. If you’d seen him you’d understand.”

“Uh-huh. Moving right along….”

*

Once he cleared ID, Skye took him through a Q&A on how their status—healthy, injured, degree of freedom, that sort of thing. This was another conversation where it didn’t matter so much what you said, it was all in how you answered. An opportunity to pass messages in code. Which, again, had an added difficulty level thanks to having to restructure their team’s entire code system after Ward.

It took some finagling, but Fitz managed to pass along Simmons’s new work email address—even evil organizations had to have them, it would seem. Simmons had freer access to official communications than he did. And she and Skye had been working on a bioinformatics code before things… had gotten busy.

He could practically see the judgmental look that ought to have been on Skye’s face once he’d finished spelling out the email address, slowly, a letter per sentence, if she hadn’t been doing her best poker-voice. To an untrained ear they’d technically been talking about the sludge-like substance that the cafeteria was labelling “gravy.”

@hydra.org? Seriously!?

“Yeah, really,” he asserted. “The food here has you waking up in the morning and wondering why you ever bothered to leave the U.K.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind if they ever come recruiting around here,” Skye commented offhandedly. Fitz scratched his head. No, that didn’t mean anything. Just filler commentary.

“How’s Simmons?” she asked. Fitz was suddenly very conscious of the sound quality that indicated, whatever they had the quarter transmitter plugged into on that end, that several people were on the line.
It was just a bit wrong, Simmons reflected, snacking on a roll as she walked down the corridor, how much eating could help one’s outlook on life. *Existential crisis over your evil deeds? No problem: just add carbohydrates.*

She neared her door and, with a bit of jostling, got the tray settled on one hip to free one of her hands. Raising her hand to knock, Simmons very faintly heard his voice and froze. That wasn’t the cadence of Fitz talking to himself-- he must have raised the team.

Loathe to interrupt, Simmons decided to see where in the conversation he was before knocking. She couldn’t quite make him out through the door, though. Seeing the corridor was empty, Simmons took up one of the empty glasses from the tray and held it to the door, ear to the glass, to get a read on where he was at.

“...think she’d made up her mind before we even landed,” his faded voice emerged out of the glass.

There was a staticky response that she couldn’t quite pick words out of. She could just make out flickers of May’s voice, though. Simmons let out a broad smile of relief. Along with finally having eaten something, knowing the Cavalry within comms reach was doing wonders for her spirits. And Fitz was relaying her cover along to the team just as she needed him to. The listening devices in their room proper may have been gone, but it was still possible for Hydra to be monitoring the transmission itself.

“Yeah, of course I’m gonna keep an eye on her,” Fitz replied. “I mean I can’t be there all the time since they haven’t got us working together-- which is a waste, by the way-- but I’m doing what I can.”

Another line of static from the other side. And a long silence.

* Fitz heard his voice sounding aghast in his own ears.

“What do you mean, ‘there were signs’?!”

It was just May on the line now, the other lines having been cut out soon after they started talking about Simmons.

“What I said, Fitz. She was showing a lot of ambivalence during Orientation,” her rather exasperated voice came back over the line. “It’s not a total surprise.”

Skye’s voice broke in next.

“Wh-- don’t you think she’s under some kind of duress? Is there any way to find out?”

“No more than I am,” Fitz sighed, breaking off her hope, and hoping to hell he managed to sound as convinced about it as May was. “Like I said, I’m doing what I can, I’m staying with her and all that, she’s just--”

He stopped, racking his brain for something as truthful as possible to say to May and Skye that wouldn’t get Simmons in trouble with their current employer and landlord. All he could think of was her face, which already started out the mornings with dark circles under her eyes and, this particular day, had progressed to outright crying as the day wore on.

“--she’s in rough shape,” he allowed. “It’s hard to say--”
Outside in the corridor, Simmons broke away. There was someone coming around the nearest corner.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, dropping the glass in her momentary panic. It fell onto the tray and bounced off, knocking the other roll onto the floor on its way down. The security guard looked up at the noise, a sympathetic expression when he saw the nice volunteer lady struggling to manage her door with her hands full of dinner.

“Ma’am?” the man said.

“Oh! It’s quite alright, you don’t--” Jemma blurted, bending down to pick up the glass and roll. “Been dropping things all day!” she insisted, and shooed herself in the door.

She got inside just in time to see Fitz slam the top drawer of her dresser shut, trying and failing miserably to look innocent. Momentary panic forgotten, it was all she could do not burst out laughing hard enough to attract attention from the hallway outside.

Bless him. He’d gone and tried to hide the transmitter in that drawer.

Fitz stood stiffly with his back half-turned to Simmons, realizing from the sound of her snickering that he’d been caught red-handed. At what should have been a perfectly innocent bit of espionage, but no. He had to go throwing the transmitter into the one drawer with the frothy things, which his memory was telling him from the brief flash of looking before he slammed it shut were arranged into orderly, colorful, very soft layers. The whole situation was all… well... very Simmons.

“I-- um-- the--” he stammered, turning to look at her, gesturing toward the drawer.

Simmons just grinned slowly, then dropped her eyes to the floor and threw him a rope.

“I brought dinner,” she announced, though it was rather redundant given that she’d just set down a tray smelling deliciously of roast.

Fitz looked extremely relieved at the change in subject.

“Oh! Great, that’s-- I’ll just-- um-- get these filled up, then,” he offered, taking the glasses off the tray and scooting to the loo to fill them from the tap.

* * *

In a familiar replay of many a hurried dinner break in the lab, they ate quietly, sitting knee-to-knee on the edge of the bed. Fitz filled her in on the conversation with the team-- how he’d managed to pass a coded message to May about keeping an eye on Skye for symptoms, all while carrying on a conversation about Simmons’s sudden but apparently inevitable betrayal. Outside, the sounds of impending rain grew more insistent. Trees blowing in the wind joined the thunder grumbling in the distance.

Jemma cleaned off the last of her plate and put it down with a barely-audible contented sigh.

“Feels better, doesn’t it?” Fitz smiled lightly, bumping her knee with his own. He’d completely inhaled his own dinner as of a few minutes ago.

“Food solves ninety-nine percent of life’s problems,” she nodded. It was an axiom he’d literally been insisting on for years. “And moving critical information where it needs to go works for the remainder,” she admitted. “Thanks for getting that passed along.”

Fitz shrugged, nudging her shoulder as he did.

“Hey. You’ve got the hard job,” he said quietly.

Jemma glanced down, feeling an oddly-timed flush burn across her cheeks.

“I don’t have to run out of melting buildings. Or lie to Agent May,” she rallied, smirking up at him.
“No, no, it’s easy-- when you can’t see the--” Fitz did his best deadpan May impersonation. He couldn’t hold it for long, though, with Jemma laughing at him. He eased off the teasing for a moment and just watched her laugh, relieved that the nerves that had been eating her alive earlier were gone. For now.

“Honestly,” he reassured her again. “You’re doing brilliant.”

Then he pulled back a little, trying to read her and contemplating his next move. He knew perfectly well what he wanted to do, but with both of their emotions running all over the place it was hard to tell just where that ranked on the spectrum of good-to-awful ideas. Fitz elected for a compromise.

Tugging gently with a pair of fingers on her shoulder, he pulled her near and dropped a kiss on the crown of her head.

Jemma leaned into him, eyes dropping shut at the press of his lips and the wash of warmth from his breath. She stayed there for a few beats, resting in the warmth of his shoulder. Then she looked up, caught him watching her with wide eyes, and drew him down with a hand on the back of his neck. With a little smile, she softly laid a kiss of her own to his temple.

Fitz felt himself light up in a blush. On impulse he bent down and caught her with another kiss, this time on the cheek. He instantly felt ridiculous-- You’re a grown man, for the love of-- until he heard Jemma let out a giggle that sounded just as dopey as he felt.

“Was that a--?” he started, splitting into a bright grin. Jemma shook her head.

“Shhh,” she insisted, drawing in quickly and cutting off his breath with a soft kiss to the corner of his lips. He followed her, tilting to catch her in a proper kiss, keeping his lips gentle against hers.

Jemma stilled nearly instantly, quietly putting a hand down to the bed to steady herself. Fitz was the more reserved of them-- she’d recognized that years ago. Not wanting to rush him and a little wary about her own impulses after weeks of jangled nerves, Jemma relaxed into his hold and simply let him kiss her, content to follow his lead for now. She’d long been curious about what he’d be like anyhow. It never hurt to have detailed notes for later.

Encouraged by the soft breath she let out, Fitz leaned in, tracing fingers down her cheek and along her jaw. There was an irrational (probably) part of him that felt like a street preacher who’d suddenly been handed a megaphone and felt the need to shout everything at once, just in case the opportunity never came round again. Only instead of sour-faced gloom and doom, all he had to say was one thing--

I love you, please let me love you

--and with every movement he made, he as good as whispered it against her lips.

Fitz was a lot of things all at once-- warm, solid, a faint taste of salt-- but above all, he was… careful. He had to be nervous, but that wasn’t quite it. There was something soft but deliberate, a purposefulness to the gentle press of his mouth.

Jemma broke off first, needing to see the look in his eyes that came with this. She laid a hand on each side of his face, softly closed the kiss, and regarded him quietly.

“I’m-- sorry, was-- did--” Fitz stammered.

Jemma scoffed and pulled him in for a proper kiss. After a moment for both of them to get their bearings, she gave him a soft flicker over the bottom lip with her tongue. He breathed in sharply, almost a gasp. Unable to help herself, Jemma grinned against his lips.

The next thing she knew, his hands were all over her waist and back, pulling her close and she loved it, and she was also suddenly very, very aware of the fact that she hadn’t showered or changed since coming back from the lab. She hadn’t spilt anything on herself at work, which was
how she’d justified eating and sitting all over the furniture in this state, but it still didn’t feel right. The sixth sense of lab safety had a way of insisting itself be heard.

With a frustrated grumble, Jemma pulled back.

“Can I wash up?” she asked, eyebrows knit together apologetically. “I don’t mean--” she backpedalled, hoping he wouldn’t somehow take it the wrong way, whichever way that was--

“ugh-- I need to, and it’s going to bother me un--”

“Go,” Fitz laughed, using his grip on her ribs to nudge her into a standing position and waving her on her way. Jemma’s shoulders sagged in relief. Right. If there was anyone who understood her very important relationship with work/life balance vis-a-vis lab safety, Fitz would be it.

“I’ll be in after you,” he said. Then he turned bright red. “I mean after you’re done I’ll-- it’s about time for me too is all--”

“No, don’t worry, that’s perfect,” Jemma reassured him over her shoulder, breezily waving his embarrassment away. “This shower’s too small for two people anyway.”

Then as soon as she’d turned back away from him she cringed, mouthing as she scolded herself. **What!? Why do you say things like that, the poor thing’s shorting his circuits already….

Jemma emerged from the washroom a short while later, yawning sleepily, freshly showered and fully clad in pyjamas and a soft purple dressing gown. Granted there were a number of other interesting items in that top drawer she could have gone for, but she didn’t want to make any presumptions. This whole situation was uncharted territory. Simmons was up for any number of things, the thought of which had her eyebrows spiking wickedly anytime he wasn’t watching. But she realized, quite unusually, that while she had some guesses she hadn’t any precise read on where Fitz was wanting to go with it.

That was alright-- she could play it by ear. They chatted and joked a little as she slipped into bed and enjoyed a few warm glances, followed by a lovely view as he made his way back to the shower. Once he was out of the room Jemma dropped her head back against the pillow, trying to puzzle out whether the mystery on where this was headed was sexy or just confusing. Her eyes slid shut. This would require some serious deliberation.

Fitz stood under the hot water, heart thudding and trying to get his brain to work out the math. He had no idea where this was going. He didn’t want to come off as not interested, because he certainly was. But the bigger danger by far was being too pushy. And if the clouds parted and the heavens opened-- well, safe to say there wasn’t any scenario that would play out well if he was still in this state. Best to engage the manual relief valve.

Within a few minutes he returned, clean and still slightly damp around the edges in a t-shirt and slightly overlarge flannel trousers. This was good. Washed up and relaxed, now he’d be able to pay proper attention to--

She was curled up on her side, fast asleep.

He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t a tiny bit disappointed, but not altogether surprised. They’d both been exhausted nonstop since getting on the Bus, what with critical missions and constant jet lag. Since Hydra came out they’d both been running on fumes. Then today she’d been on her feet since early morning while he’d been lying about on enforced medical leave, so it was hardly fair to expect her to be up and running just because he was. In any case… in contrast to the worry lines and dark circles she wore of late, asleep she looked so peaceful it seemed like blasphemy to disturb her.

Fitz slid himself under the covers with care and blacked out the light.

“Mm?” she murmured, the dip in the bed registering through her sleepy fog.

Fitz let out a soft laugh, reaching around her waist to pull her close and nuzzling at her neck.
“Go to sleep, Jemma.”

“‘s just resting my eyes,” she protested drowsily, turning to face him. “C’mere.”

“Okay,” Fitz agreed readily, lifting an arm to make room as she got settled. “You’ve got tomorrow morning off, yeah?”

“Mm-hm. Lab maint’nance,” she nodded slightly.

“Well then I’ll see you then.” He paused, nudging in a little closer, settling his lips near her forehead. “You had a big day,” he murmured. “High-tech espionage… some more high-tech espionage… with a side of sneakin’ around…”

“Hmmph,” Jemma mumbled, smirking slightly and batting lazily at his chin. Fitz was not to be dissuaded.

“Who’s a sleepy double agent?” he whispered.

“Do you want to sleep on the sofa?” Simmons said, emerging from unconsciousness just enough enunciate clearly.

“No,” he said earnestly, shaking his head.

“Ugh,” Jemma grumbled, and found his hand and laced her fingers between his.

Fitz shifted to make room, and she shifted to get closer, and suddenly it was a congress of knocking knees and awkward tilts.

Jemma made a soft hum to pause their shifting about. Fitz stilled, only to feel her slip her top knee up and over his hips.

“Prob’m solved,” she murmured. In her sleep-fuzzed mind, this was turning out to be a lovely prototype run. Fitz felt damn good between her thighs: hypothesis confirmed.

“Um…” Fitz tapped his lip, not even certain he wanted to say anything. Quick fix in the shower or not, having her hips wide open and warm right in front of him like this was bound to lead to some additional… er… spatial logistical issues sooner or later.

“That problem solved,” he amended.

“Sorry… not comfortable over there?” she murmured hazily, beginning to tilt away.

“No, I’m okay, I just don’t want-- you to--”

“Ugh, Fitz!” she groaned, though there was no heat to it. “It’s alright.” Sensing a possible awkward silence in the making, she kept going. “Honestly! Do you think I’ve ever been in bed with a man who wasn’t aroused?”

There was a brief silence from both of them, and Simmons felt herself flush bright red in the dark. “I’m sorry, that came out wrong, all I meant was--”

It took Fitz a moment to remember that she couldn’t see him grinning in the dark. Jemma Simmons making wildly inappropriate statements was quickly becoming one of his favorite things.

“Oh, I know what you meant,” he laughed. “C’mere then,” he said, tugging her knee back up, although giving himself a little more room this time. It was a good thing, too, since the shuddery sigh she let out as he did-- while barely audible-- sent a hot bolt right through him.

“Um. And if you want to sleep right now, um, let’s get to it.”

“Yeah,” Jemma nodded, taking his meaning. Under other circumstances she’d have made a very
different call, but months of hypervigilance had taken a toll on them both. She snuggled into his shoulder and reveled in being able to simply take in some peace and quiet together.

They drifted off in silence for a few moments, listening to the rain, when Jemma spoke again.

“Fitz?”

“Mm?”

*If I don’t make it out of this for some reason, and you do,* she tapped drowsily on his fingers. Fitz could already tell he didn’t like where this was going.

*Can you make sure people know I wasn’t really working for them?*

“Let’s not worry about that quite ye--” he began in a whisper.

*I SAID ‘if,’* she tapped back, though her touch was gentle, and her fingers settled softly back between his.

Fitz nodded. “Yeah,” he whispered.

*Thanks* she tapped.

“I will avenge your name,” he hissed quietly in the dark, and tried and failed to dodge the sleepy swat that came his way.

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Chapter End Notes

1. I STILL LIIIIIIIIIVE

2. On a similar note, sorry I've been out of commission and haven't replied to the last couple of notes put on the last chapter, that's next on my list now that this chapter is up. FEAR NOT, I LOVE U GUYS, I FEEL U, COMMENT AWAYYYYYY

3. I'm so sorry about the chapter title, I didn't think before deciding I'd name the chapters and I'm straight out of titles. I'm 3,000% open to suggestions.

4. This is my favorite chapter SO FAR

5. I know some of y'all are probably disappointed that people would decide to sleep instead of do the secks but deep down this fic is about how to have supportive long-term relationships when you're overworked and fucking tired. Lemme tell ya *takes long pull on a beverage* this is what happens y'all. lol

6. But seriously. There are lots more chapters and these two have no chill. :D
Ugh I was going to post it all in one chapter but there is way too much. It is now at least two chapters. Enjoy Copensmütten Phase 1 and the knowledge that the next chapter is already more than halfway done. As a result this one isn't even all that smutty. BUT IT'S FUN, OK.

The May/Skye interaction is very s1, as the timeline on this fic is right in at the end of s1.

Speaking of May, may or may not be giving up on chapter titles entirely. If I'd known beforehand there were going to be 30+ I would have made a different call....

On another note, there was a request about making a non-smutty summary of this chapter. Um, that's complicated. I get that for squick and religious and parental monitoring and other reasons sometimes people don't want to read the secks. That's fine, you do you. That said, the whole reason there's any sex in this story at all (after 80K+ that stands up pretty well on its own without any, I'd like to think) has a lot to do with me trying to pick up the pieces after an über-religious upbringing where sex was so "special" and "sacred" that talking, thinking, or art-ing about it were strictly verboten. I bought into it 3,000% and did everything right like I was supposed to and it fucked me the fuck up. Ditto for a lot of the people I grew up with. Got a lot of friends who "stayed pure" for their future spouse, including not talking or joking or thinking about sex, and now they don't know how to have a functional sexual relationship with the person they love. And I don't mean on the honeymoon. I mean after 5-10 years of marriage, and I don't know if that level of baggage can ever totally leave you. If more people want to make those same choices with their lives, ok. But I'm sure as grits not helping them do it.

Anyway. You do you, and if that involves skipping certain chapters that's fine. We all have our stuff that we need to navigate. This story is me hella navigating mine. Here's hoping that it also results in an interesting story for others to read. And if you're going to be entertained by the stuff I'm doing to work out my issues, I do need to ask that you let it be what it is.

/soapbox over

Also, mega props to typhanni/notapepper for beta-ing and helping my sad little fried brain find a good place to make the chapter break. With her help we now have a fun little starter chapter and then the next (almost halfway done already!) picks up, and I quote, "like a damn steam train."

“Any luck on that location yet?” May asked, striding down the hall to Coulson’s office with Skye bouncing in tow, laptop in hand.

“It looks like Fitz is having to bounce the signal, so it took some math, but-- it’s looking like the Deep South. Way Deep South.”

“Pensacola?” May asked.

“With the race track? Could be, but also anywhere within two or three hundred miles of there,” Skye answered.
Coulson’s door was locked-- a precaution that meant he was talking to a team of SHIELD agents somewhere around the globe. May and Skye waited outside his door to be beeped in. He knew they were coming.

“Aren’t you a little worried? I mean, I’m super-relieved that they’re, you know, not dead or anything, and they can’t be doing that bad since they’ve made it this far, but-- Simmons under deep cover? You didn’t see it, May, but this might not last long,” Skye fussed.

May crossed her arms and looked thoughtfully at the wall for a second.

“You said that was an enhanced quarter transmitter?”

“Yup.”

“I’d say she’s doing alright then,” May shrugged.

Skye looked at her, her face clearly letting May know that wasn’t much of an explanation.

“If I was Hydra, I’d at least strip-search all incomers. Means there’s only a couple ways they could’ve gotten that transmitter in. Think you can see Fitz pulling that off?”

Skye said nothing for a moment.

“Thank you for that mental image.”

May nodded and gazed appreciatively at the wall. Walls were great. They were quiet, tended to stay where you put them, and only let you down if they had a good reason. Like explosives. Also, they were quiet.

“May,” Skye said again. She looked over, waiting for the younger agent’s question. It came whispered over the top of her computer.

“Are they doing the sex?”

May turned her head just enough to fix Skye with an are-you-serious glare. It was her go-to method for dealing with questions she didn’t have an answer to, because nobody ever asked Melinda May what that look meant.

•

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, Colonel,” the chief of the Bio department said. She was a ridiculous little breath of a woman, wearing possibly half her bodyweight in makeup and floral prints and clicky little heels.

But seeing as how both the previous Bio chief and head of Ops had both either been killed or gone AWOL-- it was hard to tell which, to be honest, and it didn’t really matter-- in the thermite fire, he’d have to figure out how to work around her anyway.

“Why don’t we start with getting an idea of what Ops will need from Bio under your administration,” she began.

