Easy As Pie

by BC_Brynn

Summary

Post Skyfall. Avengers remix. Loki never fell off the Bifröst – he was put on Midgard with his powers bound. As a member of a counterintelligence agency, he tries to save the Earth.

Notes

I don’t own Avengers. I don’t own Avengers’ quotes either, and I’ve taken them from the movie and put them in where I liked them. If you recognise them, I’m happy for your taste in cinematography. I don’t own Skyfall. I viewed all the Craig!Bond movies mostly for the purpose of criticising them, but I adore the new Q (and it shows). I’m not aware of having quoted Skyfall anywhere, but shit happens. In that case, it’s not mine. ;-))

See the end of the work for more notes.
- Absolutely not, Mr Smith. Those files are confidential. –

Q should have expected it. He checked the other screen and, indeed, the AI was now hacking back.

It was welcome to. After the Silva debacle-

(And how Q regretted the worm’s death, so quick and easy compared to the plan he had built up in his head for when he would get his hands on him! He had had weeks, perhaps months of pain prepared for the invertebrate! Few dared to oppose Q, fewer yet succeeded, and those all came to dearly regret it in the end.)

-he had gone over every switch, every router, every slot and port in the Headquarters, and disabled all non-critical connectivity. He had banned WiFi at the premises and physically removed all wireless adapters from the servers’ hardware. He could not access any sensitive files from this computer.

There was not anything more interesting on it than his Tetris high scores which, all silly humbleness aside, were phenomenal.

- I am impressed. – Q typed in.

- I shall relay that to Mr Stark. I am sure he will be flattered that the British counterintelligence thinks so much of him. –

Q had expected that the machine would discover as much. The location of the MI-6 building was nowhere near as secret as the Executive Branch would like to pretend that it was, and localising a known IP address was trivial. Q had, of course, rerouted through several servers worldwide, but his opponent this time had the skill to go toe to toe with him on the field of programming, so it was mostly just a formality.

- Not so much him personally, as his accomplishments on the field of computer security. – Q replied to the sentient machine on the other side of the conversation. – You may inform him that he has become a source of frustration to me. –

The Stark Tower was one of the very few places on the planet he could not access. He was quite impressed with Stark’s sentient machine, and similarly impressed with its creator. He had made forays into assembling a dossier on Anthony Stark, but quickly found that most of publicly available information was either of pornographic nature, or data Stark wanted people to know (or both). Useless.

If he ever lowered himself to admiring a mortal (not that he would ever admit to it), it would be Anthony Edward Stark. He would have been the ideal disciple, were Q the type to take disciples. Alternatively, were Q anything like his brother (which to him seemed a fate worse than death), he would have wanted to call Stark… a friend. His skin crawled just thinking it.

“Look at you, Q. Fanboying?”

Q cursed himself for not paying sufficient attention to his surroundings. Ordinarily, his office was one of the safest places for him, outfitted with locks that counted as pinnacle of technology, but there had to be allowances made for the emergencies, and the double-oh agents were walking emergencies.
That, I am certain, will make sir very happy.” was written on the screen, on the background of a picture of the Iron Man armor in flight, which the machine had managed to install as desktop background without Q’s knowledge. Credit where credit was due: Q might have met his match in programming.

“I do hope you have a valid reason for invading my sanctuary, double-oh-six,” Q said, typing at the same time to figure out which weakness the machine used to change his settings.

“James trusts you,” the agent claimed.

Q was sure it was not anything nearly as clear-cut, but there had been certain undeniable… synergy between him and the double-oh-seven from the first moment they had touched – the handshake at the gallery. The agent had become a constant distraction, to the point that Q had let Silva momentarily get the better of him. Admittedly, there had been many other factors in that situation (like the fact that Q had taken over the whole branch mere days before the snafu, that he had insufficient premises, technologies and personnel), but they all felt like excuses, and the rage simmered just under Q’s skin.

He had wanted all the processing power – but that processing power was redundant. He could – and had – requisitioned enough technology to keep the servers safe from another Trojan horse of the metaphorical sort. Nowadays the MI-6 had an established system of quarantine for any new data and a roster of techs employed to safeproof all information before it was allowed to be downloaded. It might have been too late, but Q made damn sure it wasn’t too little.

Even so, every time he so much as glimpsed James Bond, every time he heard or read his name, he recalled his failure.

“He has his reasons,” Q allowed eventually.

“Whatever they may be,” Alec Trevelyan replied. He was very obviously trying to incite a reaction in Q, not even putting any effort into it, thinking he was hunting easy prey.

“I do not kiss and tell, double-oh-six.” With Bond’s reputation, it was enough of a suggestion to sell the implications.

Trevelyan snorted, as if that had been completely predictable. Q briefly wondered what kind of a fairy tale Bond had spun for his colleague about them, and whether wild sex was a part of it. By the look on Trevelyan’s face, it probably was.

Q decided to tentatively take it as a compliment. Bond was, professionally and personally, an unrepentant manwhore, but he did have standards, so his interest was generally assumed to be flattering.

- I would be interested in continuing our conversation later. – Q wrote. He had spoken to various sentient constructs before, but never a machine without a slightest spark of magic, and never one built by a Midgardian.

- That would be my pleasure, Mr Smith. –

“People James sleeps with tend to die a lot,” Trevelyan said once he realised that Q was sufficiently amused by his online chat and was not going to play a waiting game with a field agent, much less with a field agent that had already lost his own game by virtue of being the one who needed something from Q rather than the other way around.

“Have you come to discuss existentialism, then?” Q responded, glancing over his shoulder to this man, tall and strong for one of his race but within his mind still a child. “I will happily give you
directions to Medical. I hear MI-6 has an excellent psych department.”

A tremor ran through Trevelyan’s body – not quite a full-fledged shudder, but perhaps a suppressed one.

Double-ohs were predictable.

Q stood up from the computer, turned to face the agent and leant back against the desk. He took note of the appraising look Trevelyan ran over his body – assessing threat level and physical appeal at the same time, as if trying to see what Bond had seen (and failing, quite possibly because there had never actually been such an encounter between Bond and Q) – and waited until the man met his eye.

Trevelyan’s shoulders sank. He let out a harsh exhale and pulled out a mobile phone. He stabbed at the keys for a few seconds and then offered the device to Q.

Q took it and read the displayed text message.

- Join me in Stuttgart, Sashenka. –

It was followed by a string of numbers that Q quickly interpreted as date and time. It was in five days.

Q pulled out his own phone and checked. Bond was supposed to be in Pottersville for another week, pending any pesky mishaps like him being discovered or him discovering an immediate threat to the British nation. If anything of the sort had happened, he had a slew of methods for contacting the Headquarters, the foremost of which was the radio Q had equipped him with. The radio had not been used, and it had not been destroyed, either. Bond was a competent pickpocket, and there were still payphones in the USA, weren’t there? There were internet cafés. Also, he had a known contact in the CIA.

He had once called in from the middle of a damn rainforest. If he had intentionally gone off the grid, he would not have sent a text message to his colleague.

Well, possibly. If it was a person whom he trusted. But such a person would not have come to Q with it.

“Are you sure Bond wrote it?” he inquired, checking on the status of Bond’s tracer on the other computer, the one connected to the servers, but not to the internet. The status was displayed as inactive. Q, in frustration, refreshed the page, even though it updated automatically every thirty seconds.

“He’s the only one who would risk calling me by that pet name,” Trevelyan explained.

Trouble, then, Q concluded. Was Bond trying to warn them about something that was about to go down in Germany? That seemed the most likely conclusion, but still insufficient. Bond wasn’t talkative by nature, but if he had valuable intel, he relayed it without the need for additional questioning.

Q checked the outgoing messages. Trevelyan had replied. He had tried to call Bond, repeatedly. Bond had turned off his mobile.

What for? Had there been any news? If so, it would surely be featured world-wide, because about the only time Bond hadn’t left behind a huge mess in the wake of his explosions was when he had died.
Q could, of course, just Google it, or even go outside and ask, but it was faster this way.

- Has there been any breaking news in the USA over the past twenty-four hours? –

Stark’s machine replied instantly.

- There has been several, but I believe that the only one British Secret Service would be interested in is this one. –

A media player window opened on the screen, covering the lines of text, and Q recognised it as news footage. It concerned the sudden evacuation of a research complex in New York, preceded by unexplained meteorological anomalies and followed by the rapid implosion of the whole complex. It would have been mildly interesting, if not for the fact that it was supposed to have happened mere miles from Pottersville.

The timing was important. Q checked the news, decided that the most likely time of the destruction of the complex was eleven twenty-two, and compared it with the time when the text message had been sent. Oh-one, oh-eight. Almost two hours later. Bond had been compromised. Strange, how uncomfortably warm the cool underground office suddenly became.

It was now close to six, and Q was irritated that it had taken Trevelyan that long to come, but the human might have chosen to not do anything at all, or to escalate the problem through the ‘proper channels’ instead. Therefore Q took a deep breath and counted his blessings. If James Bond was compromised, blessings might be very helpful.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, double-oh-six,” Q said, sitting down to do a bit of a hack on another of his side-projects. “You are dismissed.”

The big burly blond straightened, assuming an intimidating poise that, frankly, was hilarious when compared to a drunken Ás trying to get to the next horn of mead. “My phone-”

Q would have waved his hand, but he needed both for coding. He mentally thanked the Norns that he had already pre-written this program (because he knew to anticipate some situations, and it was as good as inevitable that he and this Division would cross paths), and mostly it just needed to be executed. “Tell the techs on your way out. They’ll equip you with a new one.”

Then he was inside the SHIELD database. He started a search for everything related to the incident near Pottersville, found PEGASUS, and started downloading as fast as the processor could. He would not have much time. SHIELD had to have a brilliant sysadmin.

“But I need that number!” Trevelyan protested.

Q looked at him.

Trevelyan noticed, of course, but not fast enough to hide that he had been intently staring at the device, as if to will it to come back into his possession. He seemed to be quite a loyal friend, to risk that he would be considered traitor for his effort to help a colleague.

Loyalty was an emotion, or a characteristic, for which Q did not have any place in his life anymore. He had tried. He had given his best, and he had been repudiated for it – well, then that was how life was. Once bitten, twice shy, as the mortals said.

“You are dismissed, double-oh-six.”

Trevelyan went. He cast a wrathful scowl at Q, and Q was nearly certain that he had made the mortal
hate him, but he did not particularly care. What he, despite himself, cared about, was Bond’s return. He suspected that to accomplish that, he would need the phone.

Now, regulations stated that he would have to inform Tanner, who would, in turn inform M – bureaucracy at its most primitive – and then would follow a committee made up from members of the Executive Branch, the Q Branch, Intentions, Logistics, Archives, Legal, Accounting, HR and a representative of the Cabinet. They would outline the protocol for this occasion, and decide whether any effort would be made to retrieve the possibly compromised agent, whether he should be neutralised or if there even was an operative who could be expected to achieve the neutralisation of James Bond.

Q interrupted the download, scheduled himself a plane ticket, disconnected his laptop, packed it up into his rucksack together with a few technological toys he had hidden in the locked drawers in his office. He selected an appropriate set of documents that were technically genuine, but had been issued specifically for MI-6, and for the next few days would identify him as John L. Smith, instead of the ‘Anderson’ ones he carried on day-to-day bases.

Then he clocked off and left just as the sun began to rise above London.

On the *accursed* plane, on his way to JFK, New York, Q reviewed the information he had… *borrowed* from SHIELD.

PEGASUS, he learned, was a project ostensibly dedicated to energy, but requiring many strategy and weapons experts from all over the globe, because that was not suspect in the least. Also, it employed several leading experts in various fields, including a Dr Selvig, with whom Q was, unhappily, personally acquainted. There were leading physicists and engineers by the dozens, and none of the documents mentioned anywhere just what it was they were researching.

The official project proposal had stated reactors, similar to Stark’s arc reactor (which, yes, Q admitted it in the privacy of his mind, was a marvel). Glaringly, Stark’s name was absent from all reports and invoices and payroll sheets. As little as Q knew about the most hated American darling – including that he consulted for SHIELD on a recurrent basis – he did not believe for a second that Stark had done any work for them gratis.

They were developing a new kind of weapons on the Adirondack. Someone had found out and stopped them. Only, Bond had gotten caught in the impact and now was… what? Collaborating with the enemy?

The first breath of the New York air at the airport felt like inhaling from the exhaust of a car, and while remaining inside the flying tin can would have been worse, it was all Q could do convince himself to keep breathing. Not that London was that much better, most days, but at least Q didn’t notice the stink anymore.

His phone rang.

Q glanced at the caller ID, only perfunctorily interested in whom he was going to ignore. Later they might sack him for this, or put him in front of a disciplinary board – but right now he was getting *his* agent back from what he suspected was either magical or alien threat. The MI-6 were not authorised to handle anything that originated from space.

The caller was a name he had not programmed into his mobile. Someone had hacked him. Judging by the blinking word ‘JARVIS,’ he had an idea about the perpetrator.
He picked up. “Smith.”

“It is a pleasure to welcome you on the US soil, Mr Smith,” replied a voice that did not sound computerised at all.

“I have lost something around here. I do not suppose you know where it might be?”

“I could not even guess at what it might be, sir.”

After a while of consideration, Q admitted: “A colleague.”

“My condolences,” the machine replied, misinterpreting Q’s statement of ‘losing someone’ as them having died rather than Q literally losing them, as was the case.

Bond was not gone – he was simply temporarily misplaced.

“Mr Stark instructed me to invite you for the grand opening of the Stark Tower.”

Q was tempted. Q was so tempted it sent a shiver down his spine. He wanted to get inside that building and discover its secrets, not to destroy it or replicate it, but simply to know. He wondered if Stark understood that motivation. It was likely.

“I would be delighted,” Q said with rare sincerity, “but my original purpose takes precedence.”

“I understand,” the machine replied in a tone that suggested it truly sympathised, “but I am afraid that Mr Stark cannot be relied on for an equal amount of empathy. Please, do not take offence. It is his way of expressing appreciation.”

The call disconnected, and Q felt a little bemused as he stepped out of the throng of travelling humans and toward the taxi services to secure transportation.

A shiny dark car blaring obnoxious music swerved in between the parked taxis and braked to a halt inches from a concrete pillar. The door opened and a small man wearing glasses and a goatee stepped out of it. For a second Q thought it was a car thief – someone who drove a car that expensive would not do it in ratty jeans and a band t-shirt, but then it all clicked together in his head, and he realised it was too late to run and hide.

“Mr Stark,” he said, stepping forward and ignoring the gasps and shouts of surprise behind him. Celebrities. Q hoped no one would try and take a photo; the last thing he needed was his face on the front pages.

“Mr Smith,” Stark replied with an ironic twist of his mouth. “Get in before the hounds eat you.”

“Are you abducting me?” Q asked, tightening his hold on the strap of his rucksack.

Stark tapped the roof of his (beautiful) car. “It’s not abduction if you go willingly. And believe you me, at this point going is much less hazardous to your health than staying. Plus, if you go, I won’t tattle on you to Fury. You are here about the you-know-what, right?”

Technically, Q wasn’t. Not ‘about.’ Perhaps ‘because.’ Yes, that was more the case. He was racing against time, both due to the unknown force that had compromised Bond and because of the MI-6, which would start hounding him soon enough. He didn’t have the leisure to play around with Stark.

On the other hand, tripping over his own two feet while trying to get to his agent would not help anything. Sometimes the shortest way wasn’t the fastest one. And Stark had resources.
He also had an intermittent consulting job with the SHIELD, and Q wanted to avoid them very much.

“What is your gain?” Q asked.

Stark was as inscrutable as only a madman could be. Even most of the double-ohs were easier to read and predict.

“I get a playmate for a few hours,” he said and then paused. “That came out wrong. I want to play, and I want to not be alone. Usually when I play, people get mad or bored, but you wouldn’t, because you would understand, and anyway – you started it when you tried to hack JARVIS!” He punctuated this exclamation by pointing a finger at Q’s chest.

Q was inadvertently charmed. This always happened to him. It had happened with his brother many, many times over the years, and it had happened much more recently with Bond. That was his most secret and most terrible weakness: he found this kind of behaviour endearing.

Obviously, he was cursed. Not in his right mind. An arrow short of a quiver – or a bullet short of a magazine.

Q put on his best ‘let us be friends from now unto forever’ smile, which he had perfected for use on the courtiers in the Valaskjálf and said: “I know something you might be interested in.”

Stark laughed with his entire body – chest and belly shaking, hands gripping hard onto the open door of the car, head thrown back.

Q strode to the other side of the car, let himself in, took a seat and settled his rucksack on his knees.

Stark overcame his fit of mirth and climbed in, slamming the door with gusto and starting the car. He maneuvered them out of the car park and onto the streets, which at this time were not quite as horribly busy as to call them jammed, but which raised Q’s pulse anyway. Stark did not seem affected in the least. He was nattering on about the car’s make, model and specifications, which Q listened to – because it was interesting – but which he did not want to focus on right now.

There were yellow taxis, street vendors and McDonald’s. There were thousands upon thousands of people walking out in the red light of the setting sun.

It was worse than London.

Stark somehow found the time, in between dodging swerving vehicles, to observe Q.

“You don’t look like a secret agent.”

Q blinked. He was wearing his usual office clothes (slacks, shirt, cardigan) plus the parka, which really was too hot for this weather. Only, if he tried to shrug it off now, he would probably plant some of his extremities in Stark’s face and they would have a fatal accident. A little magic would be handy now, but nothing for it.

“You’ve met enough secret agents to be able to make such a claim.”

Stark shrugged. “They seem to like me. At least, they keep coming around, and while my coffee is great, it’s not that great. But they all wear black – suits and catsuits and so much leather they would give PETA a collective aneurism. One wore a dress that one time, but she was undercover, so it doesn’t count.”
“I’m undercover, too,” Q informed him.

Stark glanced at him and frowned. “Undercover as what?”

“As a secret agent,” Q replied, curious about what the man would make of that. He really was as engaging as his programming indicated.

“No, really?” Stark said.

“No, really,” Q agreed.

There was another while of silence, and Stark took a sharp left turn into a narrow alleyway that was unusually empty of rubbish and vagabonds.

“JARVIS told me you work for the British Secret Service. Intelligence optional.”

Q chose to observe the system of ramps and hydraulics that transported the car to what apparently passed for garage in Stark’s reality, but which Q couldn’t help but classify as amusement park for technophiles. It was truly a place out of a fairy tale – only it had to be a fairy tale from Midgard’s future, because this kind of place could not have ever existed before.

“Bugger,” he muttered, feeling quaintly colloquial in the middle of New York.

“Ah,” Stark agreed, magnanimous. “You don’t have everything back over the Pond, do you? Come in. I’ll introduce you to Pepper, and then I’m going to disconnect the transmission lines and go all… 

_{f\text{iat l\text{ux}.}”

“You have an arc reactor in here?” Q deduced, craning his neck to see the ceiling and try to extrapolate the architecture of the building. He was used to magnificence and opulence, but Stark had created something new, something he had never seen before. It made his fingers itch to touch, explore, understand.

“You’re cute,” Stark concluded, grabbed Q by the flapping rucksack strap and dragged him over to a lift.

Once they were inside, a disembodied voice spoke: “Welcome to StarkTower, Mr Smith.”

“I have been abducted,” Q protested. He might have had a case, had he not been practically vibrating with excitement. Arc reactors were like the Casket of Ancient Winters, only without magic. His eyes, unbidden, strayed to the muted blue glow under Stark’s t-shirt.

It was pretty.

“So I gathered,” the machine replied with a tone of fond exasperation, as though Stark was its errant child. “I shall refrain from calling nine-one-one for the time being; I am certain that, should you indulge sir, he will be glad to help you on your mission.”

“Why?” Q demanded. That was what he still didn’t understand. “There must be hundreds of hackers trying to infiltrate your computers. Maybe thousands.”

“But none of them succeed!” Stark exclaimed excitedly. “You actually got in! JARVIS had to stop you – that means you got in through all the firewalls, all the trapped honey pots, all the encryptions! You know how many people ever successfully hacked me? Two – that’s how many. And one of them was me.”
Q couldn’t stop a gratified smile from spreading. He hoped this detour would not bring more harm to Bond, but fretting as if he were Bond’s bloody nanny wouldn’t bring him any closer to recovering the agent.

The reaction still seemed strange to him. When Silva had compromised the security of his servers, he hadn’t been angry – he had been incandescent. Later on, shame and frustration had set in. The experience had been terrible.

Stark reacted in the very opposite way. He was happy. Amused, satisfied and downright giddy. It might have had something to do with the fact that Q had not actually managed to get in – as opposed to Silva, who had infiltrated and promptly started killing people. The worm.

“I wanted to see inside,” Q professed.

“And now you can,” Stark replied just as the lift dinged. The man stepped out into a sitting room that was only partly furnished – lavishly – and partly used as a security center; he walked into the middle of the empty space, spread his arms and spun on the spot. “Behold, the fruits of my genius. And Pepper’s. Pepper’s and my genius. She goes first because she’s first alphabetically. That okay with you, Pep?”

Q finally followed his host into the open space.

A woman, attractive by human standards, in shorts and a white blouse came toward them. Her barefoot steps softly smacked against the hardwood floor. She smiled at Q – the smile of a politician or a business shark.

“Mr Smith,” she said and offered her hand. “Tony told me loads about you.”

Q obediently gave it a shake, observing her observe him. He had not missed the leading statement. He was not sure if she was lying because Stark had made up some story about their prolonged acquaintance, or because she was trying to catch him out. Whichever the case, she was being hostile.

“Pepper Potts, John Smith. John, Pepper,” Stark spoke over their mutual assessment, and just like that they were supposedly all on the first name basis.

Q liked how slick Stark could be.

“Does he really have an arc reactor powering the Tower?” he asked to divert Potts’ attention.

It worked.

“You didn’t believe him?” she inquired, startled.

“He didn’t say so much. He let me guess and never confirmed.”

She nervously bit her lower lip and then nodded. “Come on, then. Let’s see the specs. Tony’s-”

They looked over, but Stark was already gone. He had walked through a glass door out onto a terrace; Q needed a minute of taking in every detail to put together that Stark had re-engineered the terrace into a take-off and landing pad for his armour, and installed units capable of disassembling and reassembling it.

“…off.”

Potts pressed her hips to the side of the desk and stared at the running numbers on the holographic
projection. Q hovered a little to the side, trying in vain to watch everything at once, to retain every scrap of information. It was too much, too fast. Stark must have known it – otherwise he would not have invited a foreign counterintelligence agent into his home to watch a procedure that was as arbitrary as it was momentous. A little step for Anthony Stark, a great one for Midgard.

“Two more minutes, Pep, and we’re offline,” Stark’s voice said from the speakers.

“Crossing my fingers,” the woman replied.

“You having fun, Johnny-boy?”

It took Q much too long to realise that he had been addressed, but at least he had the excuse of staring at the running numbers and fluctuating graphs. On a second thought, maybe Stark didn’t care one way or another that his guest was supposedly a foreign counterintelligence agent, as long as he could brag to someone who understood the magnitude of his accomplishments.

“Doesn’t have enough eyes to watch everything at once,” Potts said for Q, unfortunately hitting the nail on the head.

Stark’s laughter filtered in. “That is fun.”

“I’m surrounded by strange people,” Potts complained humourously. “Wait, no! You are surrounded by strange people. I only have the misfortune of frequently standing next to you.”

“You’re good on this end,” Stark informed her moments later. “The rest is up to you.”

Potts, nervous, pressed her palm into the projection over a big red circle labelled with the power button pictogram. The picture disappeared and was replaced by a graphic depiction of the energy output of all technology within the building. It was horribly wasteful. Also, pretty.

“How does it look?” Potts asked.

“Pretty,” Q heard himself say. Of course, he was talking about the numbers rather than the visual experience of the fully lit Tower.

“Like Christmas, but with more… me.”

JARVIS, dryly, announced: “It feels tingly.”

“No comments from the peanut gallery, J,” Stark replied, but he sounded amused. Moments later he landed on the pad, and this time Q took the chance to observe the disassembling process – only that, too, was much too fast with too many processes happening at once.

“Sir,” JARVIS spoke despite the curtness he had just been treated with, “Agent Coulson of SHIELD is on the line.”

Q paled.

Potts noticed, and so did Stark. They both must have figured out that whatever Q was there to do, he did not want SHIELD to know about.

“That information I mentioned I had for you-”

“Not for SHIELD?” Stark asked, frowning.

He made an incomprehensible gesture toward Potts, which she interpreted and complied by moving
off to the table and bringing back three glasses and a bottle of champagne. She had dexterous hands.

“SHIELD already knows this,” Q explained. “They, however, don’t want you to know.”

“That could be a reasonable executive decision,” Stark pointed out, taking his glass from Potts’ hands and ignoring the trilling telephone.

“How about the difference between clean energy research and weapons manufacture?” Q inquired.

“Does that not blur the line of ‘lying by omission’ a little too much?”

Stark’s face closed. He exchanged a look with Potts. Potts nodded, hesitant but willing to play along.

Stark had known, Q realised. Or, at the very least, he had had an idea. Otherwise he would not be accepting Q’s assertion nearly as easily. He might have found out by hacking the SHIELD servers, too – it had not been as difficult as it should have been, considering what kind of a shadowy Big Brother of an organisation they were dealing with – and he also might have known more about the snafu that had happened at the Pottersville complex yesterday.

“Close the line, JARVIS,” Stark ordered.

“Sir,” the machine protested.

“I know.” Stark grabbed Q’s wrist and dragged him toward the sofa, where he pushed him down and took a seat plastered to his side.

Potts’ sat down and leaned on the man from the other side mere moments later.

“You should be used to this, Agent,” Stark said to Q. “Briefing. We’re lovers. We’ve met online and had a few great cybersex sessions, I hacked your webcam, found out you were eatable, and invited you for drinks and a little tête-à-tête with me and Pep. How ‘bout it?”

Q noticed that he was still holding his half-empty glass of champagne. So was Stark. Potts’ glass was still full, and she was holding the bottle in her other hand. He had never wanted to be a field agent.

“Sir,” the machine spoke again, voice filled with sarcasm, “my protocols are being overwritten.”

Q felt Stark’s chuckles against his ribs. Obviously, that was not a concern, so it must have been a code between the creator and his creation.

“Too late to protest,” Potts informed Q and smiled at him. It was a new smile, much different from the one before. It was smaller and warmer and teasing – the kind of an expression one might bestow upon a lover.

Q found that he liked her, too.

The lift door opened and closed behind someone with a light step. The reflections in the glass windows showed a man of average height, dressed in a generic suit and carrying one of those futuristic tablets that cost more than a house on the beach and were about as practical as the average Ming vase. He stopped at the stairs leading down to the sofa and, exasperated, spoke: “We need to talk.”

“Look, Agent,” Stark said lackadaisically, sniffing at Potts’ neck, “I’ve told you it was just that one night. You’re a good guy; I’m sure you’ll find a nice boy or a girl – or both, why limit yourself? Look at me, I’ve got one of each and I’m perfectly-”
“Stark!” the Agent cut in. “I’m flattered by your interest, but you’re not my type.”

“How’s the cellist?” Potts asked, twisting around so that she could look at Coulson over the backrest of the sofa while not completely dislodging Stark, who tensed. “Is that still a thing?”

Q snuck a hand under Stark’s shirt, ghosting his fingers over the skin of his stomach, and nosed at the man’s collarbone. The man did not smell repugnant – the wonders of warm water and soap – and while warm, his body was not uncomfortably hot to touch. In different circumstances, Q might have considered doing this for real. As it was, he had the hope of keeping his face hidden for the duration of the SHIELD Agent’s presence and being dismissed as one of Stark’s endless line of brainless bimbos.

“I’m sorry, Pepper,” the man said, serious. “We’ll talk when I next have a free moment.”

“Won’t be anytime soon,” Potts guessed with palpable regret.

“I’ll do what I can,” Coulson promised, and turned to Stark, offering him the tablet. “We need you to look this over.”

“I don’t like being handed things,” Stark dismissed him without looking his way.

Potts handed Coulson her glass, took the tablet, handed over the bottle, and settled the tablet on her thighs. Stark leant over and activated the screen with a touch of his left hand, while his right had somehow become buried in Q’s hair.

Coulson remained standing above them with a glass and a bottle, like a waiter. Who was waiting on them.

Q found it humorous. He tried to read a little of the files on the tablet, but that was tricky to accomplish with an Agent hovering and two clever humans probably aware of his every move.

Potts softly sighed. “I take it the date is over.”

“This is not a consultation,” Stark protested. “You’re reviving a project you’ve worked very diligently to scrap. I should know – I was being assessed by your Madam Web.”

The Black Widow, Q interpreted. There were files on her in the MI-6 archives. Interesting reading. Improbable, but not much more so than some of the more memorable double-oh stunts.

“It was scrapped for many reasons,” Coulson said stiffly, depositing both the bottle and the glass onto the nearest flat surface.

That meant that SHIELD was beholden to someone else, someone who had the authority to dismiss projects. Q would have to hack them again, lest his own curiosity torture him.

“I’m not sure I want to invest this much into a project that is designed to fail.” Stark’s fingers tightened in Q’s hair.

Q preemptively grabbed the man’s thigh, ready to bury his nails in flesh the instance Stark would cause him pain.

“We need you,” Coulson professed. He did not even bother trying to hide his desperation. “Yes, more than we realized we do. You were right.”

“You’re shit out of options and shit out of luck, Agent. You broke my fragile heart when you said I
was volatile, self-obsessed and didn’t play well with others. Now you get to deal with my frowny businessman face.”

“What do you want?”

“What do I ever want? Money, contracts, licenses… a good close look at PEGASUS.”

Coulson closed his eyes and hid his them under his palm, swallowing down a curse. When he looked up again, to meet Tony’s expectant expression, he seemed defeated.

“At this point,” he admitted, “we don’t have a choice. As you said, we’re out of options. I merely hope that you understand we’re doing this to protect the mankind.”

“I understand perfectly,” Stark replied.

“You do?” Potts inquired, tongue-in-cheek.

“I do. However, if they wanted me to sympathize, they shouldn’t have told me I wasn’t worth it when I was looking for friends. Now that I’ve risen up in the world, they come knocking on the door thinking… what? I owe them something?”

“They did help you with the palladium poisoning,” Potts reminded him.

“Which is why I gave JARVIS permission to let the Agent into the building. And why I’m even talking to him. He wants my tech, my expertise and me risking my life for him?” He gestured toward the tablet, where the video recordings of several superhuman individuals were replaced with the static picture of a blue glowing cube.

Q went warm. He felt heat creep through his marrow, blood speeding up. He knew that thing. That was a thing that most certainly should not have been on Midgard. It had been lost, but to think the mortals had found it… Now he knew what the SHIELD used to create their weapons, and he knew what the attacker had come to steal.

“Phil,” Potts spoke, “you’ve got a free place in your car? Tony has a lot of homework, and that means I’m off to get the files on the PEGASUS…” she paused. “Which, of course, I know nothing about. And neither does Tony.” She gave the Agent a beatific smile that was met with an unamused, almost hurt downward twist of lips. She sighed and climbed to her feet, leaving the tablet on her spot on the sofa.

“Be good,” Stark told her.

Potts patted him on the shoulder, did the same to Q – some sort of warning, undoubtedly – and padded over to the lift.

Coulson followed her, only to come to a halt just before exiting the room. He turned back and zeroed in on Q. “It was nice to meet you.”

“He’s deaf,” Stark said quickly, before Q could think of an appropriate response that wouldn’t require him to raise his head and give the SHIELD Agent a good look at his face. “And mute. Deaf and mute. And narcoleptic.”

Coulson gave him a truly epic what-the-Hel look.

Stark shrugged and explained: “We met online.”
The lift door closed, and Q heaved a sigh of relief. That could have gone worse.
“Sir, Agent Coulson and Miss Potts have left the building,” the machine informed them.

Stark had by this time drained all three glasses of champagne and was in the process of pouring himself a fourth one. “You work for the SIS, but you’re not a field agent,” he summarised once he had gulped down the bubbly liquid. “R and D?”

Q nodded. He remained sitting on the sofa while Stark paced around, filled with nervous energy and watching the data from the tablet, which he had transferred to the holographic projections.

“And you’re here because PEGASUS imploded?”

Q steepled his fingers and wished he had a mug of Earl Grey to hold onto. “When the research complex went down, one of our agents had been posted in the vicinity. We have reasons to believe he is alive, but no idea about his location and some suspicions about his condition.” No need to mention yet that Bond was possibly mind-controlled; better to have Stark believe him wounded.

Stark seemed surprised. “You’re not after PEGASUS?”

“An hour ago, I would not have given a damn about it,” Q said. “Now, however…” He pointed to the hologram of the Hypercube. “I know what that is. I know of some things it can… facilitate.”

“You do?” Stark invited him to expound.

Q scoffed. “How long have they had it?”

“How long have they been using it to build weapons and claimed to me it was clean energy research, you mean?” Stark rephrased. “You wait, and I’ll have JARVIS relay the basic info once I have it.”

Q would have very much liked to know both, but he wasn’t about to sit around. “I don’t have time for that. I need to go find our agent.”