Well. Now that attitude, he could work with.

He took her through a list. It took an hour. To her credit, she was focused-- didn’t wander off into the weeds. And she didn’t balk or talk back at some of the more significant demands. Accommodating with hints of at least basic competence-- maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“And that, unless there’s anything else, ought to cover the Ops-facing end of Bio responsibilities.
Colonel?"

“Yes ma’am, that’s everything.”

“Be sure to let me know as soon as possible if something should arise. It’s easy for communications with other departments to drop to the bottom of the priority list, but my experience has been…” She drew her shoulders up in a little sigh. “That Ops has always been happier when they kept Bio in the loop than when they didn’t.”

The man nodded.

“In particular,” Raina mentioned. “When enhanced soldiers are on-mission, we need advance notice and up-to-date estimates of time of arrival and types of injuries to expect. As you know, due to constrained resources, Bio personnel often double as medical crews. We’ve already lost good men to being unprepared when the field teams returned. Those deaths came from poor communication, sir, and they’re completely unnecessary.”

“I’m with you there. I’ll include you on the mission planning comms, and you have my full permission to ride the crew chiefs’ asses if they’re not keeping you up to date.”

Raina gave a little laugh. “I doubt that’ll be necessary. You’ve got a… commanding presence,” she said, eyes flicking to his shoulders. “I have the feeling you’ll be able to get the message across.”

The Colonel came away from that meeting with a profound sense of relief that they finally had a Bio chief who actually understood how things worked in the real world.

And Raina walked away with with the software keys to spy on everything Ops did. With full permission.

• • •

Leopold Fitz hadn’t been this eager for morning to come around since the Christmas of 1994. In an unusual occurrence, he woke up before Jemma did. Reluctant to wake her, he propped his head up and watched her breath go softly in and out. And tried a little bit to store the memory away, for later, what she looked like when she wasn’t running scared.

Before long it occurred to him that she was sleeping in an odd sort of jackknifed position, half on her side facing away from him and half spilt over onto her belly. It didn’t look like it could possibly be comfortable but was doing some really intriguing things to the profile of her arse. He was beginning to ask himself some searching questions about the geometry situation between her and the mattress when she started to stir. Which was alright, since it saved him having to worry about his imagination running away with him.

Jemma hummed softly and stretched, starting to turn towards him. Fitz reached an arm over her waist and pulled in close, bringing her shoulders into his chest, and nuzzled her neck through scattered strands of bedhead hair.

“G’morning,” he mumbled.

Her cheeks peaked in a smile, and she reached a hand back to brush the back of his neck.

“Good morning,” she answered softly. Then she traced her hand down his arm, where it rested over her ribs, and laced her fingers between his and held it tight. Fitz squeezed back and leaned forward over her shoulders, dropping a soft kiss behind her ear. Then he lingered, all fondness,
nuzzling down her neck with little heat. Jemma closed her eyes, smiling into his touch, and gave a pleased little hum.

Then she squirmed in closer, blithely planting the lovely arse he’d just been contemplating flush against his hips. Fitz winced a little in spite of himself. He’d been trying to be a gentleman, thank you, but there was no way she could be missing the morning erection digging into her backside now.

“Careful, love,” he murmured, though he was fairly sure it was a useless warning. Jemma probably knew what she was about.

“Hmm, right,” she nodded, and wiggled about some more until he was resting loosely down and somewhat, well, between her thighs instead of blunting into her arse.

“Better?” she asked in all earnestness.

Fitz clapped a hand over his eyes, blushing furiously. Her shift ratcheted him up from sleepy and pleasantly aroused to brilliantly aware of whole new genres of ways to embarrass himself. Not that he’d draw away for anything, as long as she wanted him there. The press of her, warm and yielding around him, had him spinning instantly, wanting to pull her up and drape her over his lap and--

“It’ll work,” he allowed.

“Sorry-- I can-- hang on--” Jemma drew up a knee to make some more room for the both of them.

Fitz shook his head. “‘S’okay,” he answered. Good work, Fitz, he thought, bending down to give some more attention to her neck. Thrilling feat of eloquence just there.

Jemma gently dropped her knee, pulling a quick breath from Fitz as she closed back around him. A moment later she felt his fingers stroke gently across her neck to draw her hair back, a warm sigh of breath, and the soft, bright heat of his mouth.

An appreciative laugh bubbled out of her, and she worked a hand back to wind into his hair. He was raising a lovely series of goosebumps back there, and Jemma was in an encouraging mood.

After a few long passes up and down her neck, as much as she was enjoying herself-- he was tugging her tightly into himself and sighing into her skin and God, just this with him was delicious-- Jemma was also starting to feel that Fitz was getting the raw end of the deal. She slipped her hand over his and plucked it up and under the covers, taking him down to cup her breast through the thin fabric of her camisole.

His reaction was instantaneous. Gentle but eager, he soon had his thumb tracing the side of her breast, letting out a murmur of appreciation in her ear. Jemma slowly released a breath of her own, surprised to find she’d been holding it. Even with his obvious enthusiasm, there was a sort of familiar affection in the way he touched her. She blinked slowly, realizing with a lump in her throat how badly she needed that.

Several long moments passed that way, Jemma tracing her fingertips over the flexing sinews of his hands while he did his own explorations, reveling in the pause. It was different with him. Without her even realizing it, a long time back he’d become the standard by which she judged everyone else. Which did explain why nobody else had measured up. It was finally time to close the circle they’d been dancing around for… years, and Jemma was in awe of the moment.

Within a few minutes, though, that cock tucked down the backs of her legs had become thoroughly distracting. It may have started out as an endearing geometric hazard, but had grown heavy and hot and-- Fitz’s qualms about being pushy aside-- rather insistent. It no longer rested as easily as it had at first, and Jemma shifted consciously around it.

“Fuck, Jemma,” he ground out in her ear. Recovering slightly, he dragged his thumb across her nipple and grinned at the crisp breath that drew from her.
“Mmhm,” she nodded in agreement, eyelashes flicking with humor as she tilted her head to look up at him.

His eyebrows knit together briefly and then nearly jumped off his face.

“Did you j-- wh-- Jemma Simmons,” he stumbled, shaking his head in mock shock and disappointment, and more than a little surprised at how raspy his own voice sounded. Huh. Blame it on a morning lie-in.

In the meanwhile, she just blinked up at him innocently. As if she weren’t immensely pleased with herself. The nerve, he grumbled to himself. Affectionately.

“You have good ideas,” she shrugged simply. And then couldn’t quite contain her snickers at the look on his face.

I have some awful, terrible, horrible, no-good, bad ideas, he corrected her mentally, but couldn’t quite bring himself to say it.

He settled for just showing her, tacking in for a three-fronted manoeuvre—teasing her nipple between his fingers, hitching his hips up and into hers, and latching onto her neck right where she’d squirmed the most just before. He was rewarded with a genuine gasp. Before she could even think about it Jemma was arching her back as if to better fill his hand, and shifting her hips into his, trying to get him settled where he might do some good.

Fitz stifled a groan, more than a little in awe at how supple and warm and eager she was in his hands. If he’d ever— even dreamed— well, he clearly hadn’t or he would’ve spontaneously combusted some time ago. Been found all charred up in his bunk with no explanation while his ghost hung around and desperately tried to prevent the investigation that would inevitably ensue from finding out what really happened. Which would probably involve lots of following Simmons around in the lab ruining all her tests when her back was turned and her crying a lot. So. Good thing that hadn’t happened, was the point.

Fitz drew his hips away from her, bowing to necessity if he was to make it through the next two minutes, and nudged her down onto her back. She followed gamely, running her hands up his arms and around his neck. However, an impasse soon followed. They had apparently both decided the occasion called for higher standards than morning breath kissing, had attempted to move in on each other’s necks simultaneously, and knocked their chins together in their effort to properly honor the moment.

“Sorry, had the--”

“—same thought—”

“—probably more fun if we—”

“—yeah.” Fitz was thumbing towards the washroom door.

“Professional courtesy,” Simmons agreed. A split-second later Fitz had launched himself off to brush his teeth and generally clean up for the morning. She wasn’t sure she’d ever seen him move that fast, and Jemma was repressing the urge to tease him to be careful or he’d take somebody’s eye out with that thing. She settled for a light swat on his backside as he moved away from the bed.

“Hey!” he coughed, breaking his step, and looked back with a bashful grin. He didn’t look upset at all.

Then Jemma had another idea. She pulled open the drawer and raised a thoughtful eyebrow. This was going to be fun.
Fitz returned to find her brushing her hair, seated on the edge of the bed and wrapped up in her dressing gown against the over-conditioned chill in the room. He couldn’t help but smile at the thoughtful look on her face.

“All yours,” he said.

Jemma looked up at him with a little smile and stood, letting him draw her in for a quick kiss to her hairline. She noted with a little disappointment that he’d gone and shaved. Ah well. Hardly a deal-breaker.

“What?” she said into his shirt.

“Yeah?”

Then she cleared her throat, stood on tiptoe, and murmured a suggestion close to Fitz’s ear on what he might think about while she got ready for the day.

His eyes went wide, and she squeezed his hand and sauntered off.

Fitz sat against the headboard and tried not to fidget. Or let his imagination run away with him.

More to the point, he tried to get his imagination running where it was supposed to. He thought he’d put it to rest yesterday, but as soon as Jemma wasn’t in the room with him anymore his worries came racing back.

It couldn’t be that he didn’t trust Jemma, he decided. Fitz had tried and found that he literally could not wrap his head around a universe in which Simmons intentionally did unsavory things. (There was an even quieter voice further back in his head that thought that in itself ought to be a warning. And he told that voice to go sit on a busy bridge, because if Simmons couldn’t be trusted then nothing in this world made sense and it all might as well burn anyway.) The worst-case scenario, the one where Jemma was taking advantage of his by-now rather obvious feelings for her, was one he couldn’t buy into.

It was the situation he didn’t trust.

The best-case scenario— the only one he could really believe in— was that the two of them had been closing in on each other for a while now. But trying not to get killed had kept them too busy to talk to even each other... when he wasn’t too busy just being a prat.

Fitz sighed heavily, cursing time wasted on his account. Good thing he’d managed to straighten up his tune by the time Hydra threw them in a room together or he’d probably be living by himself in the closet.

In a way, they owed whatever-this-was to Hydra. Which sat oddly with him. But then again, that was life, wasn’t it? Ordinary, everyday things had a way of producing bizarre results sometimes. And normal everyday things took strange routes to arrive.

Fitz shook his head, feeling entirely too philosophical for his own liking. Chalk it up to having his brains turned to waffles by a case of too much Hydra. They’d known it was going to make a mess of their heads going into it, and this was just what that looked like up-close and in person.

In any case, it was hard to put a finger on exactly what he was afraid of. Fitz pondered briefly on whether it was actually possible to get any more stuck on Jemma than he already was. He looked at the ceiling, blinked a few times. That would be a hard no. He’d already been compromised over
her, and known it, for a while. Didn’t seem that there was anything that could happen today that could change that.

And anyway, this could be good. He was doing alright, what with his medical leave and permission to behave in an unruly manner, but Jemma was seeming preoccupied and overwhelmed and out of sorts and… well… like she could stand some loving attention.

Yeah. A bit of TLC. He could do that.

Fitz rubbed at the seam on the knee of his pyjama trousers, a little smile growing as he thought of a couple ways he might like to try.

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Jemma returned to find Fitz sitting up by the headboard, clearly trying his best to look casual but just as clearly thrumming with the excitement of a schoolboy about to leave for holiday.

A grin crept across her face, and she suddenly felt unaccountably flustered. Apparently there were not enough naughty threats in the world to keep him from bouncing his toes in anticipation. And it made her blush.

Oh, no, Jemma thought, a new level of insight dawning into what kind of trouble she’d set herself up for. A sort of giddy dread bubbled in her belly.

She slipped in next to him, tucking herself into his side. Fitz wrapped an arm around her and held tight, spanning his fingers over her back, and gave her a long look, wide eyes dancing over her face.

“Good morning again,” Jemma smiled. He nodded, tipped her chin up with gentle fingers, and softly met his lips to hers. They were the same kisses as last night’s-- simple, deliberate, and so earnest it almost hurt. Gradually, Jemma relaxed into his hold, from the edges in like toffee left in the sun and silently thanking him for the slow pace he was setting. It would’ve been easy for him to go hell-for-leather broke. She’d have gone with it, too. But considering the setting and how many layers of tension she’d have to drop before she could put her full attention in the moment-- on him-- it was good to have the time. He seemed to grasp that. And was disciplined enough to follow through. And cleverness and basic competence always got her a little flushed anyway, it was a little embarrassing--

She smiled until he broke the kiss and fixed her with a questioning look.

“What’s that?” he nudged, an amused warmth in his voice.

“Oh! Just-- this is really nice, Leo, it’s good t--”

Something almost imperceptible shifted in his demeanor.

“What?” Jemma asked, feeling quite like she’d lost track of the conversation.

Fitz mumbled something.

“I’m sorry?”

“Only my mum calls me that,” he repeated quietly, scratching his head with his eyes on the floor.

“Oh!” Simmons nodded, eyes wide in understanding. “Not the best timing, then, was it?”

Fitz shrugged and mumbled something noncommittal. One thing was for certain, the quiet ardor he’d been exuding earlier had somewhat evaporated.

Jemma Simmons considered her options. The ball had clearly bounced into her court.
“So if I were to try and get things back on track, I might—um, come up here,” she began, sliding a leg over his lap and sitting up to straddle him, looking slightly out of place in her dressing gown tied adamantly shut at the waist. “—Is that better, Leo?”

Fitz had started out nodding as she climbed up into his lap, hands drifting to her waist, and then promptly shut down with an askance look at her using the wrong name again.

“It’s shaping up to be such a lovely morning, Leo,” she continued, leaning in conspiratorially and dropping into her best burlesque of a throaty voice. Fitz started shaking his head as he realized she was deliberately taking the piss.

“Jemma no—”

Her face took on a concerned pout as she placed a hand on his cheek.

“Leo, what’s wrong?”

“Everything about this conversation,” he groused, curdling away from her hand, though he couldn’t manage the full force of it as if he were truly aggrieved. Particularly upsetting was the fact that once it became clear she was doing it on purpose to get a rise out of him, it… well… worked. God f*cking damnit.

“Sorry, Fitz,” she demurred, hands folding over what currently passed for her lap.

“You’ll be sorry,” he thought quickly, and bit down on his lip to keep it from coming out.

“Mm,” he nodded, as if considering her apology, and then went on in a teasing tone. “And I wonder,” he said. “I had a lab partner once who’d get so wrapped up in her work that she’d forget to eat, but insisted on regular mental breaks—”

“Oh! She sounds clever—”

Fitz heaved a long-suffering sigh. Jemma rose and fell gently with his breath, a fond little smirk illuminating her face. He was only peripherally aware of it, because he couldn’t take his eyes off rather striking line that the purple of her dressing gown cut across the flat of her chest before wrapping softly around and beneath one of her breasts on its way to tie at the side.

“—and I wonder if somebody’s not looking for a touch of distraction,” he finished. His index finger traced a light line along her elbow.

“Beg pardon?” she asked, head tipping slightly.

“In the interest of full disclosure,” he shrugged. “Both Mythbusters and Doctor Who are running marathons today, so—” He couldn’t help it if he’d had to run the TV much of the afternoon before to hide the noise of chipping microphones out of the wall, and as a result had a good handle on the upcoming weekend’s programming schedule.

Jemma’s face scrunched ever-so-slightly, not sure where he was going with this. Fitz mostly missed it as his gaze was locked rather helplessly on her breasts.

“So perfect. So close.”

“Leopold Fitz!” she exclaimed, then dropped her voice. “Sorry,” she apologized, remembering the first-name situation a beat too late. And then pushed on, leaning forward to drive home her point. “Don’t you ever doubt my commitment to enjoying our time together in an au-naturel setting.”

Bluff called, Fitz blushed and glanced down, stammering. “Okay,” he nodded.

“I realize now in hindsight that it could be confusing.” Jemma went on, pulling a face, “because of
all those other times that I’ve crawled into your lap in my night things and didn’t want to engage in intercourse with you--"

“Oh my God,” Fitz muttered, bright red and grinning and clapping a hand over his eyes. Not even in his wildest dreams had that ever happened.

“--and I’ll have you know that I am fully capable of ‘distracting’ myself,” she continued, dropping air quotes around ‘distracting,’ “Fitz, I am an independent wom--”

“Did you just--?” Fitz peeked out from under his hand.

“--make a masturbation joke?” She looked disappointed. “No, Fitz! I am very serious about autoeroticism.”

The hand went to his forehead, as if to help contain building pressure.

Jemma’s face shifted to a look of mild self-reproach.

“I feel like I’m talking a lot,” she worried, suddenly feeling rather exposed on her perch. Fitz patted her knee in what he hoped was a reassuring manner.

“Do you? Want t--” Jemma asked.

Fitz’s head snapped up, eyes finding hers before he began to nod. A lot.

“Oh,” she breathed, shoulders relaxing. “Good!” she beamed. “Same page, then.”

“Did you really have to ask, though?” Fitz wondered, eyes drifting down to the general vicinity which was-- to be fair-- visually composed of a mostly formless mishmash of pyjama trousers and dressing gown and a bit of the sheets. “I mean, you’re-- sitting right on it, for Christ’s sake--”

“That’s physiological!” Jemma countered.

“True,” Fitz shrugged, “but…” His eyes, which had been rather bashfully downcast for most of the conversation, flicked up to meet hers. The result-- and she couldn’t even say if he were doing it on purpose or not, and didn’t particularly care-- was a look that might’ve sent her knickers jumping off on their accord if she hadn’t been sitting on them.

Jemma swallowed carefully.

“C’mere.”
“C’mere,” Fitz said after a moment, pitching up his knees and catching her at the waist as she lurched forward into him with a delighted squawk of surprise. She had to work her way back into keeping her balance, one hand clutching his shirt and the other planted on the wall behind him. Focusing was a challenge with the way he was kissing her, but between him holding her and leaning on the wall Jemma managed not to fall off the bed. Success, she congratulated herself faintly. Though that thought was mostly lost in a pleasurable daze as her clit ran aground on him like a ship on a goddamned reef and she sank fully into him, boneless and only shaking a little bit, her arms still wound up behind his neck.

Fitz swallowed a very undignified groan as she pressed into him, soft and languid and feeling for all the world like the yielding flesh of something perfectly ripe. But then she picked herself up and turned into his neck, dropping open-mouthed kisses there that tugged lightly on his skin, and damned if Jemma draped over his lap and kissing him and half-lying on him so that her perfect breasts (so what if he hadn’t exactly seen them yet, they were obviously perfect) were pressed right up into his rapidly-thumping heart wasn’t the most erotic thing that would ever happen in his short and stupid life. God, she was gorgeous. And needed a break. And that was one of the few things he could actually help her with in their current situation. Say whatever else you want, but Fitz felt reasonably certain that she wasn’t thinking about Hydra just then.

And then she began to move. Not the wobbling for balance from earlier (that had still shorted his breath). Her hips nudged into his, gently and slowly, but head-on and direct-- no circles or squirming or shyness to her. She moved on him so slowly that every time she drew away, he’d be about to about to reach for her to pull her back-- and then she’d press into him again on her own, warm in his lap with her lips playing on his, supple and eager beyond anything he could have dared hope. For him, of all things, and just-- his belly and thighs were on fire and he’d never been harder in his life, it almost hurt-- and then he remembered that she was still in a nearly full-length dressing gown.

I’m dead, he thought distantly. Good planning, her having a friend at the morgue. They can try to make the report sound dignified. But he couldn’t get the words out. Not with Jemma nursing a spot under his jaw and rubbing up and down his cock.

Temporarily unable to form new ideas, Fitz decided to try and make himself useful with what Jemma was doing. He tipped her chin up to kiss her properly, and then wrapped his arms around her to tug her in time with the slow, teasing pace she was setting.

Jemma happily allowed Fitz to suck on her lower lip, enjoying the hungry feel of his mouth on hers. And then her eyebrows flew up, luckily unseen, when he reached for her waist.

Is he serious right now? she wondered. Apparently somewhere deep in his head, this poor boy was still trying to be a gentleman. It was adorable. And it needed to stop right now.

Jemma stalled out for a moment, wondering how best to bring the point across.

“Fitz?” she asked, breaking off the kiss and timing his name to one of the moans she’d long felt coming as she rolled her hips into his.

“Yeah?” he answered breathlessly.

She took his hands and slid them down to her arse, giving them an encouraging little squeeze once they were positioned. Then she set her lips back to his, kissing him gently until she let out a gasp (definitely not a whine because Jemma Simmons did not whine, this was a fact) at the feeling of his hands pulling her into him.

His lips drew back in a grin, and Jemma had to stop and find out where exactly this one rested on
the sweet-to-cocky-and-pleased-with-himself spectrum. To be sure, she could work perfectly well with either--

--and backed away to get a better look, once she got a glimpse of him. Fitz was looking down at her with such wide-open eyes and an almost-bashful smile, she almost felt guilty for all the times she’d ever looked at his arse when he wasn’t paying attention.

Almost.

After all, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t got his own wiry hands all over hers and was in fact using that grip to grind her up against a rather compelling erection at this very moment. More than a little flustered, she crinkled her nose into a question.

“Ugh, Fitz! How do you--”

“Mm?” His eyes drew back to her face, having gone wandering a bit. One of his hands had come up and was toying with the knot at the side of her robe.

“Oh! No, just-- by all means, carry on,” Jemma nodded. “Don’t mind me!”

“What?” he smiled, looking up briefly from his one-handed untiring effort. “Of course I’ll mind you,” he said, bringing his free hand up from the knot to tap her on the nose. Jemma couldn’t stop the mischief from playing out on her face in a grin. She was feeling a little impatient to get the dressing gown done with, but could appreciate his wanting to use just the one free hand. Because heaven forbid you take both hands off my arse. And it couldn’t take too much longer. After all, she’d gone with a--

“Slipknot?” Fitz laughed, once he’d seen how she’d tied it, and pulled it loose in one tug.

Jemma tried to make her shrug nonchalant. “In case you hadn’t noticed, I am fond of you,” she reminded him. “Like to make your life easy and whatn….”

“That’s very thoughtful,” he nodded, trying not to look excessively eager as he drew the tied-up side of the robe aside, slipped a hand over her ribs, and tugged her in for another kiss. Jemma followed readily, loving up his lips and a bit of his jaw. A pleased little hum escaped her chest when his hands-- both of them-- wandered to her breasts, and she gasped into his mouth at the brush of his thumb through the lace when he found her nipple. And grinned, and waited for the other shoe to drop.

It took him a moment to realize what she’d done, but it was worth every second. He froze, tongue halting in mid-brush across her lip.

“What’s this?” he asked, mock-warishly, tugging a sleeve so the dressing gown fell off her shoulder. Now exposed to his view was the lacy black bra she’d switched into, flushed pink and trying not to giggle so loud that he’d hear her and suspect something, while he was washing up. It was an elegant design, barely-there with little black leaves settling and falling down the curves of her breasts, and her favorite of the bunch by far. Other than how it turned out to be wretchedly uncomfortable in person.

Fitz’s jaw dropped, and every second of itchiness this thing had put her through was suddenly worth it.

“Oh my God,” he breathed.

As if in a daze, and eyes still transfixed on the breasts directly in front of him, he smoothed down the other shoulder of the gown. In order to fully comprehend what he was dealing with, of course.

“Oh my God,” he repeated.

Jemma could no longer contain her glee at a successful bit of mischief, and threw her hands triumphantly up in the air. Was it juvenile? Yes. Was she going to get away with it? Absolutely.
Jemma grinned, reaching up as if to smooth his cheek and then reversing course to cover a spell of giggles. “Worth it,” she smirked. But her eyes and voice were at least as fond as they were triumphant.

“Oh my God,” Fitz nearly wheezed, this time shaking his head. Then, seeing how raising her arms had made the gown slide back towards her neck, he began to object.

“No, no no no no no,” he fussed, rearranging the fabric in a way that happened to lead to it falling completely off. And then flying across the room. Because he threw it.

Then he turned his attention back to her. Jemma was now sitting up very proud and straight, so that he had to look up slightly to meet her eyes. But that was more than compensated by the fact that her breasts were now in very easy reach. He took full advantage of this arrangement, cupping and stroking them as he spoke.

“Look who’s gone all sneaky,” he groused, not upset in the slightest. “I imagine you’re pretty pleased with yourself about now, aren’t you?”

Jemma gave an emphatic nod. She was very pleased with herself, thank you, and Fitz cursed his scumbag eyes for continuing to find her hot whilst gloating. Only one thing to be done about this, really. Breaking eye contact, he nuzzled around the swell of her breasts, dropping silent kisses onto the almost intolerably soft skin he found there, and took a nipple into his mouth through the thin lace.

Jemma sucked in a breath. She hadn’t been expecting that, somehow, and the surprise as well as his mouth sent shivers down her stomach. He seemed to enjoy the rise and fall of her chest, if the good-humored tension in his lips was any indication. Or the renewed grip on her arse, pulling her flush into him, rigidly at attention and hot and making delightful promises into her weak-kneed flesh. She let out a bedraggled sigh and reached up, drawing fingers through his hair, wiry and coarse under her fingertips, arching her back as he worked her over with his tongue.

It wasn’t too long before Fitz felt her chest shaking beneath his lips. Momentarily panicking—Please for the love of all things don’t be crying—he broke off and searched for her eyes.

Much to his relief, she appeared to be laughing. Well. Maybe “relief” wasn’t quite the right word.

“What?”

Jemma’s eyebrows leapt up in concern. “Oh! No, it’s—nothing, Fitz!” She gave a hopeful little smile, one hand on his shoulder and the other still where it had snuck up the back of his neck. “As you were?”

“You like that?” he gave a little grin up at her, gaze leaping from her eyes to her (perfect, flawless, probably descended fully-formed out of the clouds, really) breasts.

Jemma gave several happy little nods.

“Oh, good,” he mumbled. Though it was a little hard to make out the words, what with his face being buried in her chest.

“And let’s—” Jemma started, fidgeting to remove the bra. It may be nearly nonexistent, but this was sure to be more enjoyable without lace in the way. And the damned thing itched. It was getting a little difficult to focus properly on Fitz. “Please?”

“Oh alright,” he grinned, head bobbing a little side to side. He reaching around a moment to open the back, pulling back just enough to see as he undid it. The look of pure adoration on his face as he nudged the straps down, releasing her breasts the way one might send off a loved one on some great adventure, set her stomach swooping. Jemma reached for him and kissed the crown of his head, letting her eyes slide shut as he busied himself again with her chest.

“What is it this time?” he mock-scolded her a few moments later, looking up. She’d gone laughing again. How was he supposed to do quality work when the subject was bouncing about and
knocking him *(softly, oh God her breasts were perfect)* on the face? Not that he minded, the point was just-- Honestly.

“Sorry,” Jemma said, touching her fingers to her neck briefly. “Focus,” she told herself quietly, looking up to the ceiling-- and then back down to Fitz with a wry little smile.

“Come here,” she whispered, and bent down to give him a deep, slow kiss. He groaned, and she reached down to the hem of his shirt with a decisive tug. Fitz nodded into the kiss, and they broke apart for one tiny breathless moment just long enough to get the shirt over his head and fling it across the room. To join Jemma’s dressing gown, presumably. At this rate they could perhaps be expected to come traipsing back to the bed in a few months’ time with a little passel of baby sweaters in tow.

They managed to get several good sighs and moans in before Jemma lost the kiss to giggles again.

“Excuse you,” Fitz groused playfully, looking to give her a truly hard time about it by now. “I hope you brought enough to class for everyone.”

She sighed. “It’s-- I’m sorry, it’s not even that funny.”

“Hmph. Clearly.” He actually folded his arms and waited for a response. Jemma realized she wasn’t getting out of this one and sighed, working out how best to frame it.

“You know how, on occasion, one has intrusive thoughts at inappropriate times….”

“Well this is the very definition of an appropriate time, Jemma, I don’t know what you could mean.”

She tapped her lip nervously, then seemed to find her words.

“Alright,” she decided, and twisted down to suck on the join between his earlobe and jaw.

“Fitz,” she whispered after a long moment. Her breath curled across his ear and set him shivering, head tipping back to rest on the wall behind him.

“Mm?” he replied, eyes closed. His hands were roaming fondly, softly traveling her skin with a touch both hungry and affectionate.

She dropped her voice to a throaty whisper and pressed her hips into him until he sighed, chin tipping up helplessly.

“Who’s your favorite double agent *now*?” she murmured into his ear.

His eyes flew open.

“What?” he choked.

“I told you it wasn’t that funny,” she backpedalled. “But you just had to hear i--”

“Jemma Simmons,” he said sternly, fixing her with a heatless glare. “What am I going to do with you?”

“…” A mischievous look crossed her face, drawing an eyebrow up with it. “…will tell you when you’re older?”

The next thing she knew, Fitz spun her down onto the bed. Jemma let out a startled and rather delighted squeal, clutching at him with all four limbs in surprise. Encouraged even more by feeling of how tightly she’d wrapped herself around him, Fitz settled into the hollow she made with her hips, propping himself up on an elbow to see how that mischief on her face was faring now.

For a brief moment he decided that it didn’t really matter. Not with her holding onto him so close that she seemed determined to make sure he didn’t float away. Or at least that she’d go with him
too, if he did. Fitz gave a beatific little hum and ducked into her neck, and grinned when when his kisses drew some rather unscientific giggles out of her.

“That tickles!” she insisted. Her voice was quickly followed by a yelp from Fitz as her fingers found a sensitive spot over his ribs, and his whole body seemed to curl around the spot for one very defensive moment. Before he even had a chance to look down and see her face, he felt her laughter rocking his ribs.

“Got you,” she giggled. And her smile was just as smug (and fond, fair enough) as he thought it’d be.

“Excuse you!” Fitz objected. “I’m not the one who’s in such a state that she can’t do bloody math,” he pointed out, and thought it might be a good idea to punctuate his sentiment with a nudge of the hips. It was an excellent idea in that she gave a tiny gasp and her eyes dropped shut for a moment, shooting a thrill through him as he realized he was angled just right to drive her to distraction. It was less of a good idea in that the friction-- and her response-- felt incredible and he temporarily lost track what he was saying.

Jemma gave a little scoff, even as she grinned and pushed back, tugging him in for kisses along his cheek and ear. “Hmm. I don’t hear you reciting any times tables,” she pointed out in a murmur.

Fitz leaned in close-- keeping his hips painstakingly in place against hers-- and dropped his voice.

“You are a triple agent, for one thing,” he grumbled carefully against her ear. Then he pressed his case, drawing a slow, long stroke over her center that turned everything else into static around the edges. It was working out quite nicely for her, too, if the rather wanton way she pressed back into him was any indication. God, but she was gorgeous, and as hard as it was to believe, clearly eager. For him of all things. Fitz took a deep breath and moved against her again, twice, three times, forgetting everything except the feel of her, supple and warm between his hands, making little moans and gasps in time with him that were music to his ears. And couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d feel like around him.

After a few long moments he remembered what else he was going to say. Speaking of distraction.

“But it’s understandable enough,” he admitted against her neck, pausing to lay some kisses on a heretofore neglected patch of skin. She gave a shaky breath and wrapped her fingers through his hair, tugging him up to kiss along his jawline. Fitz closed his eyes, letting out an appreciative sigh from deep in his chest, and rocked into her as he spoke. “You’re a little preoccupied.”

Jemma chuckled against his skin and gave a little shrug of admission. A few beats later she drew back.

“Well, you did mention a Doctor Who marathon, what did you think was-- ah-- going to happen?”

Fitz was stuck between laughing at her joke and rolling his eyes. Honestly, if she was trying to goad him-- and he was trying to be helpful, thank you, not that--

He thought out his next move carefully. Normally he’d love the banter, but they were operating under some circumstances that were decidedly... well... not normal. The moments here and there where he could sense her getting lost in what she was feeling. And yes, he was proud of his work and it was incredibly erotic and all of that, but-- there was something in him that felt like he could finally breathe when she was like that. He liked distracting her, he realized. A lot.

“Young lady,” he gave an amicable growl into her ear. “I’m going to need you to pay attention," he said sternly, rolling his hips carefully into hers. She took a crisp breath, and the hand she’d had toying about his waistband earlier made a reappearance.

“Mm?” Jemma hummed. He couldn’t see it, but he could feel the “Well, I’m listening” look on her face. He grinned and went on.

“We’ll make sure to leave time for whatever devilry you’ve got planned,” he grumbled into her
hair, remembering her whispered message from earlier. “But first I’ll be minding here-” he said, thumping and teasing over a nipple-- “until it’s good and-- you know, paying attention and whatnot--”

Jemma gave a syrupy laugh, shaking his hand where it rested. “You’re too late,” she taunted him, giggling.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m touching it anyway.”

She laughed again, and tipped her head to invite him into a kiss. He nuzzled over to catch her mouth and played with her lips, lost in how soft they were and the sighs that came out of her as he pressed against her hips.

A thick strand of hair had fallen across her face as she turned to meet him, and had gotten to tickling his nose. Fitz reached to stroke it away, and had almost gotten it tucked back to wherever hair came from when it occurred to him to wonder where her hands were. The answer came shortly in the form of a sharp gasp as her fingers-- warm for once in her life, thank God-- closed brilliantly around him and gave a gentle, nearly inquisitive squeeze.

Trying to say anything at that point was like pitching a staring contest with the sun. Fitz dropped his head into her shoulder to stifle the embarrassing moan that was definitely coming.

“If you just want a lot of heavy breathing in your ear, ummm... that’ll do it?” he managed to get after a moment. He couldn’t really figure what else she might be expecting from that particular activity, but bit of warning only seemed fair.

Jemma made a disappointed-but-understanding sort of clucking sound and let him go, smoothing her hands back up to his shoulders. And then Fitz realized he still had his hand wrapped up in her hair and had probably been pulling on it.

“Oh-- sorry,” he said, letting go quickly.

Good work, cadet, he scolded himself.

Jemma gave a little shake of her head. “Mm, don’t worry,” she hummed. “Felt nice.”

Ah. Um. Well then.

Once his eyes had shrunk back to normal size, Fitz cleared his throat. “Still. No reason to be half-arsed about it.”

Jemma gave a reasonable nod of agreement.

“In that case...” He trailed off, feathering his lips over her jaw to draw her into a kiss. She deepened it within moments and Fitz was all eagerness to follow. But, lost as he was in the taste and scent and feel of her in the morning light, inspiration soon struck and he stroked a hand up her jaw and into her hair. Tugging lightly, he broke off the kiss and laid open-mouthed kisses into her neck. Jemma gave an appreciative squirm. And then cried out softly, breathy and broken, as he gently set his teeth in.

He couldn’t help the victorious little chuckle that came out of his throat at the sound.

“And then I’m going to make you come,” he said whispered into her ear, tone frank and unapologetic. “After that I’m going to do it again.” He paused, expression going thoughtful. “Hm. And some more after that.”

That now stated, he kissed his way down to her breasts and took a nipple into his mouth. Her fingers tightened in his hair, and the gentle tug keeping him at breast-level and the deep sigh she took in showed fairly clear appreciation. Fitz worked carefully, worrying it over with his tongue and eventually setting his teeth in, just barely, and watching for her response. She gave the same pleased little hum that she had for a number of things, and Fitz was about to try a bit more pressure when she started laughing. Again. It was like trying to bob for apples in an earthquake.

“Is there something you need to tell me?” he teased her, breaking off with a gentle slurp. The
sound did nothing to quell her laughter.

Jemma soon composed herself. Her face became very serious, and taking his face between her hands, she blinked and looked softly into his eyes.

“Fitz,” she murmured.

“Yes, sweetheart?” he answered quietly, eyes mirroring hers in going wide.

“I’m going to make you come, too.” She nodded very seriously as she said it, but her eyes were having trouble concealing the mischief within.

Fitz blinked, not really sure where she was going with this.

“Once. Because that is the very best that I can do.”

Fitz shrugged. “It’s al--?”

Jemma kept nodding and speaking very seriously. “You’re in good hands, Fitz. I have a 98% success rate with the male orgasm, and I’m going to take care of you.” She smiled and stroked a hand down his cheek. “Alright?”

“Oh my God,” he muttered. This was worse than he’d thought.

Scratch that. She was worse than he’d thought.

“Hmph,” he groused, moving forward to lean down over her face, a wicked grin growing as he spoke. “Thinks it’s all fun and games. ‘Oh Fitz, let’s take each other’s clothes off and make fun of each other’s biological limitations, it’ll be a lovely way to pass the time!’”

She laughed, a sweet crinkle at the corners of her eyes. It went nicely with the flush in her cheeks and the kissed-pink split of her grin. They clearly needed more attention, and Fitz bent to give it with tender lips nuzzling over her face.

Fitz maneuvered his hips forward for another pass, wondering just a bit how long she’d be liable to keep laughing after that. Something didn’t quite work, though. Somehow in the shifting about he’d lost track of the right spot, or-- no, actually, he couldn’t quite get to it, it--

Amid Jemma’s giggles, he looked down to discover that he’d somehow gotten hung up in the sheets. Badly. A swath of fabric was wrapped around his hips from when he’d turned her under, and just now he’d somehow managed to get snagged on it by his cock.

“Oh no!” Jemma exclaimed sympathetically. And then giggled.

With a bit of fussing and grunting and apparent levitation against the snare he’d gotten into, Fitz managed to lift himself up enough to make a useful clearance space to reach down and get untangled. It wasn’t exactly a complicated knot, just a wad of cloth, it really shouldn’t have been so--

“Here, let me,” Jemma offered between streaks of laughter.

Ugh. On the one hand, embarrassing. On the other, it was already embarrassing and this might get it over with quickly. Plus, hard to complain about any plan that involved Jemma’s hands and his trousers. He moved back to kneel between her thighs, and she quickly sat up to follow him.

“Yeah, go ahea-- oh!” he spluttered. The trousers were now untied at the drawstring and slipped halfway down his hips, courtesy of Jemma.

“Um-- super helpful, thanks for that,” he allowed. While he fumbled on his words, she managed to get the sheet unwrapped and tossed to the side. And continued to giggle. At his predicament. Not that that was the worst thing ever. Because she was also grinning and looking up at him and had her hands absolutely everywhere trying to pull off his trousers. That, he could live with.
“Not to worry, Fitz!” she said lightly. “Getting caught in the weeds has always been a struggle for ships of a good, solid rudder.”

Fitz right then had a struggle of not knowing whether to turn bright red, laugh at her attempt at a joke, or have a unsightly moment of ego on account of her clear enthusiasm for getting ahold of him and a very personal compliment. He could die happy. Well, preferably not too soon. Give it about an hour to be safe. Yeah. That would work.

While he was spluttering, Jemma made quick work of freeing him from the current hang-up with the trousers.

“Ah! There we are,” she sing-songed out. Then she nudged him up off his heels so she could keep working them down, and looking up and down at him a bit like a starving person might look at a plate of ribs. Once he was up on his knees, it put him nearly at her eye level. She carefully licked her lips and looked up to meet his eyes.

“One moment,” he chided her, bright red under her scrutiny. “Got to--” The trousers were still wrapped around his knees, and the last thing he wanted was another entanglement-related mishap. That was simply not the sort of hazard any conscientious engineer could allow to continue.

He closed in on her, putting his weight on his hands so he could shuck the trousers off the rest of the way. Jemma gave him a knowing little smile and slid her hands up the tops of his thighs and arse, drawing him down with her. And then the inevitable happened. Tangled up in his trousers and the sheets and maybe a little distracted by Jemma, he lost his balance and pitched forward into her. Thankfully, she managed to catch him-- her knees jerking up to catch his hips-- before he landed hard enough to do either of them any real damage.

“Help,” he complained, and officially gave up. Which naturally involved planting his face in her chest. So lovely. So soft. Ideal place to stage a recovery, really.

Jemma giggled, and patted his head good-naturedly. “There, there, Fitz. You just take a moment.” Take plenty of moments, she added silently, and gave a wicked grin that he wouldn’t see. I need you well-rested.

“Condoms are in the drawer, by the way,” she murmured.

Fitz perked up immediately, and turned his gaze up at her a bright look of adoration. That meant they could-- and she definitely wanted t--

“You’re an angel,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she said, looking to the side for a moment. “I am that.”

Actually, she’d gotten them during those awful first couple of days when she didn’t even know where they’d sent him or what they wanted with her. She’d put in an order for them along with the rest of her personal items on the off-chance she’d end up having to work some kind of 007 nonsense. Point was, you never could be too prepared, especially not in these circumstances, and-- well, she was just glad Fitz was the person she’d be getting to use them with. Very, very glad. So bloody glad.

“Hey,” Fitz murmured, sensing her attention go dark for a moment. “I am that.”

“Sorry, it’s alright, I just--” Forgot to forget where I was for a second, she finished. “Come here,” she said softly, drawing him down for a kiss. Fitz willingly gave it to her, trying to give her some reassurance any way he could.

She seemed to have come back to herself before too long. If the hands squeezing his arse were any indication, anyway. Soon she was squirming against him and trying to tug down the waistband of her knickers.
“This’d be much easier if I were still on top, you know,” she pointed out.

Fitz gave an unimpressed scoff. “It’d be a lot easier if you’d stop sassing me,” he said, holding himself up and helping tug down the fabric down on the side she couldn’t reach. “But you don’t see me complaining.”

Jemma grinned. “That’s true, I suppose I only hear you complaining...?”

“Oh, shh,” he laughed, and bent down to nip at her collarbone. She continued to wriggle as she finished working the knickers down her legs. Fitz only partly managed to hold down a groan as her squirming put him right at her entrance, slick and sweet and almost burning hot. Too close, he realized, and backed away before he could second-guess his judgment and move into her. It’d be easy, because fuck was she ready.