“Do you even know where to start? And while we’re at it, the fuck is a lab rat doing extraction of a field agent?” Concentrating on different matters, Stark apparently lost his ability to censor his mouth.

“A lab rat can be a field agent,” Q protested, trying to draw attention further away from the fact that it was very, very obvious that this operation was not sanctioned by MI-6. “What else is Iron Man?”

“Touché.”

Now, Q thought, now he keenly missed magic. Bond had mentioned Stuttgart in four days, but even assuming that he had any intention to turn up there, he would not be there yet. No, he would have gone to the ground – and requested extraction through the official channels – or he had been taken somewhere. To the same place, presumably, as the Hypercube.

When inert, the Hypercube had very little effect on its environment. When used, however, the effect was quite profound. It would have left behind a glaringly obvious trail.

“I need meteorological data for the past twenty-four hours, concentrating on Adirondack.”
Stark paused in his pacing and softly cursed. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Perhaps a significant part of your attention is still focused on Miss Potts and Agent Coulson,” his machine replied.

Stark glared at the ceiling. “Donate you to a public high school. Or a Zoo. No difference. I need coffee. Come on, Johnny-boy, let’s get coffee. Did I mention I’ve got great coffee?”

“I prefer tea.”

“Heathen.”

x

The weather maps, compiled and analysed by Stark’s sentient computer, showed very clearly where the attack on the PEGASUS complex had originated, and which way the attacker had gone after it was over. The Hypercube disrupted the natural patterns severely enough to leave traces for hours afterwards.

Q was sitting Indian style on a mat in a large, mostly empty, warehouse-like room that he knew would in the next months be transformed into Stark’s workshop. Presently, there was nothing much to exclaim over, except maybe the holographic projections, which were so futuristic that they would have made Boothroyd cry. Stark was using those, so Q was stuck with an otherwise perfectly acceptable TFT-LCD, 23 inch screen.

“Got them,” Q announced once he was sure of the present location of the Hypercube.

“So fast?” Stark came over to kneel at the edge of the mat and lean over Q’s shoulder. “Not hidden very well?”

Q shrugged. “They might do better once the Hypercube’s emissions lessen. Right now they’re still visible on the map. Here—” he stabbed his finger at the display in the center of an improbably circular depression.

“That’s less than fifty miles from here,” Stark observed.

“Why travel far? If they know enough about the Hypercube—” and Q was sure that whoever was after it knew too damn much, “—they know it’s pointless to hide yet. In another twenty-four hours, this data would be useless. Then you’d have to go by the radiation it gives off in its inert state, and with the current infrastructure that’s like searching for a particular drop of water in a river.”

“Bet you dinner Banner could do it,” Stark muttered, but his eyes were glued to his tablet, and chances were he had no idea what his mouth was saying.

Q secretly agreed. Provided that Bruce Banner could be located, and made to come, he probably could have found even something as skilled at hiding itself as the Hypercube. Humans were continuously stepping out of the shadow of their race.

Q emailed his techs and requested updates on double-oh-seven and double-oh-six. No news on the Bond front – just as expected. He received Trevelyan’s new number in the second info packet, along with the notification that the agent had requested a week of leave, which was granted on recommendation from Medical alone. Q would just wager that double-oh-six thought Germany was nice this time of year.

He checked Trevelyan’s phone. Bond had not made any further contact. No one had made contact.
Going by the phone, an uninitiated observer would have thought that Trevelyan led a very boring life.

“I need to go,” he said after a while. The window of opportunity was shrinking, and Stark had more work to do in a few hours than any team of scientists could be expected to accomplish in a week.

“I’d offer to lend you the armor, but it’s got sentimental value,” Stark quipped. He set down the tablet and instructed the machine to turn up the lights. “Are you seriously walking into the lion’s den on your own? What are you – a mutant? No problem if you are, some of my friends… well, no, some of my acquaintances are mutants, and they’re no worse to be around than regular homo sapiens people. No better either. Just people. Only usually weirder. And by weird I mean… blue.”

“I am not a mutant,” Q assured him. He stood, stretched to make his spine pop in several places (causing Stark to grimace) and tilted his head to the side. “I do have several aces up my sleeves.”

That was a lie. He had no weapons except a Beretta that would be very redundant against anything of Æsir or Jötnar origin, a couple of knives, and his wits. He also had a fool’s hope of tricking the geis on him into granting him absolution, but that was subject to chance and he could not rely on it.

Stark idly tapped the tablet, then glanced over his shoulder and asked: “You wanna borrow a car?”

Q nodded. “That would be great.”

x

Q parked the unconscionably flashy Pontiac Trans Am a block away from the building that according to Stark, Stark’s machine and Q’s own calculations housed the Hypercube.

It was just past midnight and he was going to get out of this car, walk through the persistent drizzle and make like a double-oh until he got to Bond and… No, it really was not a good plan. He had a good feeling about it, however, and it had been a while since he could be unrestrainedly destructive.

He checked his gun, but left it in the holster and instead took up a titanium shaft with a cuspate end, which he had liberated from Stark’s crates of broken, failed and forgotten technology. He had no idea what it had been, or had been supposed to become, but right now it was a lethal object in the hands of a man whose preferred weapon had always been a spear.

Down the street he crossed the little car park, knocked on the window of the porter’s lodge and (inspired by Stark’s bullshit) pretended to be partially deaf. When the man inside opened the door to come out and get rid of Q bodily, he received the pointy end of the shaft between his ribs, whereupon he began to expire.

An odd blue glow ran out of his eyes seconds before he breathed last. He tried to speak. “How… I’d… not me… Bertha…”

Q got the gist. It was mind-control after all.

He recovered the man’s keys and let himself into the building. He remained in the dark, keeping his steps as quiet as possible. He could hear distant sounds, voices and the humming of technical devices, but nothing distinctive. He found two guards – silenced one with a chop to the neck that crushed the larynx, struck the other over the head with the shaft.

At least he still had this. It was strange to use a spear without magic, but it was not impossible, and it had not stopped feeling natural. He had not ceased being a warrior, even robbed of most of his power.
That was gratifying.

Q continued exploring the building, which apparently served as a wholesale business for cables, and killed three more mortals with progressive ease.

After the Allfather had caught him on the Bifrost, he had decided that since the punishment had worked so well in reforming one of his sons, it would work just as well on the other.

When had anything worked the same on them, Q asked. When? They had needed different tutors, different weapons, different fighting styles – they even sought out very different people to take to bed. Some days it felt like – *ha, ha* – they were not related at all. Strandng Q on Midgard had been an all-around bad idea.

For the Allfather. Because all that Q could think about it was that the Æsir had given him a home that had been moderately comfortable and welcoming, even if he had chosen to turn his blind eye to the instances of battery Q had suffered in his household. He would not have allowed such a thing to happen to his real son, but that was a privilege of blood relation, and Q accepted that. So what if now, after the truth had come out and set him free, he was no longer welcome in that home?

Here he had a new world, one that he had but touched without even tasting, and one that he was finding more and more engaging with every passing day.

Finally, all that was left was the main hall, the place of business, which was partially illuminated by ceiling lamps along one of the shorter walls. He stood in the shadows of the hallway and viewed his opposition.

There were three men and two women. One of the men was Bond. Another carried a scepter that shone the same blue as all their eyes did.

Q could not see the Hypercube.

“*We have a visitor,*” spoke the man with the scepter, and unmistakably turned to face Q, as if he could see him through the shadows. It was more likely he could sense Q. His face, now that it came within sight, was obviously not human. He was of neither Æsir nor Vanir, neither Jötnar nor Áltar nor Dvergar, and of other races Q had but heard. “*Have you come to join us, little human?*” he called out and then he laughed, for too long and too desperately to even resemble sanity.

“*He is one of my colleagues,*” Bond spoke. “*Very dangerous.*”

Q had to look at him. There was an unnatural expression on Bond’s face – something like happiness, perhaps euphoria, but forced, struggling against facial muscles used to scowling and sneering and smirking. This was not Bond, only a simulacrum with all Bond’s knowledge.

How bloody bad was that?

“*Then you have definitely come to join us,*” the extraterrestrial with the scepter concluded, and laughed again. “*Bring him to me.*”

Bond and the third man, also blond and unfairly muscular (with the muscles clearly visible under his sleeveless, skin-tight overall), strode over to Q; the stranger ripped the shaft out of Q’s hands and threw it aside onto the huge coils of cables, while Bond wound his huge, way too warm arm around Q’s waist and gently but without allowing the slightest possibility of struggle dragged Q over into the light.

Q could feel the magic of the sceptre, and once again regretted that the Allfather had bound his
powers. Learning to live without them had been a hassle, but he had always been adaptable.

Electricity and indoor plumbing almost made up for it.

The thing Q liked most about Midgard was how clean all the civilised mortals were. Even now, after a day AWOL, Bond was not stinking like a barn. Q also appreciated the lack of the Allfather and some of Thor’s comrades. Thor himself, he was on the fence about.

Magic… well, magic hadn’t been necessary for everyday survival here. He could usually get by without it. Just as, a snide part of him insisted, Thor could have survived without Mjölnir.

Now, however, it would be handy.

The extraterrestrial stepped closer; from the sleeve of his black woolen coat stuck out a clawed hand in which he gripped Q’s jaw to tilt his head back. The creature’s eyes were dark, not shining blue like those of the mortals he had bewitched, but he was no less controlled by the weapon he carried.

Q elbowed Bond, who decided that now that his ‘leader’ had Q firmly in his taloned grip, there was no need to paw at him anymore. He backed away and remained between the two women, who presently draped themselves over him. Business as usual in the world of double-oh-seven.

“You picked the wrong mortal,” Q slurred through the grip on his jaw. “This one is mine.”

“And who are you, little maggot?” the creature inquired, snarling to show off a mouth full of sharp teeth and truly horrifying halitosis.

“I go by Q,” Q replied.

“Your name means nothing.” The creature drew itself taller, so much so that Q could barely stand on his tiptoes and almost choked. The tip of the scepter touched the front of his cardigan. “You are nothing. I come bearing the power of the Chitauri! Soon, this whole planet will burn and you-with-urk.”

Q blinked and looked down at his hands. His hands were covered with gloves. Not any gloves, but his gloves. As he stared at them incredulously, a golden glow radiated from his body and enveloped him, momentarily materialising into his armour. The helmet was a little inappropriate for the occasion, but he couldn’t be dissatisfied with the theatricality of the instance when his magic had returned to him.

He did not believe that the Allfather’s binding spell had failed, so that meant that Q must have fulfilled the condition. Offering to sacrifice his life for the life of a mortal was what it took, after all? How trivial.

“I would ask for your name,” he said to the creature that appeared to be dying in a painful manner on the floor of its own lair, “but I see you are not in the condition to introduce yourself.” Never mind, then. The idiot had had enough time to impart all relevant information.

A coil of fire sprang inside Q’s stomach. He had a brief vision of the memory of Thor standing up for the meaningless village in America, its meaningless, cowering people, and perhaps comprehended a little of that self-righteous drive to oppose all enemy forces to defend, to protect. It was what Q had done for Asgard, and it was, apparently, what he was going to do for Midgard – the final step to adopting Midgard as his own, his kingdom to rule and to protect.

“…they are all mine,” he breathed. It felt good. It felt like he had finally achieved what he had
wanted, finally become who he was supposed to be.

The blue light of magic receded from Bond’s eyes, and the agent forced the women off of himself. He stood straight, speedily regaining his balance and his poise.

Q dismissed his armour but it was too late to hide its existence from Bond. He would not even try.

Bond looked him in the eye. His irises had returned to their natural blue-grey colour. Q found he could breathe more easily in the presence of his magic and the knowledge that not only had Bond not willfully betrayed Britain (betrayed Q), but he was also not controlled anymore.

“Jesus!” one of the women pronounced, and a moment later threw up.

The other one dispassionately watched her for a few seconds and then fainted. Bond grabbed her to prevent her from braining herself and settled her on the floor.

The male stranger blinked a few times, rubbed at his ears and clenched his jaw, as if fighting not to scream. He did a short breathing exercise and calmed down enough to open his eyes again and look around. “Selvig,” he said.

Q glanced at Bond. Bond didn’t have any idea where the physicist might be, either.

“I need a phone,” the man insisted.

“Me too,” added the sick woman, before shuffling off a few steps to the side from her puddle of vomit and dropping onto her butt.

Q pulled out his phone and dialled the last used number.

“You’re not dead,” said the man on the other end of the line rather than his machine.

Q felt quite privileged. “No. Check the weather maps. Is it still here?”

There was a while of silence, broken only by the conscious woman’s demands to call 911, which, in Q’s opinion, could wait.

“Shit,” Stark said emphatically. “It’s moved North. It’s going straight for that monster storm over Canada. In twenty minutes it’s gone.”

“We can’t get there in twenty minutes,” Q pointed out. The Pontiac was a beautiful car, but still just a car. Whoever had taken the Hypercube had to be flying it. That would be risky in a storm, but far from impossible, and if they were mind-controlled, too, they would not mind such a risk.

“I can’t go, either,” Stark assured Q, before it even occurred to Q that was an option.

“That would kill you,” Q agreed. It was just guessing – Stark had been doing miracles with his armour – but flying into a storm encased in what amounted to a tin can could not end well for a mortal man.

“Mnahhh…” Stark disagreed, but it sounded like he wasn’t sure enough to start arguing about it.

“So what now?” Q asked. He had hoped that the Hypercube could be recovered, but fortunately he was not as much of an optimist as to expect that it would happen. He was even pleasantly surprised by the successful localisation of Bond, and suspicious of his speedy and painless de-brainwash.

“Now SHIELD brings in Banner,” Stark replied jauntily. “Look, honeypie, I’m sorry, but I’ve gotta
run. See you on the flipside.”

“Fare well,” Q replied before he could think better of it, but his only response was a beeping tone. That was just as well.

“That was not the Department,” Bond opined. Whatever might have clued him in?

“I need to make a call,” the stranger demanded. “I am an agent of SHIELD-”

Q reached into the left outer pocket of his parka, pulled out a burn-phone and threw it at the man, who caught it with a dancer-like motion and started pushing buttons without even glancing at the screen. While he was so occupied, Q briefly hesitated over the corpse of the creature and its weapon.

He didn’t dare touch the sceptre, because the magic of it seemed vicious and, to use a Midgardian word, toxic. It was a tool of control, but it controlled its wielder first and foremost, far more tightly and irresistibly than anyone it affected through momentary contact. Q did not currently have the power to destroy it, and he could not move it without being directly influenced by it, so he resorted to leaving it there.

He attempted to plant a tracer on it, but the technology burst in a flower of tiny multi-coloured lightning bolts upon coming within ten centimetres of the weapon. Q gave it up.

He moved forward just in time to evade Bond’s hand when the agent reached for him.

“We need to get out of here,” he whispered, walking faster. He made a detour to the side to recover his titanium shaft – that was a damn good shaft, and he would happily keep it, once he cleaned the blood off of it – but otherwise selected the shortest way to the exit.

“Hey,” the SHIELD agent called out, “where are you- stop!”

Bond fell into step with Q.

“SHIELD will descend on this place soon enough; I’d rather be far away by that time. Bond, you’ll have to disappear and turn up in London later this week. Just make up some story – everything you put into reports sounds like bad fiction anyway – no one can disprove it, with what happened in Pottersville-”

Bond grabbed him and pushed him up against the wall, with the cold shaft pressed across his neck.

Q reflexively blasted him off with a burst of magic. Recently freed, it was on hair-trigger.

“What are you?” the agent demanded, backing away to stand against the opposite wall of the corridor, not frightened – perhaps he did not have it in him to be frightened – but cautious and very conscious of what he had just seen Q do to a thinking being with nary a twitch of his fingers.

Q grinned. “Extraterrestrial.”

Bond scoffed. His hand strayed to his belt, but he did not have a weapon on him. He shook his head in mock-dismay. “Really? And already infiltrated into the highest rungs of the Secret Service.” At least he was not dismissing Q’s statement out of hand. Admittedly, after being mind-controlled by a scepter-wielding alien and watching the effects of a destructive spell, not to mention Q’s inconveniently exhibiting magic, it would not have been such a far-fetched story.

Q shrugged. “It did take me a few months.”
“Oh.” Bond solemnly nodded. “A few months.”

“Yes.” Q found himself smiling. It had been a good few months, enjoyable, full of new knowledge and new experiences, of people who had embarrassed themselves by underestimating him and of unprecedented freedom. “You… mortals are quite inventive.”

Bond rubbed his temples, leant back against the cold, damp wall and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Just how fucked are we?”

Q grinned. There was a possibility that Bond would try to attack him out of some desperate hope that he might have a chance to kill Q. It wouldn’t work, of course – far more powerful creatures had tried and burnt. It was a failing of his own bleeding heart that he simply wished it wouldn’t come to it.

He could have lied. Could have told Bond that he was going to raze the whole planet and leave no two stones standing, or he could have told him that he wasn’t going to do anything ‘harmful’ unless he was really bored, which wouldn’t be anytime soon, since the position of the Quartermaster allowed him a lot of ‘sanctioned’ destructive fun. And when he stepped out of line, he had even more leeway than a double-oh agent.

The – slightly frightening – truth of the matter was that Q didn’t know. He didn’t know what he was going to do, what he might be forced to do, or if he would change his mind in a month or in a year. He wasn’t an attention deficient hyperactive puppy like his brother (thank the Norns!), but he also did not have the Allfather’s patience. In this, his reckless, bloodthirsty Jötunn heritage prevailed. He saw no reason to return to Asgard, just as he saw no reason to leave Midgard, seeing as it provided a multitude of its own amusements. And it was his, no matter what Thor might think.

Thor already had a realm to reign over. If he started to shoulder in on Q’s domain, he would find out how much Q had held back in their spars to avoid doing permanent damage to him.

“We need to get out of here, double-oh-seven,” Q repeated. “I’ll drive you part of the way, but I trust you are resourceful enough to make the rest of it on your own.”

Bond deliberated for a long ten seconds, then nodded and beckoned Q to precede him.

Apparently it was too early to turn his back on the alien. But that was okay. Q could work with that.

x

Unbeknownst to anyone present in the warehouse, Q had left behind a spell.

It had come surprisingly easy to him as the overflowing magic itself hurried to conform into the shape he had in mind. He released it, temporarily connected to the SHIELD agent yet capable of disengaging as needed. Certainly, he was more interested in other parts of SHIELD than the Medical or holding cells, where this agent would unavoidably end in a few hours.

It had truly been very kind of him to spare Bond the same fate. He knew Bond had not turned, and he was reassured in the agent’s loyalties and in his mental autonomy, but others would not be. Why borrow trouble? Bond could just claim to have followed his usual modus operandi in going off the grid.

The text message to Trevelyan was an aberration, but Trevelyan could not expose it without implicating himself. And by midnight, Q would have half a dozen witnesses in his branch who would swear on their lives that he had been feeling unwell and taken a sick day. Oh, the joys of magic.
After he had returned Stark’s car (he was not sure why he bothered, except that it was a truly beautiful piece of engineering and having it stolen or destroyed would have been criminal), the trip to London took him all of five minutes, and required no lengthy sojourns within Norns-forgotten flying contraptions consisting of metal and glue. He could bring his spear with him, too, which would have been Hel to smuggle through airport security.

His Midgard home in Marylebone welcomed him with the smell of rotten fruit. He had brought that out of the fridge to snack on some days ago and then forgotten about when he left for work. How long had it been? Three days? Four? His Midgardian underlings called him a workaholic, but they did not understand his way of life. He did not work as Q. He was Q.

“…estimate no lingering after-effects,” someone was saying near the blond SHIELD agent from New York.

Q closed his eyes and opened them again, corporeal yet intangible, invisible to human eyes, standing in an unmistakable counterpart of Medical. Just as he had predicted. He checked the clock; SHIELD worked fast.

“We’ll keep him for observation if you insist, but I see no medical reason not to release him,” an older woman with improbably red hair, wearing a lab coat, was saying to a younger woman with improbably red hair, wearing a catsuit.

The younger woman nodded, and threw a very unprofessional look at the man lying in the bed with his hands behind his head, annoyed as only an agent on a medical leave could be.

“Thanks, Doc.”

“Thank us by taking him off our hands. He’s a menace.” The Doctor threw a dark look over her shoulder and made herself scarce.

“That is what he is paid for,” the younger woman remarked.

It brought the slightest hint of a smile to the agent’s lips, but one lasting only a moment. Soon enough, he was grim again, less irritated and more upset. “Nat,” he said.

The woman switched to Russian, settling on the side of the bed and reaching for his hand. “I know, my friend.” She squeezed his hand in hers. When he sat up and extended his hands, she folded him against her torso and held him fast. “I am glad you were returned to us so fast, but I cannot shake the suspicions.”

The man attempted to disentangle himself, but it appeared that the woman was too strong.

“Not of you. Of who took you, of who released you, and what their intentions are. We have too much to do, are spreading ourselves too thin. If an enemy strikes now…”

Q rolled his eyes and let the spell go off to explore the facility. He quickly ascertained that it was, in fact, not a stationary building, but rather a mobile one. The hallways and rooms were equipped with airlocks, which were only necessary on airplanes and ships. He felt none of the anxiety of an airplane, but that might have been his lack of physical body.

“Barton identified one of his fellow victims as this man – James Bond, a British counterintelligence agent.”

Q followed the sound of the speech and came upon the Bridge. There was a multitude of people sitting in front of screens, overseeing or just milling around. The tall black man in black leather, with
a black eye-patch (Q was beginning to understand where Stark’s idea of an agent’s wardrobe came from) in the middle had to be the SHIELD Director, Nicholas Fury.

“It is likely,” suggested a thin woman in a skintight overall next to him, “that the man who had come to Bond’s rescue was also an agent. However, we have only a very sketchy description – moderately tall, uncertain body-type due to wearing a bulky anorak, wild dark hair.”

Anthony Stark was leaning against a railing, arms crossed, and watching the pictures of Bond projected on one of Fury’s terminal’s screens (there were a lot of pictures; Bond just couldn’t do inconspicuous). Stark appeared dead on his feet, with deep dark circles under his eyes mostly masked with judicious application of make-up. A con artist, born and bred.

Nothing in his countenance suggested that he had any additional information.

“Bond is the oldest surviving agent with the designation double-oh,” Fury explained to his audience. “The double-oh program is one of the most wildly successful counterintelligence efforts in the world. Its turnover rate is off the charts, because its losses are ludicrous.”

That Q absolutely agreed with. On the other hand, he had met all but one of the current double-oh agents personally, and all of them were traumatised sociopathic beasts who made murder, destruction and mortal danger into a game. He liked them all. He could just imagine that losing them would be frustrating.

It was worse with Bond. They were all his, of course, but Bond had been the first. He was the favourite. If what the Allfather felt toward Thor was anything like this, then Q could understand… Not forgive and forget, but understand. It was quite an insidious feeling.

“They call it the British Kamikaze Corps,” Stark remarked faux wittily.

They did not – it was something that had come out of Stark’s brain – but the name itself was fitting. Also, Q could not ignore the fact that Stark had to have known quite a bit about the programme to be able to name it so aptly.

On the other hand, the programme had existed since before World War II. Stark might have learned of it from his father, or from the retired Agent Carter, who had been a family friend. Security used to be far more offhand in the past than it was today.

The female agent flinched and looked at Stark as if he had just told her that he had privatised Christmas, too – and would she like a ticket? She was quite agog at the thought, obviously.

Her male colleague, dressed in a business suit as dictated by the mores of fashion, gave Stark a much less surprised glare. “Do we want to know how you know that?”

“I have an online friend in one of their branches,” Stark quipped, eliciting disgusted sneers and sighs from all amassed SHIELD personnel.

Q narrowed his eyes. That was a hint Coulson would have caught, if he would not have realised the scam earlier, when Q’s description was provided. Stark was playing with fire, even though Coulson was not present.

“Then see if you can find out anything useful!” Fury snapped.

Stark waved his hand. “Nah, we just exchange office gossip. Also, the weather in London is quite dreadful.” He paused. “That’s not confidential information, by the way. The weather in London is always dreadful.”
The two agents repeated their earlier gestures of exasperation, but then they noticed that their Director did not seem to have the same equilibrium and was about, so to say, blow a gasket.

“This is what I have handlers for…” Fury looked around, hands balled into fists. “Sitwell, where’s Coulson?”

“Escorting Miss Potts, as per your wishes,” the suit informed him.

That did not help Fury’s blood pressure at all. “I never authorized that, Sitwell! We’re not a fucking SBS! I’m in the middle of a planetary emergency and Coulson’s off playing Costner to some chick?

Sitwell convulsively swallowed, and his eyes strayed to Stark. Stark dispassionately looked back. Sitwell swallowed again.

“He’s a multitasking marvel,” Stark offered. He had fingers in more pies than even Q had suspected, if he could by-pass Fury within SHIELD. It probably didn’t help that the whole organisation was desperate, and Stark was one of their cherished fledgling hopes for survival. That was a lot of power for one mortal, but Stark wore it damn well.

The woman raised her hand to the communication device at her ear. She listened and then relayed: “Sir, they’ve landed.”

Fury nodded. “Initiate take-off.”

A flurry of activity started, geared toward the operating of the mobile base around them. Indeed, soon enough, there was the familiar lurch and the sensation in Q’s stomach that unmistakably informed him that he was flying. It seemed that he did not even need a stomach for that.

As soon as they were in the air and the cloaking device had been engaged – Q recognised it as reengineered knock-off of the one Boothroyd had created in his era of ridiculous cars – the Bridge was invaded by a group of six people, four of whom Q knew on sight, plus one that seemed familiar. Introductions ensued. The woman with Fury was Maria Hill, the other agent’s name was Jasper Sitwell. Potts and Coulson came back with a Steven Rogers that looked barely old enough to drink, but judging by the adoration spewing out of Coulson’s mouth, was actually the real Captain America. Whether ‘the real’ meant that he was the actor, or that he was the soldier was anyone’s guess. Either way, he was in the wrong century.

That could be a most uncomfortable experience, and Q would rather forget about why he knew that.

The redhead from Medical was Natasha Romanov, the famous Black Widow who held one of the top spots on the ‘list of enemies’ in MI-6. Her formerly mind-controlled colleague went by Clint Barton or Hawkeye; the cringing man with the terrifying aura on her other side was introduced as Dr Banner.

That last name finally snapped Stark out of the morose funk he slipped into when Rogers first came in. He grew animated and came forward to shake the… the beast’s hand. “It’s good to meet you, Dr Banner. Your work on the anti-electron collisions is unparalleled… and I’m a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage-monster.”

The beast gaped; its mouth twisted in a moue and it took its hand back, grumbling with a lot more grace than could be expected: “Thanks.” It looked around the room and realised that most of the people present were expecting him to lose control right at that very moment, and were cringing away from him – even the trained agents. It looked down at its hand, the one that Stark had shaken as if he was talking to a human being.
Stark had not moved an inch further away.

Q felt a fond smile spreading on his lips. Pity that the beast made even him nervous. There was something supremely off-putting about indestructibility.

“Come on,” Stark said, and slowly, careful to not startle Banner, put his hand on the beast’s elbow. “Let’s leave the heroes to play at war. I’ll show you the lab and you can show me some spectrometer magic. It will be like a science camp, but with more cool toys.”

Banner chanced a shallow smile. “Haven’t been to science camp for decades.”

“Not missing out on much. I promise you’ll have more fun with me. Have you ever seen an arc reactor? Bet you haven’t. I can show you.” Stark skillfully steered the beast toward the archway leading away from the Bridge, deeper into the belly of the aircraft. They passed through Q, warming him to his bones, and he considered whether to follow them or to stay with the executive group.

Potts whispered something into Coulson’s ear and, after exchanging nods, they both followed on the heels of the scientists, each with a suitcase in hand.

Q figured that he could always read up on the science later – it was unlikely that he would be able to contribute, since astrophysics made much more sense to him as magic than as science – and he would gather more useful intel by staying around Fury.

A phone rang and Q’s consciousness left the construct at the SHIELD base to attend to matters in his London flat. Curiously, the caller ID displayed a denomination rather than the unknown number, which made the caller’s identity obvious. Q was hard-pressed to find a valid argument against that amount of hubris.

“Supreme Imperator?” he asked upon accepting the call.

“What did you think SI stood for?” Stark returned. “I’ve got someone here you’d kill to meet.”

“With a little perspective, you may find that killing is my day job,” Q said, “so that does not really mean much. But say ‘hi’ to Dr Banner.”

“How did you…” Stark paused and let his brain catch up to his mouth. It lacked a sound-effect–otherwise the cartoonish impression would have been picture-perfect, in Q’s opinion. “Could be more ‘Intelligence’ in your Secret Service than I thought. Are you sure you’re not a mutant? This is totally a judgment-free zone.”

“Espionage has existed longer than telepaths. I am just that good at my job.” Q swiped his fingers over the touchpad of his laptop. It came out of hibernation. One-handedly, he typed in his password. “Put me on speaker?”

Mock-nervous, Stark inquired: “You aren’t going to kill me to get at Dr Banner, are you? I thought we had something special!” But he did put Q on speaker.

While the spell listened in on Sitwell coaxing the Captain America away from the Bridge to ‘situate him’ and on Fury and Hill plotting how to keep the World Security Council out of their hair for long enough to prevent the impending apocalypse, Q traced the location of Stark’s phone – somewhere over the Pacific ocean – and re-opened his connection to the SHIELD servers, searching for the security cameras.

“Uhm… Hello Mr Stark’s friend?” the beast’s demure voice spoke, slightly distorted by the microphone.
Q wasn’t looking to become bosom-buddies with the beast, but he was safe from it – thousands of miles away, practically as far as it was possible to get without leaving the planet – and the man-shaped shell was interesting to talk to.

“John,” Q offered the pseudonym he had used with Stark. “I’ve read some of your work, Doctor. Very ambitious.” Too ambitious – else he would not have turned himself into an abomination while attempting to prove the validity of his theories. That, however, would have been impolite to say, and politeness was the lode of the British culture. Since Q was currently British, it behooved him to conform to this ideal.

“Uh… thank you?”

“Oh, c’mon, Bruce!” Stark cut in. “Don’t be shy. You’re a genius – your brain is a weapon of mass destruction – and you’re acting like an anemic wall-flower. Live a little!”

“I haven’t been asked to dance in years,” the beast replied drolly.

“I’m asking you! You and me and this sexy, sexy spectrometer. Let’s boogey!”

Banner laughed helplessly. It was a low, hoarse, underused sound, and Q knew it was exactly what Stark had desired to hear.

“Mr Stark… Tony…”

“I’m not taking a no for an answer,” Stark assured him. “And John won’t mind – right, John? By the way, could you just give me hint? I’ll find it out on my own eventually anyway, and you know it.”

Q most certainly was not giving away his secrets, but he could offer something juicier, because his spell was still… casually passing by Hill and Fury and happening to have heard an interesting tidbit of info.

“Have you come across Phase Two yet? If not, Miss Potts and Agent Coulson have the files you extorted-” Q faked a cough, “I mean, requested in recompense.”

Just before he hung up, alarms blared from the other end. Neither of the scientists panicked, one trained to keep his mental equilibrium in face of the improbable, the other being an avatar of chaos who had to have been used to it.

In the end it was Q whose reaction was the most pronounced. Having finally gained access to SHIELDs security system, he could see what – or rather, who – had caused the alert. Standing on top of the aircraft, between the fighter-interceptors, braced against the air currents, Mjölnir held fast in his mighty hand, was the one person whom Q hoped to avoid for a very long time yet.

Q disconnected the call and hunkered down to his laptop to get at SHIELD’s active projects, with special emphasis of the Avengers Initiative.

Chapter End Notes

This story is finally, finally finished, and will be posted in more or less regular intervals. Illustrations are pending. Reviews are always appreciated. Enjoy,

Brynn
SHIELD had *passable* information security.

They probably didn’t think so, since it took them almost fifteen minutes to detect the violation and start working on ousting him, and they had not managed an effective counter-strike, but Q could objectively judge his ability, and he pronounced them passable – for mortals.

It was their own fault they hadn’t had Stark create their firewalls; from what Stark had said, they really had only themselves to blame.

His phone rang, and this time it was neither Stark nor his artificial intelligence. It was a number Q had programmed in himself. A mental calculation assured him that it was impossible for Bond to have reached Britain yet, so it had to be a different emergency.

He picked up with a bored: “Have you tried turning it off and on again?”

Tanner gustily sighed. “Most agents, once turned off, can’t be turned on again. Bond is the exception in this, rather than the rule.”

“I don’t know all that much about turning Bond on,” Q replied, because he had to.

Tanner was asking for it by pretending to be stuffy and stodgy and offering such easy lines.

Q could almost hear the man shaking his head.

“Is this something you may still mature out of, or do we have to look forward to years of you and the double-ohs egging one another on? Because I would like to get an early start looking at retirement venues.”

It might have been too late for that. They were in the midst of a global crisis, and it was still uncertain whether mankind would survive long enough for Tanner to worry about retirement.

“Sitrep?” Q asked instead, throwing the other man off for less than a second.

“We’ve lost contact with Bond-”

“That was thirty-three hours ago. The situation is being monitored.” Q had not been actually sleeping, but he dearly hoped Tanner had not tried to wake him for this.