Jemma gave a disappointed little sound as he moved away.

“I know,” he murmured, nuzzling from her collarbone down to her breasts, giving some love to the one he hadn’t been kissing on last time. “But I told you, I’m going to take care of you. Yeah?”

“Mmhm,” she nodded, stroking a thumb over his cheek. “And you’d better look alive, because that 98% success rate is headed your way,” she smirked, the raised eyebrow comically at odds with her heavily-lidded eyes and lush voice.

“Yeah, I’ll look out for that,” he grinned against her skin, working his way down her belly.

This time both of Jemma’s eyebrows went up. If he was--

He kept trailing down her stomach, slowing as he passed her navel and continued onward. *Yep.*

Jemma shifted, moving up the bed to sit up a little. Incidentally this shift in their relative positions also put his mouth right where she wanted him.

Fitz just started laughing.

After a moment he rested his check on the top of her thigh and looked up at her, eyes full of mirth.

“Wh-- what am I supposed to do with this?” he asked innocently.

Jemma tried to shoot him a dirty look. And failed. Really, there was no way to even pretend to be cross with his stupid face grinning up from between her legs. She dropped her head back against the pillow with a groan.

“Trying to be helpful, Fitz,” she did not whine. Because Jemma Simmons was not a whiner.

“Ah. Well then,” he said with a sound of relief, and dropped a quick kiss to the seam of her leg and hip. “I shall have to express my appreciation.”

“Oh?”

“You know,” he shrugged, moving inward and dropping an open-mouthed kiss into the top of her thigh. “Positive reinforcement. I don’t know, something about getting off easy for good behavior, it’s almost there but I can’t quite make--”

“Ugh, Fitz,” she groaned.

He nodded and paid attention to his job. That wasn’t exactly the kind of a girl’s saying your name during an intimate moment that he was really striving for, even if the joke may have seemed worth it at the-- *Focus, Fitz,* he reminded himself.

He started softly, looking to get the lay of the land as it were before deciding where to invest the bulk of his attention. She’d need a moment to settle in, too, before he could get a good idea of what she liked.
“That’s not even what positive reinforcement actually means,” he heard her pipe up from the head of the bed.

“Whatever,” came his nonchalant and muffled reply.

Jemma gave a fond smile and closed her eyes, wondering if he was going to get down to business or if this was--

He made a firm, flat-tongued pass directly over her center, and her knees twitched and she gasped out loud. Fitz gave a triumphant little hum and reached for a thigh, nudging it over his shoulder. Thus settled in he got to work in earnest.

“You cocky-- little-- ah,” Jemma trailed off, feeling herself relax tremendously. A lot of men, in her experience, tended to be rather half-assed about this and it wound up being a frustrating waste of time for everyone involved. Whereas someone who knew what they were about made her feel like a damn princess. Now the main thing would be remembering to breathe regularly. The last thing she needed was to pull a repeat of that hyperventilation stunt from too much gasping and moaning. That date had gone so well right up until she passed out... and poor Fitz, the man would just die of worry.

Shoulders and knees sagging, Jemma reached a hand down to where one of Fitz’s rested low across her belly. She tangled her fingers in his and squeezed, fitfully, and closed her eyes to let him carry her away.

Chapter End Notes

Ta-daaaaa, it's the one we've all been waiting for! This is my first time writing the smuts so go easy on me. LOL

Props to notapepper/typhanni for the phrase "like bobbing for apples in an earthquake," for it is glorious to behold. Also to memorizingthedigitsofpi and notapepper/typhanni for über betaing skills and general talking me down when I'm pretty sure this whole fic’s going down in flames.

Also: I feel it's only appropriate to warn y'all... see the tags that are for sad things? The last few chapters are super fun and my favorites in the whole work so far, but the sad things are still happening. DON'T WORRY, THERE'S STILL A HAPPY ENDING! But like most of life there's some crap to slog through first.

*Update: forgot to include this at the original posting, but in case you were wondering: the prettiest bra in all of Hydra.
Turning Point

Chapter Summary

With our two favorite scientists kidnapped and working for Hydra, shit was bound to hit the fan eventually.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fitz had to fight not to grin as Jemma began to flinch under him, muscles starting to give under the tension he was laying down into her. Staying steady was paramount at this point, thank you, and it did little good to be distracted by the first little sign of success. Not that the sounds she was making weren’t encouraging. She’d gone a little quieter in the last few minutes, dropping away into her own little world. One of his own making, mind-- which was really fucking incredible if he was honest. But now she let out a soft, breathy hum and curled her fingers around his, rocking gently into him as she tremored. It wouldn’t be long now. Fitz redoubled his efforts, speeding his pace and sighing into her.

He’d have liked to whisper something, encourage her to go on, but he’d have to stop what he was doing. That would hardly be helpful. So he squeezed her hand, and her fingers fluttered between his as she let out a desperate-sounding gasp.

He risked a look up, and couldn’t even hear the rapidly gaining crick in his neck over the sight of her. The hand that wasn’t fumbling in his was curled up around her head, fingers tense and curling into her hair. The hair itself was all askew from where she’d dropped back against the pillows, then tipped to the side at a helpless angle, overcome with a look both dreamy and furiously involved. Her lips were parted to better carry the tight, shallow breaths animating her breasts and ribs, her lashes dark and pressed tight down to shut out everything that wasn’t him.

He had to suppress a very undignified sound right then. A hot, fierce sort of tenderness that she probably wouldn’t have approved of had she known about it burned inside his ribs. He almost paused, watching her move with him as he drew a slow, firm, lavish stroke along her center. Then another, and again.

She was so close -- she could feel it nearly catch with every stroke-- and then he did something slow and strong and gentle and the floor fell right out from under her. It came on slow, and hard, and Jemma even nearly had time to voice her appreciation before it all fell open. She cried out softly once, twice, and tried unsuccessfully to swallow a third. Sensing failure, she snatched a pillow to her face and smothered a cry, high-pitched and trailing. And he didn’t let up-- if anything, he went after her harder as she came, driving her ahead as she shook.

Several breaths later the haze began to lift. Jemma lowered the pillow just enough to allow a peek over it, pink and flushed and a little worn out, to see Fitz resting his cheek on her thigh and looking mighty pleased with himself.

“What are you laughing at?” she demanded a moment later. There was no heat in her voice, only amusement.

“You’re hiding behind a pillow,” he grinned. “What are you, twelve?”

She flicked the pillow at him with a lazy hand. “Says you, of all people!”

Fitz dodged it, ducking his head down alongside the thigh that rested over his shoulder. The pillow bounced off the bed. And since he was already down there, he flicked a curious tongue
over her again.

“Aaah!” Jemma gasped, jumping in place. She stifled a giggle once she’d caught herself. “Too soon!” But a beat later, she reached out to make fond strokes in the short hair at the temples of his smirking face.

And a split second after that she’d snaked her foot under his hips and delivered enough of a tweak to make him yelp.

“I warned you,” she informed him, in triumphant repose. “That that kind of positive reinforcement was only going to make me incorrigible.”

“Right. But it’s fun when you’re terrible.”

Jemma only rolled her eyes a little bit.

“Come here, though,” she chuckled after a moment, nudging him up with her knees.

Fitz never got to find out what came after that. It all happened at once-- a pounding on the door, hard and sharp. Both of them jumped. A shriek rang out, and Fitz whirled around to see the door wide open and three armed men already in the room.

All at once Jemma scrambled away towards the headboard, clutching the covers to herself by reflex. As if they’d do any good against lead.

She watched him leap to put as much of himself between her and them as possible-- and he looked back at her to make sure of where she was, and there was shock and something unreadable in his expression. And then she remembered--

Who’s your favorite double agent now?

--and the white-hot shock now occupying her entire body doubled, trebled in an instant. Her hands and jaw began to shake and all sophistication of thought she may have had shut down as she began to reach for him, trembling and half-paralyzed in shock.

“Get some fucking pants on,” the lead guard growled. He sounded almost bored.

“Fuck off,” Fitz snarled. He’d scooped up a swath of bedding in his hand and thrown it to Simmons, who quickly tucked it under her arms with the rest with barely a thought, and was looking around the room rapidly and murmuring something in a voice half-broken with tears.

“Fitz, they’re not-- I don’t know what-- no, no, no no no no Fitz I didn’t--”

“Shut up!” the lead guard yelled at her. “Get on up,” he ordered, turning his attention back to Fitz, who was turning slowly to face them as they came nearer. Once Fitz had felt out his trousers he pulled them on, glaring at the guards as he did.

“Shirt,” Fitz ordered, pointing with a jerk of his chin to his buttondown from the previous day laying on the sofa. The skinniest of the goons obliged and tossed it over.

Jemma scooted down the bed as best she could, and tugged Fitz’s elbow to get him to move further up to face her. He tried to hold her back at first, a frightened hand pushing her away by the hip. She slipped her fingers under his.

Come here, she traced urgently.

He finally seemed to hear her, and scooted up against the headboard. It left Jemma’s back open to the guardsmen, which Fitz clearly didn’t like. He flickered from glaring them down, to her, and back again and again. But it let her speak to him without being seen. Something inside her had gone to ground, like a rabbit that knew the second it moved the dogs would tear it apart. She wasn’t about to let them see her upset by this. They could bloody well wait.

Jemma reached out with numb fingers and began to do up his buttons. She shifted very close,
nearly in his lap, and shook her hair down to curtain her face and her voice.

“I’m going to find out what’s happening,” she murmured, eyes and voice full of tears. “Probably just want to ask some more questions about the fi--”

“Jemma,” he said—quick, quiet, and harsh. He covered her hands with his as if to help with the buttons.  
*Be ready to go, just in ca--*

“Where?” she cut him off, a broken whisper. “If we could run, we’d already have.”

She moved to the next button, carefully doing him up. As if she could secure him against wherever he was going.

“Jemma,” he murmured. *These aren’t the same guys as last time* he told her hands. Not just their faces. The uniforms, their attitudes, everything promised something different than a repeat of last time.

“I know,” she gulped. Even though that was nonsense. If she’d known any of this were coming, she wouldn’t have shown up to it naked.

“I’m getting you back, Fitz,” Jemma pushed out, matter-of-fact through her tears. She shook her hands out and moved to the next buttons, whispering out of the guards’ earshot the whole while. “That’s why I’m doing… all of this.”

Fitz gripped her hands. A microscopic nod followed. “Yeah.”

“You know you’re the most important thing here, right?” Jemma murmured, voice rising up to a crack.

Fitz ducked his head and gripped her hands in his. The only thing he was certain about was they were running low on the security personnel’s patience.

“Good luck,” he told her anxious eyes.

“You too, love.” Jemma finished up the button at his throat. Her empty hands twitched and started to straighten his collar.

“Alright, let’s move it,” the head guard grumbled, sounding bored.

“She can stay though,” a second one pointed out, appreciation quite evident in his voice and waggling eyebrows. Jemma made a point of ignoring him.

She held on to Fitz’s fingers until he’d stepped too far away. She didn’t hear what Fitz said after that, but she could make a guess on what that angry mutter contained on how it set the guards off.

“Fitz!” she cried out, but not in time.

“Come on!” the second guard yelled, all impatience, boxing him on the ear and pulling him back by his collar.

Fitz spun, a little unsteadily, and swung into the man, managing to catch him off-balance and knock him onto the floor. The other two rushed him and devolved into a rhythmless flurry of blows.

“No!” Jemma cried out, to no result. Desperation quickly building, she jumped to her feet and screamed at the top of her lungs.

“STOP!”

In the blink of an eye she was faced with one, two... four jaws dropped in shock. But at least they were too busy staring to keep beating Fitz. Milliseconds ticked by as she sorted through what to do with their attention while she had it.
“Now get out and do your jobs, will you?” she shouted, eyes full of fury. “Interrupting like that--you’re all on shaky enough ground as it is! GET OUT!”

To her surprise, the team abruptly about-faced and hustled Fitz out of her room. As requested. And it saved her from avoiding his eyes for too long, as he stared at her wide-eyed on his way out the door.

As soon as the lock clicked shut, Jemma darted her eyes around the room, blinking back the hot spurs that suddenly appeared in her eyes. Out. It clearly wasn’t safe in here, she needed to get out.

But first she needed clothes.

A scant minute later, Simmons was walking down the corridor, as fast as she could move without looking like she was up to something. She had to get to the lab. It was public, and therefore safe. Not to mention her best chance of tracking down Raina to get down to the bottom of this.

It had to be about the fire. Had to be. Unless there was something else afoot that she didn’t know about, which—well. That was actually quite likely.

Simmons crossed yet another empty corridor. The sometime sound of her rubber-soled shoes on the hard floor squelched loud in her ears. They fell between echoes of the ridiculous stammers that were all she’d had to give him, on his way to who-knows-what, blubbering in her ears.

Now all she could hope was that compliance had indeed bought her something. Some access, some traction, some ability to watch for him from her tiny place in the order of things. And for that, she couldn’t let it look personal. Granted they probably knew they had feelings for each other—Raina had all but set them up together, hadn’t she? and the guards had walked right in on them— it’d be no secret. But there was a difference between a panicked lovesick girl and a materfamilias with people to look out for, an asset. She needed to be the second.

So strange, what science had done to her in the end. She’d chosen it for being a straightforward world-- mostly-- where data prevailed and intrigues could go hang. There was a reason she’d picked it over all the other options. Pretending to be someone else was exhausting and she’d never had the knack for it. Or so she’d insisted to herself.

This is what you do now, she told herself, lips set against uncertainty. An object that changed just from being observed. After all-- when she was with Fitz, she was with SHIELD. Standing for “do no harm” and all that. And when she was in the lab-- it wasn’t pretending, exactly, what she was doing. The work she was doing for Hydra was very real. It was going to be used. For real things. On real people.

She’d become a walking, talking Heisenberg uncertainty. The Copenhagen interpretation of a human, as if there could be such a thing, simultaneously existing in two different states-- for neither of her two lives here were a lie. And her existence, her footprints in time were felt most not when she stayed one or the other-- but when the observer changed, and like that she crossed between the two.

Everything at Hydra would proceed more or less the same whether she were here or not. The same with SHIELD. But trespassing between the two-- oh, there you could move history.

But who could say how, yet? She knew how she wanted it to end. Ideally with betraying the people feeding and sheltering her. Pulling data, destroying programs, exposure and prosecution-- that was the light at the end of the tunnel. But neither she nor any other power on earth could guarantee that end. It could turn out in-- a lot of ways, really. Death, for one. Disgrace for the remainder of human history. The betrayal of-- other people who didn’t need it.

Simmons gulped before she rounded the final corner. Breathing out slowly, she cleared the evidence from her face and crossed into the lab. She’s actually here, Simmons realized with relief. The back of a head full of dark curls showed through the window of her office, thick in the middle of the lab cluster. It stood to reason that Raina would see a maintenance off-day as be a good time to get work done without interruptions, but still-- this was a stroke of pure luck.
Her ease was short-lived. *Bloody hell*. Now she had to be sure of what she was going to say.

•

“I was *working* him-- you must know what he’s like after the last time, you’ll never get anything from him without help!” Simmons heard herself ring out, staccato against the walls of Raina’s office. As always, curiosities loitered around in jars on the shelves lining the wall behind Raina’s desk.

Raina normally liked to not say anything during people’s outbursts. The silence got them nervous and they’d wind up telling far more than originally planned. Here, though, was a thread worth exploring.

“*Last* time,” she repeated.

“Two days ago,” Simmons fired back, glaring down at Raina’s desk. Fitz’s abrupt disappearance had her struggling-- not just to remain professional, but to remember what professionalism *was*. “After the fire. He was kept for questioning, and they dosed him with enough barbiturates that he blacked out. You don’t need me to point out that hardly sounds like a successful interrogation.”

Raina had never ordered questioning for any scientist Simmons was in contact with, which meant it must have been interference *again* from--

“Ops,” she muttered with a pointed look, typing a few short sprints into her computer. “What’s his full name?”

“Leopold Fitz.” Simmons crossed her arms and waited.

Within moments Raina picked up the desk phone. Her voice was fluid steel.

“Lieutenant Waters, Raina here. I’m looking for a scientist; I think you may know where he is.”

Pause.

“Leopold Fitz. We can’t locate him in the research wing, and I’m wondering if Ops might have leads.”

“You lost one of your scientists and you want us to fix it?” said the voice on the other end of the line.

“No. We didn’t lose him so much as he was reported as removed from the residential area by three armed personnel, and the RFID chip logs show him passing into an Ops area about ten minutes ago. You can see why we thought Ops might be the ones to call about it.”

There was a longer pause.

“On hold,” Raina sighed. She produced a cell phone and tapped something into it. A towering supersoldier appeared in moments.

“Ma’am?”

“Bring me the drug inventory logs for the last… oh, two weeks.”

Simmons watched Raina with alert eyes. A few more moments, and she seemed to lose patience with being put on hold. Another command in the cell phone, and another supersoldier appeared.

“Get Ledama. Time to make a visit to Ops.”

Simmons stood up to go with them.
“Wait here,” Raina told her.

“I need to see him,” Simmons insisted.

“That’s sweet. But Ops says it’s a ‘conflict of interest’ for us to bring friends and family to questionings.”

“And having interrogations run by people who don’t know anything about him or his work so their primary motivation couldn’t be anything but sadism isn’t a conflict of interest?”

“Welcome to working with Ops. Those are their rules, and as long as they have the guns they get to make them.”

Raina pulled on a blazer, black with sharp angles.

“And believe me when I tell you I don’t want them holding him any more than you do. We won’t be long. Gentlemen?” She turned to her two supersoldiers now looming at the door.

Forbidden to follow, Simmons watched them go. She fidgeted against the feeling that something was slipping out of reach.

A few moments later the first supersoldier reappeared with a binder.

“Drug inventory logs?” he said.

Simmons hopped up with a smile, craning her neck to make out his name badge.

“I can take that, Mr. Mendez,” she beamed, and happily accepted an armful of what Raina considered key evidence in the mystery of what Ops was up to with Fitz.

Chapter End Notes

Welp I had to buy internet on a plane to do it but HERE’S THE NEXT CHAPTER Y’ALL. (Tomorrow it’ll be a year since the last update, so... that whole “IRL before URL” thing escalated quickly. :P)

The next several chapters are lined up and beta’d, so will be posting each Friday from here on out. Props to notapepper, memorizingthegofpi, and 0hcicero/atomicsupervillainess for super (and super patient) beta-ing.

And hold on to your hats, folks. We’re still barreling towards a happy ending but the ride there’s going to be... uh... eventful. :D
Orphée

Chapter Summary

Simmons is very determined to get Fitz back from Hydra. While working at Hydra.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Raina raced down the hall, two immense guards in tow. Ledama had been a bouncer when she found him. In Kibera. Before the serum.

There were benefits to having spent years recruiting people for the the serum project. You remembered the good ones. And there was plenty of time to... build a relationship once they were in.

Fitz watched people walking by his cell with guarded eyes, seething and wondering what in the fresh hell they wanted for this time. So far he’d seen a few people come in, and only one leave. After a lot of screaming.

On a gurney.

Wasn’t that encouraging.

They’d already pulled the RFID chip from his pocket, so that jig was up. Fitz was just thinking for the thirtieth time how handy it’d be if Donnie hadn’t taken off (also assuming he could somehow get smuggled down here to freeze the bars brittle enough to kick them down) (not that you could begrudge Donnie for leaving, that was definitely the right choice)-- when a familiar figure walked by. Wispy, big eyes, curls, flowers. Though the two human mountains walking with her were new.

She looked right at him and nodded as they clipped by.

The fuck?

Perhaps even more frightening, it had him feeling maybe ten percent hopeful again. He didn’t quite feel that he could trust his eyes, but that looked a lot like a “We’re going to get you out of here” nod. She was Jemma’s boss. Maybe Simmons had managed to pull something together already?

Fitz let out a shaky breath. You know your life had gone straight to hell when you were glad to see the girl in the flower dress.

He could say one thing for Hydra, they knew how to build a cell block for dramatic tension. Although it was out of sight, you could hear every awful detail of fellow detainees being questioned.

Of course, that rather cut against them when they got interrupted.

“How long has this gone ungrounded?” Raina demanded, calm voice stalking down the hall.

Confused murmurs waffled out of the crew that had, until a short moment ago, had had quite the
mastery over their task.

“Remember you’re counting on us in Medical to keep your detainees on this mortal plane when you’ve taken it too far. That will be difficult if you’ve taken out the power to our half of the building.”

A muffled yes ma’am followed. Shortly after it, a second set of footsteps came into earshot. Somebody must have come out of the back offices. A series of emollient greetings followed and then Fitz’s ears picked up something interesting.

“...6B is key personnel for our aerospace program-- which as you know is already facing significant delays.”

That’s one way to describe it getting incinerated, Fitz thought.

“--if he can’t work we stand to lose months of weapons development time.”

More murmurs followed, and then the sound of several people-- including Raina’s clicking heels--drawing away and the shutting of a heavy door.