“Yes, and the objective of his mission has caved in, so that one is a write off. I don’t suppose he contacted you.”

“Bond?” Q scoffed. “Doesn’t write, doesn’t call…”

“That’s what I expected.” Tanner loudly exhaled, trying to physically expel stress. “M has been on the line with our contact in the World Security Council for the past—” he paused, presumably to look at his watch, “—eighteen minutes. This is worse than the Madagascar incident. Last time this happened was September two thousand and one.”

Q had originally thought of the WTC attack as a much-needed wake-up call for the stagnant
imperialistic powers, but recently had come to agree with some of the so-called conspiracy theorists. Either way, as a social experiment it had been most interesting.

He, however, viscerally disagreed with the idea of the WSC being involved in the actual execution of defence of anyone and anything. Politicians as a breed lacked the competence to make operative decisions about public safety.

“What do you imagine I can do?” he asked. “Be realistic. The WSC don’t convene geographically. Everything happens on the Cloud. I can monitor them, yes, and I can cut them off, but that won’t stop them. A good half of the countries each have their own arsenal that dwarfs the dreaded Cold War ‘mutually assured destruction’ reserves.”

That was not to say that Q couldn’t devise a way to neutralise them. If fact, he would have gotten right on it, if he weren’t facing a more important emergency.

“Just come in,” Tanner said shortly, bitterly disagreeing with Q’s easy-going habit of annihilating his way through a problem. “M’s called a committee.”

After a moment, Q allowed: “I’m on my way.”

That was all Tanner needed. He disconnected without confirming that Q would attend their misinformed and underprepared brainstorming session.

Q locked his computer and went for a quick shower – but not too quick, since you can’t hurry a genius. He found clean clothes and dressed, favouring shades of green – stripes on his slacks, his tie, his cardigan – to the point that he could almost see himself when he looked into the mirror. It was an illusion, of course, easily dispelled by the hair, the glasses and the missing inches of height. It was a good thing that he had never striven to be imposing.

Sitting in a cab on his way to work, he made a call to the woman that was employed as his assistant, but on whom Q basically foisted off all the managerial duties so that he could attend to the real work.

“You have reached R,” a mechanical message said, “please, wait for the signal and-”

“I sign your paychecks,” Q cut in, used to this treatment.

The voice, still with its mechanical distortion, grumbled a phrase that was uncomplimentary while physically possible only for highly trained gymnasts. “One day that will work.”

She had gone through a slew of foreign languages (including Quenya, apparently) before she had resorted to sound effects, and had yet to succeed in bemusing Q for even a second. Of course, it was hard to play this game against an opponent gifted with Allspeak.

“That day you will have my job, and you will be the one to delegate, Renfri.”

The name she went by in civilian life was Joanne Winters, changed from Millicent Westernra after an incident involving domestic violence and high-grade explosives in Edinburgh in 1998. She reminded Q of Hel, and he jealously guarded his soft spot for her from the notice of anyone else; that was why he indulged her pride in her designation as ‘R’ in the least expensive way possible – by bestowing her with nicknames, plentiful and meaningless.

“I don’t know half the stuff you do half as much as I would like,” she replied.

It was meant to be a pop-culture reference, but between learning all the science, feeling out the society, establishing enough of an ‘identity’ in twenty-first century Midgard and detecting the razor-
sharp line between cutting-edge technology and science fiction, Q had not had the opportunity to haunt the libraries. And what glorious libraries they were! There had been none as rich and as enormous in Asgard as they were here – in many places, containing much knowledge that was freely available to all literate folk. Q avoided them for the time being, acutely aware that he could sink into that ocean of knowledge and not come up for air until the double-ohs came looking for him.

“That is why the dubious honour of attending a committee with the Director falls upon your shoulders today. The planet needs my brain to keep it turning.” However facetiously he might have said it, he suspected it was true.

“Very well. I better get hazard pay for this. The only way to survive those meetings is to imagine all the Department Heads naked, and you won’t believe the trauma I’ve accrued that way.”

“Your employer is not liable for any damage you cause yourself through excessive imagination. Tell Tanner that in the case of the Ragnarök, I might be in my office.” Since he was the one who allegedly embodied Ragnarök, Q felt fairly confident that it would not happen without his permission.

“You owe me coffee,” Winters replied.

Q did not acknowledge that he heard her before pushing the decline button. Having his subordinates in love with him could be a hassle and half.

“Tha’ll be fourteen forty, gov’nor,” the cab-driver said, stopping by the curb.

Q, perfectly aware that the usual fare for the trip (it wasn’t like he had made it today for the first time) was about two pounds cheaper, let the driver give him back all the impractical change. He was not going to tip someone who had already so generously tipped himself.

He crossed the park and walked down the street to a business centre that saw a little more traffic than was strictly statistically probable. He descended the stairs, took the ‘maintenance only’ entrance and let the biometrics scanner confirm his identity. The security of this entrance was not quite appalling, but it did not meet Q’s personal standards, and he – or, rather, Miss Winters – was in the middle of lengthy negotiation with the Executive about the kind of standards that should be mandatory for the MI-6 Headquarters.

It had been months, and they were still in the tunnels, as if it was impossible for one of the most powerful agencies in the Kingdom to take over any of the multitude of available spaces. Someone wanted them to get used to it.

Q wasn’t falling for the Silvaesque smokescreen again.

“Good morning,” said the guard, wearing the uniform of a private security firm.

Q nodded.

Two steps beyond the next door he was descended upon by a gaggle of lab-coat-wearing stereotypical Q Branch weirdoes who must have monitored his approach through the security cameras. They started speaking over one another, updating him on projects, requesting authorisations, demanding attention, asking for aid and grumbling about the yellow alert that had put a halt to some of the missions and all of the field testing.

“Try invar for that,” Q replied to the one project-leader that had come to him with a reasonable, constructive query. The other was a lost cause: “Johnston, you’re demoted. Be glad you’re not fired, but apparently incompetence is not sufficient cause after you’ve passed the trial period. Bors, show
him where the interns keep the cleaning equipment – that will be a good fresh start for him.
Malenkin, reports in my Inbox, as usual. If you feel you need to add anything verbally, send it to me in another mail. San Luca ditto. Hurtfew…”

He met the woman’s heterochromatic eyes. She dispassionately stared back.

“Hourly reports from Winters. Just this once make them in person, just in case; we want to avoid a trail.” He was tempted to demand that someone compile for him the intelligence they had on the World Security Council, but he was the only one with the slightest inkling of what to look for.

As the throng scattered and the scientists scarpered every which way, Q dared split his attention.

Pepper Potts stood between Stark and Coulson on a lower deck of the Helicarrier – the designs for which Q’s spell had read over Stark’s shoulder about thirty minutes ago. Rogers crossed his arms and looked strict, which had a lot lesser chastising effect that it would have had if he had any idea of what he was looking at. Banner, on the other hand, knew exactly what they were dealing with, yet he lacked the arrogance own to the man out of time. Q wondered where Thor was, but he assumed that the other SHIELD agents were attending to him.

The space around the construct was cavernous, designed as a hangar or a warehouse, and filled with a number of objects that did not belong in it. This, Q extrapolated, was what SHIELD had managed to salvage from the Pottersville complex.

“This brings back memories,” Stark muttered, trying for a light tone and failing spectacularly. “I’m not building Fury a Jericho. Not even if he asks nicely.”

“Does that thing explode in vacuum?” Fury’s voice inquired, and a moment later the Director made himself present, startling Banner and Potts, but not Coulson, Stark or Rogers.

“Aliens!” Stark deduced. “Every day’s a little bit brighter with the lack of an alien invasion. No, Jericho is very bomb-like in that it needs an atmosphere to properly blow.”

“Then it would be worth fuck-all to me.”

Rogers scowled at the vulgarity, but he didn’t remark upon it, focused as he was on the dozens of crates in front of the group. They were all reinforced and locked, but that would not have presented a challenge to Stark, who disentangled himself from Potts and, before Fury could stop him, opened one of them. Inside was, to no one’s surprise, a futuristic weapon.

Stark picked it up. He checked the weight, the balance, the sights. People tended to forget that he was a weapons expert when they were confronted with his reputation as a libertine and an egomaniac glory-hog, but right now it was plain for all to see, and Q (as a tentative admirer of a mind perhaps nigh on equal to his own) felt cool satisfaction settle in the pit of his belly.

“So,” Stark spoke once he noticed the others were letting the silence stretch, “let me recap: a sibling squabble shook up a podunk in the middle of nowhere, leaving less mess and casualties than the average tornado, and your response was…” he drew an arch with his hand, trying to encompass the hangar full of high-grade weaponry.

Fury could have passed for a dark brown stony statue.

Banner choked. “That’s like nuking a kindergarten because one of the kids comes down with hepatitis.” The morbid analogy became yet more morbid when the expression on the beast’s face showed clearly that he had seen a similar situation occur. Presumably there were no nuclear weapons involved, but mass-murder was a favourite pastime in many third world countries. The beast could
have witnessed many atrocities.

Fury retained his superior attitude regardless of his position as the one man interrogated by a group of people of whom several were individually more powerful than himself. “We have become aware of a threat we can’t fight. How would you expect us to react?”

“That excuses lowering yourself to their level?” Rogers asked, personally insulted by the happenings in his vicinity.

Of course, he had slept through the atom bombs. Maybe he didn’t know that this was the essence of America: private health insurance, mutagens, foodstuffs that qualified as biohazard and nuclear warfare.

Coulson threw Rogers a look of fond amusement.

“Depends,” Stark said. “‘You’ as the WSC? Nuke anything and everything preemptively. ‘You’ as in SHIELD? I suppose exactly this way. You may preach safety and security, but just like every other organization of your sort, you’d rather start a war than admit that the other side’s not an enemy.”

“What if they are an enemy, Stark?” Fury demanded. “Maybe not all of them, but it would be enough if one went rogue. What if Loki comes back bent on revenge?”

“You won’t have half a cry against Loki with this.” Stark disgustedly threw the prototype back into its case. “Good luck, Fury. You’re gonna need it.”

The real Q inside the temporary MI-6 building raised his phone and dialled the number entered into his address book as ‘JARVIS.’

It took three rings, but the call was picked up, and it was the machine on the other end.

“Hello, Mr Smith,” it greeted, “you called. That means that Mr Stark owes me another TIPS of processing speed.”

Q dearly hoped that Stark had instructed his machine to say it, because… that was a crapload of data. That was… oh dear, as the British tended to say. All the more fitting that he had come with his query to this artificial intelligence.

“Hello,” Q replied, because he had noticed that observing the niceties had put the machine into a better mood – and it did illustrate how eccentric Stark was (although most people somehow never noticed) that he had programmed his AI to have moods. “I have a question.”

“A particular one, I hope?” the machine inquired. “Otherwise that singular would make me very afraid for your state of mind, sir.”

Q did not manage to suppress a smile – he twisted it into a smirk, but even that was enough to attract the attention of the shadow lounging in the corner next to the vending machine.

“Who is the American representative on the World Security Council?”

The computer fell silent. After perhaps ten seconds – which the shadow used to detach itself from the vending machine and solidify into the form of James Bond – it replied: “I do not know, sir.”

“Take it as a challenge, then,” Q concluded. He hesitated, and added: “Goodbye for now.”
“Have a nice day, Mr Smith,” the machine replied, for once sounding like a machine. It must have already started on the issued task. Q wasn’t sure if it would let him know what it would have found out, but at least there was someone working on this task from another end.

There was no point in searching for the representatives from Russia or China. The same went for India, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Morocco, South Africa, Togo, Guatemala and Colombia. There was some point in searching for the envoys from France and Germany, and a fool’s hope for finding the one from Portugal, but Q was going to start from home. Or what passed for home these days.

“That,” Bond said, “was not a call to the Department either.” The man was not exactly towering over Q – he wasn’t that tall – but he was bulky enough to make himself seem like a viable threat. At least, until one took into account the fact that Q newly had magic at his disposal.

He still wasn’t used to that. However, if it liked computers half as much as he did, there would be no problem.

Q stashed the phone in one of his many pockets. He briefly regretted that he had left his titanium shaft at home. “No,” he admitted. “That was an external contact.” He looked up, daring the lunkhead to say anything.

The lunkhead did. “If you’re treating the security of the country as a game, I’ll-”

“You’re one to talk about treating this business as a game.”

“-see to it that you never have the opportunity for treason.” Poor guy was probably venting his compartmentalised feelings about Lynd, maybe even without realising it. He was leaning deep into Q’s personal space, all but spitting out saliva (which no one would have been happy about).

Q was… flattered. “If you could stop thinking about the Union Jack for one second!” he hissed, intensely aware of all the security cameras’ angles, all the guards posted at the ends of corridors and at the terminals. “The flag is not aware that you had let some whacko mind-control you. You want to talk about betrayal, double-oh-seven?”

Bond folded. He looked like he was about to sink to his knees, so Q grabbed his elbow. Bond decided not to dislocate any of Q’s joints and remained upright. His eyes, however, were wild with a sort of desperation that Q had not ever seen in a Midgardian before.

“Steer clear of the scepter,” Q warned Bond, because the man was just as predictable as the other double-ohs: if there ever was an epicentre of destruction, he was standing within it. This trouble with the Chitauri and the Hypercube was far from over and Bond would most certainly find his way back into the midst of it. Better that he be warned. “Have you reported in yet?”

Bond took the chance to regain his seemingly unflappable poise, and retorted: “Worried?”

Q shrugged. “It’s physically impossible to do what you would accuse me of.”

“But not impossible, if you have… magic.” Bond spat the word out as if it were a curse. Q had met with that attitude before, from Æsir who were taller, more bulked up than Bond and carrying swords.

“Moi?” Q intoned, and looked over Bond’s shoulder at the first wave of the clerks working the eight-to-four-thirty shift. The not-lobby clearly ceased to be the place to have this confrontation. Q, nonetheless, understood. Bond had returned to Britain so fast that he had skirted the edges of humanly possible, because he was worried that Q had betrayed the MI-6.

It was a valid suspicion. Q felt the overwhelming responsibility toward his subjects, and if saving the
mankind meant that he would have to put the goals of this agency aside, then that was what he would do.

“If your paradigms change,” Q found himself whispering almost straight into Bond’s ear, imitating a far more intimate stance than what was generally acceptable between two men (and thus undoubtedly spawning a new generation of rumours for the office grapevine), “then what are your goals, double-oh-seven? The Kingdom is a part of a wider world. And M’s memory-”

Bond gave him a glare hot enough to whiten iron.

“...will not be honoured through adhering to the standards of the past. Figure out who is the enemy to what you want to protect. I wager you will find it is not me.” He walked away, eager to ensconce himself in the relative tranquility of the Q Branch.

Q’s construct was shadowing Clint Barton, also known as Hawkeye – the agent whom he had freed from the influence of the scepter – through the restricted parts of the Helicarrier. Barton was quiet and unobtrusive through training, although his true nature craved attention and physical contact from others. Q could read his history from his bearing and actions, and that was not a good thing at all. Barton presented himself as a wild card, but he was regrettably easy to solve.

Romanov, ostensibly his partner for most field operations, was more difficult to figure out. Q’s spell had come to the conclusion that it was because she had repeatedly suffered amnesia and brainwashing, and herself was not sure of who she actually was.

The two agents together with Fury, Hill and Sitwell – not Coulson, Q noted with mild interest – were standing in front of a see-through cage. Fury had just finished his monologue on the properties of the ‘prison cell’ built with the hopes of containing the beast within Banner. Hill and Sitwell seemed to be hanging onto his every word, but Barton just looked barely not dead, and Romanov scowled in ostensible disagreement with the treatment of the Ás in their midst.

Q, on the other hand, saw immense entertainment value in it. Thor, the interminable hero, was the one stuck in the cell this time. How novel.

“I like this feeling,” Q’s spell remarked, tips of its fingers pressed to the not-glass, eyes on the pouting muscle-bound lout inside. “This is a good feeling.”

Thor harrumphed and glared at his captors. Q reviewed the memories of his construct and found that Thor hadn’t been so much captured as simply invited inside and asked to ‘please, enter the transparent room’, and he had feared damaging the fragile little mortals so much that he had gone along rather than protest. Good Norns, he really was helpless.

“I am seeking my brother!” Thor announced in his mighty voice that had been known to shatter the spears of his enemies and loosen their bladders, but which in this setting merely caused some elevation of eye-brows. “He could help us with this weighty quest!”

“He’s a criminal,” said Rogers staunchly, leading a ragtag group of the Earth’s mightiest heroes in from the opposite direction.

Either Fury considered locks superfluous, or Stark had done his craft on them.

“He is repentant,” Thor protested in a much unwanted defence. “And he has been punished. Only recently, he has regained his honor. When the Allfather became aware of this, he was joyful, and he sent me to assure my brother that he would be happily welcome back on Asgard.”
Not on his life, the overgrown lapdog. Q was not leaving this world – his world. He was most certainly not securing a collar around his neck and handing the other end of the leash to the Allfather – if that pleased Thor, he was free to do so, but Q had come to know freedom, and he was not giving it up on anybody’s say so.

“Welcome, provided he returned bearing the Tesseract,” the man that housed the beast suggested, for the first time looking up from the instruments he carried with him.

Q’s construct barely stopped itself from flinching. The beast was not a mortal anymore. It was not human, despite the fact that it looked like one and thought like one and even acted like one when in this form. It was a skin worn by something animalistic, primal, something so strong that Q himself, with all his magic, probably could not stand against it. It was the mirror to a man’s soul. Q feared that it might have mirrored his soul too.

He favoured the colour green. Prior to his expulsion to Midgard, he had chosen clothing and decorative objects in its shades. To this day, he preferred to wear it. His armour and his parka were green.

Only now this nightmare was assuming that same colour, and he wasn’t sure he would ever feel the same way about it.

It didn’t help that the monster was right.

“If Loki has been planet-side for months,” Fury spoke before Thor could launch into a protest, “how come we never noticed?”

Thor shrugged his expansive shoulders, ruffling the edges of his cape. “He was stripped of his powers – as was I, upon my first visit to your realm.”

Coulson, a part of Rogers’ retinue rather than Fury’s, did not accept that. “Yes, but we still noticed you within days of your arrival. In fact, we noticed your Hammer before it arrived.”

Thor pouted. He jerked his chin to the side like he used to when told that he was not allowed to take part of a hunt, whether for protection or as a punishment. Invariably, that gesture was followed by getting himself – and his brother – into trouble. “The Allfather deposited my brother on the other side of the world. You would not be worried about an unusual storm in a place where storms are a daily occurrence.”

Stark, who had kept his mouth shut for longer than most people would guess him capable, finally let go. “You think some pygmy tribe caught him? They would have thought he was a god – that is sort of funny – and roasted him over fire and eaten him.” He paused and reflected upon what he just said. “That is not funny, I mean. Not much, anyway.”

Fury’s eyebrow twitched. Coulson stuffed his hand in the pocket of his jacket and chewed on the inside of his cheek in a manner that suggested he was trying very, very hard to not laugh.

Q did not think the idea was that amusing. Fortunately, there had been no pygmies. He had met an English family who had taken him for a survivor of a convenient nearby shipwreck and helped him contact the embassy. It had been fantastically easy to learn how to erase himself from the system afterwards, and once he had learnt that much, he had found a passion for science. Almost all kinds of science.

Gamma radiation made him nervous.

“Agent,” Fury growled.
Instead of quelling his hilarity, the admonishment broke Coulson’s tenuous hold on it and left him shaking and covering his mouth.

“That is not laughable, Son of Coul!” Thor thundered. “My brother could have been harmed!”

Q’s spell rolled its eyes. Seriously.

“Then you should not have left him in danger,” the beast pointed out reasonably.

Thor pouted again.

“People!” yelled Stark, whose eyes were still practically glued to the chuckling figure of Coulson, as if the man laughing was some unprecedented incident that required documentation and possibly a formulation of hypothesis and further experiments to confirm it. “Look, Loki’s obviously fine. He played nice, toed the line, got his mojo back. Are we sad or are we happy about it?”

The facial expressions of his audience ranged, and that was an answer in and of itself.

“My brother is a great warrior, whose honor I shan’t see impugned!” Thor informed them. “I will find him and bring him to us, so he can fight by our side!”

“No,” Fury rejected the whole idea concisely and soundly.

Stark faked a cough. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, this is one for the books, guys, but… I agree with Fury.”

Fury huffed and gave Stark the stink eye. It was likely that he kept to the left of Stark for precisely this purpose. Alternatively, he simply judged it unsafe to have the man out of his sight. Commendable of him.

“I…” the beast said haltingly, “don’t *a priori* mind. Just… I’ve heard he likes to provoke people. It’s not…”

“A good idea to keep dynamite and open fire on the same aircraft,” the woman finished for him. “Unless it’s enemy aircraft.”

“If Loki tries to gain access to the Helicarrier, we know why,” agreed the archer, standing behind her and in the shadows, hiding, as if his mere presence was somehow offensive to others. He had nothing to be ashamed of, in Q’s opinion.

“That guy’s mind is a bag full of cats,” Stark let himself be heard on the topic.

Q’s spell faux modestly looked up through its fringe. “Thank you.”

Stark’s eyes flitted to the left to where the construct was standing, but it remained beyond his conscious sensory perception, even if his instincts had picked up on it.

Hill sighed. “I’ve spoken with Miss Foster, Director—”

“Who the fuck ordered you—”

“-and she’s determined to come on board.”

“Nay!” Thor exclaimed. “The fair Jane belongs not in danger!”

Fury stared at the Ás for a few moments and then grumbled out an offensive and mostly
untranslatable phrase. “Let him go and talk to his Doc. We don’t need any more busybodies around here.” He glared at Hill like she was the cause of all his troubles and thumped away, leaving his agents to disengage the locks and release Thor among the planet’s own self-proclaimed defenders.

There was Stark, on whom Q would wager his past months’ earnings. There was Banner, whose creature extended the definition of ‘frightening.’ There were Potts and Coulson, holding in their four hands the ends of many of the invisible ropes tying Midgard together. There were Barton and Romanov, ready to take on anything, whether it would kill them or not. And, finally, there was Rogers, lost and yet at the same time the only one of them who truly felt like their footing was steady.

“Comrades,” Thor said warmly, exiting the cell.

Q should have expected that.

x

Q, the newly reinstated god of chicanery, was hard at work on one of the Q Branch’s notebooks. He could have built a far superior machine, but that would have taken time and resources that would be better spent otherwise, and what it came down to was that he had ordered a ton of technology of various brands for the whole branch, gutted it all, re-cobbled it together, and fit it into whatever casing was closest at hand. This one was… \textit{Vaio}.

\textit{Sony}, really?

It was working, so he saved his skepticism for later.

“If you don’t have anything to do, I have an archive of EPUB science textbooks,” Q faux casually mentioned into the room, watching the shadows of his underlings freeze on the wall in front of him. He understood that the forceful cessation of field testing had stranded several of them geographically as well as professionally, but they could deal with this situation with more dignity than to start a Winmines tournament, surely?

Not that he disapproved, in principle, but he wanted that out of his own place of work. Too bad that retiring to his office right now would lead directly to being interrogated by people who wanted to meet him in a place with no witnesses. Like Bond.

Winters entered the central office, low heels clanging against the grille. She carried a sandwich in one hand, consuming it in transit, which meant that she would momentarily be back on her way upstairs, to the cushy offices where the carpets did not rot away within weeks and where the staff maybe saw the sun once in a few days. The interns working to her left side flinched, almost in unison.

“You’re cheerful,” Q remarked, watching as his algorithm thinned the list of the people who might be the British representative on the WSC. He was down to four. Only one of them was a known head of a criminal organisation. “Did you make someone cry again, Ragnbjörg?”

That had happened. There was something about an attractive woman with a horrifically maimed face that made even some hardened field agents lose their equilibrium. The paper-pushers from other branches were known to stash bottles of contraband alcohol in their lockable drawer chests for the aftermath of a prolonged exposure to her. Also, she could look straight at a man while her glass eye stared – blankly – in a different direction.

She had made a career of using this effect to interrogate, intimidate and occasionally extort people
(many were willing to give her whatever she wanted just to make her go away). Which was what she had just been engaging in, by the looks of things.

“I made Intentions lend these to you.” She offered Q a folder.

He took it, briefly meeting her eye, and opened it. It contained the objectives and background of Bond’s mission to Pottersville.

“Coffee,” the woman requested succinctly.

This was why Winters was the second-best-paid personal assistant in the country. But since she did not triple as arm candy and bodyguard (or own her multibillionaire boss’ soul like Pepper Potts did), she was winning on monetary remuneration for competence.

There was no earthly – or otherwise – reason to humour her desire for cafffeination in a potentially romantic context. Q privately admitted to some nigh-fatherly fondness for her (she truly resembled Hel, more than just on the surface), but that was as far as he was willing to indulge her.

“Pick out a coffee machine for the office. Your budget is what you can defend before Tanner.” Which wasn’t nearly as much as one would suspect; while Tanner was not completely immune to her effect, he had been desensitised over several rotations in several warzones. If he hadn’t been married, he might have been an ideal partner for Winters.

“One day,” she grumbled. “One day it will work.” After a glance at the time on Q’s screen, she left in a hurry.

Q ignored the sudden start of several whispered conversations behind his back. By now most of his coworkers should be used to Winters, since she had ceased wearing her mask when she had become ‘R,’ but there was always someone new to catch up on the gossip. They were not, however, offensive; the reactions ranged from virulent pity to shock to admiration for Winters’ accomplishments despite her ‘plight.’ If nothing else, Q mused, at least his people weren’t stupid.

One of the candidates on the list faded into dull grey, leaving three. Q opened the folder and read.

“I was about to offer to show you how it works, but you would probably break out in hives from the proximity to me,” Stark said, looking intently at his knuckles.

“Is technology truly all you care about?” Rogers retorted, positioned on the opposite end of the admittedly cozy room.

There was a hologram of the Hypercube slowly rotating in midair in between them.

“Because if it’s not artsy enough, it’s not worth it, Picasso?”

Rogers flinched. “How did you know… oh. I see. It’s a pity your father was ten times the man you could ever be.”

“He had ten times the ego, too. Ten times the drinking problem, ten times the domestic violence… but apparently he talked the good talk, and that made him a better person than I am. You know what?” Stark eloquently shrugged. “That’s fine with me.”

Rogers grimaced and looked away, crossing his hands. He had changed into the costume that had been prepared for him, but failed to look particularly iconic; there was something about a guy in
rubber that just didn’t lend itself to the vision of manly heroism. He had a body easy to look at, but if he had wanted to be this exposed, he could have gone with just a speedo.

Q wouldn’t have protested the free show.

“Tony,” Potts intruded upon the superhero stand-off, “I’m going back to work. You have kicked off the largest successful green energy project in history – this one time we’ll skip the press conference, but just because the planet’s in danger doesn’t mean that you will get away without putting out at least a statement. And there was an alleged sighting of you doing something unnatural to a mule in Texas, which Legal will take on and wring for every cent-”

“Pep!” Stark exclaimed. “Pep, breathe! Breathing is essential – JARVIS will get you pamphlet on it-”

“Phil’s taking me,” the woman spoke over him. “You can’t tell me it’s safer here. This is the least safe place in the world… except maybe Somalia.”

Stark puffed up his cheeks. “You’re gonna leave me here alone with the Megazord?” He glanced over at Rogers, who was half-heartedly trying to find anything to occupy himself with that would save him from witnessing the conversation.

Potts smiled widely. “You have your own team of Power Rangers now, Tony. You’re going to make it.”

Stark’s semblance of seriousness shattered, and he conspiratorially grinned at her. “Is Thor the pink one? Please, say it is so!”

Q was startled into a grin, too, curled up in the swivel chair at his desk in the central office, with his socked feet up on the seat.

He wished he had at least a vague idea of which cultural milestone they had referenced so that he might have shared in on the hilarity, but imagining Thor being pink was quite mirthful in and of itself. It was also an idea for a clichéd but always humiliating prank. It had been a while since Q had played any.

He decided to replace Mallory’s password to his work computer with a game of hangman.

He was just finishing with that when the footsteps of the first bored underling filtered in as they returned from the mess hall – or not. Apparently, Bond had somehow sensed that Q was briefly alone and decided to have that talk without witnesses. Judging the pros and cons – and after a moment recalling that his magic was available to him, which solved the dilemma neatly – Q killed the surveillance. No need to alert the agent to it, of course.

He sent off the little virus for Mallory and swiveled to face Bond, only to find him half-seated on the edge of a desk, eyes on the screen of a terminal.

“SHIELD is a supranational agency that responds to threats on a global scale,” Bond read from the Wikipedia page he had accessed on the employee’s work station.

Johnston was going to get reinforcements for the cleaning; when a computer was not attended, it was supposed to be off or locked.

Q mockingly tapped his cheek. “You and a SHIELD agent-” an elite SHIELD agent, by the looks of things, “-under mind-control. Seemed like a global enough threat to me.”
No one could deny that Bond alone could be a global threat if the fancy ever struck him, although he would go about it in a manner very different from Silva. There would be much less hacking and many more explosions.

“But there was something more to it,” Bond protested. “Something to do with the Pottersville earthquake-”

“Implosion,” Q compulsively corrected.

“-and the man that had… compromised me,” Bond looked pained.

Certainly, for a man trained to withstand inhuman amounts of pain and deny his own fears through sheer stubbornness, having his will ripped away from him – worse yet, having another’s will implanted and made to seem like his own – might have been the single worst thing to ever happen to him. No wonder he wasn’t dealing well. Did he even have anyone to… lean on? Mortals did that, didn’t they? They leaned.

Mawdsley was dead, Tanner didn’t consider the double-ohs human beings, and Moneypenny used them as sex toys to prove to herself that she was just as capable as the field agents. In some way, at least. Even Trevelyan was gone on his ‘vacation.’

Speaking of the double-oh-six, Q had stopped checking his phone, and perhaps that was a mistake. He did so now.

No, Bond had not contacted him again. Neither did anyone else.

“That wasn’t a mask,” Bond finally said, spurred on by the fact that Q didn’t seem to pay him any attention, playing around with a mobile.

In that the agent was correct: the scepter-wielding alien hadn’t been wearing a mask. He had himself been a mask for the true face behind the Hypercube thief. A puppet, just like Bond and Barton had been. Who knew if he had even been aware of what he was doing while under the thrall?

“How clear are your memories?” Q demanded.

“Clear enough,” Bond retorted. Frankly, that could have meant anything.

Double-oh-seven should have been glad that Q was willing and able to keep quiet about what had gone down in the USA. Barton hadn’t been so lucky; presently he was under a 24/7 watch, and the only way he would see action in the next three months would be if he was needed to prevent the world from ending. Q was grimly convinced that that would happen sooner than anyone would like.

The fact of the matter was that Q was perfectly willing to dodge Intentions and M to prevent the bureaucratic bullshit from putting Bond on hold at the time when they might need him the most – because people ignorant of magic were uniformly afraid of it – but he needed the information. That meant he would have to interrogate Bond himself. And, if needed, encourage him with some magic.

“So you remember what your abductor was after?”

Bond’s stony stare protested the allegation that he had been abducted. He did, fortunately, choose to respond: “He was having the scientist-”

“Dr Selvig?” Q cut in. Specificity was vitally important.

“-build a device that could open… the…” Bond’s face remained blank, but there was a tension
around his eyes that betrayed how hard he was trying to remember. Apparently the memories weren’t quite that clear.

“The portal?” Q suggested, suddenly feeling unnaturally warm.

Bond nodded. “Yes. That was the word he used.”

Silence fell on the room. Q started compulsively tapping his fingers against the armrests of his swivel chair. His mind was light-years away.

“A portal where?” Bond asked.

Q felt his throat tighten. For a few seconds the paralysis entirely prevented him from speaking; afterwards he was appalled at how hoarse his voice sounded when he said: “To the Chitauri.”

Bond, naturally, had no idea what that meant – even Q had but an indistinct one – but he could read clearly in Q’s face just how bad the circumstances were. Perhaps that was what prompted him to extend a little trust to Q again.

There was a beep and the ‘bulletproof’ door opened. In the doorway stood a quartet of men, of whom one was wearing an utterly superfluous lab-coat as homage to the late Major Boothroyd.

The one half-way inside the room nervously cleared his throat. “Excuse us?”

Q checked the time on his computer. They still had four minutes until the end of their allotted break, but he wanted to positively reinforce punctuality in them, so he waved them in. He would have gone for a smile, but even a tremulous one was currently beyond him, and the smirky baring of teeth that would have resulted if he tried had been known to make battle-hardened Æsir run for their mothers’ skirts.

“Office,” Q stated concisely, and locked his computer.

Bond obediently followed him into the ‘private’ space that was at Q’s disposal, and which he used mostly to store his personal effects, keep the top secret documents, and do his extracurricular programming. The person who had designed an entirely isolated office for the Quartermaster must not have had the first clue of how work was done in the Q Branch. Q spent more time in labs and on field testing than he did wearing a suit, and the rest was coding and management. There was a reason he had a whole branch of people working for him, and most of them needed his directions in real time.

“You frighten them,” Bond remarked, pacing around, poking at things, trying to create a profile of Q inside his head.

It might have been telling that Q had nothing telling in his office. No personal effects worth a mention, with the sole exception of his scrabble mug and his tin of quality Earl Grey, which he hid from his underlings to keep it safe.

“Yes, that is a problem. I cannot be expected to function as a private person, as a member of society, without internet access. Only here, most have a vague idea of what I can accomplish with a web connection.” Q had once toppled a government in fifteen minutes, with only a web connection and a laptop. It was just a very small government, but Q also hadn’t been at this very long. Programming was still very new to him. “It is… silly. There are other ways of being frightening. Far more destructive or immoral. Deeds I know from experience I am capable of—”

“Now you’re just boasting,” Bond huffed.
“-and from those, their minds will protect them. They will paste their piddling illusions of safety over the slightest edge of reality they may notice, willfully remaining a herd. Shamefully akin to sheep. Fish in a barrel, so feckless that shooting them is a game for children.”

Bond picked up an e-book from an otherwise empty flower pot, checked the contents – all textbooks from various fields from medicine to psychology, politic sciences and history to science and chemistry. The only fiction on that e-book was the Bible. Disgusted, he put it down next to the Newton’s cradle, and checked for Q’s reactions. “You think shooting people is a game for children?”

“I thought we were speaking in metaphors,” Q replied easily; he wasn’t nearly as attached to this place as to be compulsive about its organisation.

“Metaphors are imprecise.” The agent pocketed a chocolate bar.

Q wasn’t sure that it wasn’t the one laced with rat poison, but after a moment of indecision he concluded that it could be considered field testing. “Oh, I agree. It rather is their point.” He loved metaphors. They were the vessels of misdirection, verbal sleights of hand – they were the magician’s first recourse. “A metaphor is a lie that is generally accepted to be a lie by both the speaker and the listener, absolving the liar of his deception. Is it not wonderful?”

“I am more partial to direct statements,” Bond replied. “That is why they metaphorically call me a killing machine… but you are aware that it is not literal.”

“Keenly,” Q assured him.

“When the aliens open the portal-” Bond paused, giving himself time to digest what he had just said and Q the time to admire the matter-of-fact pessimism, “-I won’t be of much use in stopping the invasion.”

“Certainly,” Q retorted, “standing you in the middle of a street with a biometrics-equipped Walther PPK and a radio won’t help anyone with anything. That is why we won’t do it, double-oh-seven.”

“The best way to neutralise a weapon is to keep it from firing – but you are not able to. Then what? The next step should be prophylaxis. Evacuation? Are civilian lives a priority in wars?”

Q shrugged. “Never been in any of mine. But Midgardians do even war differently.” All their rules and laws to restrain it, as if war was not by its very definition outside of law. It was the making of the law and the power behind the law, so it could not be bound by it. Midgardians bought mercy from the victor for the price of limiting the destruction – and its actors called this cowardice civilisation. Abhorrent.

“You have a plan,” Bond accused him.

“Do I?”

“If you need me… I will trust you.”

That was precious of him. Q felt a frisson of chill, but he didn’t let it show, because if he called Bond adorable, the man would have taken it as an insult. Instead, he spun around on the swivel chair and tapped the knot of Bond’s tie with one finger. “What little strategy I have presumes that you shall act as yourself, double-oh-seven.”

Bond chose to assume that Q was trying to tell him that his trust was reciprocated. Q had meant that he trusted Bond as far as he could throw him, with the aside that he believed Bond would gladly let himself be thrown. That basically amounted to the same thing in their circles.
Bond came to stand by the door, signalling that he considered the chat to be over. “You are a little crazier than your average lab rat, Q.”

“I am not average anything, thank you, double-oh-seven,” Q replied.

One of the advantages of having his own office in MI-6 was that his biometrics were needed to open it… from either side. He had Bond effectively trapped.

“Now, agent, your report. You may keep it concise, as long as you tell me everything substantial. And don’t try to cheat – I’ll know.”

That, on the other hand, was one of the advantages of being a god.

Chapter End Notes

I apologise for the delay. RL is kicking me. I’ve got a bruised knee to prove it. Either way, thank you for the encouraging response – please, keep encouraging me. I like being encouraged. Encouragement is good.
Cheers,
Brynn
The day went past at an unprecedented speed, as days often do when a deadline is looming and there is much work to be done.

Winters came to provide Q with the specifications of her coffee machine of choice, earning a blank look. Hurtfew, standing behind her shoulder, professed her undying hatred for Q, cursed himself and his descendants with pox, which caused Q to question the logic of her curse, since him catching pox would preclude him from having descendants… and that was when he knew he was tired. Not that his brain did not usually work along these lines, but he was mostly able to keep his thoughts private (unless he deliberately voiced them to confuse his foes and random witnesses), and right at this moment he didn’t have enough time to go and make himself another cup of tea (he didn’t mind it cold, but it was stale) much less to start a pointless argument about nothing.

“It’s bad,” Winters concluded after a glance at his face.

Q did not respond, but that as such was an answer.

Winters and Hurtfew shared a meaningful look and nodded. “We thought it would be, once the circus upstairs started, but from what I’ve seen the World Security Council are only vaguely aware of some unspecified threat that might or might not have been sighted around New York sometime over the past three days.” She stole Q’s mug, took a draught, and grimaced.

She had done it to herself. At least she didn’t spit the liquid back out.

“Basically, they want guided missiles aimed at New York.”

Q felt his eyebrows rise. Really? Midgardian mortals had yet to cease to amaze him. This was a more destructive measure – he could not even claim it to be a solution – than he, as a self-proclaimed purveyor of chaos could have devised.

If all else failed, he would so be putting this information on all major social nets.

“M told them what?” Q inquired. Hopefully, something along the lines that tomorrow was the great inventory day and none of the British missiles would be available.

Hurtfew sighed.

Winters sat down into an abandoned chair. Q had a unique opportunity to see only her unscarred profile. No doubt she had done it intentionally – she tended to stand to the left of him at all times – but at the moment she looked too stressed to be called beautiful. “What could he say? The PM’s signed on the dotted line. If the WSC asks for military support, we’re obliged to provide it.”

Q huffed. They wanted to play hardball? Fine with him. He was going to see who the WSC was obliged to. Juvenal and Plato asked quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

Q had an answer: himself, in this instance.

“Go home,” he instructed both women, “but stay accessible. This mission may grow hot at a moment’s notice.”

Q blinked. After Trevelyan, that was the second double-oh agent in two days performing the same wildly out-of-character action. Surely someone must have paused… no. No, they wouldn’t have paused. Q had not alerted anyone to the fact that everything was not perfectly alright with Bond and his broken saviour complex, and now Bond had run for the hills to lick his wounds. Right in the middle of this bloody situation.

“And he got it, because Medical stumbled over themselves to grant it before he changed his mind,” Q filled in.

Still, that left him with nine – well, eight – agents. They were not his preferred ones, but this way at least he could play up his supposed impartiality.

“Fine,” Q said. “Protocols as during any active level one mission. Go home and sleep.”

“You should sleep too, Boss,” Hurtfew replied, timid as though it was her personal failing that Bond wasn’t available.

“I could—”

“Obey orders,” Q cut in, unnecessarily sharply, before Winters could suggest anything ‘improper.’

“Make you a new cup of tea before I go,” she finished tonelessly.

Q sighed. “Just go.”

Winters and Hurtfew both nodded and left. Q remained alone with the LED lights and the blue glow from the screens in front of him. He packed up his work station and moved to his office. It took three minutes for the kettle to boil; he settled the mug of steaming tea on his table and called Stark’s machine.

“Good evening, Mr Smith.”

It wasn’t evening where the machine was, but Q decided it was polite enough to reply: “Likewise.”

“With Mr Stark’s permission, I have established who, with the probability of ninety-seven point eight-six-six percent is the American representative on the World Security Council.”

The name itself, however, wasn’t forthcoming.

“But?” Q suggested.

“I was instructed by Mr Stark to only divulge it to you on the condition of reciprocity.”

“That depends.” It depended entirely of what Stark would do with the knowledge. If he wanted to find something to hold over those people’s heads, he was welcome to it. If he wanted to go on a killing spree… Q might be convinced to keep quiet about it. If, however, he wanted to play those people’s families’ hero in titanium-gold-alloy armour, Q was not giving him a single letter of the name.

“I regret that I cannot acquiesce to your request.”

“Can you call Mr Stark? Make it a conference call.”

There was quiet on the line, then the distant, muted sound of ringing, and moments later Stark picked up with: “What’s up, J?”
“Mr Smith suggested a conference call as a means of negotiation,” the machine explained.

“Ring up Pepper, too,” Stark ordered.

“Sir,” the AI said, sounding somehow nervous, “Miss Potts’ phone is inaccessible.”

“There is no place in the States where the Starknet doesn’t have signal,” Stark pointed out. “And Pepper doesn’t turn her phone off.”

“I am trying Agent Coulson,” the machine informed them initiatively. “The same response.”

“Fuck,” Stark stated succinctly.

“I could try from my end,” Q offered.

“Don’t bother. My tech is superior to yours.”

That Q was forced to concede.

“But you called for a reason, sugarpie. Out with it.”

Q smelled his tea. It was too hot to drink yet, but it already had an invigorating effect on him. “If I give you the name, what will you do with it?”

“Ruin their credit score,” Stark blurted without thinking about it. At least he didn’t have any elaborate altruistic plan.

“So you know about the guided missiles?”

“What- Ah, you mean guided missiles.” Someone caught a coughing fit in the background; apparently Stark wasn’t alone. He must have made fast friends with… Banner, yes, it was the man that housed the beast.

“It gets worse, then?” Q guessed. If Stark hadn’t been so fired up at the WSC because of their militant actions, there must have been an additional reason.

“Oh, you’ve no idea.” That wasn’t strictly true, but if thinking it made Stark happy, he could go on. “Say that someone starts asking around about the geezers on this Council, and so I get curious. I set my very personal AI on it, of course. And J finds not only who this geezer is, but also why he never made it as a Congressman.”

“You’re going to keep me in suspense?”

“If anyone made I-heart-nuclear-weapons t-shirts, he’d be wearing one.”

Q mused on that. It did sound ever more likely that the bastards intended to murder several millions of people in New York for whatever reason, and have decided that the recent spot of extraterrestrial trouble was a sufficient excuse. He wondered what their siblings and spouses and kids would think once they’ve found out.

“Let me guess – he has no family or friends left in New York.”

“None whatsoever,” the machine agreed.

“The British representative is Serena Aurelia Nottingham, née Bings. Date of birth is the third of January nineteen sixty-two.”
“J?”

“Processing data, sir. Mrs Nottingham is a former Army officer.”

“A widow,” Q added, “three sons, two in the Army, one dead. Never appeared in public – she seems to have been drafted for this chair straight from active duty.”

“Ours – I say ours, but I think I mean theirs – J, what are the prerequisites for forming your own nation? I must be rich enough for that, right?”

“You are indeed more wealthy than most of the world’s countries,” the machine assured Stark.”

“Ha! But I was saying – JARVIS has determined that the American representative is David Tybalt Kimberley, informally known as ‘Duke,’ a nickname left over from his days of college football. A married man with two grown and married children and three grandchildren with another statistically on its way.”

Q already had the man identified – there were few of that name – and found that much of his life’s documentation was missing or had been redacted. Presumably, he had been a contractor for the military, owning a company that specialised in pyrotechnics. Nuclear weapons were his hobby – his life’s passion, so to say. He had made a run for the Congress after some success in local politics, and had been quickly sidelined into a quiet position out of the public’s sight.

“What does the WSC have to do with the Tesseract?” Stark asked after a while.

Q with some difficulty suppressed a sigh. The tea helped. “As far as I know, nothing.”

“So we’re fighting on two fronts. What are the chances they’ll take one another out?”

“Nil,” Q stated, grimly certain.

The WSC was geographically spread all over the globe, and no one strike would wipe them all out. The Chitauri would not be destroyed with a guided missile, whether or not the warhead was nuclear.

“I agree,” the machine said.

“That’s what I was afraid you’d say.” Stark conferred with Banner under his breath, then gustily sighed and returned to the conversation. “Fine. Fine. Pookie, tell me about this scepter-waving alien that’s mind-fucked Barton.” Of course he had gotten at SHIELD agents’ reports.

There was a while of silence over the line. Eventually, perhaps fifteen second later, the AI spoke: “Were you addressing me, sir?”

“No, J,” Stark replied. “I was talking to the British boffin.”

“Oh,” Q intoned. He had been deliberating on how much he was going to share with Stark, and came to the conclusion that in the interest of the planet’s survival, he was going to share all but what would implicate himself. “After I dealt with its original wielder, the Scepter seized another victim.” He had no idea whom, but since the weapon was not in SHIELD’s possession, it must have been one of the two women at the scene. “I freed Bond and Barton, but Selvig is still in its power, and that means they will open the portal.”

“How do we stop them?” Stark asked instead of inquiring about what portal Q meant, so he had wisened up to that much on his end. Good. Presumably Barton’s report was at least as comprehensive as Bond’s. Apropos, that was something that he might like to read.
His fingers danced over the keyboard.

“I know of no way,” Q admitted. Would that he could send in Bond and have him blow up everything. He would even gladly sacrifice all Bond’s equipment – this one time.

“Can we close the portal?”

“I don’t know – can you?”

Stark did something evil to the microphone that sent a disgusting smacking, squelching, screeching sound through it. “Me and Bruce will get on it.”

With that both he and his AI dropped the call.

Q leaned back in his chair and sensed his way into his spell’s consciousness. He received the memory of the same conversation from the other side, with very little additional information mainly consisting of the beast’s reactions to the revelations.

“When I said that about nuking the kindergarten,” Banner spoke gloomily, standing above a screen and watching data compile itself, “I didn’t mean it that seriously.”

“Nukes are pretty serious things, Doc,” Stark replied mechanically, concentrating on something else.

“You know, yesterday I was earning my rupees as a medicine man in India. Now I’m handling equipment that cost millions of dollars, trying to look for an alien answer to inexhaustible energy source.”

“You’re a diverse man, buddy,” Stark said in the same absent tone.

The beast glanced over. “I don’t suppose you could explain to me how are these aliens going to power their Star Gate? If the numbers are right, we’re looking at them hijacking at least a nuclear power plant. Can’t we just… cut them off at the source?”

Stark suddenly jerked and looked up. He meandered through the lab to the opposite side, adjusted the lid of a laptop, dismissed the screensaver (consisting of an animated logo of the SI switching with the picture of the Iron Man armour) and with one hand lackadaisically typed for a while. “Sixty-five of them, hundred and four reactors. That’s a lot, but maybe not too much… that was a strike of brilliance, rock cabbage! You’ve deserved your pay for today!” he spun on his heel and set off, presumably to find Fury and alert him to a potential solution to their problem, however half-baked it was.

“I wasn’t aware I was getting paid for this gig,” the beast muttered, but he went after Stark.

Q’s construct quickly made a round of the screens and had a look at what they were working on. Still searching for the Hypercube, it seemed, hoping to find it and the scepter. At the same time, they were trying to come up with at least a rough project of a device that could open a wormhole. They didn’t have a lot.

They had enough to start Q off on his own research, but that would have to wait until they weren’t so pressed for time. And until after Q had had a good night’s sleep.

By the time the spell had caught up to Stark and Banner, they had apparently given their report, meagre as it was. A discussion sparked among the executive officers – notably Fury, Hill, and one of the mostly interchangeable agents apparently ousted from the lab that temporarily belonged to Stark and his new friend – who, it seemed, understood about as much as ‘aliens will need a power plant.’
Q was a little disappointed that Stark had stopped looking after realising that. Surely there was something else Selvig would require? Some materials were common enough that they could be bought at any corner store, but others…

And what, in Hel’s name, was in Stuttgart?

“Stark?” Fury asked, cutting off the blabbering around him.

Barton, Romanov, Rogers and Thor were standing in various spots scattered across the Bridge and seemed to be trying to garner at least an outline of an idea of what was going on. Incidentally, Barton and Romanov appeared to be the only successful ones.

Stark pretended to contemplate whether he was able to tell them more precisely what kind of plant they should be looking for. “Hmm… yeah, no. Get me the specs on the doohickey Selvig’s building for them, and I’ll tell you.”

“We may have to ask Dr Foster after all-”

“Thor will step on you if you do that. You know he can.”

Fury did not even look in the Ás’ direction. “I will deal with that when I find the time – in the next decade, by the looks of things. Right now I need some sodding geniuses to figure out this shit, so I’m having her brought in.”

Stark shrugged. “Your funeral.”

“I would not challenge he who invited Jane to walk on an island with me,” Thor assured Rogers, who was standing next to him, “however, I would much prefer to be assured of her safety. I would certainly give much effort to convince her against coming.”

Rogers stared at him for a while and then turned to face the front again. “Some dames are much stronger than they appear. To keep them from the battlefield would be dishonoring them.”

“I shall never commit such an injustice upon the fair Jane!” Thor boomed, disturbing the conversation that had in the meantime come to completely exclude the scientists. “If, however, our circumstances are so dire that she of the keen eye and keen mind must risk herself, I must attempt to seek out my brother ere the mighty battle!”

Several people spoke at once, creating an unintelligible cacophony.

Thor ignored them all. He raised Mjölnir in a mute valediction, and set off to find one of the exits leading to the topside of the aircraft.

Q bit the inside of his cheek and after careful consideration decided that he was not nervous yet. There were only two ways for that giant oaf to succeed – one was that serendipity would sway his feet to trip over Q; the other was if Q did magic. Of course, the idea that his magic would be available to him and yet he refrained from engaging in it must have been preposterous to some, but those persons probably knew nothing of artificial lighting, central heating and socks. Socks, Q admitted, were the one invention that had made him reconsider the blanket inferiority of the Midgardians. He liked cold, but his circulation wasn’t the best even on an exciting day, and long standing in underground laboratories would have taken its toll on his magic-less feet.

For the time being then, he would be playing a mortal.

Q slept in his office, in the sleeping bag he kept there for this purpose. It happened often. He had the
training to make the experience almost comfortable, so he woke up rested and nigh on cheerful, until he made the trek to the bathroom and over its course realised that there was less than two percent chance that he would make it until the evening without revealing his origins.

“Q Branch think tank!” Q barked, entering the main office. “Call in all nonessential personnel! Call in people from other branches if they can help with strategy and tactics! If you know anyone vetted who’s exceptional at strategic games, call them in too. I want everyone who’s not already tasked with saving the planet… or the nation,” he allowed, “to get to the mess hall. Starting at nine, sharp! Stragglers will be electrocuted!” Then he passed through to his personal office and slammed the door shut behind himself.

The room was soundproof, but he did have the feed from the security cameras available, and thus knew that he had caused shock and consternation among his underlings. Very few had ever seen him in a similar state before, and those were now reassuring the others that he had not, in fact, been poisoned, or high, or hallucinating due to overwork and neglecting sleep.

At five to nine, about two hundred people were sardined inside the mess hall, sitting on and around the tables, many on chairs they had brought in themselves, others on the floor. Under Q’s management the Q Branch had absorbed the entire R&D and IT departments, so it wasn’t nearly everyone, but perhaps everyone currently in the building not busy with anything vitally important. There were laptops of all brands everywhere, but there were also a few paper notebooks and some attendees seemed to have nothing but their phones on them. Quite a lot of heads periodically turned to the entrances, but no one else was coming in, so it appeared like they would not have the chance to observe anyone being electrocuted.

Q wasn’t entirely sure if he had meant the threat when he had proclaimed it, but in hindsight it did not seem like a bad idea at all.

He said a few choice phrases to the cook that had attempted to oust them, and since he was so many rungs above her that there really was no comparison, she clenched her teeth and bustled off to complain to her boss, who would complain to their boss, who might complain to their boss, who most certainly would not complain to their boss for fear that they may complain to Tanner, of whose existence these people were perhaps vaguely aware. After that cameo Q judged that they were ready to start. He climbed onto the serving counter that usually offered a variety of salads and waited the five seconds it took the room to fall quiet.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he started, skipping over all the niceties (these people worked for him or thereabouts; he was under no obligation to be unfailingly polite), “we’re facing an invasion. It’s quite unlike any invasion we’ve faced before, and we do not have a viable defence strategy as of yet.” He paused; then it occurred to him that it might be relevant to inform them that: “We need one.”

Some of the less sane members of the crowd chuckled at that. The rest was staring at Q in confusion about why he was stalling.

By three o’clock in the afternoon the cooks had turned off their cookers and were holding a bridge tournament, going by the sounds occasionally filtering in from the kitchen.

Tanner had come by to complain to Q, but upon a short interrogation it became clear that it was Legal that had come to complain to him, because they were hungry and the mess door was shocking them. Tanner himself had a mildly electrocuted and largely annoyed look about him.

“The Q Branch had the necessary spatial accommodations in the previous building. As this is only
temporary housing,” Q said with much irony, letting the entire eavesdropping room know not only that their leadership had considered staying here permanently, but also that Q strongly disagreed with this choice, “I understand that we cannot expect a similar level of comfort. However, we are tasked with providing your agents with the means to succeed on their missions, and I say we need an assembly room. You’re welcome to remind M of my previous suggestions for premises.”

Tanner rubbed his temples. “We’re in the middle of a crisis,” he hissed, as if that was supposed to have been some huge secret, and the rest of the room hadn’t yet been aware of it. “Can’t this wait a week?”

Q gave Tanner a look that must have been truly ogrish, for even this hardened man that almost routinely denied Winters paled and subconsciously took a step backwards.

“What,” Q breathed, and the temperature around him sank to the point that Tanner’s breath condensed into little clouds of vapour as he exhaled, “do you imagine we are working on?! This is the last ditch effort to save your self-important skin, along with six billion others.” He raised himself to his full, if unimpressive height, extended his arm and pointed his index finger at the door Tanner had come in through. “Leave.”

Tanner swallowed. He looked around the room.

The scientists and assorted clever people were staring at Q as though he had just hung the Moon. The ones closest had felt the temperature change, but they seemed like they had ascribed it to some Boothroydesque device Q had created for the double-ohs to use in some completely predictable situation that would require them to lower the atmosphere’s temperature.

Tanner nodded. He looked Q in the eye and said: “In that case, work hard. Good luck.”

He left, having impressed Q a little, for there were few who had dared to as much as face him after he had given them a taste of his anger. Once Q truly let loose, he was capable of frightening even Thor, and that Ás was ridiculously unconcerned about his self-preservation.

“Balls like an elephant,” someone muttered.

“Do you have something to say?” Q turned in that direction. The temperature was back to its air-conditioned twenty-seven degrees, but his mere attention seemed to freeze those upon whom it fell.

A young man with dreadlocks in his voluminous hair stood up and helped his colleague – a woman on two crutches – to her foot.

“Sir,” she spoke, “you said they had a sort of a hive mind. That’s a major weakness. That means they are absolutely dependent on continuous communication. So, unless it’s telepathy or something else we’ve never encountered, we could disrupt that.”

Q nodded, tapping the pads of his fingers against his lower lip. He didn’t know how the Chitauri communicated. “Much of their technology is… biological, for a lack of a better descriptor.”

He was still somewhat astounded by how well these mortals had handled the revelation that there indeed were other sentient species in the universe, and that they were about to be attacked by one.

“It’s a crying pity we don’t have any bio material to analyse,” sounded from the other end of the room.

“If we at least knew what their planet consists of… and their atmosphere… can they even breathe air? Do they need to breath?”
Good questions. Great ones, even. If they could not… no, they would be.

“They can,” Q said, based on moral certainty. The creature that had brought the scepter to Midgard had been able to, but it had previously survived the Chitauri’s world, and while it was indeed possible that it had used protection from the atmosphere and breathing support, such a meeting would be too impractical to facilitate for the gain of one mere puppet.

He tried to recall if he had heard anything else of the species, even a rumour, but nothing came to mind. He had, however, never heard of a creature that was alive and yet did not breathe. And much as they might have resembled constructs, the Chitauri were, indeed, living beings.

“So, what it comes down to is, we need an Iris?”

Q, intermittently unfamiliar with the popular culture as he was, fortunately recognised this reference, if only because the plans for a similar device already existed in the archives. Sadly, without a solid ring to limit the portal, there was no way to install such a lock – and they still did not know enough about the portal to even dream about limiting it.

“No, that only worked because matter could traverse the wormhole only in one way… Q, will this portal be traversable both ways?”

Q bit onto the end of his index finger’s nail. It was more difficult than he had expected to apply magical theory to phenomena caused by Midgardian science, but if he took into account the fact that the science was using the Hypercube as a source of direction, while, presumably drawing on a nuclear reactor as a source of power, than it would stand to reason that the Hypercube’s functionality would translate.

“Assume both ways,” Q instructed them, before remembering that he was speaking practically with a finger in his mouth. How sloppy.

“We need to stopper it, then,” the crowd suggested.

“Or make a grille. We make a net of microfibers; they’ll kill themselves with their own momentum.”

“Yeah, if we had six months to engineer it.”

“It’s not a bad idea in principle. We can’t do it right now, so let’s do what we can.”

“Have the army spread around and cover it. How big will the portal be?”

Q had no idea.

“We would still need a location for that.”

“They won’t bother to try and move a reactor.”

“A minefield. We can set that up in ten minutes.”

“They could come through underwater. Or ten miles above the surface.”

“No, if they use a reactor as battery.”

Q bit on another nail, itching to move, apparently getting into one of his maniacal phases. No one liked it when he was maniacal. He couldn’t stand still.

He wished Bond was there to share the little corner of unrepentant cynicism and perpetually
victorious mindset with him.

“Hey, how about we tell them we surrender and then poison their celebratory beer?”

Well, they had been at it for more than seven hours with little success. Against certain enemies – notably the Æsir – that might have been a working plan.

Or Q could let himself be taken prisoner by the Chitauri and strike at them from the inside of their camp. Like Silva, the Ymir-whore. Well, he might have had some rather pointed feelings about it, but it was a valid infiltration strategy and, depending on his enemy, Q might one day decide to implement it, too. Not against the Chitauri, though. He had a feeling that they only gave quarter when they could use mind-control or their captives.

He needed some genius idea. Something completely different from everything that had been suggested – and which did not involve guided missiles with nuclear warheads.

Too bad nothing was occurring to him.

He yawned and narrowed his eyes. Oh fine. So Thor might have the slightest chance to ‘make him’ as they said at the MI-6. He rested his chin in his palm, reconstructed the link to his spell and delved into its consciousness.

The beast cleaned its glasses, put them on and hunched over to more closely scrutinise a screen. “Who is that?”

“It is Benigno Esteban de Pato, Dr Banner,” came from the laptop’s speaker in the familiar voice of Stark’s machine.

“A passionate fisherman, I see,” Romanov remarked, giving the picture of the middle aged man holding a three-foot long catfish a look over Banner’s shoulder.

The beast flinched, startled, which in turn made Romanov flinch and attempt to moonwalk away from him.

“What else is he?” Romanov asked, reflexively changing her posture and facial expression to the dewy-eyed, puffy-lipped strong-willed yet doomed woman that had been trained into her. Q found it supremely unattractive, but he had known enough men in the past, mortal and not, who would have ripped their hearts out of their chests and offered them.

Banner looked away, then at her as if he couldn’t help himself, and once more away, shaking his head. He took off his glasses again.

Stark did not even notice her pantomime. He was engaged in a typed conversation with his AI, and kept half an ear to the door. “An acquaintance of an acquaintance,” he said easily. Since he knew the richest two percent of the world, mostly personally, he probably wasn’t even lying. He did, however, close the app, stand in front of the laptop, clap his hands once and smile insincerely. “Dave Kimberley. You know him, Fury?”

“I don’t have the time to schmooze in between putting out urban fires,” the Director grumbled, appearing in the doorway a moment later.

“Yes, yes, we know.” Stark waved one hand, continuously typing with the other. “Enough work to employ two LMDs fulltime.”

“Don’t I know it.” Fury sighed and took a seat. He leaned back, his head falling over the backrest so
that he would have been staring at the ceiling, had he bothered to keep his eye open.

Romanov moved toward the scientists’ pot to pour him a paper-cup of coffee, but a myopic look from Banner – which was as much of an expression of anxiety as the beast ever showed – froze her. She raised both hands slightly, one still holding the paper-cup, showing that she was not holding a weapon, and was not going to use violence to steal coffee from its rightful addicts.

“Director Fury,” Stark’s AI spoke, “you have not slept in more than fifty-six hours. Sleep is necessary for the optimization of—”

“Not having this discussion in front of my subordinates, JARVIS,” Fury grumbled.

Stark for a split second met his eye, before Fury closed it again. Unexpectedly – to Q at least – there must have been a little less resentment between these two men than Stark’s earlier diatribes would have implied. Perhaps it was just SHIELD then than Stark despised so ardently?

“You seem distracted,” Banner pointed out when he caught Stark staring in a different direction and forgetting to type.

Stark took a gulp of his coffee, grimaced, and then turned to Romanov. “When’s the last time Coulson’s reported in?”

He still hadn’t reestablished contact with him and Potts? Q felt warm dread spread through his bones, but was not given much time to divine its reasons, because the grille covering the air vent moved aside and Agent Barton landed in a crouch between Romanov and Fury – who had sat up and scowled in response to Stark’s question.

“Why the sudden interest, Stark?” Romanov inquired coyly.

Stark turned to Fury. “Because last I saw Pepper, she left with him, and I haven’t heard from her in over twenty-four hours. If this is your scheme, Nick, I’ll be pissed, but if not, I need to go find her and break whoever touched her.”

“I did not have your girlfriend abducted,” Fury replied solemnly, with a flat attempt at sounding annoyed by the accusation.

“You’re sure about that?” Stark mocked, but the lines around his eyes deepened in genuine distress. “I know sometimes these minutiae can slip one’s mind… I mean, so many schemes to plot, so many people to manipulate or extort—”

“Stark!” Fury barked. He pointed two fingers to the floor in a gesture that seemed to have a meaning only to the two men engaged in the argument, and which made them both deflate. “It crossed my mind, yes. But Coulson had a few pointed counterarguments.”

Barton nodded. He glided over to Romanov and muttered: “It was epic. I wouldn’t cross Coulson if you paid me.”

“You keep missing the point,” Stark said, moving back to his computer and starting another written conversation, this one requiring a lot of emphatic Enter-pressing. “Coulson’s incommunicado, too. At this point I don’t care who’s got them. I’m kicking ass and not bothering with names. It’s no skin off my nose if you’ve got to sign a hundred condolences letters tomorrow.”

“Stark,” Fury repeated, audibly exhausted.

Stark shut the laptop, took it under his arm and looked at the trinity of SHIELD agents. “I’ll believe it
when I see it. You haven’t given me any reason to trust a word out of your mouth.”

“It’s not us,” Fury promised, and even Q wanted to believe him at this point, which showed some serious skills in manipulation. “We’ve lost contact with the quinjet somewhere around the Vancouver Island.”

“And not bothered to tell me,” Stark retorted.

“We cannot afford to have you – either of you – distracted now!” Fury gave as a token protest.

“Tough luck.”

“Tony…” the beast spoke up gingerly. “I’ll keep at it. If I find anything or think of anything…”

“JARVIS will let me know, right buddy?” Stark concluded.

“Of course, sir,” the machine replied from the terminal speakers. Apparently, it was already infiltrated deep into the SHIELD servers.

Without further debate or any fanfares, Stark left. Banner instantly shrunk, as if the agents were going to lock him inside a cage now that his protector had left, but Fury only tiredly rubbed the edge of his eye-patch and threw a weary glare at his subordinates.

Barton was absently juggling five glass beakers.

Romanov pursed her lips and crossed her arms. “With all due respect, sir, if Potts comes to harm, it’s the last time we’ll have gotten Stark to cooperate with us. In fact, it might just push him to the other side entirely.”

“Your assessment of Stark missed a few salient points, Agent Romanov,” Fury replied in a gravelly voice. “If both Potts and Coulson come to harm, we might as well start redrawing the maps, because Stark will set the world on fire.” He shook his head. “You haven’t seen him go insane yet.”

Q blinked and mentally went over the short meeting between Stark and Coulson that he had witnessed. He couldn’t recall anything at all in the direction of what Fury had suggested, but then… who knew? Stark was interesting because he was inscrutable, and Potts seemed like she had been born of ice. There was no telling what treasures lay hidden beneath Coulson’s suit.

Back in his office, Q uploaded pictures of Potts and Coulson and let the facial recognition software run. It was a long shot, but if there was any chance, he quite viscerally wanted to aid. Then he had an idea that was either genius or absolutely retarded, and he narrowed the search parameters.
“Bond.”

“Where are you?” Q asked without preamble, like it wasn’t ten in the evening and he couldn’t hear the characteristic sounds of a bar in the background. At least the man had picked up his phone.

“Why are you asking?” Bond counter-questioned just before he exchanged a whispered phrase in German with someone. He had covered the microphone, but the Q Branch made better phones than that.

“If you are where I think you are, I’ve got a job for you.”

“You can’t just ping my phone?”

Because that was what Q was going to waste his time on while he had to figure out the attack, the counterattack, and how to lead by their noses the agents of several secret service organisations without anyone pointing their finger at him – or Thor coming to hug out their ‘misunderstanding’ and cry manly tears of joy at their ‘reunion.’