He shifted and craned his head up to see the placard tacked to the bars. 36B. He wasn’t ready to relax just yet, but this was looking about as promising as anything could at Camp Hydra. Fitz went back to picking at the rust on the bars with renewed vigor.

It had to be ten or fifteen minutes later when they all spilled back out. He heard Raina let out an ebullient laugh.

“No, I should hate for anyone to find themselves getting shelled and unable to fire back,” she called out brightly, the sound like a grin over the shoulder as she parted. “You’re doing the right thing.”

A moment later she and her hulking entourage came into view. Raina paused in front of him, arms crossed.

“You’re not to be hurt,” she informed him with a calm relish of triumph. “Which after what you did took quite a bit of convincing.” Raina tilted her head and looked down at him silently for a moment.

“You’ll be out by noon,” she announced. Then with a nod to her guards she was gone.

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“Done,” Raina announced. “He’s to be released unharmed within ninety minutes.” Then she closed the door behind herself. “But you could have mentioned that he disabled all surveillance in your quarters.”

“It shouldn’t be any trouble at all to put back!” Simmons blurted, her pathological need to be helpful coming back now that they had good news. Then she felt a blush rise. “I’m sure he just wanted a moment of privacy….” She trailed off.

Raina shook her head.

“Is that what he told you?” Accusation was strangely missing from Raina’s voice. It was soft and a little tired.

It was Simmons’s turn to shake her head.

“No, he… didn’t tell me anything about it actually, other than indicating he’d fixed the privacy issue for a time.” She sighed and kept her eyes glued to the pages on the drug logs. She didn’t want to say too much. And this page was just as full of blank spaces and scratch-outs as the previous ones, and that was not right….
Raina nodded.

“Agent Simmons, he didn’t temporarily block anything. He completely destroyed every piece of surveillance equipment in the room.”

“He what!?”

Raina watched very carefully. The young agent finally looked up from the logs, shocked. But there had been the briefest of moments, before she looked up, where her pupils widened and pushed a crinkle into the corners of her eyes.

_There you are,_ Raina thought with an invisible smile. _I found you._

Raina was convinced this Dr. Fitz had nothing to do with the fire-- but here was confirmation that he was out for blood nonetheless. And not only did this Agent Simmons know about it, but she also found it rather _exciting._ That wasn’t exactly a revelation given this scientist had just had the boy’s face down her thighs not an hour ago. But the context was valuable.

“I am so sorry that all this has happened to you,” Raina admitted, “and I understand privacy has been a concern for you both. Since we haven’t been able to track down the source of that problem we talked about the other day--” the aggressively off-the-books piece of hardware in the shower-- “I had already been wanting to talk to you about changing out the locks on your door.”

Simmons only looked up briefly.

“Won’t they be able to key through any new ones as well?”

Raina shook her head.

“These would be the locks we use in the labs to secure scientific assets,” she explained. “Biometrics-based, so only authorized people can use them, and they send an alarm to our security desk-- not Ops-- in someone attempts to force it open. It should stop you from being barged in on, at the least.”

Simmons’s’s eyes narrowed at the unexpected generosity.

“Alright,” she said, voice neutral.

Raina laughed. Under the table, she tapped the button that cut out her in-office surveillance.

“It seems that Ops is still concerned about Dr. Fitz’s role in the accident earlier this week. Which is absurd,” Raina added off-handedly, as if she knew exactly who _had_ done it.

Simmons lifted a curious and uncertain eyebrow.

“Classic case of poor industrial hygiene,” Raina dismissed with a shake of her head. “They’ve had it coming for years. But they’d rather blame anyone than themselves.”

_Right, then_, Simmons thought. And she made a mental note that this place had been here for years.

“Returning to the point, I have reminded Ops of this and that they are dependant on the science branch-- and its employees-- for their long-term survival. They have their deadline today and have been set on notice that any future questioning of science staff must go through this office.”

“Fair enough,” Simmons responded.

“So that’s all well and good for the short-term, Dr. Simmons. But you’ll also need to think ahead on how you’re going to get out of this in one piece.”

“Beg pardon?”
“Your heart’s clearly not in this whole ‘Hydra’ thing,” Raina continued.

Simmons felt the panic in her skin like a thousand hot nails.

“When have I not--” she began angrily.

Raina had to bite back a laugh. “Oh no, there’s nothing wrong with that,” she said quickly, smoothing the young scientist back down. “In fact it’s much better this way.”

Simmons watched warily as Raina leaned back in her chair, the exasperation on her face suggesting this wasn’t Raina’s first time through this conversation.

“You’ve had questions that drove you wild,” Raina said. It wasn’t a question.

“Of course,” Simmons replied, blinking.

“Times when you could see very clearly that we needed a key to something important, but you couldn’t convince anybody to let you work on it.”

Simmons nodded. She thought of all the dozens of proposals for new vaccines, other nonlethal weapons, diagnostics, and everything else she’d ever put in that all came back stamped Not A Priority.

Fitz had always had better luck getting his proposals funded. Granted, he still had better luck on projects with the two of them than solo projects. But he still could get solo approvals on occasion, and for Simmons they were scarcer than the teeth on a hen. It wasn’t that she didn’t like working with Fitz. He was brilliant. But there came a point when she realized all their supervisors saw was her riding his coattails. It couldn’t have been long before he’d have noticed, too.

In the end, leaving the lab had been a tougher call for him. He’d had something to lose.

Not that it had made much difference in the long run. They were both here now.

“That’s the life of science,” she replied out loud.

“For the most part, yes,” Raina agreed. “It’s frustrating.” She toyed with a pen for a moment. “Every so often, though, a sponsor comes along whose interests manage to line up with your own. Hydra turned out to have a lot of the same questions I do, and they were the only ones.” Raina paused, a How-do-I-put-this question written on her lips.

“They were there for me at a time when nobody else was. So here we are together.” Her eyes narrowed. “Unfortunately it turns out most of the organization is run by charlatans who learned everything they know about life from action movies, so the work environment leaves something to be desired.”

Between her nerves and Raina’s clear annoyance, Simmons couldn’t stop the laugh that came out.

“And that’s life with ops,” she said.

Raina tilted her head in agreement.

“There’s a culture of using brute force to cover incompetence. As you’ve seen. It’s not to my taste. I can protect you from the worst of it-- would be happy to, in fact. But my power to do so within Hydra depends on getting results.”

“Of course it does,” Simmons nodded, expressionless again.

Raina straightened the hem of her dress.

“Dr. Fitz’s release is already arranged,” she announced. “As well as increasing the security on your quarters. You understand I’ll need something in return.”
“And that is?” Simmons asked quietly.

“Blood,” Raina replied smoothly.

A long pause ensued. Simmons felt herself go pale. Was it her, or had this conversation just taken an uncomfortably melodramatic turn…?

“Only a pint, Dr. Simmons,” Raina elaborated. She flicked the pen against the arm of her chair and narrowed her eyes. “This isn’t a Wagner production.”

•

Raina had the courtesy to let Simmons do the blood draw herself— the thought of letting Hydra put a direct port into her bloodstream was not one she wanted to dwell on. That was the big perk of collaboration, apparently. You got needles in the arm either way. But unlike Fitz she got to put them in herself.

Raina also sat with her while she did the draw,. Simmons decided one might as well use the time to go through what she’d found in the logs. It was a bit of a tussle to move the binders around with a line in her arm while half-lying down on an exam table, but there was no telling when she’d have her supervisor’s undivided attention again. Simmons had learnt to make it count.

Strangely Raina was much more interested in a couple minor discrepancies in the barbiturate supply than in the massive, systematic lunacy going on in the opiate books. After the fourth time Simmons pointed out an entire section that had been covered in white-out— an inventory control disaster— Raina heaved a sigh.

“The opiate logs are a mess,” Raina explained, “because we have several doctors and staff who are addicts. It’s an epidemic in the health care professions, as you must already know. And if you think it’s hard to run a medical facility when your supplies keep disappearing, try running one where two-thirds of your staff are either going through withdrawal or overdosing on the street version in the washrooms.”

Simmons tried not to look taken aback. Judging by Raina’s face she was failing.

“Given the amount of shrinkage we have, much of the supply take isn’t even for the addicts. Staff who don’t use still keep their own personal supply to give to patients for the times when stocks run out. It doesn’t happen often, but it does happen. I’ll set you up with some before we go.”

Simmons blinked, suddenly feeling dazed. She shifted to look down at the bag, slowly filling with dark venous blood. Raina’s explanation didn’t make any sense— that was still no way to run an institution . Then she settled back into the half-raised table back and shot a disconcerted look at the ceiling, which would not judge her for being confused. Simmons actually hoped it was the blood draw hitting harder than usual. That meant this would start making sense later.

“Thank you?” she said.

A long silence stretched out. Simmons felt an unaccountable need to— not quite apologize for Fitz, but perhaps just a little— and while she was at it, give an explanation. Something that would give them an idea of how drastically they’d fail to get his cooperation this way.

“He did something that got him on various agencies’ radar a couple of years before we met,” Simmons began, guessing Raina would know whom she meant. “I don’t know what it was,” she clarified quickly. It was possible Hydra, with all their spies, already knew the details. But she wasn’t about to volunteer them. “It was all done and classified away well before we began working together.”

Not that the 16-year-old boy he was back then understood the finer details of what ‘classified’ meant. He’d told her enough about it that at this point she, too, could probably construct a small breeder reactor and make a few thousand atoms of plutonium in her mum’s back garden. The authorities had cleared out an entire section of Glasgow’s East End before discovering the whole project had been tightly controlled. In spite of everything there was no contamination of the area.
Fitz’s medical records agreed, clearing him of all signs of dosage injury.

*That* was what had sold Simmons on Fitz being a goddamn genius. Building a reactor in your mum’s shed? *Not that* hard. Doing it without irradiating yourself and the entire neighborhood was another level entirely.

The Crown had obviously sensed that between wasted potential and the public safety hazard of leaving him to his own devices, he needed to be formally trained and put to work. Right away. But nobody knew what to do with a fourteen-year-old who could make his own plutonium.

“He spent a couple of years being horse-traded around various defense agencies—three months here, six months there. He was told where to go, put to work, and much of the time he didn’t even know what the project was.” In a lot of ways it was dumb luck that he’d even made it to SHIELD. He’d probably still be locked up in the Royal Navy if it hadn’t been for his utter inability to pass a swim test.

Simmons raised up on her elbow and gave Raina a significant look.

“The hazards of being capable of classified work as a minor so agencies can claim *in loco parentis* authority,” Simmons commented, a keen eyebrow raised. “We met when he’d finally been passed off to SHIELD. He never had many positive things to say about his time working prior to that. You can see why the…” Simmons stopped and searched for words. “…the terms of his being here will tend not to go down well.”

“No, I know,” Raina agreed. “I’ve read his file. It’s not hard to assemble those pieces. And had Ops respected my authority as head of the science division at this facility, none of this ever would have happened.”

“The whole division?” Simmons wondered. Last she’d heard Raina was only over the biology department within the science division.

“That’s recent,” Raina allowed, no trace of offense in her manner. “The former head has been missing since Thursday.”

That was two days ago—*the day of the fire.*

Simmons raised her eyebrows. “Congratulations,” she said. That was a considerable promotion. With intriguing timing.

Raina demurred. “Ideally it’d be under better circumstances. But we take what life gives us.”

A few short, wordless minutes later, Raina tapped her free hand.

“That’ll do, Dr. Simmons. Remember to keep some for yourself.”

Jemma nodded dully and finished off the draw. Raina cleaned up and walked the still-warm bag of blood out of the room. What seemed like seconds later, she reappeared with a juice box.

“Take your time,” Raina told her. “They’ll be doing it properly now, but they do still need to ask him questions. You’ve still got about an hour before they take him back to your quarters.”

Simmons nodded again, checked the seal (discreetly, she hoped) to make sure it couldn’t have been spiked with something, and fumbled the straw into the juice box. Then just out of curiosity she checked what fruit had been squeezed out and boxed for this moment.

Pomegranate. Fair enough. The juice was full of phenolics—*the* source of much-lauded antioxidant content—*that* made it bitter. But Simmons didn’t mind that.

“I know what you’re looking for,” she said once she’d had a sip. “In the blood.”

Raina gave her a polite arched eyebrow. Simmons cleared her throat.
“If you give me back my phone, I can give you the names of two other people who have it.”

“That’s easily done,” Raina smiled quietly. She thumbed a message into her own phone and looked at Simmons expectantly.

Simmons smiled back, and conspicuously took another sip of the juice box rather than speak.

It had to be antibodies to the Chitauri exovirus. There were a number of possible uses for them. The benign ones didn’t sound like things Hydra would be interested in. But they couldn’t do more than basic preliminary work with blood. When they started coming for her bone marrow—then it would be time to get nervous.

More relevant at the moment was how Hydra knew she’d been infected. All the records on the Bus had been destroyed. Her name had never been included in the files at Sci-Tech and the CDC. There she was simply Patient 4. That left Ward as the mostly likely source for Hydra’s information.

And what Ward didn’t know about viruses could fill volumes.

Like most civilians Ward was only thinking of people who’d been actively infected. Whereas a biologist would understand that anybody who’d been exposed—whether they’d become sick or not—would have begun producing antibodies in response.

One of Raina’s guards from earlier made a reappearance. Jemma’s phone was tiny in his hands.

“Thank you,” Simmons accepted it from him with a bright smile. It felt good to have it back. It felt good to take things back from Hydra. Damned if progress wasn’t her favorite thing.

“The first person,” Simmons said to Raina, “is Fitz. If you need another reason to keep him alive and well.”

“Thank you, although we don’t,” Raina shook her head. “But I don’t need to explain his value to you.”

Jemma unclenched her jaw while her supervisor made notes in her phone.

“And the other?” Raina asked.

Simmons enunciated carefully.

“Grant Douglas Ward.”

Chapter End Notes

Props again to über-mega-betas notapepper, memorizingthedigitsofpi, and atomicsupervillainess/0hcicero!

Apologies all around, this fic is old as balls so this chapter got written before Daisy's DRAIN ALL OF MY KREE BLOOD YAS moment. WHOOPS. In my defense Copenhagen's science is a lot better than Kree blood drainage for cloning science I mean omg blood doesn't even have that much DNA in it wtf
Always on the Watch

Chapter Summary

Fitzsimmons aren't the only SHIELD scientists with a problem. As events unfold under Raina's watch, a faraway plot threatens to overwhelm the last of the Treehouse's resistance... with consequences for our protagonists.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Same day

The Treehouse

“Right. And then we run back into the thing with ‘We’re in the middle of Assfuck, Nowhere.’”

Two scientists sat in a booth in the cafeteria of the old SHIELD research station. The older of the two by far, a man with a heavily lined face and salt-and-pepper beard, rubbed his face patiently. Windows on the other side of the hall showed scrubby, dwarfed palm trees and the merciless turquoise of the Caribbean. The bump and clatter of the busy cafeteria all but drowned out their soft chatter.

“Going up the river wouldn’t be so bad. Couple dugouts, plenty of machetes for the maroons, you’re in business.”

The younger of the two-- tall and full and bronze with hair pulled back into a bun stabbed through with a couple pens-- frowned.

“That’s dark, man,” she observed.

“For giving away! Jesus!”

Nua laughed into the side of her hand. “Mmhm, make yourself useful,” she waved. Then she crammed in a quick mouthful of vegetables. When the workplace politics were getting bad enough that you were semi-seriously planning to run away into the jungle, it was time to feed for speed.

“Tell ‘em you need to do a survey on mosquitoes in the interior. See if they’ll fund you.”

He snorted. “Can I pick your brain for ways to convincingly weaponize mosquitoes?”

“It’s not like I’m going anywhere,” the virologist laughed. “But if it’s money you’re after, you’re better off getting Bursin to collab it with you. Instant gold.”

Jim mocked writing down notes on the bare table. “Project... needs... more... human experimentation,” he mumbled.

“For real though, this really explains how that idiot always had all the funding,” she observed. The virologist shifted into a sotto voce, waving her fork about while she whispered. “‘Get off my lawn! I was hailing Hydra back when you all were in dia-pers!’”

“It’s almost a relief,” he agreed.

She snorted. “Almost. I do miss back when we were curing diseases, though,” she breathed. “Those were some good times.”

The older man raised his mug. Nua clinked hers into it and they drained them down.
Gallows humor aside, the scientists had important business to discuss. Lately they always did. As a research station for tropical diseases, the Treehouse had fallen to Hydra quickly. The personnel here were equipped to fight Ebola. Not guns.

The battle-- if you could even call it that-- had been bloody but short. Before the dust had even settled, their new Hydra overlords were saddling them up with a ridiculous list of demands. *Weaponize this!* *Weaponize that!* Needless to say the base’s scientists met these requests with very little enthusiasm. Except for those few, of course, that seemed to have been waiting for it all along.

At first the limitations of the Treehouse’s space and equipment were enough to stall out most progress and keep the staff’s nerves at bay. But more people and money and materiel had been pouring in ever since. The Treehouse was at a boiling point. And something, frankly, had to be done.

For Jim’s entomologist soul, running off into the unwanted corner lot of the Amazon with a machete and a pair of sandals was a normal day’s work. Nua wanted nothing to do with the outdoors whatsoever. And anyway, even Jim knew it was a terrible game plan. It wasn’t enough just to get out. They needed to cripple and expose what was happening in their old home. That would mean moving records, biohazardous materials that had to be kept on liquid nitrogen to avoid a violent and infectious death, plus entire families-- without being noticed.

In other words, there was no fucking way.

At first they’d hoped to get some outside help from the ESA nearby, or at least be able to borrow a line to send out a distress signal. The European Space Agency kept a launch site in nearby Kourou (courtesy of France, which technically owned this piece of South America) to take advantage of the 463 m/s velocity boost from launching this close to the equator.

It was one of the few amenities you couldn’t get in Europe.

There were rumors that some rusty old partnership with ESA was the reason for the Treehouse being located here at all. In any case, the launch site and the small town of Kourou that had grown up around it were the Treehouse’s only other real links to the world outside SHIELD-- which was now gone. Other than that it was flat, salty ocean or green hell for hundreds of miles in every direction.

A few days after the handover Nua had made some excuses about errands and gone into town. Two taxis, some bonjours, and a judicious wave of her Polynésie Française passport later, she was waiting in an office lobby for an appointment with the head of ESA’s exobiology department.

She was supposed to have been ushered in at 10:30am. Nua was going make some polite inquiries about collaborating with the Treehouse on exobiology, do the obligatory grumbling about funding shortfalls, and if she was lucky, see if she could get him going about how ESA fit into EU internal politics. *That* never failed to reveal something about a person’s or an institution’s priorities. Data collected, she’d be able to figure out if ESA could help or if Hydra’s reach in fact had extended there as well.

But at 10:26, in walked none other than Bursin himself. He went past her right into the department head’s office, and then stayed there for an hour and a half. Nua wound up kicking herself for not going up to listen at the door but she had lived in perpetual certainty that they were about to finish.

As the two exited, Bursin looked at her for what had to be the first time since she’d come to work there three years ago. Then he came over to shake her hand.

“I understand you also have an interest in exobiology,” he said.

Nua silenced her internal screaming long enough to reply. Yes, in fact she had actually handled the aftermath of the first known exovirus outbreak—analyzing the antiserum, attempting to isolate and contain the virus, sampling the corpses, and *doing it all via robot because doing it in person was too dangerous, even in a full containment suit*—for SHIELD at the Treehouse. And it was all *so fascinating*.

She left out the part about having been roommates with the notorious Patient 4 for two years back at the Academy. The first known human to survive an infection... though admittedly despite her
bursin didn’t need to know about that detail.

The next thing she knew, Bursin was inviting her to join him and ESA’s Dr. du Gaire for lunch. As befit a more junior scientist in those situations, nua mostly listened. The real gold mine had been afterwards when Bursin offered her a ride back to the base. None of the cautions she offered about the Chitauri virus’s undomesticable nature seemed to make a dent in Bursin’s enthusiasm for it. Trapped in his car, by the end she found herself agreeing to yet another new project—this one a thorough analysis of the Chitauri virus. Strictly for reasons of basic science and exploration, of course, he assured her. Very civilian. Pursuit of pure knowledge.

Nua nodded in understanding. Of course, she’d said. And she fumed silently, wondering how Bursin could possibly expect her to believe that.

Maybe he didn’t. That was the thing with deranged individuals. You never knew if they believed they were actually deceiving you, or if they simply thought the world was full of similarly deranged co-conspirators.

Back at the Treehouse she’d wandered around the labs in a daze for hours until running into Jim. He asked her if she could show a poor hapless entomologist how to do a sterile culture transfer again. Then in the safety of the laminar flow cabinet’s loud fan, he got the whole story and reminded her that bioweapons research was going to happen anyway. At least this way there’d be some adult supervision on the project.

Nua reflected back often on her now rather childish-sounding plan to drive up to the ESA and ask very nicely to borrow a secure telephone line. What on earth had she been thinking?

So. The ESA was right out. Weaponizing unbelievably aggressive exoviruses that she, of all people, knew that no one understood—was in. And she had a direct line on the entire project.