“I’m running the GPS trace right now, but the process is crawling. Concurrency slows down the…”

It was at best difficult to judge how much technical jargon any double-oh understood, because not only were they completely eccentric jacks-of-all-trades, they were also brought up understanding the logic of floppy discs and prone to playing dumb.

“Never mind. Is double-oh-six there?”

Bond made an injured sound. “I leave for a couple of days, and already you have a new favourite?”

The agent had to have been dropped on his head as a child. A lot. Aside from Bond’s inimitable capacity for creating chaos in his wake and Q’s inordinate, unprofessional glee at it… oh, whom was Q kidding? Everyone and their dead and cremated Great Aunt knew that Bond was his favourite. From that somehow most extrapolated that Q was sleeping with the man.

This ‘most’ included Trevelyan, incidentally. If the two double-ohs were somewhere together, like Q suspected they were, there was no telling what far-fetched stories Bond was feeding his colleague and how Q was unknowingly playing along.

“He was helpful,” Q said, hoping to annoy Bond as much as he could without wasting time or resources. “It was a shocking experience.”

“I’m sure,” Bond finished that trained of thought, switched tracks and asked: “What’s the job?”

Stuttgart blinked on Q’s map.

“I’ll send you profiles of people that have been… put into the same position as you. It’s critical that they survive – do you understand me, Bond? One of them is highly trained, but they both must survive.” Potts would not give much of a fight; even if the scepter tried to control her reactions; she was physically weak and at best capable of basic self-defence. Coulson, on the other hand, was a wild card in Stark’s and Fury’s league – that also explained why both aforementioned men held him
in such respect.

On this Q agreed with Fury: neither Potts nor Coulson were expendable.

“How am I supposed to do that?” Bond asked, somewhere part-way between sarcasm and seriousness.

“Hit them on the head,” Q replied, yet again amazed at the resilience of the human race. Of course, it came at the price of mortality and frailty, and that prompted him to add: “But gently, Bond. These are mortal human beings.”

“Resistance?” the agent asked shortly. A bit of German in the background prompted him to offer his Visa card.

“No idea,” Q said. He had said and thought it more times in the past few days than in decades before. Strangely, it did not fill him with shame: only with frustration and determination to succeed against overwhelming odds, like he had before, and like he would again. This the Allfather never understood, because to him everything was fathomable, and he never thought or said that he ‘had no idea.’

“Fantastic,” Bond bit off, exiting the bar and walking into a street. Cars were driving by – and a tram.

Q would have been a little more reassured if Bond had been truly sarcastic. As it was, he simply sounded as though he were having fun. That kind of complacency was barely acceptable from someone immortal; on James Bond it was absurd, vexing, and stupidly charming.

“And Bond,” Q added before hanging up, “be careful of the scepter. I would be so annoyed if I had to mount another rescue mission.”

But he would mount it if necessary – just like he had gone off half-cocked when Bond had been in trouble before – just like he had blatantly implicated himself over the course of the Silva debacle by going along with Bond’s slapdash plan.

Bond just had that effect on him.

Q’s computer search spat out several names of German citizens – nothing conclusive. One of them had been born in Stuttgart, one of them had studied there, and two owned some property within the district. To the best of Q’s knowledge, there was no tie between the WSC and the city. None of the potential candidates for membership of the Council were on the guest list for the auction Potts had crashed.

Hopefully, Bond would deal with Potts without inciting Stark’s wrath. Potts was exactly the kind of a woman Bond didn’t go for – she was far from bored; she knew what she wanted, how to get it, and that Bond didn’t have it hidden inside his pants.

Admittedly, she was mind-controlled right now. Bond might not have had the kind of moral compass that would make him refrain from sex with a drunk, drugged, misled, emotionally extorted or previously repeatedly raped woman, but he knew that Potts’ continued well-being was important to MI-6, so he would likely refrain from damaging the objective. Also, there would be very little time and no imaginable opportunity before the gala, but Q had made a resolution to not underestimate Bond.

It came with the added benefit of winning many a wager.
His construct in the meantime shadowed Fury and his people and made notes. Coulson’s disappearance had driven a wedge between some of the special operatives and Barton, who insisted on tacitly yet staunchly defending his handler, even going so far as to attempt and disclose the details of his own brief ‘desertion’ – that event was prevented by Romanov, who made it clear that she would not become interested in her colleagues’ opinions for as long as they kept those opinions to themselves.

That statement effectively silenced – an in short order emptied – the Helicarrier’s rec room.

Maria Hill took the conn, and then practiced her unique ability to become one with the background bustle of the Bridge. She only came out of the woodwork when there was a problem to be solved. Q resolved to learn, or at least imitate, the skill, for she managed to catch two slacking off employees within five minutes; the second one with a promise of a reprimand in his file for installing unauthorised applications on the server.

The reason she was needed to take the conn was that Fury shut himself in his meeting room to liaise with the WSC.

“With all due respect, sir,” Fury was saying in his poker-player voice, “there is absolutely no evidence to support that wild hypothesis.”

On the screen Fury was currently keeping within his eye’s scope, the silhouette of a slightly superhuman size fidgeted.

Fury didn’t give any observable tells when he continued: “So far the most plausible of Dr Banner’s readings point us to Western Europe – probably France, Germany or Switzerland.” He crossed his arms behind his back and waited, like a man aware that there was an enormous pile of bullshit about to drop on him.

Indubitably, Fury was canny enough to figure out a lot of what was going on by himself, but Q rather suspected that Stark had given him enough intel on the sly, to keep him in the loop.

“Unacceptable!” objected someone – presumably the French representative, guessing by accent.

“I agree.”

“What would… why would the aliens even come to Europe? Do not all Martians go to America anyway? Those two last year…”

“I absolutely agree, sir,” Fury said easily, shocking the silhouettes into brief, wary silence. “Therefore my best analysts compiled a list of most viable places to establish an event horizon – that’s what Banner calls it, anyway – for their paratroops. The file-”

“Berlin is on here!”

“Paris… Lyon… have you gone mad, Fury?”

“Edinburgh? Really? At least London I might understand, but *Edinburgh*?”

“Lisbon, Madrid, Barcelona, Venice, Milan… Rome? You are that keen to blow up the Vatican, Director?”

“Of course not, sir,” Fury replied readily. “If you would sort the list by the value in column F, ‘verisimilitude,’ you will find that only ten European cities have a greater probability of being the site of an alien attack than New York. We have two nuclear warheads at our disposal. According to the
Protocol you have instated, they are presently aimed at Paris and Frankfurt respectively.”

“Have you gone insane, man?!” a woman demanded.

Fury blinked. “The World Security Council has instated this Protocol.” Meaning, of course, that it had been all their idea and their scheme and they should have thought it through better if they had wanted to get it past him.

Unlike the villains Q was more familiar with, these were crafty enough to not implicate themselves by saying something along the lines of 'you should have bombed New York!' but they had implicated themselves enough by not mounting a protest based on reasonable arguments.

The best (and worst) they could do was suggesting: “Do you truly trust the assessment of the Hulk?”

Fury took an almost imperceptibly deeper breath, and just as inconspicuously released it. “May I suggest you re-read the briefing on Dr Banner that was made available to the Council, ma’am?”

Obviously, there had been no security-related reasons for the preemptive nuking of several millions of American citizens. Q could understand the desire to commit such a deed – there were unnecessarily many of the Midgardians as it was – but on the other hand they were his subjects, claimed, and these faceless self-important pigs thought they had the right to decide life and death? Not in Q’s domain.

Q went home. He took the Tube, then walked, and ducked away from Mrs Zola Hawley, the neighbour that would have been an archetypal old cat lady, had she had a cat for a pet instead of a boa constrictor. She had once informed him, in gin-inspired confidence, that she had worked for the RAF as a prostitute in the old days, shortly after it was founded; in fact, she had provided most of Q’s working knowledge of Midgardian society. However, right now he didn’t have the time to chat if he wanted to get to Germany before the showdown, preferably without Thor jumping out at him from the shadow of the nearest fastfood restaurant.

Q stumbled into his flat; the door fell closed behind him, electronic locks engaging automatically, the manual one secured with a habitual twist of fingers. There was a scent reminiscent of the Asgard in the air – the take out from three days ago that he had left on the kitchen counter when Tanner had called him in.

Leaving the shower after mere five minutes required superhuman strength of will, but he promised himself that he would make it up to himself with a long, indulgent one once the crisis was over; that meant that Midgardian indoor plumbing had to survive. He called it additional motivation.

Then, still dripping water from his hair onto the shoulders of his jacket, he was in Stuttgart.

There was a crowd of well-dressed people running his way, high heels clacking, purses waving, voices screaming as if their animal instincts weren’t telling them to save their breath for the movement. The sound of shots fired came from the inside, and Q wondered if it was his pessimism that made him identify it as Bond’s Walther – the weapon that he wasn’t even supposed to have with him, seeing as he was ‘on leave.’

Well, Q was the one who had stipulated that two double-ohs were to perform an extraction without casualties. He wasn’t surprised about the shooting. In fact, in his opinion there was an explosion or at least a toxic cloud missing from the scene.

What he genuinely had not expected was the chopper.
He reappeared on the roof, hoping that the general panic happening around him had effectively concealed the magic. The chopper was already taking off, and short of risking the lives of everyone onboard he had no way of stopping it. He could, however, send a construct with them.

Q’s consciousness invaded the space around and inside the bodies of Coulson and the pilot, and slid back into the seat that had been reserved for Potts.

“There was a complication,” Coulson announced.

The pilot did not ask for further explanation.

Upon closer look, both men had the same eerie blue light in their eyes as the other victims of the scepter.

Q blinked and side-stepped on the roof just in time to avoid being bodily tackled by Bond, who obviously hadn’t recognised him from behind. Must have been the still wet hair. “Tell me you have Potts, double-oh-seven.”

Bond paused mid-strike, reached out and pushed Q’s chin up to check his eyes. Q tolerated it; it allowed him to do the same in return and take stock of the agent – he was ruffled, sweaty, but unhurt and – honest to Norns – in possession of all his illicitly obtained equipment. Q felt like patting him on the head for that neat trick.

Bond nodded. “The woman is disoriented but conscious. She’s got a mouth on her.”

Q stepped backwards and belatedly remembered his glasses. They were nowhere around this country. He materialised a pair, barely paying attention to the agent’s reaction.

Rather than apprehensive, Bond seemed curious, sizing Q up, trying to figure out how to fight him – should he turn out to be an enemy, presumably.

“I need to speak with her,” Q said, “and then I need you in London to charm M out of starting World War Three – or bullshit him, I so honestly do not care.”

“What makes you think I could do that?” Bond inquired, leading the way to the roof door and then down into the darkened stairwell. “One doesn’t become the head of a secret service agency without being immune to the usual techniques.”

Q backtracked to the lift and called it. Of course Bond had run up the stairs – all fifteen or however many levels. Just his usual way of brute-force-thinking through his problems.

Bond huffed his impatience, but remained standing by the wall and waiting for the lift.

“World War Three,” Q repeated what he had thought was the important part of his statement.

“Thought it was more of a War of Worlds,” Bond countered.

“Leave me to worry about the War of Worlds,” Q improvised, uncertain about the reference yet perfectly capable of extrapolating from context, “and solve the World War problem. I can’t split myself into three men-” he might have been able to temporarily clone himself, but that was neither here nor there. “-and there’s too many catastrophes going on at once. I still don’t have this one figured out.”

The lift dinged when it arrived.
The way down was interminable, and the music coming from speakers didn’t help. Q was glad to step outside into the lobby. Feeling like he could breathe again, he fell into step by Bond’s side as the agent hurried over to the hall.

“Miss Potts,” Q spoke once the woman was within sight.

She rapidly turned to him.

She was sitting on a marble altar-like structure in the middle of the hall, holding a man’s jacket around her shoulders, provided by Norns knew who (definitely neither Bond nor Trevelyan) since she must have been freezing in her silver satin cocktail dress. Her hair was falling out of the elaborate do, significantly more so on one side, as if someone had grabbed it and pulled on it.

Obviously, Bond hadn’t been too much of a gentleman about the concussive force.

At least she wasn’t bleeding.

“Mr Smith,” she said, surprised to see him, and immediately afterwards both glad that there was someone familiar there and suspicious that he had something to do with what had happened. “And a colleague.” She looked at Bond.

Q scoffed. “No need to be coy, Miss Potts,” he assured her sarcastically. “You may as well greet Agent Bond by his name – we all know you are familiar with it.”

Bond’s twitch of an eyebrow eloquently asked: ‘we do?’

“He was the one who…” she trailed off, swallowed, and started again: “He had the same thing happen to him as what has happened to me.”

It wasn’t a question, and neither Bond nor Q saw a reason to respond to it.

“The other agent…”

Bond was in motion before Q’s brain caught up. A moment later the local police ran inside, waving their guns and yelling in German into the mostly empty space to ‘put their hands behind their heads and lie on the floor,’ before they realised there were no terrorists left to capture or negotiate with.

Potts gave them a disdainful look, and easily cast Q into the role of her rescuer, stating – in accented but grammatically perfect German – that: “Two more men helped, and I think one of them is wounded!”

The Polizei Captain, pale and possibly on the verge of vomiting but holding up a brave face for his men, directed a handful of EMTs down the corridor Potts indicated. She insisting on going after them to ‘thank her heroes’ and walked almost literally right over the protesting officers. Q, of course, went with her, since she was still hanging off his shoulder.

Q let himself be subtly dragged and called Stark.

He got the ringtone.

The whole group came upon an unexpected scene: Bond was helping Trevelyan sit up on the floor, while Trevelyan slowly raised his right hand to his face and palpated around the edge of an oozing burn covering half of it.

“Mein Gott!” blurted one of the Germans.
Trevelyan turned a normal human-coloured eye to Q and slurred, as distinctly as he could through partially missing lips: “He did it wi’ the glo’ing schtick!”

Q ripped himself away from Potts and crowded in on the double-oh-six. “He used it release a blast?”

Trevelyan attempted to nod, and then thought better of it.

“Those are some damn efficient power sources they have,” said Stark from the other end of the phone line, which had apparently connected in the meantime.

“But we knew that, Tony – just the gamma signature…” Banner nattered on, and since he was still on the Helicarrier, Stark’s machine must have set up a conference call between all three places.

“I’hn thine, I’hn thine!” Trevelyan demanded and half-blindly tried to bat the medics away from him.

“Mensch!” one of the younger EMTs yelled, “Halb Ihren Gesicht ist futsch!”

And then Q figured it out. “Efficient... efficient!” he crowed and raised his phone, even though it was on speaker and Stark had heard everything. “They don’t need big, they just need efficient!”

“What just happened?” the Captain asked, bewildered.

“You’ve never met a genius, have you?” Potts dryly replied.

The Captain at Trevelyan, who was walking away on his own even though his brain was about to leak out of the huge – if mostly cauterised – hole in his head, and at the group of EMTs cowering away from him. He had never met a double-oh either, obviously.

The part of Q’s attention that wasn’t on his surroundings wrestled the idea he had had into verifiable concepts. “Aside from the Hypercube, what is the most efficient power source on the planet?”

Stark smugly chuckled; he might have tapped the LED light inside his chest. Then the self-satisfaction drained from his demeanour, replaced with fury. “Son of a bitch!”

“What? What did we miss?” Hill’s voice snapped from Banner’ end of the connection.

“They’re not going to bother taking over a power plant,” the beast explained breathlessly. “They’ll just use the StarkTower arc reactor.”

“Set course for New York!” Hill ordered in the background.

“Too slow!” Stark objected. “I’ll be there faster than you.”

“Stark!” Hill yelled in protest.

She was cut off by Rogers. “We must act as a team!”

There was a while of silence over the line – on Q’s side Potts began to masterfully bully the officers into doing what she wanted them to do without them realising that they had somehow shifted that perception of authority from their Captain to the strange American woman in three inch heels.

“Yeah,” Stark said eventually in a jaunty tone that set Q’s teeth on edge, “why don’t you tell that to my father, Cap?”

The SHIELD side of the line was dropped – the action confirmed by Stark’s AI in its customary
polished voice – and then Stark once again proved that he was a genius in more than just engineering or science, because he asked Q: “Where’s Pepper?” and fully expected to receive a specific answer.

“Double-oh-seven has extracted her. She’s fine.” Q felt a little proud of that achievement. It was his achievement, for all intents and purposes, after all. And he had achieved it with inferior technology, as he was tempted to point out to the mortal.

“You…” Stark grumbled something unintelligible. “Fuck this. Thanks.”

Potts provided a vague description of the terrorist with the glowing weapon, and it was one that would have exonerated Coulson if anyone had ever assumed him responsible. When cross-questioned for further details, she complained of the blow to her head – in the next breath she sent the medics away to check on the crowd, since ‘oh my goodness, that guy was shooting!’

She was extraordinary, and Q had missed out on an apprentice par excellence in her.

“You owe me one,” he retorted easily into the phone. And collect he would. There were oodles of requests to make he could think of just off the top of his head; there was so little Anthony Stark could not provide once he set his mind and money to it!

“I let you see the inside of the Tower,” Stark protested, “I didn’t tell on you to Fury. I didn’t even tell Coulson. I helped you find your agent. I lent you a car. And I didn’t sue you for hacking me.”

Q scoffed at that. “You couldn’t prove anything anyway. And are we playing quid pro quo?”

“Nah. Pepper’s worth that and more.”

“Anytime, Stark,” Q replied, and with the stretch of a smile on his lips he felt the sting of truth on his tongue. What was it about Midgardians that they found the infinitesimal cracks in Q’s armour through which they touched his viscera?

Stark likely hadn’t heard that, because he was already on the phone with his girlfriend. She turned away, but just before Q could see on her face the slackness of helpless relief. There might, very probably, be tears in the next minutes. Q did not need to stay for that.

When Bond entered his office, too damn early in the next morning, Q was waiting for him. He had a file in his hand, downloaded from the SHIELD archives and printed out before their sysadmin even thought of defending the servers.

He had gone through it while waiting for Bond’s plane to land, checking if the information wasn’t too detailed to be problematic in strange hands. Fury had done a fantastic job on making the potential candidates for Avengers seem like uncontrollable lost existences who would do much more harm than good if someone tried to use them. Oh, they had done three quarters of his job for him by suffering a huge variety of mental problems from PTSD to sociopathy to alcoholism to a truly legendary case of dissociative identity disorder. They were utter wildcards, and no one wanted to try playing a hand like that…

Except that Fury had been doing just that since the World War Two, when he had led the original Howling Commandos. The Avengers Initiative was just a knockoff.

Besides, it could hardly be any more difficult than managing the double-ohs.

Q gulped down the last of his tea and set the mug on top of some official-looking documents from
Tanner’s office. If they were necessary, Monneypenny would come with copies in a few days to personally ensure that Q would actually sign them. If they had been important, Winters would have dealt with them. “Double-oh-six?” he inquired.

“Making personal acquaintances with the nurses of Marienhospital in Stuttgart,” Bond replied, as though wondering why he wasn’t currently making a personal acquaintance with a nurse. Slowly, he turned his neck until he was looking at Q, not quite accusing, but tense, coiled for a spring. “The Docs say his eye’s a lost cause. So why don’t you tell me what you are doing, Quartermaster?”

“Because I don’t want you to stop me,” Q said sincerely.

He knew, of course, that it was exactly the wrong thing to say if he wanted Bond to cease questioning him.

But he also knew that the SHIELD Helicarrier was already above Montana and heading for New York, and that Thor had landed on it simultaneously with Jane Foster, surprised because he had been following the feel of the spell Q had left there for observation. He knew that Banner had detected the gamma frequency he ascribed to the Hypercube in several places of the world, including Germany, China, Russia, Chile, several states of the USA and the Helicarrier itself. He knew that Coulson and Trevor McLain (the same man who had flown the SHIELD jet for Coulson and Potts) had landed their rented chopper on the Strasbourg Airport and switched back to the jet. Q had given up on following them after that and let the spell dissipate.

Somehow, Bond must have seen some smidgen of the knowledge in Q’s mind, because he spoke with confidence: “At this point, I believe you are the one best qualified to make the decisions.”

Q so wanted to dare Bond to say that to Mallory’s face, but that might have very well ended up with Bond actually doing it, and that would have dashed what little hope for cooperation Q had.

“The truth is,” Q said, letting the chair take his weight in a feckless try to not feel the fate of the whole planet pressing down on his shoulders for at least an instance, “bombing New York might be a viable strategy after all – not to stop the invasion, but to stall it.”

“For a price,” Bond pointed out.

Of course. That much was obvious. Q had already foreshadowed the threat of another World War, which had become swelteringly likely after Fury’s gem of a double-crossing abuse of protocols. Just suggesting to the heads of counterintelligence agencies that countries all over the world were going to be aiming their guided missiles at one-another’s cities would effectively neutralise the Council’s plan. To spread that information among the right circle, however, Q needed Mallory. If he just tried to seed it to other admins, it would go through the channels and arrive where it was supposed to get a day or two late.

Besides, there was no guarantee the admins would believe that information – much less, should they be skilled enough to find that MI-6 was its origin.

No, this had to go through the bigger fishes.

Ergo someone – meaning Bond – had to make Mallory go along with the plan.

“Yes. From our employer’s point of view, it would be worth it, short-term,” Q admitted. For MI-6 the clear priority was the security of the British nation and the safety of its people. Naturally, there had to be some British citizens in New York, but the number would have been negligible next to those who would potentially be saved by sacrificing that one city.
Bond let out a sound that might have been the undead cousin of a chuckle. “I am the last person to
discuss morality with.”

Q disagreed. He sat up, shoulders locking back like they always did when he faced opposition that,
while dangerous in its own right, was going to suffer a defeat at his hands. “I have killed many
before in the name of saving many more others. I have killed enemies to save our own people. I was
punished for it.”

Midgardians had a phrase a variation of which he had, in those early days of his banishment, adopted
as his mantra: ‘Fuck the Allfather.’ Just thinking it tended to have a cathartic effect on him.

“Well? You want to go down the other road for a change?” Bond asked, faux unconcerned.
Something inside him – who was not half as sociopathic as his psych test results showed, and who
had ten times the PTSD – balked at the idea of repeating the Hiroshima event.

“Not necessarily.” He would certainly not allow his grudge against the Allfather to dictate how he
governed his realm. “It is just… that there has to be a more elegant solution. And I will find it. Only I
have to go to New York to work on finding it, and I would rather not risk the horrible death by
irradiation.” And the political situation afterwards would be an inordinate hassle.

“The blast doesn’t bother you,” Bond remarked.

Q dismissively waved his hand. “That would be over before I noticed it was happening.”

“And you are immortal.”

Q glanced up. Bond was staring at him, gauging his reaction for an idea of how far from the truth he
was with his guess.

He was pretty far. There were many ways of killing an Ás, and equally as many of killing a Jötunn.
However, Q wasn’t about to go giving that information out – not even to Bond, or perhaps much less
to Bond, knowing who they both worked for.

In the end, he responded by saying something trite. “Death is an enormous inconvenience whether
you survive it or not – as you should know personally, double-oh-seven.”

“Just because Mallory covered for us once does not mean he will tolerate us doing it again,” Bond
pointed out. If he, who considered even the laws of nature to be mere guidelines, was concerned,
they must have been in a damn deep hole, and still digging. Not that Q was worried, but magic was
far from a cure-all, so he would have preferred prevention.

The best way of salvaging the situation then was tricking Mallory into jumping into their hole after
them. “One does not become M without having connections in the strangest of places.”

Bond raised his eyebrows. “You’re suggesting going through the channels?”

Good. He was following the clues like he was supposed to, with far less convincing than Q had
imagined he would require.

“I’ll tell him what I’ve seen in Stuttgart. You’ll tell him what’s happening.” Bond quirked his lips, a
stretch of facial muscles that came out looking like a smile. He was satisfied with his own bargaining
skill. “You’re the quartermaster, Quartermaster. Do your computer magic and find me a threat, so I
can go and pull the trigger.”

Bond bargained well. Q didn’t have any better option.
There was no need for magic, because Bond needed all of five seconds to distract Moneypenny so thoroughly that she forgot not only where she was, but also that she was supposed to be bodyguarding her boss.

Q breezed past, unnoticed, and a moment later he was inside Mallory’s office.

Bond followed behind him, closing and locking the soundproof door on Moneypenny’s: “James, wait! He said no dist-”

Mallory looked up just in time to fail to prevent Q from picking a sleek little device masking as a tablet from the desk. Q shook it a little, and the menu offered him a direct line to several people whose countries weren’t officially on speaking terms with Mallory’s country. Third millennium, and the secret services had their own phone tree.

“Q,” Mallory spoke quietly and firmly, meaning roughly ‘if you do not stop touching that and if you even think of accessing restricted information with it, I will have no choice but to have you shot and I shan’t have qualms about it.’ As far as intimidation went, it was quite skilled.

“About the nuclear warheads,” Q said.

Mallory paled. Now his expression asked, distinctly: ‘How the bloody Hell do you know?’ and answer itself: ‘We employ him because he’s the best at his job. But what if he’s too good?’

Before the man could start an argument with himself, Q continued: “We need to stop that order. What is supposed to be the point of wiping New York off the planet’s surface? There is an army of Chitauri invading through a transdimensional portal.”

“An army of what?!” Mallory blurted. That was third strike against him, to borrow a metaphor. He really must have been exhausted. Q made a mental note to send up one of the less abrasive underlings with some home-cooked stimulants. Just this once.

“Aliens,” Q hissed, annoyed with this mortal that thought he knew everything worth knowing.

Mallory’s nostrils flared. Red spots of anger appeared on his cheeks, and he raised the retro desk telephone’s receiver to his ear. “I don’t have time for-”

Q gritted his teeth and stomped down on the desire to turn this human worm into a literal worm. “I said,” he repeated, and the temperature in the room lowered as his ire grew, “that this planet is being invaded by aliens. If you do nothing, you are complicit in mass murder.”

It might have been the fact that the tea in his cup just froze, or that Q’s eyes were undoubtedly beginning to glow and would soon turn the color of blood that was not usually found in the human species, which made Mallory hesitate and redact his instant dismissal. “And you know this how?”

“Because he’s an alien himself,” Bond provided dryly, standing outside of Q’s immediate reach.

Q could have materialised a spear and run him through before the mortal could blink. He had a spell on the tip of his tongue, one to bring slow and painful nights to the target, but he bit down on it.

James Bond was his, and Q accepted the responsibilities that came with ruling. He took reign seriously – always had done so, unlike Thor.

He had been punished for it, but he would take his punishments as lessons and ensure that the next
time the story would end differently. Bond would learn.

“If you just killed my career in espionage,” he said in a tone just as dry as Bond’s, “I will teach you
the meaning of ‘bad luck’ over the course of the rest of your life.”

Bond smiled. “That won’t be a long enough time for such a complex lesson to sink in.”

And, Norns, this was why Q liked the mortal so much. Perhaps there was a reason for a short trip
back to Asgard, after all – one just long enough to have another pleasant chat with Freya over some
delicious food. He felt like discussing apples.

Mallory stood, laying both his hands on top of his desk. “Gentlemen-”

“I disabled the panic button before I came up here,” Q informed him, uninterested in whatever the
man might verbalise to stall for time. He looked to the side at Bond. “You remember Natasha
Romanov?”

Bond smirked. “Good times.”

Mallory, to his credit, did not panic. He settled back into his chair, poised as if he was presiding over
the happenings despite the fact that he did have but the dimmest idea of what was in fact happening.
He observed and deduced. Competent, for one of his race.

“How would you feel about working with her?” Q asked of Bond.

Bond’s smirk did not abate in the least. “Like I would about sticking my hand into a wolf’s maw.”

Q bit down a grin. Of course the agent had done his homework. Q had certainly offered him enough
clues, what with his exclamation to the Norns and the off-hand dismissal of humans as ‘mortals’
suggesting his own relative immortality, which he hadn’t refuted when asked. He had to wonder
how much more Bond had guessed.

It was unlikely that he had made a correlation between Q’s identities, but Q’s reputation as a trickster
followed him in nearly every one of his incarnations, so it was not impossible.

Q stuck his hand into his back pocket, brought out a USB drive and held it up between two fingers.
“Let me brief you about the discontinued project of SHIELD called the Avengers Initiative.”
Q considered leaving Bond in Britain to keep an eye (and, if necessary, also the laser sights of a Barrett M82, which Q would have lent him without compunctions) on Mallory, but in the end he changed his mind.

He could have drawn a spreadsheet about why he chose to take Bond with him, and push it through a committee like any Six Sigma project, but he did not bother. Once he was fairly sure that Mallory had bought what Q and Bond were selling, and had firmly parked himself in the camp that sought to prevent the razing of any and all capital cities worldwide, Q didn’t have any further need for Bond’s charisma in London. What he did have was a completely irrational desire to not throw himself into a potentially lethal situation without someone acknowledging his presence and his affiliation.

“Is this supposed to be chicken salad?” Bond inquired, stabbing a plastic fork into the depths of a plastic container. He brought it out adorned with limp pieces of celery and cucumber.

Q became a little stuck on the sight of a double-oh agent wielding a plastic fork. Since they have been averting a World War in togetherness for the past few hours, the picture seemed especially piquant.

“It’s not five-star fare, is it?” Q agreed. “Even the chicken is probably British – dry and rigid.”

Bond blinked at Q. He set the fork down and considered the possibilities of weaponising what allegedly passed for his meal. “Why the United Kingdom?”

Q shrugged. He had decided against taking a meal in the mess hall, since the cooks were said to be quite cross with him for commandeering their space and he wasn’t eager to find out if his magic could counter laxatives. Especially if he was going to be actively saving the world again in a little while.

Norns, how he preferred standing in front of the computer screen while Bond did the physical saving. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t suffice this time.

“Chance,” Q admitted. He didn’t believe in fate anymore, since every allegedly confirmed instance of fate translated into the Allfather’s will, and he knew just how fickle the Allfather could be if the mood struck him. The Allfather left Q stranded; a British ship had gone down near the place where Q was found when the British Embassy was looking for survivors, and that was all.

“You are not exactly a patriot,” Bond pointed out. The words carried a faint tone of accusation.

Q forcibly kept himself from looking heavenwards. There was something about the charade of peace played between so many ‘democratic’ countries that left him itchy. If they were a single country, they should admit it and administrate accordingly. If they were different countries… well, then the war between them was always a real threat and they should stop pretending that it wasn’t so.

Bond was stupid about his loyalty to his fatherland and its crown, and Q was a little disappointed about that. Without his selectively blind idealism, the agent would have lost some of his charm, but it was still liable the drive Q up some of the multitudinous walls of the current Headquarters.

“About standing you in the middle of a street…”

“With a Walther,” Bond reminded him.
Q shook his head. “I would at least get you a bigger caliber. And I know how much you despise automatic firearms, double-oh-seven – I would hardly provide you with a weapon you would hate – but we’re talking about the Chitauri here, so maybe an RPG would not go amiss. Pun intended.”

Bond solemnly nodded. “Handling an unsatisfactory weapon is worse than bad sex.”

“You haven’t tried handling a handful of double-oh agents,” Q quipped, before it had occurred to him that perhaps including himself in a sexual metaphor that involved him and Bond, in however oblique a way, wasn’t the smartest thing he could have done.

“You are not our handler.”

Q blinked, pursed his mouth and looked over the table at Bond, who had ceased pretending that he was eating. “Then who is?”

Bond let the following silence be the answer. He scratched at the salad bowl with the plastic prongs of his fork, subconsciously exercising his destructive tendencies.

Kamikaze Corps indeed. Q gave Stark that one.

No wonder Bond went off the grid on every other mission he took. He scrapped plans, broke rules, cut communication lines with the Headquarters and could not follow a rule if it was leaving behind a mile-wide track. He did not trust orders – and with good reason. Mawdsley used to micro-manage her favourite assets sometimes, if she had a personal stake in the objective, but otherwise the agents were left to Q Branch techs, or completely on their own.

Field agents had handlers. Even SHIELD, otherwise the paragons of not giving a broken cent about conventions, had kept the structure – and that basically meant that there was a good reason for it. Agents’ job was hard enough in and of itself; giving them a solid connection to the real outside world was necessary for their sanity. The success of the mission depended on the mutual trust, understanding and ability to predict one another of the agent and their handler. Only MI-6 had scrapped that model when it had initiated the double-oh program, for whatever reason. Q had not stumbled upon the reports from that time while trawling the archives, and it was likely that they had molded away into nothing over the decades, what with being stashed in the wet, dark underground.

In taking up surveillance over missions in real time, Q had broken the mold (pun not intended this time) and become a kind of handler to those double-ohs who were willing to unbend a little and take a chance on him. All of them were still alive, and Q was beginning to learn to predict them. He had learnt how Bond’s mind worked over the course of the Silva debacle – and finally, finally that irksome association was becoming useful.

“False trails,” Q breathed.

Bond huffed and shook his head. “Too big a mental leap for me to follow, grasshopper.”

Q allowed himself a sour grimace – that was as unfitting an epithet as anyone had ever bestowed upon him – but he knew that Bond couldn’t have followed that train of thought. Not even because he was mortal, but simply because Q was Q. “Having Mallory’s cooperation is all fine and well, but one country refraining from bombing others is not going to make much difference as things stand. We need to cut off the heads of this shrew.”

“Unless you manage to call an impromptu international conference, I can’t assassinate more than one Prime Minister at a time,” Bond replied, which basically added up to a tacit agreement.

“One double-oh per a Head of State,” Q explained.
Bond blinked, and a moment later grinned. “False trails?”

“That’s what that room full of genius young programmers is for,” Q replied. “We don’t need to kill them right now – just threaten them a bit. We’ll deal with the fallout once the planet stops being attacked from space. Besides – false trails means there won’t be any legal or diplomatic fallout. Everyone wins.”

“This won’t stop the World Security Council,” Bond warned, raising his plastic fork.

Q nodded. “Except the Council meets on the Cloud. And the Cloud’s my backyard.”

Bond and Q stared at each other over the mess hall table for a while, ignoring their coworkers, who were practically tiptoeing around them (some on very high heels), all tense in accordance with the atmosphere. They were an organisation of spooks – of course it wasn’t a secret that they were facing a threat on the humankind level – and they tended to pin their hopes on their best and brightest, which at the moment amounted to Bond and Q.

The two of them grinning was either helping the morale, or sinking it to the bottom if their audience worried that they had gone insane.

Bond stood, pocketing the fork but leaving the plastic bowl with the rest of the salad on the table, fully expecting someone to clean up after him – as per usual. “Go tell your ducklings what to do, Q. I would hate to be late for the invasion.”

And then he set off, certain that Q was going to take him along for the ride.

Q took possession of the rest of the salad. Bond didn’t have cooties – regular mandatory check-ups at the Medical ensured that – and none of the cooks would dare try and poison him, so the fare was probably harmless, if barely edible. Still, life on Asgard had taught him to eat before a battle, because fainting in mid-strike impressed no one, and usually ended in a messy death.

x

They materialised in front of the Central Station in New York.

Bond took to Q’s specific form of near-instantaneous travel with grace and aplomb rarely found in Æsir, much less in mortals. He maintained his equilibrium and did not lose the contents of his stomach, and if he felt nauseated at all he did not let it be seen.

“That does save up on travel expenses,” Bond pointed out, looking around himself at the stupefied crowds.

Q followed the gaps – and the mobile phone cameras – to the sight of a portal opening in the sky above the StarkTower. He understood the practicality of hijacking Stark’s arc reactor – he would have done it himself, had it been his idea – but the mere thought of the Tower being damaged by this rampage filled him with ire. So typical of so many races, this urge to destroy, the capability to destroy, mitigated by neither a desire nor an ability to create.

A beam of energy that registered as fluctuating blue to his eyes was bisecting the sky and connecting the portal to the top of the Tower. There was the Hypercube, a juicy target ripe for picking, except for whatever defences were installed there to keep any interlopers out. Still, unless Q was dramatically mistaken, Coulson was up there, and so was the scepter.

“And on time, too,” Q replied. “It seems like we’re on the dot.”
The portal continued widening.

“Double-oh-seven,” Q breathed, “do you know how to direct an evacuation?”

Bond tilted his head to the side. “In theory.”

Q decisively nodded. Apparently Fury couldn’t do it, with all the power and acumen at his disposal, but he hadn’t had panic as the driving force. The crowd around Q was just on the verge of panicking.

He wished he had had the foresight to equip Bond with a megaphone.

“Start practicing!” he ordered and disappeared.

Bond had a wig in his ear, and his backup was only an expletive away. Q wasn’t leaving the agent to die here, not even if he had to abandon his cover to keep him kicking. Besides, Bond was as death-resistant as a mortal could conceivably be.

A second later Q rematerialised on Stark’s landing pad, and was promptly forced to raise a magical shield against the salvo from Stark’s security. He liked to believe that the AI would have recognised him, so it must have been an automatic defence. He ran along the curve of the half-circle ledge and took cover behind a buttress.

Once he was covered he checked with his construct – it was still on the Bridge of the Helicarrier – on which frequency the rag-tag superhero group communicated and pulled out his phone. Remotely accessing Bond’s wig would take a while, so he let the tech do its job and tuned in.

He got an earful of cussing in Russian, the caliber of which would make Volstagg blush.

“Please, stop,” someone – presumably Rogers – begged.

“Yeah, not helping,” Barton’s voice added dryly, through loud, rapid exhales.

“Patience is a virtue,” Romanov retorted banally, but at least she stopped cussing.

The shadow of an aircraft fell on Q where he was jammed in a corner. He grinned up and waved.

“Hello, agents of SHIELD. I’ve heard you’ve found yourself in a spot of a bother.”

“Identify yourself!” Romanov demanded.

Barton, in the meantime, laboriously made his way up the side of the building from the platform to the roof. It wasn’t clear why he hadn’t just been dropped there, but if Coulson was in charge, there was the distinct possibility that the villains had a strategically sound defence.

“Agent Smith, MI-6,” Q said. “I presume you are piloting the jet, Agent Romanov?”

“No shit, Sherlock,” bit off Barton, alternately glancing down to Q’s hidey hole and up to the sky, where the portal was gradually gaining shape.

“Weren’t you Avengers supposed to be some great team?” Q inquired, while Romanov undoubtedly contacted her supervising officers about Q’s identity.

“Weren’t you supposed to be cooling your heels in London?” the woman retorted. Q grinned. “What, and let you have all the fun by yourself?”
“Look up for me, Agent Smith,” Romanov demanded.

Q allowed it. He supposed that it was reasonable precaution to check if he wasn’t controlled by the scepter, and as far as anyone knew, the ones controlled were distinguishable by the unnaturally blue eyes. Not that Q couldn’t have his eyes glow whichever colour he pleased, but that was neither here nor there. He narrowed his eyes against the brightness of the sky and let himself be observed.

“Clean,” Romanov admitted.

“We need all the allies we can find,” Rogers pointed out.

“Say that we believe you,” Barton panted. “Are you a mutant?”

“No,” Q replied, and inquired: “Why take the long way?”

“Because we can’t get inside, genius.”

That wasn’t what Q had expected. Surely Stark’s AI wouldn’t have been as easy to control with the scepter as mortals were?

“Where’s Stark?” he inquired. He should have gotten here before any of the other members of his team.

“He went off solo.”

At least that made sense. Stark flew forward, arrived here on his own, entered the Tower – even if his AI had turned hostile, Q believed that he would have found a way. If the man wasn’t coming out or supporting the S.H.I.E.L.D agents from the inside, he must have run into trouble.

“So,” Q summarised, “Stark’s in, and he’s not responding. Have you tried his AI?”

“Yes,” Romanov reported easily, as if she had already slotted Q among her allies, “It’s down to security protocols. Does not acknowledge me.”

Q refrained from rolling his eyes. He stood up and leant back against the wall. “Have you had Fury or Potts try the AI?”

Barton cursed.

“Why Fury?” Romanov inquired after a pause.

“How do you think Coulson got in? Fury lent him his override codes.”

“…I thought Coulson had his own,” the woman admitted.

“Not yet, apparently,” Q said. “Let’s make sure he gets them in the future, Miss Romanov. Get Fury or Potts on the line, and have them call the AI. I’ll go and see if Stark’s still salvageable.”

If he wasn’t, Q would be seriously mad. And no one liked it when he got seriously mad. Things tended to break around him. Things like for example Bifröst.

“Oh, and Miss Romanov? Switching agents. Bond says you know him, but try to keep him in one piece despite that.”

“No!”
But it was too late. Static crackled in Q’s ear, replaced momentarily by the background sound of a city, peppered with the sounds of blasts. Bond might have huffed and puffed at the prospect of working with Romanov, but they were both skilled professionals and would be able to cooperate well.

He was proven right when the jet took off in the direction of the Central Station. Frankly, Romanov was in the double-oh league as an espionage specialist, but standing her in the middle of the street with two handguns wouldn’t work any better against the Chitauri than it would have worked with Bond. She would be far more useful in intimidating law enforcement into organising the evacuation.

Pushing a few buttons, Q managed to isolate himself and Barton on a different frequency.
“Hawkeye, this is Agent Smith of the MI-6. We’ve met briefly a few days ago.”

“I definitely remember you,” Barton replied, breathing hard with exertion. “But I had been skull-fucked to Eldorado, so they’re treating my report as a Grimm fairy tale.”

Q had to admit that, taking into account the maze of Midgardian culture, ‘they’ were relatively close to the truth.

“Where’s Nat?” the man demanded, not nearly as nervous as he should have been, considering that the rest of his team had disappeared from his communications channel.

“She’s handling my agent,” Q repeated. “We’re optimising resources.”

“Smart. I should have done that. And now…” there were sounds of gunshots fired, “…I’m out of arrows.”

When Q looked up, he saw the agent hanging on one hand off a fistful of arrows embedded in the wall, using the other to shoot up at what Q recognised was the first wave of the invaders. The portal was stabilising.

Q’s construct on board of the Helicarrier watched as a young civilian woman shoved Hill away from a terminal, leant over and spoke into the microphone: “Thor, why don’t you stand up on that building there and just… hit them with lightning bolts?”

The sky above Q lit up with lightning and the bodies of dead Chitauri rained. Sometimes Thor was stupidly useful.

The Ás harrumphed. “While not a very glorious or diverse tactic, you are wise to point out the immense effect it would have on the enemy. Indeed! Keep safe my heart, for I will be back for it!”

“Make sure you are,” the young woman replied worriedly, biting her lower lip, fistig her hands and practically jumping on the spot with anxiety as she watched the descending alien army on the screens. Q privately admitted that Thor had exhibited a discerning taste in picking her from among the six billions of mortals.

Hill had in the meantime righted herself and was glaring at the scientist, but she did have the basic self-preservation to not do anything that might have upset Foster.

“Hawkeye,” Q spoke, blinking back into the point of view of his physical body, “I can’t spot you if I go in after Stark.”

Barton scoffed. “I’m all anchored. If I drop, it won’t be that far.”

Q didn’t believe him, so he sent a spell up the wall that would – hopefully – act as a belay device for
the agent, should he actually need saving from becoming a splatter on the ground.

After that was done, he was ready to get inside the building and, for once, he decided to take the most straightforward route: he ran. The automatic defensive system followed him with explosive projectiles. He had hoped for a delay, but there was none – Stark must have installed motion prediction into the software. It was a magnificent piece of work, and it was quite clearly an impassable barrier to the best trained humans, but Stark had not counted on magic.

Q reached a nook where he was not visible from the outside and rematerialised inside. He waited for the internal defences to engage, but Stark himself was lying in a heap on the floor, and the AI recognised Q’s face, so no further shooting was happening.

“Welcome back, Mr Smith.”

“How many intruders?” Q asked.

“Two,” the machine replied and then, because it was capable of reasoning, expounded: “Agent Coulson is listed among permitted visitors. Dr Selvig and his companion, however, are not. Both are currently on the roof. If I may, would you please aid sir?”

Q squatted by Stark’s side and pulled on his shoulder to turn him over. There was a sluggishly bleeding wound on the side of his head, but otherwise he seemed unharmed. His breathing and heartbeat were both within the norm for his race, and when Q moved him, he regained consciousness.

At first he flinched and batted Q’s hand away, but he quickly realised that he was not being attacked, and instead squinted. “Johnny-boy?”

Q nodded. “Barton and Romanov are outside. So is Bond.”

“The Helicarrier is within reach of field communicators,” the machine informed them.

Q’s construct confirmed the information and provided a more specific location. It also relayed that the best SHIELD could do was deploy several teams of agents armed with the semi-functional PEGASUS prototypes. At the moment, the Helicarrier itself couldn’t come closer because of the spectacular electric storm Thor was creating outside.

On the other hand, the airspace around the Tower was still clear, so Thor worked well enough as a plug for the portal so far.

“Ozone,” Stark commented, sniffing.

“Concussion,” Q and the AI concluded in near-unison. The AI added: “Sir has Agent Coulson to thank for it.”

Stark pouted. “I thought he liked me.”

Q huffed. “He must. Yesterday he maimed one of my agents – someone in the league with the Black Widow. If Coulson hadn’t struggled against the conditioning, you would be a pile of overcooked meat.”

“Conditioning.” Stark grimaced at the choice of word.

“Undesirable, unless done to hair,” the machine remarked wittily.
“JARVIS,” Stark inquired suspiciously, “have you switched off the inappropriateness filters again?”
He turned to Q and solemnly explained: “He does that time to time, to ‘give me a taste of my own medicine’.”

“You will be just fine,” Q concluded dryly, and set off toward the roof. Stark would be taken care of well enough by his machine.

“I could… try and cut off the power lines?” Stark suggested, obviously disoriented.

“The device has been self-sustaining for a while,” Q shot down the idea. And even if they just… turned it off, what would happen to all that accumulated energy? Q speculated that it would explode across at least six dimensions, and end up ripping a gaping hole into the time-space continuum. Even he didn’t know what he would do to reverse something like that.

“I suggest chucking it through the portal, then. Let’s see how it sustains itself on the other side.”

That was theoretically a viable idea, except it would have meant delivering the Hypercube straight into the enemies’ hands, and that would probably lead to a swift and bloody end to the Midgard.

“I need a drink,” Stark concluded, staring through the nearest wall. “JARVIS, twinkletones, get me a drink and the schematics to Selvig’s doohickey.”

The home cinema blinked and started displaying what the AI had managed to gather through video footage and scanning the device. Q decided that Stark would be alright under the supervision of his machine and set off toward the roof. Barton had not yet needed to activate the spell, and it was likely that he had reached the top of the building by this time.

“Smith!” Barton’s voice sounded suddenly in Q’s ear. “Little help?!”

Q knew he might as well give up on the pretence of being a mere enhanced human, since the AI undoubtedly already had a recording of his magic and he could not trust the discretion of his allies, so he simply rematerialised to the roof.

The smell of ozone was much thicker here than inside. Thor was sending a lightning bolt after a lightning bolt toward the sky, and although they were all conducted to the other side of the portal, the electricity in the air made body-hair stand on end.

Q shielded his eyes against the brightness and looked around. There was a dead body of the fainting woman from the cable factory spread across the gravel, mouth open, eyes empty and between them a bullet-hole. The scepter lay nearby where it had fallen out of her hand. A balding man in an appalling unwashed checkered shirt was picking himself up from the ground, confused. His eyes were a normal human colour.

Barton was perched on the wall surrounding the rooftop, gun aimed at the opposite side.

Coulson was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is he?” Q asked.

“I don’t know,” Barton replied in a low, toneless voice. His head slowly swiveled as he tried to find his target.

The Hypercube’s magic was all around, so he could not be reasonably certain that Coulson was not actually invisible. Either way he was playing hide and seek with them – playing for time.
“Dr Selvig?” Q inquired, creating another invisible construct to join Barton in keeping watch for Coulson.

“The scepter is the key!” the balding man exclaimed. He climbed to his knees and then to his feet, obviously in a lot of pain and yet determined to struggle through it. “It contains the same energy as the shield.”

Q came to stand a step away from the weapon. “I cannot touch it. If it takes me over, I will win this battle for the other side.” He did not doubt that. It would take him ten seconds to neutralise Thor; the rest of the half-baked Avengers Initiative, which was the only feasible defence force this planet had, would crumble in his wake.

“It already took me over once,” Barton protested.

“And me,” Selvig agreed.

“You’re the only one who might be strong enough to resist it-”

Q’s shadow switched places with him a split second before a blow with a wrench would have shattered his skull. The attacker lost his balance and fell through the construct’s intangible body.

He landed on his hands and knees, grabbed the scepter, and flung himself back through the construct, the way he had come.

He barely registered Barton’s and Selvig’s surprise at finding out – erroneously – that what they had thought was Q was simply an illusion, because he focused on the attacker.

It was after he had come into possession of the weapon that Q realised he was looking at Coulson. It might have been because he had left behind his monkey suit and was presently wearing a set of protective clothing in monochromatic black. He was standing straight, eyes burning blue, the sceptre clutched in his hand with confidence as if he had spent decades training with such a weapon.

Q had said ‘anytime’ to Stark, and he had meant it, and thus he was going to do for Coulson what he had done for Potts. Only there was no Q Branch and no double-ohs here to use for reconnaissance and trigger-pulling.

He would have to do it manually. Bloody thing.

“So, this is what you need,” Coulson spoke, glancing down at the scepter. “But it terrifies you because you see you can’t resist its lure… You can’t resist the Tesseract.”

“Coulson…” Barton tried to demand, but ended up pleading, gun aimed at his handler.

“You left us, Hawkeye. We would have brought about this glorious victory together!”

“Remember what you said to me that time in South Africa, sir?” Barton tried, desperately, to make the agent fight against the scepter’s hold. “You told me we don’t negotiate with terrorists.”

Coulson shook his head. “This is a peaceful intervention by this country’s standards.” With dexterity previously unsuspected of him, he leapt up onto the concrete opposite Barton.

“Coulson!” Barton cried.

Q materialised another double of himself standing right next to the agent, who appeared mildly startled, but was not fooled into taking a swing at it – the momentum of which would have sent him
back onto the safety of Stark’s roof’s gravel.

“That’s a long way down,” the spell mentioned conversationally. The horizon around them flickered with lightning bolt after lightning bolt, but even Thor had his limits and could not sustain this output for much longer.

“I need to keep it out of your hands,” Coulson stated, enabled by the scepter to interact with the illusion.

Q tried to redirect the spell he had left for Barton’s safety to Coulson, but whether it would work was at best uncertain through the avalanche of power generated by the Hypercube.

“Maybe,” the construct allowed, “but I can just pop down for it and be back a second later. You’ll be practically handing it to me.”

While the agent was so distracted, the real Q, throwing as much magic against the influence of the scepter as he dared, came up to the wall. He grabbed the edge of Coulson’s protective jacket and yanked at it so hard that the only thing that prevented the man’s face from being planted in the gravel was the grip itself. Q immediately switched the hold from the jacket to the human’s jaw and smashed his head against the concrete – but gently, accounting for the mortality.

Barton hurried over to ensure that the agent would survive. He knelt down, palpated the head-wound, and for some reason started pulling off Coulson’s clothes.

The scepter lay on the ground, dull, seemingly stripped of all power.

Q didn’t believe it for a second.

Then Stark arrived in his armour, landing hard, falling to one metal knee due to lack of balance rather than in his customary pose. “How did he not see you coming?!” he demanded, still struck by the relief that he did not have to make a suicidal dive for the man.

Q didn’t explain. Instead he said: “The scepter might be able to destroy the device. Try it.”

“Did I mention titanium is conductive?” Stark quipped defensively.

“Not enough,” Q retorted. “Did you not complain a few days ago how much you wanted to be a hero? Here’s your chance.”

Stark steeled himself and extended a hand. Just before touching the scepter, he paused. “Is Coulson-”

“He’s coming ‘round,” Barton assured him, and did not add any paltry promises about the man being all right. He had been under the influence longer than either Barton or Bond – although not quite as long as Selvig, so his chances were not abysmal.

Stark gripped the weapon, took a repulsor-aided leap toward Selvig’s device and struck out. The blade was stopped by the barrier but not repelled. A moment later it began to sink inside.

“Good to see you, sir,” Barton said shortly. He gave Coulson a hand up.

“Agent,” Stark greeted through gritted teeth. A moment later the barrier collapsed, and the scepter slid through the wiring into the core, knocking out the Hypercube and disrupting the beam of energy that maintained the portal.

Thor stopped baking the Chitauri. As the portal began to collapse in on itself, ashes snowed down on
New York.

Coulson watched, wide-eyed, leaning back against the wall for support, as Barton went closer to the wreck of Selvig’s device and tried to bodily pull Stark out. Needless to say, he barely moved the armour.

Q briefly glanced up at the gradually bluer sky, felt cold satisfaction spread through him, and then he went to help. Together he and Barton managed to roll Stark over, sit him up, and Q figured out how to manually disengage the visor.

“Anyone got the number on that bus?” Stark asked.

Q guessed that meant he was fine. “Yes. The Chitauri Insurance will pay for all your claims. You are welcome to contact them every working day, nine to five. In the meantime – congratulations, you are the official Saviour of the World. Let’s see how you like it.” Q himself hadn’t liked it at all – mostly because it consisted of being stranded on a foreign world with his magic bound, but that was not the point.

“I couldn’t have done it without you!” Stark proclaimed happily upwards from his seated position. Then, to make his concussion more obvious, he scowled. “Fuck, that sounds trite. Is there any way to make it not sound trite and more along the lines of ‘we would have all pathetically died if you hadn’t stepped in?’ Because I’m having this odd feeling that is almost like…” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “gratefulness.”

Barton laughed. “That happens.”

“No to me!” Stark exclaimed, trying to shake his head and wincing in pain. “Okay; J, baby, come and get me. I’m on the roof.”

“I don’t think your AI is capable of that yet,” Q said dryly. “But give it a few years, and I am sure it will exceed our expectations.”

“Thank you, Mr Smith,” said Stark’s helmet in his machine’s synthesised voice. “I will certainly do my best.”

Q pulled out his phone and returned his and Barton’s comms to the SHIELD frequency.

Their ears were assaulted by Thor’s booming voice announcing their ‘valiant victory’ from the rooftops. Foster let him get out the gist, and then shushed him with praise. Like a puppy.

“Agent Romanov,” Q spoke, which caused both Barton and Stark to fall silent and listen, “StarkTower is clear, all assets alive.”

“Chyort vazmi,” the Russian replied. “Bond, Rogers and I are at the Central Station. No civilian casualties.”

Barton flopped down on his rear and grinned brightly, somehow turning into a completely different person just through changing a facial expression. No wonder he was an elite spy.

“Double-oh-seven-”

“I’ll hitch a ride with Natasha,” Bond replied. “Fury wants us in for debrief, and he doesn’t sound like he will take no for an answer.”

“Don’t even fucking think about it!” Fury snarled through the connection.
Q’s spell could see him, alone in what passed for a conference room, leaning hard on a desk, hiding his face in his palm. He looked like he might be staving off tears brought on by the combination of exhaustion and relief.

Outside of that room, on the Bridge, in the corridors and in the hangars, the mood was the same. Some of the less inhibited agents cried openly, Foster sprawled in Hill’s chair and gulped down Fury’s long-since-cold coffee; Hill herself stood stiff like a statue, hands clutching at upper arms in an attempt to disguise her trembling.

Banner had retreated into a corner, closed his eyes and seemed to be on the verge of falling asleep despite the noise rising around him.

“Come pick us up,” Barton suggested.

“ETA five minutes, Hawkeye,” Romanov confirmed.

Selvig went off to pick up the scepter – it was deactivated, little more than an elaborate stick, no magic and no blue light left in it. He used it to collect the Hypercube and deposit it back into the carrier in which he had brought it here.

Q continued dismantling Stark’s armour. Most of it was fried so Stark didn’t protest, although he kept staring forlornly at the pieces falling off.

Coulson shook off Barton’s tacit support and stood above the still only half-mobile Stark, hands crossed in front of his chest. “You said he was deaf, mute and narcoleptic.”

Stark looked up, for a moment trying to look innocent, before he gave up and shrugged. “I lied. Of course I lied. I’m a liar. Just ask Pep. Besides, you didn’t believe me anyway, so what’s the problem?”

Q disengaged the boots, then wrenched out the abdominal part of the armour – both he and Stark winced at the sound it made – and offered his forearm to help the man climb out of the ragged half-shell he was left sitting in.

Coulson, stricken, watched as Stark precariously righted himself. His eyes landed inevitably on the dried patch of blood in Stark’s hair. “I… I’m sorry.”

Stark sighed. “Don’t… Just…”

Then the jet rose to hover above them, and the recriminations had to be postponed.
The flight took all of ten minutes, but it was indescribably tense.

Stark and Coulson retreated to the opposite corners of the cargo hold and left the rest of the group to create a human barrier between them. They had left the dead woman and the remains of Selvig’s device on the StarkTower rooftop, but they had taken both the scepter and the Hypercube with them. Selvig was holding onto both, showing himself to be surprisingly resilient.

Romanov had switched off with Barton, who was the designated pilot, and deposited herself firmly next to Coulson. Bond took a place on her other side, utterly morose. Q guessed he was unhappy about not being allowed to pilot the jet himself and about having spent the whole epic battle to save the mankind herding sheeple.

He was unharmed and in possession of all his equipment (unless he had destroyed or *lost* something out of sheer spite, which Q wouldn’t put beyond him), and that made Q feel uplifted and chilly inside.

Stark sat down on Q’s other side, still wobbly and probably nauseous, and spent the whole flight staring at his hands, tired and dispirited, as if he really could not find it in himself to enjoy his own heroism.

“Great work, everybody!” Rogers announced, doing his level best to be supportive, but aware that his words would have little to no effect. Romanov, Selvig and Q turned to glance at him, but that was the extent of it. The man deflated.

“We stood around looking intimidating,” Romanov pointed out doubtfully.

Bond made a noise of assent.

“Is it supposed to a bad thing that we didn’t need to bodily shield civilians from danger?” Rogers protested, pulling off his cowl and looking around him at the subdued company. His hair was a mess. His eyes were – despondent.

It occurred to Q that this man had literally *nothing* but his purpose left, and he was being made to feel like he did not have that purpose either.

“No, not a bad thing,” Q said, feeling appallingly altruistic. Never mind, he would find a way to use Rogers later to make this up to himself.

Stark scoffed, but he didn’t say anything, and having him protest might have been a good thing in the end, because Rogers was already inclined to disbelieve anything Stark believed on principle.

“Does anyone else feel like it was too easy?” Bond inquired.

No one did. They had been indescribably lucky, but they had struggled and worked their arses off to make this happy end come to pass.

“It counts as success even if the city is not in ruins and hundreds of people aren’t dead, double-oh-seven,” Q pointed out.
Bond’s lips quirked. “Not if there’s no alcohol.”

“Hear, hear,” Stark muttered, casting a side-ways glance at Bond for the first time, as if borderline alcoholism was what made a person interesting enough for Stark to take notice of them.

“I wouldn’t mind a cap,” said Rogers, bravely trying with that lame pun.

Romanov, Bond and Stark looked like he had physically hurt them, and Q cracked his knuckles to get rid of that strange uncomfortable feeling in them.

However, a moment later Stark (a very clever man, indeed) had caught onto what Q had just noticed, and proved once and for all that he was not nearly as self-centered as he liked to appear. “Be still my beating heart! Rogers, have you unwound a little? This needs a celebration! Everyone present plus Brucie, Thor and his squeeze, ten o’clock, my living room – drinks are on me. I have a bottle of Stolichnaya that will melt you out, Capsicle.”

Rogers opened his mouth, then hesitated and closed it again. He hung his head and sighed at his boots, but the tension in his shoulders visibly lessened.

“Hmm,” Romanov agreed.

Barton followed with a mocking salute and a “Count me in!” from the pilot’s seat.

Stark turned to Bond. “What about you, Her Majesty’s Secret Servant? I used to think that British counterespionage was the same as American counterespionage, just with more tea, but Smithy here’s fun people, so you come recommended-”

“If you have enough of that Stoli to go around,” Bond cut him off, with a little self-satisfied semblance of a smile stretching his lips.

“I’ll tell M you couldn’t report because you’ve found a free tap,” Q muttered, but there were superhumans in the room, so Bond wasn’t the only one to hear him.

Predictably, Bond pretended not to hear. Barton muffled a chuckle. “Having a handler is sort of like having a wife.”

“Having an asset is like rearing a kindergartener, Hawkeye,” Coulson retorted from his dark corner, where he had become one with the shadows and caused almost everyone to forget his presence.

Stark minutely flinched.

Barton just laughed it off, and then switched his attention to the negotiation of the landing, communicating with the Helicarrier’s tower mostly through acronyms and numbers.

“In hindsight, that wasn’t an optimal lie,” Q muttered to Stark.

Stark grimaced. “He’ll get over it. Pepper’ll talk him down. She does it for a living, she’s damn good at it – I know what I pay her, so I know exactly how good she is. Also, she hasn’t stomped on my foot with a stiletto yet, so I know she likes me-”

“You still have a concussion,” Q reminded him.

Rogers immediately looked up. “Are you alright? Do you need medical help? You should have said-”

“He’ll be fine,” Q brushed it off, fairly certain that Stark wasn’t going to keel over without fussing.
On the other hand, maybe some fussing was called for, because Stark’s reaction to Rogers’ concern was what Q imagined the man would look like after being slapped with a fish.

If Coulson was worried, he wasn’t letting anyone know, and then they were landing, so no one had the time to spend gauging anyone’s facial expressions. Rogers was keeping Selvig safe and steady for the touchdown, even though Barton put them down so smoothly that the impact was barely perceptible. The eight of them filed out of the jet, Stark in the lead, Bond a step behind Q to watch his back (far from inconspicuous, but some days Q was convinced that Bond didn’t actually know the meaning of the word), Selvig assisted by Rogers, who wasn’t weary of holding the scepter because he had never seen it in action. Barton and Romanov tried to wait for Coulson, but he was purposely keeping himself apart and – oh, of course.

Coulson was not angry with Stark, not about his propensity for bullshit and much less for his acquaintance with Q. He was feeling guilty.

That one would take Stark a while to figure out, because he tended to assume that in failing interpersonal relations, the fault was always on his side. The alcohol might help.

They moved from the topside of the Helicarrier quickly, since human constitutions weren’t able to subsist on the thin, cold air for any significant length of time, and Q felt his spell nearby. It was accompanying Sitwell and Foster on the way up. They were to be the welcoming committee, apparently, and Q took that to mean that Thor was close by.

Now would be a good time to disappear. They wouldn’t get to him… probably. He could just grab Bond and within a couple of seconds they would be in London. MI-6 wouldn’t give him up. He was too valuable an asset.

“Pep!” Stark called out, and half-jogged, half-stumbled down the hallway toward Potts, who appeared on top of a staircase, looking every inch the business woman she was. She waited until Stark was within reach and then wound her arms around his shoulders and hid her face in his hair. She could do that, because she was taller than him by a noticeable margin.

They separated momentarily, muttering at each other in quiet, unintelligible voices, and then Potts turned to the rest of the group and exclaimed: “Phil!”

She dove around the Captain America, in between SHIELD agents and grabbed Coulson in the same stranglehold she had just used on Stark.

Q off-handedly noticed that she was not taller than Coulson, but the man seemed to be struggling to get out, while Potts quite determinedly kept her hold of him.

“Pepper…” he growled. “Let go!”

“No,” Potts replied, allowing for no nonsense.

Romanov bit her plump lower lip, turned away and set off past Stark toward the Bridge. Barton snorted and strode off on her heels. The entourage followed.

“Jane!” Selvig exclaimed, and then everyone was speaking over everyone, with Bond and Q becoming an ironic island of tranquility amidst the chaos.

Q absorbed the spell, an instant before Bond’s hands landed on his shoulders and Bond leaned over to whisper into his ear: “If you want the Cube, now is the time to take it.”

Q shivered, but instead of plotting robbery and escape, he leant back into Bond’s solid form,
enjoying the cool exhales that brushed the skin of his neck. “I’m not scared of the dark, double-oh-seven – I don’t need a nightlight.”

“A nightlight,” Bond echoed, then shook his head and chuckled. “It attracts moths like one, I would bet.”

Q’s reasoning ability was somewhat lowered by the acute awareness of how it was possible that people were willing to commit any number of inadvisable deeds to land themselves in Bond’s bed. He wanted to turn around and give in to that attraction, but not in the middle of SHIELD’s Headquarters.

“Somebody wake up Dr Banner!” Fury’s hoarse voice came out of the intercom and carried over the racket. “But, for fuck’s sake, gently. Don’t fucking shake him! Hill, I want the band of freaks together for debrief. God knows I’d end up eating antacids by the fistful if I did it one by one…” he trailed off.

“Fury’s invited to the party!” Stark yelled. “But not Hill. No one likes Hill.”

x

It took Potts less than five minutes to boot Stark out of her conversation with Coulson – although, admittedly, Stark had set himself up by saying to the SHIELD agent that he ‘hadn’t killed anyone important, as far as they knew – and, let’s face it, that would have been all over Twitter already… J, buddy, tell Coulson he’s off the hook for playing hooky-

Left to his own devices, Stark grabbed onto the next person on his list of favourites – which, in the present company, was Q.

“John, wherefore are thou John?”

“Thor is a bad influence on you,” Q informed him, pick-pocketing him for a phone – a Starkphone, predictably, but less predictably a prototype, which Q decided was a worthy present to himself for saving Midgard. Norns knew no one else would care to reward him.

“Bah, humbug!” Stark protested.

Q raised an eyebrow, backing away into a convenient cranny, because Fury was passing by and having Bond manhandled into the nearest room equipped with a closable door. Bond seemed to be allowing it, although whether because he was loath to break foreign agents or because he was morbidly curious about what they could pull out on him was anyone’s guess.

“First Shakespeare and now Dickens?” Q inquired. “That crosses the line from charmingly over-educated into plain tacky.” And Q conveniently blamed Winters for recognising the references.

“It’s kitch chic,” Stark objected, and then grinned, because that was oxymoronically at once the biggest load of contrary bullshit he could have pulled, and hilarious.

Out of Stark’s trouser pocket Q lifted an unholy progeny of an iPod and a Kindle. It was almost like his birthday, just with less mead. “I can see your artificial intelligence being a member of the Wordsworth Club, but you? You probably look at zeroes and ones and see poetry.”