After a quick stop by the canteen Simmons wandered back to her quarters, phone and two lunches in hand. A pair of techs were already installing a new and very heavy biometric lock on her door when she arrived.

Simmons smiled at the techs as she sat down and waited for them to finish. They offered to let her in but she declined—she wanted this to be done before ever going back in there.

In the meantime, she got comfortable sitting against the wall and went through her phone. There were a lot of panicked texts from a lot of people. Several from the team, several from colleagues, and nearly as many from home. Her parents had nearly gotten used to her being out of touch for weeks at a time when she’d gotten ill. And then she’d had to start training them all over again.

Jemma thought for a moment before tapping in a response to her mum. Raina— or whoever she had handling goods confiscated from workers—would absolutely have added some surveillance to her phone before giving it back.

Hi mum! So sorry I’ve been out of touch, as you can imagine work has been overwhelming since Hydra. She paused before adding the next part. Fitz says hello. I can’t say much, but we’re safe.

Handling the messages from other scientists at SHIELD was a trickier matter. Between Skye and Fitz’s contributions, the anti-surveillance measures on her phone were unassailable. Probably. As much good as it would do to get in touch with colleagues at other locations—let them know she was alright, find out what had happened at other labs—Simmons was out of her depth with the finer points of phone security. Absolutely none of that until she had a chance to run it by Fitz.

Then Jemma scanned through the team’s increasingly panicked texts with a hard line on her
mouth. She didn’t open them. They’d be able to make do with whatever they’d gotten by radio the night before.

Within a few minutes the lead tech asked her to come up and do a series of eye scans for the lock. When they showed her how to use it, she was relieved and slightly alarmed to note that it required a scan period of five seconds. That meant the scanner wasn’t just looking for the correct retina and the right person. It was looking for a pulse, because it would only unlock if the eye were in its original owner and that the owner was living.

Well. No point in a security program that wasn’t thorough.

Simmons checked with the techs about how to add a second person to the lock, bid them farewell, and went inside. They’d been quite nice, actually. The little team clearly got along, joking around with each other as they set in the device. They’d also been very patient with making sure she knew how to use it and didn’t end up locking herself out. Which was good, because it had taken her a lot more tries than it really should have to get it right. Now that she had gotten a chance to sit still Simmons was starting to realize how much the morning had taken out of her.

For one thing, somehow she’d forgotten that the room would still be a mess. Jemma sat leaning in a corner staring at the wall while she ate so she wouldn’t have to look at the rumpled bed and clothing scattered everywhere. She’d have to make sure to drink the entire bottle of water as well, and then some, because when it came to recovering from a blood draw the key was hydration--

Jemma suddenly realized she still hadn’t gone to the loo since this morning. That was breaking one of the cardinal rules of post-sex maintenance, and she didn’t fancy her urinary tract would make allowance for extenuating circumstances.

Once that was taken care of, Jemma busied herself erasing the traces of that morning. She halfheartedly munched down the rest of her sandwich in between making the bed and putting away all the clothes from where they’d landed earlier. Satisfied that she could look at the room without cringing now, Jemma sprawled out on the sofa for a rest and quickly finished off the water. Fitz might not be getting the full Hydra shakedown anymore, but that didn’t mean he needed to scrape her off the floor after a post-blood draw blackout. Time to pull herself together.

Simmons was just thinking she ought to put the other sandwich in the ‘fridge when a loud rap sounded at the door. She jumped and realized she’d fallen asleep.

Jemma ran the short distance to the door. As her fingers closed on the handle, she felt the tunnel vision and dizziness circle in. Simmons made a face at herself. Classic orthostatic hypotension, and she really shouldn’t have stood up so fast, but it’d pass in a moment--

Simmons flung open the door and immediately leaned up against the doorjamb to keep herself from lurching about. She aimed a polite smile at the closest of two or three people at the door, although she couldn’t quite make out his face through the black spangles and stars swimming through her vision.

Even without seeing their faces, though, she could tell none of them were Fitz.

After a moment, fighting to keep her head up and sending her good spot of vision around like a spotlight, she finally found him. He was on a gurney behind them, face-down.

Simmons blinked. That couldn’t be right. She leaned her head down against the doorjamb and let her blood pressure catch up, waiting for the head rush to pass.

When she looked up, Fitz was still there-- motionless, face-down, in the same clothes he’d been taken out in. A slim stack of paperwork now rested on his back-- which she noted with relief was moving up and down with his breath. The orderlies who brought him there had already gone round a corner down the hall.

“Fitz?” she tried.

There was no response.
“What in the bloody…” Simmons muttered. Granted she couldn’t see much of him, but nothing seemed to be amiss other than the unconsciousness part.

Jemma leaned down to get a better look. His sleeves were rolled up, and she walked around him to get a better look at a bandage at his elbow. Simmons rolled her eyes—*If at first your shit narcointerrogation protocol doesn’t succeed, try try again? Really?*—when she saw it peeking up around his temple.

A neat circle of tape and bandages. They rested in tidy, minimalist layers like they were done by someone who’d done this a thousand times.

Fitz’s left eye was covered in them.

Chapter End Notes

Shout-out to betas notapepper & 0hcicero/atomicsupervillainess! Without them this chapter would be an EVEN HOTTER MESS.

Note: this fic puts the Treehouse in French Guiana near the coast and the ESA spaceport. The interior is mostly uninhabited except for descendants of enslaved peoples who escaped during the colonial period, who today refer to themselves as maroons. In case anybody has any questions about that being a derogatory term... at least not in Guiana, Suriname, & Jamaica it’s not.

And phew wow that chapter was EXHAUSTING to write. Hope you guys... enjoyed?
A message buzzed in to Nua’s phone, jackhammering both scientists back into reality.

“Look who’s popular,” Jim observed into his coffee.

Nua, in a vast departure from normal, didn’t say a thing. Jim looked up and saw the normally boisterous scientist staring into her phone.

“I gotta go,” she said, getting up, eyes still locked on her phone. “I’m sorry-- can you--?”

“On it,” Jim waved her off. He could handle taking two damn trays back to the wash line, for crying out….

Nua reported straight to the top floor, as requested. Waiting for her in the lobby was-- along with the faint funk of mercaptoethanol drifting out of some lab or another-- the imposing, nigh-legendary new boss at the Treehouse.

This agent, as best as anyone could tell, had been the mastermind behind the Treehouse’s takeover. No one at the base knew exactly what she’d done before, other than that it somehow involved both tech and security. Whatever it was, she knew SHIELD inside and out and it had equipped her well for ruling over the Treehouse like an old-timey despot. With nothing but a scant army of a few dozen infantrymen and three or four turncoat scientists out of the forty or so on staff. Apparently that was enough.

Nua was about 78% convinced that this woman would have to die for the Treehouse to get out from under Hydra control. Give or take.

In the scant couple of weeks since the takeover Nua’d had plenty of debriefings with her. They weren’t ever quite interrogations, per se-- Nua made herself available enough to be considered part of the team. The joy of that was only having to answer exactly what she’d been asked. And from the questions Ms. Tech Security was asking, it was clear that this lady was stuck somewhere around the “advanced undergraduate” level. She knew her way around a lab but sure as hell wasn’t catching any of the tiny white lies Nua’d been throwing her way on viral replication. This left someone like Nua with acres of wiggle room on the frontiers of science.

Nua took a moment to smooth herself down. The boss was scary, but she was also walking through a pathogenic valley of death blind. Whatever it was that Nua’d been called up here for, it was because the brass needed scientists like her.

“I’m told you have something for me?” Nua said, looking down at her new boss. Ms. Security was tall, but not that tall.

“Antibodies from Patient 4. As ordered,” she replied, crisp and efficient.

Nua couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice.

“When?” she demanded.

“It’s en route from the Swamp as we speak. ETA 6pm on jet dock 2.”

“Goddamn. That was quick.” Nua made sure to sound impressed rather than horrified.

This wasn’t supposed to happen-- the whole point of asking for antibodies from Patient 4 was to stall. Weaver said Simmons had been at the Hub during the takeover. The Hub never fell under
Maybe they’d just found a cache of stored blood at CDC. That was… well, kind of in the same geographical region as the Swamp. Sort of.

“Any idea what kind of titers we got on this sample? What’s the date on the draw?” Nua fished.

“Draw is from earlier today. We were hoping you’d be able to tell us about the titers,” Security replied.

“Can do,” Nua said easily. **Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.** “Since this is a new draw-- do we have any general health information on Patient 4? We’ll need background to make any sense of the numbers.”

The boss looked through the orders on her clipboard. “Not seeing it, so--”

“I’ll prep a survey and send it out,” Nua cut her off. “What’s their contact info?”

The head of the Treehouse looked nonplussed. “Send it to me. I’ll move it through the proper channels,” she replied.

Nua nodded. “Anything else?”

“Just the usual,” she replied. “Get your lab ready to convert to exovirus work ASAP, etc.”

The scientist tilted her head, keeping a wary eye on her patron.

“...And my old project?” Nua prompted. With any luck at all it’d be canceled. As little as she wanted to be involved with the exovirus, it was at least enough of a cliff-dive that it ought to get her off the hook for aerosolizing goddamn rabies, which was what Hydra had had her on from the takeover until now.

“You’re still on Operation Foam Party.”

Great. Still on that beat, then. Perfect. Wouldn’t want all those immunizations and trips rappelling through tropical caves to collect exotic airborne strains go to waste. She’d finally gotten back on Guyana time four whole days ago.

Nua nodded, trying to keep her frown down to more of a professional *I see* than an existential *What portal did we all fall through to land in this ethical hellscape and also how am I going to cram a second lab into it?*

Although, speaking of that--

“What about lab space?” Nua asked, clutching at straws. With her lab turned over to the Chitauri virus there’d be no room left for--

“You’re taking Foam Party down to 204.”

Nua frowned again. The lab in 204 was already taken.

“So Maryam’ll be--”

“No in 204,” the boss answered quickly. Nua let it drop. The agent was clearly done handing out info, and she’d be able to fill in the details on her own soon enough.

“Is there anything else?” the boss asked after a moment. Nua sighed, re-crossing her arms. The other agent’s body language was a clear ‘we’re done here,’ but Nua couldn’t place how she was doing it. It offended what was left of her dancer’s sensibility and she’d gotten a little lost trying to break it down.

“No. I’ve got a lab to clean out, see you at six.”
The boss watched Nua cut a straight line for the elevators. That particular scientist had never given out any signs of overt loyalty to SHIELD, but she was clearly agitated about something.

“Dr. Tevahine’arahi.”

Nua turned around without meaning to, more startled than she would have liked from hearing someone pronounce her name correctly.

“Yes, Agent Morse?” she answered.

The boss joined her to wait by the elevators, hands clasped behind her back.

“I’ve been assured that the bioweapons program is for negotiating power only. Surely you can see how that is-- these projects are far too destructive for any practical use. They can’t ever be used.”

Nua nodded as if it were old news. “Force de dissuasion,” she said. It was France’s Cold War-era military doctrine: weapons of mass destruction weren’t for using. Just for making other nations think twice about using theirs.

Agent Morse inclined her head. “You’re familiar.”


Once the doors slid shut Nua let herself lean against the wall, letting out a huge pent-up breath. Her mind’s eye was caught up far away with a flash of light, vaporized trees, boiling seas, and fish that no one could eat for miles. Fangataufa. Mururoa. Elugelab. Johnston. Rongelap, Enewetak, Bikini. All places whose names people remembered for the wrong reasons if they remembered them at all.

“Tera ra, ‘ua faa’ohipa te mau mea ia matou,” she growled into the silence. But they got used on us.

• • •

Fingers numb, Simmons leafed through the papers again.

It was a standard packet of post-operation instructions. Wound care, warning signs of complications, antibiotic regimen, all the usual routine health care details.

For an optic nerve implant.

Simmons knew the words. But she couldn’t get them to make sense.

But two minutes of staring mutely at him laid out, face down, was more than enough. Jemma launched herself into action. She took the desk lamp and set it next to his head, bending the neck to shine up and illuminate his eye. Then she pulled out the bottle of vodka from the cabinet where it’d wound up, scrubbed her hands twice, and for lack of actual tools, washed down a couple pieces of cutlery and a tray. A little cardboard matchbook from an ashtray on the table rounded out her toolkit.

After carefully drying her hands with a fresh paper towel, Simmons carefully peeled the bandaging back. It was tricky with him face-down-- she had to get down on her knees beside him without using her hands-- but she managed to get it off in one piece so that it could go back on after she was done.

His eyelids were irritated-- consistent with having been on the business end of a surgical retractor. With hope quickly receding, Simmons moved onto the next step. Her limbs felt slow, like a piece
of clockwork at the end of its winding.

Still, the motions were familiar enough to steady her. Dip the handles of the forks into the alcohol, light a match, touch the handles to the hungry flame, and watch them blaze clean. Jemma held them carefully as they burned, perfectly horizontal. Let the utensil droop even a bit, and the flames would lick up your hand. Tilt them the other way, and burning alcohol would run down the handle and splash fire on your fingers. Jemma watched the flames as if they were gravity itself. Their bright, oversized flicker was everything she was not.

Jemma knelt again, levering down with her elbows to keep the tools in her hand clean. Another moment to make sure they were cool, and she gently used the forks’ rounded handle ends to part Fitz’s eyelids.

The eye was bloodshot—another point consistent with having just been operated on. And craning her head, scanning the curve of his eye surface, she finally found it—the imperfection of a tiny incision. It sat directly over pupil where it had slammed into a tiny dot from the lamp.

Jemma held her breath as she looked at it. Her heart was thundering, as if it meant to run away on its own from the mess she’d gotten it into.

Jemma stared until her breath ran out. Then she closed his eyelids back together, shielding them from the environment again before before emptying her lungs in a sob.

Her jaw shook the way it did when you were about to be sick. She replaced the bandage over his eye with deliberate motions, breathing in through her mouth and out through her nose. Jemma steadied herself against the gurney as she stood. The vodka went back in its cabinet, the dishes in the sink, and she made another quick pilgrimage to the loo.

When she was done she washed her hands again. Then Jemma washed her face, and stared back at the person who came up in the mirror.

Simmons spent another while getting things ready for when Fitz woke up. She couldn’t begin to guess what he’d make of it— if he’d realize what had happened, or be too groggy or in pain to think it through. In which case she’d have to tell him. But no matter what happened she could be fairly certain he’d need a dustbin to be sick into. That she could be prepared for.

Then she rolled the gurney against the bed and laid down half-and-half on each. Jemma picked up one of his arms and slid her shoulder beneath his. Then she turned her lips to his cheek, forcing her breaths steady and smooth. To cry would shake him, potentially scrambling what was left of his eye— and almost certainly wake him up before he was ready.

And Simmons couldn’t begin to imagine what would happen after that. She stared at the ceiling, a blank and empty slate hanging over the both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Hats off to atomicsupervillainess/0hcicero for beta'ing the f out of this chapter!

Posting will probably be irregular for the next month— my job situation now involves month-long road trip. Those trips are kind of like working on an oil rig, we're either on the job or sleeping. On the plus side the "oil rig" gig is still WAY more security and pay than I've had in years so I'll have chill time between trips to write up more chapters! Woo!
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

A mysterious death at the Treehouse sets off the alarm for Nua and Jim. Meanwhile, Fitzsimmons are up to their eyeballs in bad news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nua shook herself back to alertness and hit 2 on the elevator. Checking out the new lab was at least a good way to kill time until it was time to pick up the blood sample. Wasting time on purpose took some getting used to-- but Nua was managing to come around to the idea.

Hydra didn’t know it yet, but they had a serious management problem on their hands. They’d put the whole Treehouse to work on projects that the scientists didn’t want to succeed. They had to look busy, certainly. But then again the inhabitants of the Treehouse had spent-- collectively-- centuries dissecting pathogens and tracking down the environmental and social factors of their spread. And they did it all while dashing from one outbreak emergency to another. But now thanks to Hydra, they weren’t just trapped and angry. The scientists were bored.

They always said idle hands were the devil’s workshop.

Nua ducked her head into Maryam’s lab. Nobody was there except for Maryam’s grad student Eduardo, bent over some task or another under the fume hood. Eduardo, bless his heart, was still trying to write his dissertation under hostile occupation-- he was going to finish his doctorate, Hydra be damned.

She knocked just hard enough on the door to be heard over the fume fan. Nua also started working out how she was going to tease him for making the lab smell like ass, because she could smell the mercaptoethanol from here even with the hood on. That probably explained why he was working solo. Nua had a brief mental image of the rest of the lab staff, smelling the first whiff of the spill, suddenly remembering tasks that had to be done ASAP... somewhere else.

“Maryam around?” she said.

Eduardo looked up at her and shook his head slowly. His face was red and tear-stained.

Nua raced to his counter. “Eduardo, what’s wr--” she started, and pulled up short when she saw what he’d been doing.

Cleaning blood off the back wall of the hood. Nua looked up.

There it was. A bullet hole in the ceiling of the hood. Eduardo’d already managed to clear most of the blood off of it. Because that’s how it was drilled into you to clean up a liquid splash-- from the top down.

At Eduardo’s feet was a bucket of broken glass and a layer of kitty litter on the ground. That’s where the smell was coming from-- the flask had probably gotten knocked over during... whatever had just happened. Mercaptoethanol wasn’t dangerous, just smelly, so Eduardo was letting the spill sit and soak up into the litter while he dealt with the hood.

“Are you ok?” she blurted, feeling stupid as soon as the words came out of her mouth. He was in
one piece and crying while mopping blood out of a shot-up fume hood alone. That pretty much
said it all.

“What happened!?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t here,” he sniffled. “But I come here and I find this.” He presented a phone
and, hands shaking, pulled up a photo.

Nua’s eyes went wide.

“That’s Maryam,” she agreed. Very, very dead. Sitting in a chair, slumped back in the fume hood
with a pistol in her hand and a hole in her forehead.

“Where is she now?” Nua whispered, whipping out her own phone.

“They came and take her away,” he shook his head again. “They tell me to clean up so they can
use the lab.”

“Jesus Christ,” Nua spat.

•

Jim’s phone buzzed in his pocket.

He heaved a long-suffering sigh. Of course. Of course nobody would try to get in touch with him
all day until he was knee-deep in blood and condoms.

Jim’s eyes flickered over to the long rows of mesh cages next to him, inhabitants filling the room
with a high-pitched hum. The sound of several dozen mosquito lab colonies had a tendency to put
your teeth on edge after a while. But these weren’t just any mosquitoes-- these little fuckers were
precious. The Treehouse held SHIELD’s infectious disease vector library. Every single cage was
a different strain with a quirk in their disease transmission ability-- some strains couldn’t give you
yellow fever, in others malaria would try to replicate in their salivary glands and fail; and so on.
And nobody understood enough about what was different in these strains to use them yet. But
SHIELD had kept them for years-- some of them decades-- in the hopes that someday they’d be
able to tease it out. But maintaining colonies of mystery mosquitoes was enough of a pain in the
ass that very few institutions could be bothered. Some of the colonies didn’t exist anywhere
else. There were no backups.

Hydra had killed the scientist who used to take care of them. Thompson-- the man’s name-- had
been a promising young postdoc with perpetual raccoon circles under his eyes. Jim had met him
once as a very early graduate student, already with the dark circles, trailing his advisor around at
conferences. She and Jim had worked at the same lab back in the day during their own grad
studies, which made Thompson… some kind of science nephew.

In any case, Thompson had been a bang-up entomologist. He didn’t just settle into a routine-- he’d
spent a lot of late nights organizing & fleshing out his predecessors’ records. Now there were
picture-clear recipes for how to maintain their inability to transmit disease over generations bred in
captivity. Which was fortunate, because Thompson was also naive enough to tell Hydra he’d
never work for them to their face.

In any case, Thompson hadn’t been wrong.

In the end they’d told his mother it’d been an accident. Then they told the other scientists at the
Treehouse that they were so sorry, the fellows with machine guns had thought he was just a
 technician.

Now Jim spent a lot of time with Thompson in the form of the records he’d left. On the one hand,
being tutored by your dead science nephew was … impressibly sad. That wasn’t how knowledge
was supposed to run. You were supposed to stand on the shoulders of giants. This was more like
picking up dead Icarus and rifling through his pockets for spare feathers.

So Jim didn't think about that. He just did what Thompson found had worked, without thinking about where it came from. At this point, a couple weeks into the takeover, it was pure relief to spend a few hours a day doing something normal. Like feeding mosquitoes. Thompson had stuck with the standby method: get a lambskin condom. Fill it with blood. Tie a knot in it. Hang it up in the corner of the mesh cage, watch it get covered in mosquitoes and slowly deflate. Repeat.

The process was strangely satisfying. Something as piddling as a Hydra takeover was a terrible reason to drop forty years’ worth of work. Granted, curating mosquitoes was a long way off from the gold standard of badassitude in research science. The Soviet seedbank scientists who starved to death in a warehouse full of food during the siege of Leningrad had held that record for seventy-three years in a row by now. They could have it, too. Who really wanted to be that badass? What kind of a world were we looking at when that was the kind of professional achievements one could look forward to?