“I’m an edified man,” Stark announced loftily, failing to pretend like he wasn’t staring out of the corner of his eye at Potts, who was slowly but surely CEO-ing Coulson into a semblance of compliance, and at Coulson, who was espionage-ing Potts into believing in his compliance. It was like theatre, but more skilled.
Bond, behind the closed yet not locked door (other people’s locks had a tendency to malfunction in Q’s vicinity) remarked: “I’m surprised you aren’t neck deep in pissed off directors of secret services worldwide.”

Fury raised himself to his menacing tallest, and with an exact measure of glee professed that: “This agency is only ever as official as it needs to be. That means, Mr Bond, that we’re unaccountable.”

As threats went, that one was not very veiled, and it would have been potent, had it been directed at nearly anyone else. Since Bond and Q had already diverted away several covert and two overt attempts to walk them off away from the group for a personalised ‘debriefing’ of a presumably less civilised and more insistent fashion, he wasn’t worried. The ‘Avengers’ – as the rag-tag group of nonpareil assets were shanghaied into calling themselves – would hesitate before throwing allies to the wolves, and short of Fury himself, Hill was the worst SHIELD could aim at them.

Bond and Q were interlopers, and they were on an aircraft that was effectively no man’s land, so they weren’t protected by diplomacy. Ethics meant nothing to these people in comparison with their secrecy, and presumably with their goals, too, although whatever those goals were, SHIELD wasn’t telling. Because, apparently, that would have made them unpopular.

“Say, Nick,” Bond spoke at the same time as Stark muttered: “Just two doctorates because the dick wouldn’t let me on the grounds for the exams.”

“You mind if I call you Nick?” Bond continued, relishing in Fury’s eloquently opposed expression. “Of course you do mind. Nevertheless, Nick, I have a message for you from one crotchety old witch – not the literal kind, if you do actually have those over here in the Americas – that goes along the lines of:” he switched to a completely toneless voice, for the sake of the sanity of anyone eavesdropping –“’you were a lot of fun back in Lyon, Nick, and I hate to see you with that bayonet wedged up your posterior, it was just an eye, get over yourself.’ Might have dropped a nuance or two there – the perils of not having an eidetic memory.”

“Is it my fault I creamed him in a scientific debate by quoting his own treatise at him?” Stark whined.

Q patted his shoulder and did his very best to not burst into a fit of hysterical laughter. He could just imagine Mawdsley wielding a cocktail stick with Fury’s missing eye stuck on it, all in the name of international relations, and a harried MIT chancellor disavowing his entire bibliography and his academic title just to get away from Stark’s vicious sense of humour and justice. Which, Q felt, with Stark was interchangeable.

“Yes, it’s entirely your fault,” Q informed him. “You are, after all, duly proud of it.”

Stark smiled for real.

Fury scowled. “What are you doing on US soil, Agent Bond?”

Bond replied: “What soil? What US? The only flag I have seen all day has been wrapped very tightly around Steven Rogers. We are… what did you call it? Unaccountable.”

The way the nameless agents shrank away from him suggested that he was making that word far more intimidating than what Fury had managed.

“I need you to work for me,” Stark proclaimed. “I’ll double – no, triple – quadruple whatever the British government’s paying you. Plus, all the toys. Come on, Hugo.”

The reference passed over Q’s head, so he wrote it off as less mainstream popular culture.
“Why don’t you focus on converting Dr Banner?” Q suggested. “Perhaps the jealousy shall eat at me so much that I would have to beg your government for asylum just to keep your virtue safe from him.”

Stark smirked so hard that his cheeks must have been aching, and he didn’t care. “Assclowns.”

“Yes, decent men clever enough to tie their own shoelaces don’t go into politics,” Q summarised.

“…motherfucking zombie assets…” Fury was muttering under his breath. “Could use a guy like you-”

“I am picky about whom I let use me,” Bond retorted. “Call in Hill, and maybe we can talk.” He gave a smile that made Q feel mildly violated by proxy, and a lot aroused.

“You look like you’re after some access codes to the Tower yourself,” Romanov remarked at Q, apparently just passing by.

Q did not point out how short it would take him to exert complete mind-control over Anthony Stark, if he really tried (it would have been a waste of potential, but everything Stark already had would become his). On one hand, it wasn’t the kind of information one spread about oneself; on the other, if he had to pick one word to describe what controlling the Stark Industries would feel like, he would chose ‘boredom.’

“Access codes, yes, StarkTower, no,” Q assured her. “I’m not the sharing type.”

Romanov nodded absently – apparently she couldn’t truly sympathise, and couldn’t be bothered to pretend – but then she commandeered Hawkeye and they were off, while Selvig got listened away by a couple of jailbait agents: one a pockmarked young man that asked him a question about particle physics and then listened while inconspicuously leading the scientist down a corridor and out of sight, the other a young woman that a little too obviously resembled Dr Foster.

“Ward!” Fury barked at a mostly composed man in a suit, who admirably pretended not to flinch. “Take Bond to the rest of the nuisances!” Then he walked off, followed only by Q’s invisible shadow.

Ten minutes later, after an exemplary exhibition of management from Fury’s people, most of the company was seated around an oval table in a familiar conference room.

Coulson had to be summarily informed that he was not a prisoner and to ‘get the fuck over himself,’ in Fury’s words (audible across the whole room, even though the cell phone had not been put on speaker), and folded when Rogers had stuck by him and staunchly shielded him with his expansive righteousness. Potts still kept at least one hand on Coulson at all times and ended up sitting next to him, with Stark on her other side so she could act as a buffer if needed. On Stark’s left was the man that housed the beast, who seemed to be on the verge of falling asleep; then Foster and a lot of empty space for Thor.

Romanov and Barton sat down next to Rogers. Q despised the seating arrangements, but there was little he could do about them; at least they put him far enough from the beast. He improved his mood by magically locking all the entrances between the topside and this room, and setting them to open only after they were serenaded.

He could already hear the distant shouting. It would take them a while to figure it out, but he hadn’t made it complicated – that would be no fun. Giving people the choice between frustration and humiliation was much more gratifying than simply making them angry.
Bond threw him a sideways glance, raised his eyebrows, and promptly went back to watching the door for the advent of either Fury or Hill. It would take some time.

And singing.

Q bit the inside of his cheek, but his smirk refused to subside.

“MacLain reported in,” Stark announced, tapping at a tablet Banner had handed over after Stark had wheedled at him for half a minute.

Coulson looked up before he recalled he was being a martyr. By then it was too late to pretend he didn’t want to hear the news.

“He’s fine, the co-pilot is fine, the baby agent they had with them is peachy… yeah, they’ve lost the contact in France, but he was an elitist asshole, so it’s not that big a loss.”

Coulson set his fist on top of the desk and stonily proclaimed: “He was a colleague-”

“Shooting the messenger!” Stark bit off and ostentatiously turned his attention away from Coulson, to the tablet. An instant later he crowed: “Honeypoo, you’re online!”

“It is good to hear you coherent, sir,” the machine replied, setting off subdued sounds of amusement around the table.

“Finally, we can get down to business. Business being, how far did our stocks plummet, and why did the World Security Council try to drop an A-bomb on us.”

“The what?!” Foster cried out.

“Pizdobol,” Romanov seconded her.

Rogers blinked. “You mean like… you don’t mean…”


“But… how could…” he paused, and then the whole torrid truth dawned on him. His expression shuttered.

Romanov put her hand on his shoulder, but it was anyone’s guess whether she did that for moral support or in the hope that his solid presence would keep her from going on an assassination spree.

Pepper Potts turned out to be the voice of cold logic, when she asked: “JARVIS, please check if the members own a lot of real property.”

“Generally, or specifically in the New York area?” the AI counter-questioned, catching on a tad bit faster than its creator.

“An insurance scam?” Stark blurted. Then he gesticulated wildly, and ended up face-palming. “Of course it was an insurance scam! Why haven’t I thought of that?!”

“Because you’re a good man under all that assholeness,” Potts assured him, patting his hand.

“…but you thought of it,” Stark pointed out under his breath.

Most of the eyes in the room shifted to the very attractive, fragile-looking woman.
Potts gave him a sharp, cold quirk of coloured lips. Q felt a similarly cool fondness for her. If they had been on Asgard, he absolutely would have taken her as an apprentice, together with Winters.

“Both known members of the World Security Council own excessive amounts of property in New York,” the artificial intelligence informed them. “So does the third supposed one.”

“Hmm,” Stark mocked. “Coincidence – do you think, J?”

“The dates of acquisition of the properties do not support your theory, sir,” the AI replied dryly. “Most of them are relatively recent and do not coincide with any fluctuation on the market.”

“But,” Coulson spoke up, “why New York? Why the most possibly high-profile target?”

“Many reasons,” Potts said, closing her eyes and shaking her head. “It’s an established terrorists’ target. The tragedy of that many casualties alone would take attention away from its cause. It would mean popularity for the military, more money for them, maybe enough to start mass-producing weapons…”

“…lead to another world war-”

“Or cold war, if we’re lucky, but there’s no viable opposition for the US right now,” Banner filled in, fully awake.

Bond turned to Romanov. “There we go, mourning the fall of the Soviet Union.”

“That’s one Hell of a conspiracy theory you’ve got there,” Foster argued, but it took her a lot of effort, and she was only playing Devil’s advocate, so no one bothered answering her.

…and that was without them knowing about the way Fury had twisted the plan to make it into an acute threat of a World War right now.

“Also, the insurance payouts would be far more massive in New York,” Potts added. She would know, after having been one half of the creative team behind the StarkTower.

Coulson nodded, the pieces falling into their places inside his head, and although he wasn’t going to offer his reasoning, he was obviously convinced that Stark and Potts were right.

“And even if someone suspected, no one knows who the WSC members are, so there would be no way to prosecute,” Barton guessed, exchanging glances with Romanov – presumably conferring on how they were going to take justice into their own hands if the arm of law wasn’t able to reach that far.

Q felt detached from the mortals’ fury. After all, it was his opinion that the ‘terrorist’ attack on the World Trade Centre had also been a conspiracy, an insurance scam and a business venue for some. He mentally counted the American citizens within earshot, and decided not to say it out loud.

“What’s that?” Rogers asked out of blue. His expression became progressively more disbelieving as he stared at the archway, head cocked to side to listen.

“Great Googamooga…” Barton agreed – upon closer inspection, Q noticed him wearing a hearing aid.

“That’s Thor’s singing,” Foster informed them, with a smile that had as much tenderness to it as it had licentiousness. “He has a very nice voice.”
“Do tell,” Romanov bade her.

Thor would be the type to sing in the shower, Q privately thought, probably loudly enough to rattle the walls. Still, from his recollection, he could with certainty say that Thor had a strong voice and unless he was absolutely wasted he could carry a tune well enough.

“Why?” the man that housed the beast inquired plaintively.

Q only regretted that they would miss out on Fury’s singing voice. That would have been something for the books – and for the archives of digital recordings. He didn’t doubt that Stark was in the system and downloading already.

The singing cut off, and they heard Thor happily proclaim: “I have learnt this great ballad from Lady Darcy’s most invigorating collection!”

However, contrary to their expectations, the first person that stomped his way inside was Fury. He looked around the table and met Bond’s eye. “British intelligence,” he snarled, and then glanced at Q. “Who the fuck are you?”

“If I may, sir?” Stark’s AI cut in with a tone of badly concealed humour. “Mr John L. Smith, British Secret Intelligence Service.”

“What does the L stand for?” Barton inquired for the Hel of it.

“Lambent, of course,” Q replied promptly.


“Literally,” Stark endorsed him with a grin.

Q grinned back. “I rather thought so.”


Q pushed up his glasses and shrugged faux-awkwardly. “There was no need for invention when I was assumed a liar at face value.”

Stark offered him a fist to bump – he had to lean over the table to reach that far – which Q complied with out of sheer curiosity whether it would make the vein in Fury’s forehead burst. It did not, but it instilled a sense of camaraderie, as if Stark’s approval of Q automatically made him a member of the group.

That was not Q’s ambition, but it was better than the pointy end of a scepter into a soft place.

Fury was tired, pissed and not amused at all. “Explain, Mr Smith.”

“Do not allow them to call you that!” Thor rumbled, barreling into the room with a swish of a striking red cape and a jaunty swing of Mjölnir.

This time everyone except Bond was shocked, and no one managed to hide it. Several of them openly stared, but most were processing the information and trying to deduce what was happening before it would be stated outright.

Q sighed. He had, of course, anticipated this reunion, but that was not to say that he felt prepared for it. “Thor…” He shifted in his chair, sitting on his hip and folding his forearms over the backrest,
looking into the face he had so often wanted to punch, and yet never quite learnt to truly hate.

Thor was giving him the most incandescent smile imaginable, even while the lines around his eyes crinkled as he recalled their often bleak past. “It was unkind and, indeed, dishonorable of our fellow warriors to hurl such slurs into your face! I have punished them most severely-”

“Yes,” Q interrupted, “your lectures have become legendary.”

“-and none shall call you the accursed name again!”

“Thor,” Q spoke, trying very hard to not show the slightest bit of unwanted, indeliberate affection he felt for this royal buffoon, “they were not calling me the Liesmith. Just Smith. A common English surname.”

“In that case,” Thor concluded, spreading his arms, “it warms my heart to set my eyes upon you, brother!”

Q was pulled out of the chair with egregious ease and squashed in an embrace that he really could have done without, but it was very, very far from the worst experience of his life. Sometimes he envied this Ás his damnable puppyishness – but then his touch with reality restored itself, and he took deep gulps of breath as he righted himself in the chair.

Thor wandered off to give a similar, if far more careful, treatment to Foster.

Q pretended he hadn’t noticed all the people still staring at him. He had known this would happen. At least, he had been fairly certain. Damn families to the deepest pit of Utgard, anyway.

Bond’s fingers drew a line from his elbow to his wrist, under the table to remain unobserved, but still as clear a gesture of support as Q could have hoped for, with an added bonus of sensuality for kicks. Bond was just fine.

“I don’t get paid enough for this shit,” Fury announced. He crossed the room to the first-aid box hanging on the wall – recognisable through being a white receptacle with a big red cross on it – and pulled out a brown glass bottle of what looked like a disinfectant. It might have actually been a disinfectant. Whatever it was, Fury uncapped it and took a long pull.

Afterwards he seemed more resigned and less likely to suffer an apoplexy.

“That makes sense,” Romanov allowed, staring at Q as though she expected him to turn into a mare right in front of the Avengers and Affiliates, Ltd.

“It does?” Banner inquired, echoed with varied fidelity by Stark, Potts and Coulson.

Rogers looked floored, and appeared to be doing his best to remain unnoticed until a villain was conclusively identified and it would have become his task to save the day. Norns knew that he had not had much opportunity for heroism today, since he had been stuck with teaching Romanov and Bond how to execute an evacuation. Q had no illusions about how abysmally that must have gone.

“A lot more than some of our theories,” Barton admitted, leaning back in his chair and twirling a broken half of an arrow in his fingers.

“You trusted him anyway,” Fury reminded them. He remained standing, even though his retaining the illusion of being in charge was a lost cause. It was entirely possible that he wasn’t sitting down for fear of falling asleep and losing the intimidation factor with these people for the rest of their career. Or his career – whichever came first. With Fury it was hard to tell, and Q found that he could
maybe fathom what made Stark decide that Fury was worth an offer of faith.

It was Romanov who replied, since she was sharing with the perpetually unimpeachable Rogers the burden of shielding their colleagues from the consequence of their sojourn under the Chitauri control: “I knew Bond, and Clint said that whoever this guy was, he had already once saved him from the sceptre.” She crossed her armed, and in a tone that dared her audience to object, she professed: “The odds were better with them than without them.”

The following silence lingered for a few seconds, since no one wanted to make themselves the target, and was broken by the generic trill of Bond’s new phone.

Bond recovered it from the inner pocket of his (just the slightest bit rumpled) bespoke suit and raised it to his ear, accepting the call with a curt: “Bond.” His faced showed vestiges of bemusement – usually he wasn’t the one contacted for sitreps. That duty tended to fall to Q, who habitually delegated it to Winters.

It was a minor miracle that Bond was reachable on a company-issued phone, anyway.

“No,” Bond said dryly. “That was one of SHIELD’s. He’s an alien, too. Yes, it seems so. I’m sure the Director will know.” He extended his arm, offering the phone to Fury.

Fury had managed to ignore the chatter that had risen from the little groups forming around the table – was Thor cooing at Foster?! – but he had gotten the idea of who was calling, and counted his blessings. He took the phone from Bond’s hand, gulped down some more of the maybe-disinfectant and wandered off in the effort to keep the call private.

Q had gauged the guy’s secret powers of efficiency, and did not envy anyone on SHIELD’s payroll the inquisition that would come their way in the future. Some of them were aware of it and did not relax upon Fury’s departure. Others were less aware. Like Stark. The man was in the middle of an indecipherable conversation with his AI (Allspeak was fantastic, but Stark’s speech came out as garbage anyway, consisting of tongue-in-cheek pictograms, intuitive leaps in the middles of sentences and enough sarcasm to drown a bag full of puppies in), and disregarded most of what was going on around him, barely aware of the whispered equivalent of a shouting match between Potts and Coulson.

Q, however, was not on SHIELD’s payroll, and he saw no reason why either he or Bond should remain here. They had been ‘invited’ for a debrief, but since that was not happening, and all the follow-up work would be done by Stark’s Empire and its widely feared legal team, there was nothing left to do.

“Brother!” Thor yelled, cutting off several chats that had naturally sprung around them by the sheer force of his personality.

Q should have known better than to even think of leaving without clearing the air between them. Thor had some kind of a savant sense about deception.

And that was Q’s own fault, most likely. Overexposure.

“John, you aren’t leaving already, are you?” Potts inquired stiffly, acting the mouthpiece for someone else, while Stark pointedly wasn’t looking at Q. “We should have dinner – we can write that off as a team-building exercise and – no, not shawarma, Tony, Director Fury can definitely afford to treat us all to at least a four star-”

“But-”
“Pepper,” Coulson cut in, “don’t discourage him from-”

“Have you forgotten how much trouble he attracts?” Potts inquired, setting her jaw to indicate her readiness for the fight. “You say ‘social situation,’ he hears ‘poke the hornets’ nest’ and I only find out when accounting gets the bills, I swear, Phil, I-”

“Dude just asked for some sodding fast-food,” Barton stage-whispered to Romanov.

Romanov nodded. “Rogers, how do you feel about fish and chips?”

“I’m in!” Rogers exclaimed way too over-enthusiastically.

“Me too,” Banner piped up from the opposite side of the table.

“Count me in,” Foster agreed.

Thor, of course, echoed her willingness, with much rumbling and big, showing-off words.

Q leant in to Bond. “If you think you can pilot the jet, I’m game.”

“Is your teleport broken?” Bond asked dryly.

Q checked his reserves. He was feeling so-so – in a potentially fatal situation, he would chance a jump to another continent, but he had no excuse now. Also, colour him surprised at Bond’s refusal to steal an airplane. Fury must have made a bigger impression than anyone had thought. “On the fritz,” he replied sarcastically.

“In that case,” Bond said, “I want a spar with that guy.” He proceeded to stare at Coulson in a predatory manner.

Q didn’t have to be looking to know that his agent was becoming all hot and bothered for a proverbial penis-measuring contest with one of the best and brightest of SHIELD. It was a wonder he wasn’t gearing up to take on Thor. Q could have had a good laugh at that – Thor was a perpetual annoyance, but he did have his uses, and one of those was the dispensation of ego-checks.

“If you want a challenge, you could ask Thor for one,” Q suggested. “Just refrain from walking on an island, if you would. I have become used to having you around.”

“Walking on an island?” Bond echoed, stupefied as Q usually was about popculture references.

“How uncouth,” Q chided him, and then deliberately misinterpreted the question: “James is my pet mortal. You have one of those yourself, don’t you?” He looked at Foster.

Thor sighed and hung his head, disappointed. “Brother… once again you completely misunderstand. Jane is not… not a pet. She is a powerful woman whom I greatly admire.” He raised the woman’s hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

Q, uninterested in watching his brother and his brother’s lover make mushy faces at one another, glanced at Bond. A moment later regretted it. He was sure that Bond had read in his face exactly what Q did not want to admit: that he did indeed admire some of the mortals and coveted their attention and respect.

“You could start by feeding me,” Bond suggested drolly.
“Yes!” Potts exclaimed. She made an embarrassed face when she became the target of surprised and amused looks, but she did not back down. “I don’t even remember when I’ve last eaten. And you—” she hesitated, looking from one side to the other, and eventually jabbed both Stark and Coulson, each one with one pointy index finger, “-I’d bet neither of you has bothered with such details.”

“I wouldn’t mind a meal,” Rogers admitted.

Barton’s stomach growled.

Romanov raised an eyebrow at him.

He muttered: “’s ’cause you steal all my jerky,” under his breath, which Romanov pretended to not hear. “And my protein bars. And, now I think about it, my last stash of chocolate mysteriously-”

Romanov pulled a knife out of some pocket space connected to her skin-tight suit and started cleaning her nails.

Barton clamped his mouth shut. His stomach growled again.

“Then it is decided!” Thor boomed. “We shall dine upon this fine evening.” He tilted his head and glanced at the bright blue sky outside the windows, and corrected himself: “Afternoon.” He turned back to Foster. “I shall hunt Midgardian game and bring the prey back to please you!”

“Or,” Foster suggested rationally, “we could go to the mess and hunt down whatever’s left of lunch.”

Thor seriously considered this for a moment, and then with all seriousness conceded the argument.

“Oh, come on!” Stark complained, drowning out whatever Potts was trying to say. “If we’re not fleecing Fury for that four star tuck, I want my shawarma!”

“I’d suggest you go for it,” Banner replied drolly, “except you’ve left the suit behind, and you’re as grounded as the rest of us.”

“Oh, laugh it up, Jolly Green Giant, see if I build you that private lab now.”

“Don’t pout, Tony,” Potts ordered. “That’s not cute on anyone older than twelve.”

Bond looked around and nodded. “Suddenly I am much less concerned about the competition. If this is the cream of the crop, I won’t become obsolete for a few years yet.”

Q’s spell alerted him. It observed Fury and a pair of men Q tentatively identified as Ward and Sitwell entering a laboratory. It was a space Q had not explored before, mostly because the only truly interesting thing about it was Selvig leaning against a counter and explaining to the pair of young agents who had led him away the theory behind the arc reactor. The young man and woman were staring at him with wide, mildly worshipful eyes and hanging onto his every word.

As far as scientists went, that was the most practical way of interrogating them. Of course Fury would have know that.

“Sorry to interrupt, Doc,” Fury spoke.

Selvig simply trailed off, but his audience flinched almost in unison.

“Let’s go,” Q spoke, already on his feet. He tugged at Bond to get him out of the chair and into the corridor. Behind them the Avengers and Affiliates scrambled, unwilling to let the two strangers wander around their super secret flying base unwatched.
“Are you that hungry, Q?” Bond inquired facetiously. “You should have had the chicken salad. It was positively torturous, but it was nutrition.”

“That’s not the way to the mess,” Barton pointed out from behind them.

“I think I’d be more worried if they knew exactly where to go,” Rogers countered.

Romanov disagreed. “I don’t think they’re looking for the mess hall. And I think they know exactly where they’re going.” She was an experienced field agent, after all.

“Thor?” Q said once they were nearing to the laboratory.

“Yes, brother? What do you wish of me?”

“Open this door.” Q pointed his finger at the layer of stainless steel in front of him.

Thor parted the crowd with the power of his personality and stood by Q’s side, holding Mjölnir in a relaxed grip by his side. “We should not resort to violence when dealing with our friends and allies of the Midgardian SHIELD, brother!” he insisted. “Let me speak with them, and I am sure they would be happy to accommodate-“

The door was opened from the inside and Fury gave them all a look that accused the whole congregated superhuman company of doing whatever they were doing just to mess with him. Q privately thought that that was rich coming from a man who had deliberately set himself up for all the crap in his life by accepting a position in the middle of the greatest perpetual shitstorm on the planet. But he was not judging.

He was merely unwilling to leave the Hypercube in Fury’s hands so he could continue to build semi-efficient weapons under the guise of clean energy research.

“That,” Q pointed at the travelling receptacle now set on the counter and open, illuminating the whole room in hues of blue, “is an Æsir artefact. If you try to keep it, you’ll see what a competent alien invasion looks like.”

Sitwell scowled.

Ward, on the other hand, scoffed dismissively. “What? You think you can take the Tesseract? Yeah, right. You and what army-”

Q wasn’t sure what manner of darkness clouded his senses, but he found himself snapping and snarling. “It is not a tesseract, you dilettantes! A tesseract is, by its definition, four-dimensional!”

He felt Bond’s hand clasping first his shoulder and then the back of his neck, but it wasn’t helping calm him down. If anything, he wanted to throw Thor at the Hypercube and have him take it through Bifröst far, far away.

“Looks pretty damn four-dimensional to me,” Sitwell grumbled.

“Because you are four-dimensional, you- you mortal! Your eyes are four-dimensional, your puny brain is four-dimensional!”

“Hey!” Stark objected, raising one finger in the air.

Q dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “You at least have imagination.”

“So it’s not a cube?” Potts asked doubtfully.
“It is a hypercube!” Q announced, unintentionally raising his voice in his exasperation with mortal stupidity. “A six-dimensional regular polytope – if you must, a hexeract-” he gritted his teeth, feeling pained at the use of the word that was really misleading in relation to what he generally, for simplicity, called ‘the Hypercube,’ “–only you limited little creatures can’t see the whole of its existence!” Q refrained from mentioning that while he might have been able to use his magic to divine the Hypercube’s passing through time, he wasn’t in fact able to see all its dimensions either. But at least he was aware of them.

“I don’t get it,” Barton admitted, and glared at the jailbait agent, who happily announced that he did and continued explaining: “Think of it like taking a photo of something. You see what it looks like from that one point of view, but you don’t have any idea about its actual height, length or depth. You just see it flat. It’s the same thing, only more complicated.”

“That’s bullshit,” Ward dismissed the boy.

It was the wrong thing to say. Q could already see the revenge plot taking shape in the young agent’s head – and scientists tended to have truly awe-inspiring ideas of revenge. Q knew this, because he was one.

Stark was one, too. And Banner. And Foster. Selvig. The boy and girl, whose names were Fitz and Simmons, respectively. Fury and Romanov knew enough to mostly follow scientific conversations, and the rest – Rogers, Banner, Coulson, Potts and Thor – knew scientists well enough to strive to not get on their bad sides.

Even Sitwell stepped away from Ward.

“Why six?” asked the man housing the beast.

He was a few hundred years too young for Q to feel like talking with him about topics the humankind had pooled under the label ‘theoretical physics.’ For instances like this, he went to his other expertise. “Six is the perfect number.”

“Magic?” Stark scoffed.

Q decided not to point out that all Stark’s science was, in fact, magic. To a brain like his it was far more advantageous to believe that magic was, in fact, a much more advanced science. Because that explained why Q could leave pieces of his consciousness in other places, in constructs that could absorb and bend light or gain mass according to his will – note the sarcasm.

“You are interested in it,” Fury remarked shrewdly, crossing his arms in front of his chest and hiding his pilfered bottle of disinfectant under his coat.

Q had to – only metaphorically speaking, fortunately, that was not an experience he cared to repeat – collect his jaw off the floor to reply. “No, no, no! Take that thing away! Thor will take it to Asgard, or throw it into the void – or eat it, you eternal glutton, see if I care!”

Of course they were skeptical. They were all, collectively, under the impression that he coveted the Hypercube and had only aided in saving their overpopulated, polluted, podunk world to get his hands on it. Because he was supposed to want to use it for… what exactly?

“I would have expected you to… want it or something,” Romanov admitted.

Q put on his hurt face, melodramatically took a step backwards and leant back into Bond’s nonplussed yet solid support. The laboratory was overcrowded despite half of the throng remaining outside. It was clear to Q why Stark and Banner wanted to remain within sight of the Hypercube,
and Bond had completely naturally slid into the bodyguard mindset, but Barton and Selvig were more than welcome go away and shudder, or maybe start a club for people who had been brainwashed by aliens. Only they couldn’t have Bond.

Because Bond was Q’s.

Not a good train of thought at the moment. He could hear the vibrations of Bond’s phone ringing, set on silent, ignored. It was a wonder Bond hadn’t ‘lost’ it in a conveniently placed glass of paint thinner. Q’s official, unofficial and private phones were all inside a locked drawer in his office. Q himself was, as far as MI-6 knew, asleep in his bed in his flat in Marylebone – and the few people who had the fortitude to risk calling him were busy with trying to prevent the end of the so-called Western civilisation.

And someone was calling Stark, too, but who cared? The Starkphone was Q’s – finder’s, keeper’s and all that.

When Q looked at the Hypercube again his equilibrium was restored and he was feeling much less emotional. It was the thing itself that drove people – not only mortals, but apparently Jötunar, too, and he would wager that the same went for Æsir – out of their minds.

“Why would I want it?” he asked, unamused when Fury bodily installed himself between Q and the Hypercube. On one hand, it was a superfluous gesture; on the other hand, it was nothing more than the gesture.

It was like people kept forgetting that Q was a magician. He wondered if it was the glasses?

“Because it’s powerful?” the beast suggested.

Q scoffed. “Right, and about as practical as a blunt uranium sword. Wherever that thing is-“ he pointed a pointy finger at the bright blue source of evil, “-two-bit villains will converge. It’s a shiny bait for idiots.”

And he most certainly didn’t want it anywhere near this solar system. Midgard was his ball park, and it was so engaging, and that… object threatened all its silly delicate nonsensical balances, starting with politics and ending with the amusing virtual game of cats and mice among the l33t programmers on the grid. He wanted the thing gone.

“I’m not buying it,” Stark announced lackadaisically, not deigning to look at Q – still in at least as much of a huff as Coulson was with him, and that was one example of delightful irony right there. He spent most of his attention on the tablet, doing some extremely advanced version of finger-painting, which – considering that he was in an active collaboration with his AI – could have meant that he was buying the SHIELD or putting out a hit on Q or trying to reverse-engineer the Hypercube. If it was the last he would not be successful – although, admittedly, Q was only sure about that because Stark was so dead set against admitting that science could be defeated or supplemented by magic.

“Would you want it?” Q asked.

He took a look around, and inspired Stark to do the same.

Fury was looking about the same as ever, but Barton and Romanov were engaged in a vicious battle of facial expressions, whereas Simmons’ voice was rising to pitch unperceivable by human ears. Fitz regarded Ward with murder in his eyes and a twitch of fingers that were itching for a taser. Thor was grimly shielding Foster from the mess; the woman herself was on the phone, arguing with her
assistant in intermittent bursts of hisses. Coulson appeared like he had not had his first three morning coffees that day, and Potts glared as if she were trying to telepathically distribute her headache around.

Rogers was just about the only one who seemed unaffected. Or at least so Q had thought, until Rogers snarled at him. Alright, then. Apparently Q was once again responsible for whatever had gone wrong in whoever’s life. It was a position he was intimately familiar with.

Instead of acknowledging the accusation, Q decided to work on Stark. “There’s a lot of power in it, but think about what it would cost. Can you assemble the kind of security it would need? How much time and effort would it take? Would you have the recourse to do anything but babysit it?”

Stark gave him a dark look, the kind that warned its recipient to stop giving up other people’s secrets – Stark was, after all, a very smart man. He could count for himself the prices and values of assets. He didn’t, however, like it when other people realized this.

“Men are capable of great things with the Cube, indeed,” Thor spoke solemnly, “of great good and great evil. But my brother has always been capable of great things, and he has never needed any Cube to accomplish them.”

Q almost raised his hand to pat Thor on the head for being such a devoted puppy.

Thor beamed at him – still, after all that time apart, irritatingly good at reading Q’s emotions in his eyes. “You are wise, brother, and I shall do as you suggested. The Cube will be taken back to its rightful owners, and we shall return home the rightful princes of Asgard-”

“You just got here and you’re leaving again?” Foster shook her head. “It’s like dating a marine. Forever deployed.”

“I shall, of course, return as soon as the Allfather allows me-”

“Alright, enough!” Fury barked. “Everyone out. The Cube-” he threw a dark look at Q, “-will remain inside this room, and no one will be touching it. No one. That goes for you, Stark, and for your minions, and for Fitz and Simmons, too – I saw that!”

Fitz flinched and ducked to hide behind Bond’s back. Bond grabbed him by the collar and pushed him at Ward. Ward, to prevent being bowled over, grabbed the boy in an awkward hug, and with a disgusted grimace shoved him down onto the bench from which Fitz had listened to Selvig.

“And you,” Fury added, pointing a finger at Q.

Q met his eyes.

An understanding passed between them – establishing that Q could hold Fury’s life and everything dear to him in the palm of his hand, were he so inclined, and at the same time acknowledging that Fury would go to magnificent lengths to prevent Q from doing it or, at least, make him regret it afterwards. He suspected that this was a balance of power similar to that between Fury and Stark.