The biggest difficulty was that since the takeover it had become very difficult to order supplies. Hydra had banned unauthorized personnel from the site, so the twice-weekly deliveries from the butcher shop in Kourou were long gone. Jim had already taken to begging blood from the labs that did animal research. But more and more of the research animal colonies were being turned over to Hydra's new projects. Ones where they didn't give you enough information to know what was in the blood. With the sketchiness factor of science at the Treehouse rapidly approaching 100%, Maryam’s ferrets were the only colony left with enough non-infected control animals to work. Who knew how long they'd hold out.

And then there was still the question of a delivery mechanism. Nua was still trying to find a drugstore in town that carried lambskin condoms. So far all she’d gotten from her queries were impassioned lectures in French from the clerks about how they would only prevent pregnancy, not STIs, and wouldn’t she really prefer nitrile or latex? He was about 4 days away from needing to start re-using condoms. Which was not a scenario he’d really, really ever tried to visualize himself in.

So. Here he was, tending mosquitoes that might be worth more to the world than all of the scientists at the base put together. With practically-stolen blood and the dregs of somebody’s expired condom collection.

Might as well. It wasn’t as if Hydra could think of any use for his skill set. There was a feeling he could do without-- having Hydra staring at you, all the time, finger on the trigger, contemplating how useless you were.

Jim’s phone buzzed again in short order. This suggested it was something a little more urgent than specialty prophylactics. It buzzed a third time before he could get his bloody glove off and he started to get nervous.

[1:45 Nua: hey i’m out of orange-top 15ml tubes can you spot me]

[1:45 Nua: I’m in 204]

[1:46 Nua: you ok?]

“Orange-top tubes” were a common piece of lab equipment. They were also the code he, Nua, and some of the other labs had set up since the takeover to mean a minor emergency. Blue-tops held 50ml, thus bigger than orange-tops, and meant something immediate and life-threatening. This was a first for somebody actually using the code.

Jim scrabbled off his other glove and fired off a “k” while jogging down the hall. The mosquitoes could go hungry for now.
At the groan in her ear, Simmons's heart started racing. Fitz was waking up.

“Fitz?” she murmured, rubbing his shoulder.

No response.

A few minutes later he grumbled again. He was trying to pick his head up this time, with all the grace of someone who was still about two-thirds asleep. Simmons laid a hand across the back of his neck to gain some warning next time he tried to get up.

“Fitz?”

He seemed to hear her this time, trying to turn his head towards her voice.

“You need to keep your head down, love,” she said, as soft and steady as she could.

“'ma? You ok?” he slurred, still trying to look at her.

“I'm fine,” she said. Damn him and his ability to tell she was crying even while too drugged-up to understand anything she was saying.

“J'na?”

“Mmmh?”

He was trying to pat her arm. “Don’ be sad,” he pleaded. Then he picked up again as if remembering his train of thought. “I love you.”

Jemma kissed him on the cheek, and nudged him back when he wobbled from a proper face-down position.

“I love you too, sweetheart,” she murmured.

Fitz kept patting her arm with a haphazard rhythm.

“How do you feel?” she asked after a moment.

No response. So: put him down for "groggy."

A few moments later she felt the muscles of his stomach clench.

“Dustbin,” she said urgently, nudging him towards it. “Over there.”

A couple of heartfelt retches followed. Then he coughed and cried out, clutching towards his face.

“Fuck!” he spluttered, eye burning from the pressure of vomiting. “There’s something in my eye.”

He’s more correct on that than he’d ever want to be, Jemma thought. “It’ll be sensitive,” she agreed out loud.

His hand finally made it to the bandaging at his eye.

“Head down, love,” Jemma reminded him. “Water?”

“Yeah,” he coughed, distracted for the moment. Jemma pressed a cup into his reaching hand, and wound up having to help him keep it level to sip out of it face-down.

With that done, he dropped back down to rest from the exertion. A split-second later he even
managed to turn his face downward again without being reminded.

“What do you see, love?” Simmons asked. She rubbed slowly between his shoulders.

“Nothing,” he said off-handedly. Obviously. He was face-down in a foam pillow with a face-shaped cutout for some goddamn reason, it was kind of dark in there.

“Really?” Simmons exclaimed. Her voice and her heart both jumped by at least half a register.

Then she remembered herself. An implant could deliver all the signal it wanted, but it still took the brain some time to figure out what to do with the new input.

“Well, I mean there’s static over here,” Fitz said groggily, waving his left hand towards his face. “From the… drugs or the arc eye or something.”

Jemma’s eyes welled up again. She’d been doing so well.

“No, Fitz,” she sobbed. “It’s taped over. You shouldn’t be able to see anything at all.”

Chapter End Notes

HELLO EVERYONE I am emerging briefly from the quagmire that is my job this summer and posting a new chapter. Kind of 50% "wow this chapter is not where I want it to be" and 50% "yeah but you probably won't get to work on it again for another month" so here goes. Merci beaucoup to stillnotapepper and superatomicvillainess/0hcicero for betaing!

Speaking of betas, stillnotapepper asked for MORE INFO ON THE SEEDS AT LENINGRAD PLS so oh my god yes here we go.

So back in the 1920s, a badass Russian crop scientist named Nikolai Vavilov was developing some key research for crop breeding. As part of that, he built the largest seed bank in the WORLD at that time: 250,000 samples strong, kept in Leningrad.

This being Leningrad in the 20th century, Germany put it under siege in 1943. Right before the siege, the Soviet government evacuated a lot of valuable stuff out of Leningrad. That included all the art out of the Hermitage-- one of the oldest museums in the world. But you know what they didn't evacuate? ALL THE FUCKING SEEDS. You know, a thing they kind of needed to make sure the country could feed itself in the future.

So the nerds running the seed bank were kind of on their own re: keeping the seed bank from getting destroyed by the Nazis. They boxed up a cross-section of everything in the bank, ran it down to the basement, and just ... kind of ... waited for the Nazis to leave. But they didn't. The city stayed under siege for over two years. The scientists had to scavenge the city for things to burn so the tuber samples wouldn't freeze and die. They also got to fight off a lot of hungry rats-- because pretty soon Leningrad had a big, fat, giant famine on its hands. The scientists guarding the seed bank knew that eating the samples would kind of defeat the purpose of protecting the seed bank. But they had nothing else to eat. So about a dozen of these guys starved to death, in a building full of food. That's... like.. the Nobel prize in badassery right there.

There's a crazy epilogue to this story too. The guy who started the seed bank-- Nikolai Vavilov-- had a student, Trofim Lysenko. Lysenko grew up to be a giant science-denying douchebag. Such a douchebag, he just made shit up to fit Communist ideology and got any other interpretations of data outlawed. This ultimately led to Vavilov being imprisoned for his capitalist pig vision of "genetics." (Soviet leadership didn't like the entire science of genetics because it was kind of
based on the concept that organisms compete with each other. That's just not very
Communist.) Vavilov gave zero fucks and kept on teaching genetics to his fellow
inmates. Right up until he died of starvation, because gulag.

I think about that a lot.

Vavilov was a good fit to reference in this story-- Copenhagen has a lot of "is this evil
or just super stupid? Is there *really* a difference?" going on. So I guess this is a hat-
tip to Nikolai Vavilov. He's kind of like my personal patron saint of not doing shitty
science out of convenience.

Anyway, thanks for reading! I will not not-at-all-subtle-ly beg for comments.
Seriously. I been on the road for 2 months and kind of starved for human interaction
so LET 'ER RIP, GUYS. :D
Merry Christmas we all lived through 2017

Chapter Summary

Shit continues to go down in Hydra-town.

Chapter Notes

You guys just missed the craziest of crazies! Work. Moving. Getting diagnosed with a chronic illness. TRUMP!? Marching. Science. Moving again. Helping run a friend's city council campaign. Crunching data for the governor's office so they don't approve a natural gas pipeline in our state 'cause TECHNICALLY FOSSILS FUELS ARE NO LONGER COMMERCIALY VIIIIIIIIIIIIIIABLE

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Ok so ideally this Christmas present would be like a palate cleanser for 2017, except it turns out this fic has just been 2017 all along. So. What I CAN promise is there are at least two more chapters coming during the week between now and New Year's, and these next two chapters are when the turnaround begins. Things are still shitty and Hydra is still Hydra, but our ~heroes~ are gonna collect themselves and get their James Bond on.

YEAAHHH BITCHES WHO'S READY FOR 2018

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Last thing: a quick catch-up since it's been 84 years since the last chapter. FS are locked up working for Raina at a Hydra facility in the US. Fitz just got an eye implant and FS haven't figured out what they're going to do about it yet. Meanwhile OC's Nua and Jim are doing the same thing at the Treehouse, a SHIELD research station in French Guiana, which is run by Bobbi Morse. Nua just found out another scientist passed away under ~mysterious circumstances.~

• • • • •

Jim skidded into Maryam’s lab.

“Guys?”

Nua and Eduardo looked up.

“What happened in here?”

Nua almost laughed in spite of everything. Jim’s face had curdled up, making it clear that his
question was definitely about the smell. He was also come fully equipped with an actual rack of orange-top tubes in each hand.

She left Eduardo at the bench and hustled over towards Jim.

“Maryam’s daughter is still here, right?” she said in a low voice.

“Layla?” Jim replied. He looked lost.

“She was supposed to go back to live with her dad for the rest of the summer but things went all sideways a week before she was supposed to fly out, and then--”

“Yeah,” Jim nodded. Hydra’s ban on traffic in and out. Which-- for the staff who had family on base-- bore a striking resemblance to a hostage situation.

“Ok, come look at this,” Nua pointed with her chin. She returned to Eduardo’s side with Jim in tow. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jim double-take at the streaks of blood still in the fume hood.

“Eduardo?” She nudged the young man on the shoulder.

The grad student pulled out his phone, hands still shaking, and queued up the photo of the corpse formerly known as Maryam.

“Oh. Shit,” Jim allowed. Eduardo’s free hand cradled his eyes.

“Want to see if they’ll let Layla can go home now?” Nua murmured.

Maryam was one of the few scientists whose work had actually been making progress. A fellow virologist, she and Nua were on lab-equipment-swapping-and-splitting-hotel-rooms-at-conferences-to-save-SHIELD-travel-costs terms. Or had been. Most scientists had spent a day or two after the takeover entirely at loose ends, lost in one of the five stages of grief. But Morse had called Maryam up to the top floor right away. The scientist who returned to the lab cluster was nearly unrecognizable; as if her eyes had gone bloodshot and her cheeks hollow in an hour. Then she ordered Eduardo out of the lab and flew into work on something.

The other virologists started bringing her food, when they could get her to leave the containment area. It was a convenient excuse to keep an eye on what she was doing. Maryam didn’t seem to mind the nosiness; if anything she welcomed it. But she never stopped for long. Only enough to drop some horrifying hints, and she’d disappear back through the airlock.

Those little sessions had revealed enough for them to guess at Maryam’s dilemma. Hydra wanted something that wasn’t normally airborne to become airborne. Maryam was desperate for the project to fail, but Morse had made it clear that progress was to be made by a certain date-- or the consequences would be severe. And since they needed Maryam well enough to work, they’d fall on Layla.

Maryam refused offers to help-- something about “when the shit hits the fan, it can’t splatter too far.” She’d said she had it under control. That she was slow-walking it as best as she could. The hollow in her eyes didn’t go away, so much as it was joined by a strange lightness. One day she reassured Nua-- over her shoulder, while washing up some glassware in the lab sink-- that they couldn’t get too close, she still had a card up her sleeve. What they want, she laughed, is all in my head. Right where I want it.

• • • •

Maryam’s solution-- as effective as it had turned out to be-- left Nua and Jim with a hell of a logistical problem.

“They will let Layla out of here, right?” Jim said.
Nua folded her arms tight under her bosom and huffed.

“I mean I can’t see why not,” she said. “It doesn’t make sense anymore to keep her here, all she’ll do for them now is take up space.”

“Do we have a good way to get her out?” Jim asked, chin making a conspiratorial tilt downward.

Nua gave him a pointed look.

Jim made a very subdued fist-pump. He’d only been looking for an excuse to leave this godforsaken compound since the day this whole thing went down. Jim moved toward the door, and Nua followed.

“Right. And… to be clear, how much of this am I doing?” he asked.

“Today? All of it,” Nua replied. “I’ve got to--” She sighed and rubbed her eyes with one hand. “There’s a thing at six I’ve gotta be here for.”

Jim raised an eyebrow. Can you divulge? Nua looked to ceiling and shook her head just the slightest bit. No, but it’s bullshit, her face said clearly.

Jim shrugged. “How to get started?”

“I want to say check in with the brass?” Nua ventured. “As fun as it’d be to roll out with guns blazing that’s probably not the MO for transporting a minor.”

Jim contemplated the task ahead and sighed deeply. How exactly do you tell your evil overlord that one of your fellow inmates just clocked out of her final shift-- Nope. He was gonna get Force-choked for sure.

“I think Morse already knows,” Nua said, guessing his line of thought and glaring at nothing.

“Knows what?” Jim said warily.

“She gave me this lab twenty minutes ago.”

Jim said nothing for a moment. Then-- “That was the phone call?”

“Yeah.” A beat of silence. “Plus the thing at six. It was a rollercoaster.”

Another pause followed.

“So could you--” Jim started.

“Yeah, I’ll give her a ring.”

“It’s just, I don’t think she knows who I am.”

“Yeah, probably not,” Nua agreed.

“Which is fine.”

“Shhh! It’s ringing.”
Much to their surprise, Morse was one hundred percent behind the idea. In an “Ew, who needs another mouth to feed” kind of way-- but they'd take it.

She did have a condition. Jim and Layla were to bring an escort. One of the hulking soldiers Morse had brought with her. The jungle was full, she reminded them, of robbers and predators. Far better to be safe.

Rumor had it these men-- and a few women-- were steroied to the gills. There were others, whispers that Morse wielded some kind of mind control over these soldiers. Jim and Nua had already decided the steroid rumors were likely true. The mind control bits, on the other hand, sounded like utter bollocks. Exactly the kind of rumors that passed around like currency amongst the terrified-- even the data-driven.

Jim tried hard to not look disappointed about the escort. Nua couldn't meet his eyes for a moment. It took-- she reflected with an uncomfortable sigh-- a lot more than just ass-kissing to get that privilege.

•

Morse gave the grief-stricken little girl a whole hour to pack her bags. Nua, in the meantime, prepped Jim to use the opportunity to do a supply run.

“Last thing-- see if you can get the escort to let you pick up some things. You got cash?”

“Probably?”

Nua scowled and went fishing around in her bra.

“Here,” she said. Jim hesitantly accepted the roll of cash with two fingers. It was still warm. He shuddered.

“I just never know when they’re gonna let me go out,” she muttered. Nua was one of the few people Hydra made the odd exception for with leaving the base. But the openings to go out were unpredictable, and she intended to be prepared anytime a window came up, thanks.

Jim gingerly tucked it into his pocket.

“If there’s change, bring it back,” Nua said. “It’s for a good cause but there’s, like, not anymore where that came from.”

•

There really wasn’t much you could say to an eleven-year-old child distraught over the “accidental” death of her mother. Jim just kept handing out tissues. Not that it did the kid a fat lot of good, but at least it spared her the additional indignity of snotting all over her shirt. So that was something.

Jim didn’t much like being useless. He had nothing Hydra wanted, which made him dead weight. But unlike little Layla, he was an adult and he’d seen some things -- they’d never let him go. Jim was a problem that only had one solution. And judging by what had just happened to Maryam, they were more than willing to do it. It was time to get the hell out of Dodge.

Nua’d be left to handle Morse on her own. But Nua was a fully fledged adult now, capable in her own right-- hardly the meek, lost-looking 19-year-old who’d first wandered into his lab. She
didn’t need a mentor anymore. She needed somebody to get out and call for help.

Jim looked again at their escort—the one thing standing between him and freedom—driving them down the rocky, slippery road to Kourou. In the steam of the jungle the soldier had abandoned his jacket, paring down to a t-shirt. It left his neck exposed down to the collarbone. Jim’s stomach roiled. He checked his bag again, firm between his feet, and took a deep breath. First, see the child home. But soon.

• • • • •

Nua sent Eduardo home for the day. Then she went back to her own lab, loath to set foot in Maryam’s again until absolutely necessary.

She needed to pull her thoughts together. This Chitauri revelation—that not only did Hydra want to weaponize that too, but access to Simmons was a key part of the strategy—was a serious wrinkle in the game. Nua locked herself into her office with strict orders not to be disturbed. Out came a notepad and a pen, spinning out the threads of her reeling mind onto the paper.

It wasn’t much. But writing things down had a way of helping her draw a line between what she suspected; what she knew; and what still needed more data. Nua had found it early on to be a critical exercise in cutting reality loose from the haze of lies, innuendoes, and the convenient loss of memory that Hydra brought with it.

In time she emerged and fired up a Bunsen burner. Nua turned her thoughts into ash, swept them away into a bright red trash can marked Biohazard, and headed down the stairs.

When she returned a few minutes later, it was with a rack of test tubes, filled to the top with the violent purple of blood. Each one was marked Jemma Simmons.

“All right, girl,” Nua murmured. She set the rack down on the benchtop with a gentle hand. “Let’s see what’s going on with you.”

• • • • •

Fitz was drifting in and out of consciousness, but slowly waking up enough to piece together what had just happened to him.

“Jemma.” Fitz’s voice was thick with sleep, still drifting in and out of consciousness. In a lucid moment she’d managed to get him off the gurney and onto the bed. They were now arranged in a clumsy tangle, his upper body shiplapped over hers, the tape on his eye scratching her neck.

“Mm?”

“Take it out.”

She took a deep breath and tried to think out what to tell him.

“Take it out!” he cried.

“I-- it’s not that easy, Fitz.”

“I know!” he retorted. His determined sigh puffed across her collarbone. “But it’ll be worse if we wait till I’m awake, you know that—”
“No!” she blurted. He jumped at the sudden sound, and she cringed.

“They’re booby trapped, remember?” she whispered. “But this one isn’t like the ones we’ve seen before, Fitz. The early models were a total replacement of the eye. But with yours— I haven’t seen anything like it, Fitz.”

He raised himself up on one elbow to look down at her quizzically with his good eye.

“They’re booby trapped, remember?” she whispered. “But this one isn’t like the ones we’ve seen before, Fitz. The early models were a total replacement of the eye. But with yours— I haven’t seen anything like it, Fitz.”

“So you can take it out?”

She gave an emphatic shake of the head.

“There’s too much disturbance for a keyhole operation only.” The white of his eye had been an angry red, looking more beaten than irritated— like it had been pushed around and shoved aside. Her next words came out in a rush. “I think there’s something in there behind it.”

“B-- behind?”

Jemma nodded slowly.

“Inside your head? Yeah,” she told him. “A kill switch almost for certain, and there’s no telling what else. Maybe nothing, I don’t know! I can’t-- I can’t interfere without knowing what’s in there. And I don’t.”

She paused.

“We have to get you out of here,” she whispered. “We can’t fix it here.”

He settled his head back into her shoulder. Jemma felt him nod, a tired nudge. She pressed her lips to the top of his head, ran her fingers along his neck and jaw, and pondered the utter impossibility of what she’d just said.

Fitz beat her to it.

“How?” He struggled up to look at her again. “This--” he gestured— “is to keep me from going anywhere or doing anything they don’t want. I’m-- it’s--” He stopped, finding no words to describe what he was now.

“Shh,” Jemma pleaded. “I know.” She took his face into her hands and had words on her lips, until she remembered. And froze.

He might not be able to see with it yet— his neurosystem wouldn’t be able to make sense of the signal for at least a few days. But there was no reason it wouldn’t be transmitting to his minders already, and the backscatter would see right through the bandage. Putting aside the creepy aspect of being watched— it meant Hydra could read her lips.

Jemma dove to hide her face in his neck. A shiver burrowed into in her stomach, despite his warmth pressing into her.

“I will get you out of here,” she swore, whisper biting against his skin.

Fitz pulled back to look at her, a small part of him daring to start to hope.

Jemma dropped her gaze and turned her face away.

He blinked for a moment, bewildered, until it hit him. Everything I see, they see. Fitz gasped and scrambled away from her, as fast as his drug-addled limbs would take him. He slipped right off the bed.
“Ow!”

“Fitz!” Jemma jumped down to join him. “Are you alright?”

Without thinking, he snapped his head up to shoot her annoyed look. “I’m fine--”

“Keep your head down!” she cried.

“I know, sorry, I forgot--”

“No no no no no,” Jemma rattled, their voices overlapping. “Not because of-- that.” She knelt next to him, hand on his shoulder.

“This isn’t about transmitting-- it’s your eye function. The implant is anchored to your retina, on the back of your eye, but it’s fragile-- the retina’s one layer of cells deep. Until it heals into place, there’s a danger of the entire assembly peeling off. They put an air bubble in there to keep the retina pressed against the fundus where it belongs but it only works if you’re face-down. Without that air bubble pressing on it, your retina floats away. The transmitter and kill switch will still be in there no matter what. But away from their capillary bed where they belong, your rods and cones will die, Fitz, and it’s permanent. Blindness.”

Fitz shook his head, trying to work out through the remaining haze of drugs what had just happened to him. Jemma felt his shaking breath as he wiped at his one good eye. She slid her hands down his arms and buried her face in the back of his neck.

“I’m so sorry, love,” she whispered, her voice breaking.

Within the hour they had a plan. Simmons was to stay until he was independent again, or until the device started delivering orders. Whichever came first.

Until such time came, they’d prepare for her to leave. With no outside support, no communications, and no access to vehicles, Jemma’s only way out was on foot. Which was unfortunate. Where Fitz had flunked his field assessment due to a near-terminal inability to swim, Simmons’s was courtesy of a twelve-minute mile.

She was going to need one hell of a diversion.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Fitz & Simmons start figuring out the new normal. Nua lies to cover for Jim, who keeps getting in further over his head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“That’s disgusting, even for you,” Fitz said, muffled by the blankets. Simmons kept tapping out words on his arm.

*But the only way to get the materials quietly,* she replied. The diversion-- well, one of the many diversions-- required ammonia and hydrochloric acid. Which, she cheerfully informed him, could be sourced entirely through bodily fluids, minimizing the risk of being caught compared to stealing said chemicals. She also informed him that his were unusable thanks to the post-surgery antibiotics, so Simmons would be handling this procurement project.

*How do you get it in the bottle?* he asked, already regretting it.

*Very carefully,* she replied. Somehow she managed to sound offended, even in Morse code.

“Fine,” he grumbled.

Simmons suddenly sat up.

“What is it?” Fitz asked, startled. She left the bed and was already halfway to the door.

“Going to talk a walk, I’ll be right back.”

“Jemma.” His voice was wary.

“No, really.” Fitz heard her put on her shoes. “Actually…” she stalled out. “Have you got any cash?”

“No? Didn’t we just talk about not doing anything crazy?” *Until later?* he added silently.

“It’s nothing crazy, Fitz. I just-- really need a cigarette, that’s all.”

The door opened and shut.

“You don’t smoke,” he objected, quietly, into the sheets where no one could hear.

• • • • • • • • • •

Nua squelched out of the decon shower-- standard procedure after any work in the high-security lab, no matter how routine-- got dressed as fast as she could, and headed straight to the phone. Simmons’s blood stayed behind in the top-level biohazard lab. This was another standard safety precaution for infectious disease research. But just as importantly, keeping it locked up behind a BSL-4 firewall just made it harder for Hydra to run off with it.
She waited out the phone ringing by drumming her pen. The serology results showed exactly what they should have—antibodies to the Chitauri virus were lower than when she was first recovering, but still present.

More concerning were the other tests Nua’d decided to run. It was difficult to say from a single blood draw—but whenever that sample had been taken, Simmons’s cortisol and adrenaline levels were elevated. Very elevated.

It raised questions about the circumstances it had been taken under. If recent, it suggested Simmons was in Hydra custody and under duress.

Or it could be a sample from months ago, and she’d just been biting her nails over some evaluation or another. That girl could tie herself in knots over that stuff.

Which was why Nua needed a date.

A clipped voice answered the line. Nua collected herself into “ethics? What ethics?” mode.

“Agent Morse!” she bubbled. “Test results are in, titers are down as expected, the only question is how fast they’re going down, so I’m gonna keep pestering you for a date so we can plot that decay curve. Can’t model a vaccine without it.”

“Word is it’s from today.”

“Perfect! So we’re looking at a pretty stable immune response.” Nua paused. “Any chance we could bring the subject here to this facility?”

“I can look into it.”

“That would be very helpful, Agent Morse. It’s not very often that you can get access to an active, living subject of this kind. I can’t stress how important it is that we capitalize on that.”

“No, I hear you,” Morse agreed. “That might take some time, let me work on it. The science head over there is a complete psychopath.”

Nua stopped short.

“Ma’am?”

“Can be a bit possessive,” Morse clarified.

“Seems like a good reason to make the transfer as soon as possible,” Nua suggested. “We’re not going to get a lot of forward movement on a vaccine until we can get some plasma cells from the subject.”

“Duly noted,” Morse said. “Anything else?”

“Nope. Got the date, want Patient 4. The end.”

“Hail Hydra.”

“Hail Hydra,” Nua replied, and hung up.. Then she pulled a trash can out from under the desk, spit in it, and kicked it back under.

• • • • • •

Armed with a pack of the on-base convenience store’s cheapest cigarettes, Simmons headed back
As she walked, she took two cigarettes out of the pack and tugged them in half. Then she emptied the tobacco into her pockets and swirled her fingers through the crunchy dried plant bits.

The hallway to her assigned lab was lined with anonymous-looking white doors— but only to the untrained eye. The airlock seals, readouts for temperature, humidity, carbon dioxide level, and irrigation timers clearly marked them as plant grow chambers.

There was no way to know for sure what type of plant was growing in there. But it wasn’t hard to guess. The type of biology research Hydra was doing— exotic alien biomolecules, transgenics, and so forth— tended to be done on tobacco. Thanks to its breeding for heavy nicotine production, tobacco could be coaxed to pump out high quantities of whatever was engineered into it. Its broad leaves and thick, chunky veins made it easy to inject experimental substances and see the results. Tobacco had been a classic experimental subject for generations of geneticists and biochemists.

Victorian scientists spent so much time cohabiting with tobacco that the plant actually showed them the existence of viruses. TMV, the tobacco mosaic virus, was the first virus ever discovered, because it was so virulent that its spread was obvious even in a primitive 19th century greenhouse. Two of the pioneers in virology found that their work on TMV made them allies in the fight against disease, but competitors for grants and glory. The younger scientist wrote to the older to ask for a truce.

“You have some interesting TMV strains that would help my research, could you please send samples?”

The senior scientist wrote back at once, saying “Never! I found them myself and I’ll use them myself!” Or however 19th century academics expressed their scorn.

On receiving the letter— written in the senior scientist’s virus-strewn lab— the younger scientist promptly went to his own greenhouse and rubbed the letter all over his own tobacco plants. They soon fell sick, and the younger scientist now had all of the elder researcher’s exotic TMV strains. The senior scientist had underestimated—or simply forgotten in his pique— TMV’s ability to spread through touch alone.

The only way to stop its spread was fastidious hygiene. Only higher-end farms and processing facilities bothered with this. The end result was that entire global supply of cheap tobacco was loaded with TMV, a tobacco pathogen that spread like wildfire with nothing but a touch.

Simmons approached the door that led into the hallway with the plant chambers. It had a NO SMOKING sign posted prominently on the door. She pushed through it, running her hands along the whole push bar as it opened.

A few steps down the hall stood a water fountain. She dipped her hands back into her pockets, combed her fingers through the dried tobacco, then stopped to take a long drink. As she did so, Simmons traced her fingers over the push button.

Next came a bathroom. She went in, made a show of checking her hair for the security cameras, and left, sliding both hands carefully down the entire door handle.

Soon, Simmons had laid her virus-coated hands on a few, inconspicuous, key locations. Several doorknobs, a light switch, the water fountain— plus a couple of the hand sanitizer stations. Hand sanitizer did absolutely nothing to stop TMV. Jemma had to tamp down a smirk, thinking about folks picking it up from the handle and rubbing it all over their hands right before entering clean rooms.

The soft target was the nursery. Simmons had no idea which door it was behind. But that didn’t matter. Now that TMV was planted everywhere, the rest of the Hydra personnel would carry it there for her.

The nursery was key because tobacco made outrageously tiny seeds— the size of large sand grains. Any lab using tobacco needed a nursery, and seedlings had to stay there three months before
reaching usable size. Thus an outbreak on seedlings would grind all research to a halt for at least three months. That was a full financial quarter. It wouldn't just slow the science down-- it would get noticed by higher-ups. And since annoyed brass had a habit of firing perfectly good people and shutting down perfectly good studies, the knock-on effects could go well past slowing down individual research projects.

For the last step-- and to cover her tracks in the security footage-- Simmons nicked into her lab and double-checked the temperature on all her incubators. Then she turned around towards home, hands lingering on the doors.

• • • • • •

Jim and the armed escort, now sans Layla, bounced and skidded their way back through the back roads to the Treehouse. The road cut a sharp red line up and down the hillsides, vibrant against the vegetation’s dense green.

The soldier laughed, deep in his story. It was something about his two-year-old son and fishing and… boats or something.

“It must be hard being away, huh?” Jim asked. He eyed his knapsack nervously. This son of a bitch was making it real hard to murder him.

“Yeah,” the man acknowledged, slowing to guide the truck around a muddy turn. “But it’s worth it.”

“Right?” Jim agreed vigorously. He opened the top of his pack and threw the granola bar wrapper back in.

“You can stand there and let everything get taken over by nutcases… or not. No way I’m gonna have my kid live in some godless free-for-all where nobody gives a shit about values.”

Oh. Good, Jim thought. A dude who’d just spent the day chauffeuring a brand-new orphan courtesy of his boss wanted to talk about values. Jim suddenly rediscovered his nerve.

“Oh, wow!” he cried out, pointing across to the trees on the opposite side of the riverbank. “Monkeys!”

“No way, where?” The soldier stopped the truck, and craning his neck to see.

Jim’s hand whipped out of his knapsack, with the well-worn speed of someone who kidnapped bees for a living.

In the snap of a beetle’s wings, the soldier was making an ungodly gasping sound, and blood spurted from his neck like a jet. Jim felt a gritty, grinding crackle as the point of the blade shattered in the man’s cervical vertebrae.

He jumped away, shocked at how fast the blood was coming. Jim couldn’t tell if that was normal or part of the-- the modifications made to these men and women. More muscle meant more blood, meant more heart to push it around with, and this was what you got--

For a moment the man’s eyes met Jim’s. He was far past speaking already, but his eyes said enough.

*How could you?*

And he was gone.

Jim bent and held on to his knees, half-believing that any moment he’d blink and be riding in the
truck again listening to that poor man’s stupid prattle.

One breath, then two. Jim blinked. No such luck. He was still standing outside the Humvee, and the erstwhile driver was still dead as fuck.

That was when Jim’s fight-or-flight reflex decided to celebrate with the longest, shakiest puke of his life.

Several fumbling minutes later, he sped off in the truck. An obsidian blade-- a third of its previous length gone-- occupied the passenger seat. Volcanic glass was scalpel-sharp and great for sneaking past metal detectors, but tended to snap under stress.

When he came across a logging road, he took it, speeding far away from Hydra. He gripped the wheel through the turn and tried to stay put in the seat, rather than slip on the blood that slicked and stuck wherever his body touched the seat.

• • • • • •

“Nua.”Agent Morse’s voice appeared suddenly behind her shoulder. Nua jumped and nearly dropped the reagents she’d just pulled from the fridge. She was deep into trying to make sense of what the hell Maryam had been doing in that lab before she’d … finished.

“Jesus!” she yelped. “Don’t--” she jabbed the rack towards Agent Morse, and squelched herself down to a normal speaking voice. “Don’t sneak up on people. In labs. You never know what we're holding.”

“You know where Jim Wilcox is?”

“He got cleared to take Maryam’s kid out to the airport,” Nua replied, rooting around the rack to see if there were any tubes where the labels made sense. “They wouldn’t be back yet.”

“Especially given that his security escort’s heart stopped beating half an hour ago, then their vehicle reversed direction and set a course away from the Treehouse.”

“Oh.” Nua stuck a finger in the rack to keep her place and looked up at Morse, wondering if this was going where she thought it was going. “You think they ran into drug traffickers?”

There was a pregnant pause.

“No.”

“You think Jim killed an ex-Marine twice his size and ran off?” Nua clarified.

“I expect you’ll give us anything you know on his plans, whereabouts, or any places he’s previously had contact and may go again.”

Nua blinked. They’d joked about running, but she didn’t really think he’d really go for it. Or succeed. Damn, dude.

“I mean… he does most of his field work in Brazil, he’s got connections at the research stations around Manaus, but that’s really hard to get to from here,” Nua stuttered. “But he’s done stuff all over the Basin. Perks of working on mosquitoes, they’re literally everywhere. It’s not like stick insects or something where you’d have to--”

Morse cut her off.

“So you think an escape to the interior is likely,” she said, dubious.

“For Jim, sure,” Nua said. “He likes the backcountry better than home, that’s why his wife left
him. If I were him and didn’t want to be found, I’d just bugger off into there somewhere.”

Thing was, on this particular lark Jim would want to be found. Just… not by Hydra. Nua had no idea what he was up to, but it fading off into the bush wouldn’t be it.

“Can you please bring him back in working condition, though?” she added, dropping her voice. “I think Maryam was trying to get it to replicate inside mosquitoes for better spread and coverage, but he’s got some of the key info I’d need to finish that off.” Nua paused. “Also, he owes me, like, four hundred dolla--”

“Stay here. Someone will be by to collect your statement shortly. And don’t let it distract you-- as of taking on this lab, finishing Maryam’s vaccine is your top priority.” Then she turned on her heel and left.

Jim staggered out of the Humvee at a very scruffy, very small, very off-the-books-looking settlement where the loggers’ highway met the river. There was one at every place where a logging road met a river. And every one of them had at least one bar. Jim picked the shadiest-looking one and hustled inside.

“I need airplane to Miami,” he blurted, in a gross approximation of French, to the man behind the bar. He looked Jim up and down slowly, taking in the blood that covered him from neck to knee. And perhaps also the smell.

“Yeah you do,” the barman said.

Within the hour, Jim was sitting in a medium-sized, formerly-military, quite-possibly-stolen airplane. His backpack, minus the weight of several large-denomination US bills, was perched on his lap on top of a twenty-kilo stack of cocaine parcels and reflected the smell of sick on his breath right back in his face. Two more taped-up packets of cocaine sat between his feet. And hundreds more in the cargo hold. He’d gotten himself a discount-- not to mention a half-hour jump takeoff time-- by helping load.

Some of the packages made squawking noises that sounded a lot like macaws.

“Wildlife? Really?” Jim muttered, half to the pilot and half to himself.

The pilot looked at him. There hadn’t been time to change. Blood-- now smeared and blotted into tie-dye formations by the generous application of sweat-- still stained him. In the heat of the late afternoon it was starting to draw flies.

“Shut the fuck up, man,” the pilot said, and fired up the engines.

Within minutes they passed from forest, to a brief sliver of fishing village, to turquoise shallows, to the slatey depths of the Caribbean. The pilot stayed low to avoid radar detection from any of the several countries whose airspace they passed through. Just before the sun set, a stretch of land too long to be anything but Cuba appeared on the horizon. The plane tacked east to stay over water. When they had finally passed to the far side of the great island, Jim finally began to believe he could make it home.

It wasn’t like Fitz to be up at 5am. Granted, neither was spending 48 solid hours face-down. He
was finally cleared to be up and about, and both of them were desperate to get out of the room.

“Any signal inputs so far?” Jemma asked. She was getting dressed, while he put his shoes on, back turned.

Fitz squinted, blinking one eye shut and then the other. “Nope, nothing yet.”

It made for an odd calm before a storm. There was no telling when the transmitter would come online, no telling when… life as they knew it would come to a close.

But in the meantime, breakfast was calling.

“How are you coming along?” he asked, looking back to see if she was ready. And stopped himself.

Jemma stepped up behind him, slipped her hand into his, and rested her chin on his shoulder.

“Ready,” she said.

Simmons had the bright idea to eat in a solarium she’d found earlier. It was out of the way, small and dated in its construction. It was also rather leaky, if the water damage on the floor was any indication, but it had a few good chairs and a table. It overlooked a small, weedy courtyard surrounded by other buildings and razor wire-topped fence. No chance of escape from there-- just sunburn and mosquitoes.

Dawn was just beginning. A parade of birds made their way overhead, winging out of the orange band on the horizon into the still-dim west. Jagged rows of egrets, ospreys, and stately herons with broad wings like sails and heads tucked against their shoulders like the prow of a ship soared overhead. Closer to the ground, two or three very diligent bats swirled around a security light, trying to catch a few more moths before turning in. Jemma watched the goings-on outside with rapt attention until Fitz tugged her sleeve. He’d set up two chairs next to each other at a table, and took the one on the left. Jemma dropped into the other one, snug against his right side where she couldn’t be seen. They quickly tucked in to the breakfast Simmons had picked up in the cafeteria.

Fitz found the windows started looking rather odd. In the one eye, at least.

Simmons felt him shifting around and looked up. He was tilting his head this way and that, squinting out of one eye and then the other at the growing light.

“Did Akeela or Mike say anything about a polarized filter?”

“No,” Jemma murmured. “But it appears they have you on a different model entirely.”

“Huh.”

Jemma sat up, eyes fixed on the table. He’d seen that look before. It was the eureka that came before the eureka. Maybe more like a shark that’d caught the scent of blood.

“What’s the tea look like to you, Fitz?” she said.

He looked down from the windows to the breakfast spread on the table.

“Oh. Okay. Um-- it was not doing that before.”

“Doing what, love?”

“Giving me a headache,” he groaned, rubbing his eyes. He looked again. The tea mugs were still a stubborn shade of some goddamn color he’d never goddamn seen before.
Simmons nodded. “They’re a bit warmer now the tea’s been in them a few minutes;” she said. “I think you may be perceiving infrared.”

“Fantastic,” he said. He looked again. Nope. Still did not look right.

“Can we try something?” Jemma said gently.

Fitz nodded. She was right-- it was disconcerting, but he needed to get his head wrapped around this. Fast.

She held up a spoon.

“How’s this look?”

Fitz shook his head. “Normal.”

She stirred it around in the tea and lifted it back out.

“And now?”

“Yeah, that’s different.”

Jemma nodded. “Hypothesis confirmed, then. Whatever they’ve put in there, infrared is part of the package.”

Fitz nodded, eyes fixed on the mug and spoon. He reached out to touch them. After all, it was no good seeing bizarre temperature-colors if you didn’t know what temperature they meant.

Jemma watched him reach out, and giggled in spite of herself.

“Oh, yes-- by all means, let’s calibrate,” she said.

They spent the next several minutes playing around with the tea, and mugs, and saucers and spoons. The hot tea would always started out a brilliant shade of whatever-the-fuck-color it was when hot, then descend through a bizarre and washed-out rainbow, and peter out into a sort of nothing by the time it reached room temperature. Meanwhile, in the other eye everything looked entirely normal. After a few tries Fitz found he could guess the temperature before touching it, just by looking.

“Alright, but I’m going to drink this one,” Jemma laughed, taking the still-full mug into protective custody in her hands. “It’s early for me, and they want me to work today.”

“When?”

“Oh, by eight, there’s still plenty of time,” she replied.

“I’ll fix it up for you,” he offered. She did have a long day ahead of her. And he really wanted to see what it would look like when you poured the milk in.

Jemma handed over the mug. In the meantime, Fitz had started poking a spoon around in a glass of orange juice.

“Huh.” He put it back in the mug of tea.

“It fades out when you put it in the tea, but not the orange juice,” he said.

“It?”

“The spoon. Is that-- is that from the temperature? Something to do with sugar in the juice?”

Simmons glared at the two vessels. She shook her head.
“Tannins,” she declared. “Some of them absorb infrared.”

“So… every time you make a cuppa, you make a liquid cloaking device?”

“…Yes?”

“Huh.”

Jemma’s gaze was fixed on the hot mug. “Huh, indeed.”

After a moment she tore herself away. “Shall we try for ultraviolet?”

“Sure?”

Jemma had already stood up, and opened a door into the courtyard. Fitz joined her, and they were both immediately floored by the soaking, steaming heat. It was like walking into a clothes dryer halfway through its load—and it was still dawn. The sun wasn’t even properly up yet. Fitz was already sweating. He picked up a rock—a spongy, chalky grey hunk of limestone—and wedged it in the door so they wouldn’t get trapped in the courtyard. Then he thought about Simmons having to run off on foot in this steam bath and started sweating even harder.

“Alright, Fitz,” he heard, and turned around. She’d picked up three different kinds of weeds. Two with yellow flowers, one with white.

“Do any of these look different on the left and right?”

Fitz blinked at the fistfuls of flowers.

“Those two?” he said, pointing. “On this eye, they’ve got dark circles in the middle.”

“That’s ultraviolet,” she nodded, dropped them, and wiped her hands on her trousers. “Those are nectar guides for bees. Normally we can’t see them, but... “

Fitz nodded, and opened the door for both of them to go outside.

“Later in the day,” she said, “when the sun’s over the horizon, look for a band of polarized light across the sky. It’s how insects navigate—it’s always 90 degrees offset from the sun and still shows when it’s overcast.”

“Good to know,” he nodded. He tried not to sound distracted—down near the bottom of his vision, a tiny flurry of white pixels had blinked on. On reflex, his gaze darted down to get a better look. But the moment he did, they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

Behold! The 2nd of what should be 3 installments over Christmas/New Year's break.

BONUS FOOTAGE: Simmons wandering around the lab building dropping plant virus on everything
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