“I am a member of Her Majesty’s Secret Service, Director,” Q assured him with a little smile. “I am partially responsible for the security of the United Kingdom, and I am finding the Hypercube a deterrent to this. Ensure that Thor takes it away from this world, and you might never see me again.”

Fury snorted. So did Bond, earning himself a jab from one of Q’s sharp elbows.

“I thought we were going for some chow,” Barton said into the following silence.
“So… you’re Loki,” Stark said, with a little plaintive note.

It was the first he had spoken to Q since Q’s true identity had been revealed. That was not to say that he had affected some kind of stoic, tacit poise all through the ‘dinner,’ but he had quite obviously bumped Q down a few places on the list of his favourite people.

The company had split ways, agents and scientists begging off and leaving in search of their beds, or simply disappearing, and Q was feeling recharged enough to take Bond and himself safely back to London. When he turned around, however, Bond was not there, and Q’s spell had found him loitering around the remains of the PEGASUS armoury. Instead, he saw Coulson and Potts arguing in lowered voices along their way out.

“I have been called many names,” Q replied, but he did offer a little nod of confirmation. There was no reason to deny it. He was, if pressed, willing to admit that he was proud of who he was, even if it had taken a deportation to a supposedly inferior world for him to realise this.

Stark pointed a finger at Q’s chest. “Did you or did you not use magic to hack my Tower?!”

Q grinned. So that was what stuck in the man’s craw. “My magic had yet been bound at the time. No, I did not use it,” he professed.

Instead of being relieved or satisfied, Stark crowded Q toward the nearest clear patch of wall and slammed his fist next to Q’s shoulder. “You went into the Scepter Freak’s lair without magic? Are you insane, by any chance? Clinically depressed?”

Q blinked. He looked down at the fist, then straight forwards into Stark’s face. Norns, but the mortal got attached quickly. That was the most genuine worry anyone had directed at Q since he had arrived on this planet.

“Possibly,” Q allowed.

Stark gritted his teeth. “What… what made you even think you would survive?”

Q jabbed the man into his shoulder and made him leave his personal bubble. The rec room might have been covered in rubbish and food as if a stampede of pigs had run through it, but it was all empty of people and they had all that room to themselves. There was no need for that close a proximity. And Stark had more than enough to contend with in his personal life – not that he would have had a chance with Q if he had tried.

“Allfather had always compared his true son and myself,” Q offered, perching on the armrest of a chair. “The competitions were, in my opinion, set up to make him shine next to me. They had, however, by the necessity for justice and honour, been judged fairly. The rules had never differed for each of us.” All truth, strictly speaking, just leaving out the fact that Loki had not been thinking along these lines prior to the moment when he had regained his magic.

“He gave you the same punishment as Thor,” Stark supplied. He put the tablet down on the black sofa – of course it was black, it was a SHIELD sofa, and of course it looked like it too was wearing a form-fitting uniform – and fiddled with the water dispenser.

“And set it to conclude upon the satisfaction of the same condition,” Q added.

“But you have known the condition from the start,” Stark pointed out the inherent ‘unfairness’ of the trial.
“Thor had been a head taller and twice as heavy as I was, when the Allfather first had us wrestle. If it was just that he win then…”

Stark stood straight, plastic cup grasped in one hand and mouth half-open in an expression of second-hand affront. “That’s fucked up.”

“That,” Q countered, “is family.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Stark raised his water in a toast. “Damn, you’re my new best friend. Besides Pepper and Rhody and Happy. And Bruce. Because Bruce is awesome.”

Q, with some difficulty, suppressed a shudder at the mention of the beast. Maybe it would be wise to avoid Stark. Just in case.

“Hey, don’t be like that!” The man flopped down onto the sofa, re-appropriated his tablet (Q had lost his chance to get his hands on that, but since Stark had not mentioned either the phone, or the e-reader/player little gadget missing, even though he must have noticed, Q didn’t regret it much). “It’s not his fault – yeah, technically it is, but we’re not the kind of people that are stopped by technicalities, right? Bottom line is, Bruce is a great guy. Sure, he’s got a little green problem. But who doesn’t? And he speaks English.”

“He speaks nerd,” Q corrected him. He liked the person the beast wore – for a mortal he was very acceptable. However, Q could never stop seeing under the skin-deep veneer, and the intelligence that looked back at him was uncompromising, terrifying, and impossible to negotiate with.

“We’re nerds,” Stark dismissed him. He craned his neck to look upwards at Q, who really wasn’t that tall, especially half-seated. “Even you, the little brother of the biggest jock around.”

Q affected the height of haughtiness. “I was a nerd long before your primitive civilisation invented the letterpress!”

“And you are suitably proud of it,” Stark quipped, smirking as if he had uncovered the secret keys to Q’s psyche.

In that he was much mistaken. “Now,” Q said, a mite forlornly. “It’s good to live in a world where people such as you and I are not scorned for coveting knowledge.”

That gave Stark a pause. His expression darkened, too, and he momentarily became lost in memories of strife encountered for being unable to suppress or hide his exceptionality from those who expected to be his peers but had found themselves hopelessly lagging behind. It was such a typical trait of the plebes to despise anyone that outclassed or outperformed them just for the principle of it.

Q was familiar with bullying, in all its forms. The word ‘bullying,’ on the other hand, he had learnt on Midgard. Where he came from, there were no such words, and no understanding of what the less ‘popular’ youths went through when forced to endure the rest of their age group. He knew what it felt like to have disgusting and harmful ingredients added into his food and drinks, his pets maimed, his brother pitied for having to live with an argr… doors closing into his face, salt poured into his wounds, all he showed he cared about systematically taken from him.

“Yeah,” Stark agreed eventually, bitterness mixing with self-satisfaction. “But around here, we’re the kings.” He gave Q a jaunty salute and went away, letting the tablet navigate him toward (presumably) Coulson’s quarters.

Seconds after he was gone, Bond entered through the second door and offered his elbow.
Q threaded his arm through it and privately admitted: “How very right you are, Anthony Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

Check out http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypercube. They’re so pretty…
“The Hel is this?” Q asked concisely.

Hurtfew slurped down the rest of her fancy store-bought coffee and informed him: “M ordered the recall of all non-essential personnel. And the double-ohs are all non-essential, for obvious reasons.”

Let them face it: the double-ohs didn’t have much in the way of life expectancy. They had to be, by virtues of their positions, expendable.

That still did not excuse having them congregated in the cavernous junction of tunnels converted into a lobby of the ‘temporary’ building. Q surveyed them. There were eight of them – double-oh-seven was the ninth, double-oh-six was presumably still interred in a German hospital, and double-oh-two was still not responding to recall orders. Q wondered if she was that deep undercover, if she was dead, or if she had defected some time ago and not bothered to send a message to her previous employers. Mallory insisted that no one follow up on that.

Nonetheless, the respective double-ohs lounged around like snakes in a terrarium or paced like tigers in a cage, forming a unique collection of a strange black-and-white deadly species.

“I don’t like this,” Q announced loudly, flanked by Bond and Hurtfew. “All my fluffy yellow chicks in one coop? No, that won’t do at all.” He spied his assistant coming up the stairs, leading interns who carried the usual offerings to soothe the wild beasts – whisky, gin, vermouth, olives, chocolate, coffee and a dart-board with a variety of pictures they could pin on it. “Ragna, take at least half of them at least as far as the nuclear fallout will reach.”

“Will,” Winters echoed dryly, overseeing the distribution of the refreshments. “I love your optimism early in the morning, boss.”

Was it past midnight already?

“If you want peace, prepare for war.” Q paused as he was ambushed by three of the more hands-on agents who liked to reassure Q that they were fond of him through extensive bodily contact. Afterwards, feeling wrung and a little pleasantly chilled inside, he continued: “It worked for the Ancient Romans, for the Axis Powers and for Stark – it will work for us.”

“You name three train-wrecks to support your hypothesis?” one of the less tactile assets inquired sarcastically; a moment later he affected a half-smile and toasted the hall with a slapdash martini.

“Just tell me whose bright idea was it to recall you all,” Q asked, contemplating the more practical methods of getting rid of criminally stupid personnel. He came up with three different plots to be prioritised depending on the exact position of the incriminated idiot within MI-6.

“The message said something about alibis?” double-oh-three informed him, leaning, far, far over to grab herself a bonbon, while deftly exposing much cleavage. Her colleague seated next to her patted her thigh in approval.

“I am not kidding,” Q said with a little more steel in his voice, “redistribution of assets. Right now.” He pulled out the phone from the inner pocket of his jacket. It was the Starkphone, so he put it right back and found the correct one in his trousers. “Figure out what missions aren’t bust yet and pick up where you left of; send the rest of the kids to blow something up, that will make them happy, honestly-”
His call was picked up, and Q seamlessly switched tracks. “We’ve stopped the invasion, as you’ve learnt hours ago from Fury, so you can quit panicking. Sir.”

“I’m knee deep in the aftermath of a potential World War,” Mallory retorted tiredly.

Q briefly glanced heavenwards, and then toward the double-oh impromptu party that, he feared, would soon enough devolve into an orgy. These people weren’t employed for their conscience, rationality, common sense or unwillingness to follow their basest instincts. He was seeing the beginning of it as Bond joined them and launched into a tongue-in-cheek apology for Trevelyan’s absence.

“That is supposed to explain the convergence of our own black ops agents on our doorstep?” Q asked.

Mallory groaned; he might have covered the microphone with his hand, but that wasn’t a good enough soundproofing to hide his reaction. “Where the bloody Hell can I get a competent assistant? Tanner told me he’ll keep order while I’m busy negotiating with people whose houses we routinely stake out-” and whose spouses their agents routinely seduced, “-not to drop a bomb on us.”

“Tanner is working three jobs already,” Q returned. “If he wanted to be M, he could have.” Q was fairly sure of that, at least – but Tanner had never wanted to rise even as high as he did; any further promotion he was bound to refuse.

“This is a crisis, Quartermaster. Each one of us has to do a little extra-”

“I just came back from a combat situation,” Q retorted, expressing the ‘you’re telling me?’ that he would be feeling once he fully internalised that his days of blithe anonymity were past, and that Thor was back in his life and would indubitably continue clinging like a limpet as he always did.

“So this was an Intentions fuck up?” Q inquired loudly enough to be heard everywhere within the lobby. “Remind me – what do we need the Intentions department for, again?” He rather doubted that the notoriously capable Intentions had had anything to do with it, but the double-ohs would do all the detective work for him, if left to their own devices for twenty minutes or so. Intentions had been smart enough for years to keep nothing accessible online – not even on the MI-6 LAN.

Mallory sighed. “Just come to my office, Q. I told Eve to let you in.”

Q hung up and looked at his assets. “When I come back, I want to hear that at least half of you are on a plane to a land far, far away.”

“Aw,” double-oh-eight cooed, picked a chocolate from the bowl and brought it to Q, intending to feed him.

Q didn’t have to decide how he would react to it, because a moment later Bond had the guy in a headlock that might have ended with a broken neck, had Q not cleared his throat before it went that far. He tried not to show it, but Bond’s little fit of jealousy had practically frozen him inside with glee.

Q went to get a piece of chocolate himself, and spoke to the double-ohs, not loudly but making sure that they all heard him: “On a plane. I mean it.”

“Yes, Q,” a couple of the more placid ones replied, while the rest gave him a series of animal sounds that ranged from assent to exasperation to discontent.

“Let’s go, double-oh-seven,” Q ordered. By the time he reached the staircase, Bond was shadowing
“Yeah, Bond gets to stay,” someone grumbled behind them.

“Should have gotten there first, Eddie. Early bird gets the worm.”

“You’re all pigs. I think Bond’s trying to be sweet, and it’s sort of creepily hilarious.”

Q snickered into his fist, ignoring Bond’s disgusted grimace.

“Not a word,” Bond insisted.

Q complied. He led the way down the metal stairs, across the underground corridors, past the guards and the biometric sensors to Moneypenny’s desk. She was sitting behind it, painstakingly tapping something on her desktop. When she noticed Bond coming in, she attempted to exchange a loaded glance with him but failed, mostly because Bond wasn’t looking anywhere in her direction.

“M’s expecting you,” she announced, as though Q weren’t aware of it.

He opened the door for himself and left Bond to deal with M’s personal assistant, who was infamously head over heels for the double-oh-seven. Q pitied her a little, but right at this moment her infatuation was the easiest to exploit. Just seeing Bond come in had struck her dumb.

She was usually the personification of professionalism, and Q very well understood the effect Bond had on people who weren’t inundated to him. Bond could, sometimes without realising what he was doing, completely abolish people’s common sense and make them want to believe in a reality wherein they were the action heroes and nothing could happen to them… up until the moment when they died, often in extremely undignified fashions.

And, well, Q had gotten his magic back, so there was a happy end for him, but that was because he was a god.

“Morning,” Q said cheekily, taking his cue from Winters and deftly abusing the fact that it was a bit after midnight.

Mallory stared at him through blood-shot eyes.

“How’s the peace?” Q inquired and, not waiting to be bidden, took a seat and crossed his legs.

“Lasting,” the man replied, relieved and satisfied, tired and high-strung, and so damn good at his job that Q felt the irrational urge to take off his hat, which was just strange, because he wasn’t wearing a hat.

“Credit where credit is due,” Q replied, taking a seat in one of the chairs prepared for the extremely rare visitors.

Bond closed the door and stood in front of it, guided by the body-guarding instinct that Q found precious yet impractical.

“Eve released you from her clutches?” Q inquired.

Bond pulled his shoulders back and inclined his head, making his neck pop. The effect was delightfully deadpan. “I convinced her that I would die without a mocha latte. Although, admittedly, I’m not sure what a mocha latte is.”

“It’s a sort of ice coffee, I think?” Q, too, only had only a dim idea of what it was. Then, seeing the
Irritated expression on his boss’ face, he added: “M looks like he could use one.”

“So I anticipated.” Bond took a few steps along the bookcases lining the wall, taking in the amount of things Mallory had carried in during his bitter step-down of an office move.

There was no wooden paneling here, no tasteful furniture. All that was saved on comfort and style went into security. There were cameras and sensors, biometric readers, access-cards, a rotating password and a few old-school tricks Mallory had brought from his previous career and installed himself. The floor was lined with explosives and could, if necessary, be remotely detonated.

There were no windows, and the partially see-through wall connected to Moneypenny’s office was completely covered with shutters. There were people assigned to the security of this room on a round-the-clock roster.

It was too bad about the paneling – and about the bar, which couldn’t be so artfully hidden here, and which Mallory had simply moved into a lockable metal cabinet.

“I also anticipated,” Bond continued after a short contemplation, “that you will need a liaison to SHIELD once Barton and Romanov start disappearing people. I would like to volunteer.”

“Denied,” M replied shortly and definitively.

Q nodded. “I fear that it will come down to me doing the liaising. However, I would feel so unsafe were I to be deployed on my own…”

Bond gave him a flat look. Apparently, he did not enjoy the guard duty as much as he seemed to when he was wrestling double-oh-eight for the virtue of Q’s palate.

“You’re a Norse god,” Mallory pointed out, patently unamused.

“Moi?” Q affected, glancing at the men over the top of his glasses and then pushing the glasses up the bridge of his nose with one finger.

Mallory sighed. “At least we have this one bargaining chip in the UN.”

“What?” Q chuckled. “That you’ve got the Norse demigod who can’t bring down lightning bolts from the sky working for you? Good luck with that.”

Bond did an impression of a statue of a poker player.

Luckily, M wasn’t looking at him. “You must have some skill,” he insisted, although why he was so desperate for superhuman presence within MI-6 was a mystery.

Barely anyone within the UN had actual superhumans in their employ, and those who did kept it under a tight lid; the United States were the only ones who advertised their superheroes. They probably thought of the Avengers as theirs – simply because half of the team had American background (and, yes, Captain America was their de facto leader). They had yet to realise that SHIELD was not under their jurisdiction, and it was anyone’s guess which way Roger’s loyalty would go. Stark, they were already well aware, could cheerfully laugh as the economy and the political stability of the country fell apart.

He would probably buy the whole country and give it to Potts to play with.

Q, however, was going to be the ace hidden in the sleeve, not the calling card given out to everyone on a quest to impress. “Yes, of course. I’m a veritable god with a computer.” He smiled widely,
showing his teeth. It was the smile that used to make little children cry.

It seemed to give Mallory the chills.

Bond kept his poker face throughout the whole conversation. Q wanted, more than a little bit, to taste that composure, to feel it break under his fingers and to bear the brunt of the released fire. There was a beast lurking behind Bond’s eyes, too, different than Banner’s, but no less real and no less dangerous.

Q decided, then and there, to take Bond home and try him on for a size. Now he had no more reason to not seek out agreeable companionship.

He stood up, accepting the data stick Mallory handed over to him. “The double-ohs will find out who had them recalled. If it turns out to be Johnston, I would have him fired… although, knowing my agents and my techs, he will be ‘fired’ literally for my viewing pleasure.”

“Your agents?” Tanner echoed quizically, standing in the door, with Moneypenny desperately trying to appear as though she wasn’t peeking in over his shoulder.

Q spun on his heel and redirected his toothy smile to the Chief of Staff. “The double-ohs need a handler. Since I don’t see anyone volunteering, and since I basically already do the job, we might as well make it official. Cheers.”

He walked out of the office and ignored the way Moneypenny stared at him as if she was seeing him for the very first time. Never mind that they used to catch a drink together almost regularly, to the point that they had gained a reputation as the most vicious gossips in British counterintelligence.

“Why the MI-6?” Tanner asked when Q passed by him.

“You recruited me, remember?” Q pointed out. “And so far, you have had no complaints about my qualifications – or am I mistaken?”

“No. No, you are not,” Mallory assured him, and beckoned Bond to follow Q, presumably to keep an eye on him. As if there was any point to it.

He was just assigning Bond to do what Bond wanted to do anyway, but for very different reasons. For example, it was a fact that Q’s derriere looked good in these trousers.

The door fell closed. Q met Bond’s eyes and raised the stolen Starkphone up between them.

“Correct me if I am under the wrong impression here, sir,” Tanner said inside the soundproof office that obviously didn’t have sufficient shielding, “but are we truly dealing with a demigod that is a computer genius and has his personal army of double-oh agents wrapped around his little finger for the price of a smile?”

“Jesus Christ, Tanner…” Mallory muttered. “You just had to put it like that.”

“I was just clarifying, sir.”

“Why couldn’t this have happened to Mawdsley? Then I would have known better than to take this job.”

“Bullshit,” Bond said. While Q cut off the transmission, Bond turned to Moneypenny and the cup she was holding. “Be a dear, Eve, and take that to M before he decides we’re more trouble than we’re worth.” The smile that spread on his face made both Moneypenny and Q feel irrationally like
there was no way Bond could ever be too much trouble.

Q gave himself a shake and deposited the Starkphone back in his pocket.

One thing he had to admit was that Stark really did have the superior tech. *At the moment.* Q was willing to accept that as a challenge, but he thought it would be much more profitable to make it a collaboration rather than competition.

x

Things mostly calmed down over the next fortnight.

Concerned UN countries stopped panicking about British assassins targeting their PMs, New York cleaned up the remains of the attempted alien invasion, and Moneypenny got three sheets to the wind in Q’s presence and upon waking up with her original number and shape of extremities declared Q to be the same ‘boffin’ he had ever been.

The entirety of the Q Branch became privy to Q’s identity almost as fast as Mallory had, and they collectively shrugged, asking ‘and what?’ One particularly mouthy, frightfully freckled programmer stated that: “We’ve always known you were a god, boss,” and the rest just agreed with him.

The double-ohs, on the other hand, became even more aggressively *friendly* than they had been before.

And more demanding.

“Deity means you can make me an eye, right?” was the first thing out of Trevelyan’s mouth when Q happened on him as he hobbled down the stairs toward Medical, head swathed in bandages and a crutch jauntily slung over his shoulder.

“When I get in touch with Stark, we’ll come up with something,” Q assured him.

“Best get on with it, so I can get back into field once I’m done with the PT.” Trevelyan graced him with a half-faced grin straight out of a nightmare, gave a cheery salute and continued his way.

With Bond off on a mission that not-so-coincidentally put him in Romanov’s way and ended with them playing musical chairs around the suspected Russian representative on the WSC, Q finally decided that he had had enough. His life had become a continuous stream of unreasonable requests, handsy assassins and subpar tea, and in the absence of his favourite agent the only shield between him and an unhappy descent into insanity was the steady, understated worship of his Branch.

Except Johnston, who, as it turned out, hadn’t been responsible for the emergency recall of all double-ohs. He was, however, an abysmal cleaner.

The proverbial drop that made the cup of Q’s patience overflow was a text message he received from double-oh-eight on an already hectic Saturday afternoon: - Dear Q, I identified the mark. Should I draw and quarter him, or would you like to do it yourself? Yours, 008. –

- Auto: Q is out of office. – Q typed, using one of the tricks Winters had tried on him. And while he was thinking about Winters… - For urgent matters, contact R. –

There. Winters would deal with it. Hopefully, it would help discourage the double-ohs from making more and more ludicrous demands on his time and attention. If nothing else, at least being officially named their handler made Q their superior, and they were trained to obey orders. Mostly.
Well, sometimes. If they felt like it.

With double-oh-eight delegated to his satisfaction, Q headed home. And from there to New York as per his standing invitation.

“Good afternoon, Mr Smith,” the AI spoke when Q appeared in Stark’s garage. “Sir is in a meeting, but he and Miss Potts ought to be free in a few minutes.

“Stark Industries?” Q inquired, making his way toward the lift. The door slid open for him.

“Indeed. Hence my conviction that sir shall not be long.”

The lift let him out in the familiar penthouse. All traces of the recent battle were excised from it and either Stark or Potts had taken the opportunity to buy two more sofas and a smattering of armchairs, all in chocolate-coloured leather – the kind of furniture one could sink into and not be able to resurface for air without aid.

“Make yourself at home, Mr Smith,” the AI bade him.

Q did.

He woke up when someone shook him.

“Wha-”

A woman giggled.

Q opened his eyes, shocked that he had fallen asleep without consciously choosing to, in a strange place, and subsequently was snuck upon by Potts. She was squatting next to the sofa, with two heeled sandals that in a pinch could have doubled as murder weapons hanging on her forefinger by the straps. She was the one laughing at him.

“You won him a bet,” she announced. “He won’t shut up about it for months. Let’s just-”

“-act like you have found me conscious?” Q filled in.

Potts bit her lower lip. “I’ll start the coffee.” She deposited the sandals under the sofa where the pointy-looking bits would be safely out of the way and no one would step on them. Then she rose and made her way toward the bar, barefoot and as comfortable as Q was feeling.

He gritted his teeth. Comfort and complacency, hand in hand. StarkTower was a place of dangerous decadence, and he was already succumbing to its perils.

“I’d prefer tea,” Q informed her.

Potts hummed and rose on her tiptoes to root around the highest shelf above the wet bar. “I’ll see if we have any. JARVIS, doesn’t Natalie – I mean, Natasha, drink tea?”

“Agent Romanov has left behind a titanium tin labeled ‘Roaches,’” the machine announced. “My sensors cannot determine its contents, but I could extrapolate based on past experience that it is either tea or explosives.”

Potts barely blinked at the suggestion of heavy ordinance having been stashed in her home, and a moment later brought out a metal can that looked far heavier than it should have been. She opened it and gingerly took a sniff.
“Tea,” she decided.

Then the lift spat out Stark who was… molesting an air guitar? Probably. Q didn’t smell any alcohol on him; he seemed to be, as humans referred to it, ‘high on life.’

“Did I win the bet?” Stark demanded, spotting Q (whose hair was undoubtedly sticking out every which way and whose glasses lay forgotten in his flat in Marylebone) sitting on his – or Potts’ – sofa. “Pep? Munchkin? I totally won the bet, didn’t I? I did. Yes!” He let go of the imaginary guitar and punched the air.

“What was the bet?” Q asked.

Stark rubbed his palms together and went off to one of the holographic projections to fiddle with whatever it was he must have been inventing inside his head during the corporate meeting.

Potts, however, didn’t feel the need to remain so reticent. Over the combined noise of the coffee maker and the kettle, she explained: “He conned Phil into promising that if he could get all the Avengers to sleep over, Phil would… sleep over, too.” She grinned.

Stark drummed a happy tattoo with his hands on top of the backrest of the armchair nearest to him, like a little private victorious fanfare, and then went right back to designing.

“Congratulations,” Q said, amused and somehow strangely infected with their obvious happiness, “but two points: I’m not an Avenger, and I haven’t slept over.”

“Yes!” He let go of the imaginary guitar and punched the air.

“Pah,” Potts waved her hand in the air. “Semantics, John – do you prefer John?”

“It suffices.”

Stark snorted. He had lost his jacket while neither Q nor Potts watched him, and was in the process of rolling up the sleeves of his blood-red shirt. He was wearing a golden watch, simply because there was no such thing as ‘too gaudy’ when one was a billionaire.

“You’re a member of the superhero club,” Potts assured him, finishing the drinks.

Stark abandoned the design and came over to her, obviously in a hurry to get his dose of caffeine. He watched over her shoulder, standing close enough to be a bother, making her scowl at him and then laugh, completely ignoring that they weren’t alone. Although, history had shown that Stark had never much considered other people’s presence to be a deterrent to whatever he decided to do in any particular moment. He had made shamelessness into an art form.

And he was offering his hand – and his new posse, and his living space – in friendship.

“My life-long burning ambition,” Q grumbled dryly. It was a good thing that he had been given the double-ohs, because right now they were what kept him from even considering the move. Not for the agency, but, maybe… for the other perks.

On the other hand, he had the ability of near-instantaneous travel anywhere on the planet. There was no need to switch jobs just because he might have to travel a bit further to his place of employment.

“Oi!” Stark protested. “We’re great company. And you sure didn’t mind my couch a minute ago.”

“Tea,” Potts informed him and took the cup from his hands to bring it to Q, who was still feeling like someone had pulled the rug from under him, except that he was sitting inside the leather cloud of a
sofa, and it was refusing to relinquish him.

“Tea?” Stark echoed her, grimacing. “Why do we even have – Pep, is your scary ex-PA littering inside my house? And no, don’t drink that-” he wildly and incomprehensibly gestured at Q, “-have something real to drink. J, is there anything we do not have?”

“I am assuming that was a rhetorical question, sir-“

“Why would you do that?” Stark strode to what at a glance seemed like a patch of wall, but opened easily to reveal the insides of a refrigerator. “No, don’t answer, waste of processing speed. Hey, Jay-el – you know, I had JARVIS look your name up, just for the heck of it; there’s a Medal of Honour recipient John L. Smith. Lucian. That’s damn close. I almost thought I had you for a second there.”

The tea was hot. It came inside a cup that had way too much personality, and presumably had been picked out by an interior decorator, likely one that read Stark’s press. It had an unusual scent, but Q was nonetheless fairly sure that Potts had not just brewed him a draught of C4.

“He was not using the name anymore,” Q pointed out with utter detachment. And there were a lot of other people by that name. It was why he chose it.

“Yeah,” Stark sat down opposite Q and Potts, on an upended box that for some reason served as a table.

Q fancied the reason was either Banner’s beastly side or Thor – Thor more likely, since the implied damage to furniture did not extend to the walls and the structural integrity of the building. Also, it was a well-documented fact that Thor was prone to destroying tables.

“I was trying to figure out who you were,” Stark reminisced. “Wasn’t really thinking ‘god’ when someone hacked my servers. Though I should have been. Why wasn’t I, J?”

“You were sober, sir,” The AI replied.

Stark raised a finger. “And that reminds me, Jay-el-e-dee, why don’t I get you something with a little more life in it?”

“Life meaning alcohol?” Q asked, although he already knew the answer. He wasn’t much bothered. He only ever got drunk if he wanted to, and at times he enjoyed the taste and the burn. He turned to Potts, who had sprawled half-eaten by the other end of the sofa (that solved the riddle of who had picked out the furniture). “When had Thor had the chance to sleep over?” And destroy tables?

The woman made a show of nonchalantly sipping her coffee, and even so failed to quell a giggle. “We’ve put up Jane while she was stranded in New York, before Tony had her flown back to wherever she’s doing secret scientific stuff now. So, Thor was less ‘sleeping’ and more just ‘over.’”

Q gave her a longer, unblinking stare, and then declared: “Stark’s sense of humour is rubbing off on you.”

Potts groaned and covered a part of her face with one dainty palm. “Gods, no. Stark Industries can’t afford that.”

“You should have your sense of humor insured,” Stark suggested, coming back with an armful of glass bottles. “I know a few insurance companies that owe us big.”
The time spent in the StarkTower with Stark and Potts was… regrettably short.

Q had obligations in London, but already he wasn’t thinking of going ‘back home’ even though a week ago he would have. Perhaps yesterday he might have hesitated, but today he was leaving what felt like home to get back to his fancy London flat, to the neighbour that was a genuine artefact of her culture despite her constrictor, to red telephone booths and black cabs and English accents everywhere in the streets. To Earl Grey.

To Her Majesty’s Secret Service.

It was a damn good life he had built for himself, and he had only been at it for less than a year.

“Scrumpy?” Q absently asked, reading the label on the bottle from which he had been drinking for the past half an hour. That there showed just how affected his rationality was.

“Like apple cider, just a bit more kick,” Potts explained, curling up like a big, unwieldy but very pretty cat.

Q regretfully pulled himself out of the depths of the sofa. “I have to go.”

“No, you don’t,” Stark protested.

Q amended the statement for audience who understood the nuance of ‘wants,’ ‘needs’ and ‘musts’ better than to accept such an excuse at face value: “Someone needs me to go.” He had agents in the field or preparing to deploy, and he had a division to run.

“Fine, then. But bring your candyman next time, el-ee-dee!” Stark demanded.

Q almost sprayed his scrumpy over Stark’s floor; he forced himself to swallow the mouthful, and ended up in the midst of a coughing fit.

“Tony…” Potts sniggered and shook her head.

“Pox on your stables, Stark,” Q grumbled. Candyman, indeed.

“Your hot pepper, then. Wait, no – he can’t be Pepper. Pepper is Pepper. And he can’t be Agent, either, because-”

“Agent is Agent,” Q filled in, because obviously Stark wouldn’t call people by their first names.

“That makes so much sense, Iron Man.”

Potts gave on trying to hide her laughter, face hidden in her knees and shaking with hilarity.

Stark and Q were so similar; it would make sense that their… interests were similar, too. Only Stark needed two people to make up for a Bond.

“Tony,” Stark corrected him. “Next time, Q, I – we, right, Pep? We expect you and the guy who could deal with both Rogers and Romanov at the same time without coming out worse for wear.”

“It doesn’t hurt that he’s dishy,” Potts added knowingly.

“That it doesn’t,” Stark agreed. “So?”

Q inclined his head.

When he rose to go, Stark went with him. Q could have travelled straight from the penthouse, but he
appreciated the view of midnight New York from the Iron Man suit’s landing pad. It was cold and windy so far up, and Q’s shirt flapped around him.

Stark stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, as if Q had not noticed the man had something to say. “John… Loki. Q. Whatever you want to go by.” There was too much seriousness in his expression; he had drunk either too little or too much. “You know you can come here… anytime. Like, literally anytime. This is… Pepper, Agent and I, we’ve declared the Tower a safe place for Avengers.”

“I am not an Avenger,” Q reminded him.

Stark shook his head. “Yeah, you are. In all the ways that matter. So, come by whenever you feel like it – just don’t teleport into anyone’s bedroom or bathroom or- yeah, better not go straight to the labs, either.”

“And I thought I was special,” Q said dryly. “You give out access like sweets on Halloween.”

Stark rolled his eyes, clapped Q on the shoulder he had been clasping, and stopped touching him. He even took a step to the side and turned to watch the panorama. “You’re a god. Of course you’re special. Relatively speaking. And I do not.”

“You gave Fury the override codes to your Tower.” Q couldn’t have not said it.

“Someone has to have them,” Stark objected quietly. “I’ve been taken out of the game before, JARVIS is still – I’m working on it! – but he’s still just a computer program and Pepper went all wobbly-kneed when I asked her to stick her hand into my ribcage and Rhodey’s in some warzone or another all the time.”

“You trust Fury?” Q asked dubiously. He would have questioned the judgment of anyone who would reply positively, and Stark had never struck him as quite that unbalanced.

“Depends on context.” The man shrugged. “I know that he’s a stone cold bastard that will laugh any space monster in the face and then fuck its tentacled underage daughter – and son – probably at the same time… if that’s what it’d take to save this planet. But I also know that he’s hyperaware of where my lines lie and which ones he will never cross, because he knows that I could destroy this planet and he wouldn’t be able to stop me if I really wanted to.”

“So, after all, trust has nothing to do with it.” Q could agree with that. In certain circumstances it made Stark a greater liability than he was an asset, but if his gamble with creating emotional ties between the Avengers panned out as well as it seemed it would, he might have preemptively neutralised any measure Fury could utilise against him short of disbanding the whole team and once again scrapping the project.

“It doesn’t hurt that I like him,” Stark muttered, disgruntled.

Q was struck with sympathy; he knew exactly what it was like to feel that insidious and inadvertent fondness for the most impossible individuals. Cue in Stark himself, Thor and – of course, double-oh-seven.

“He knew to send Coulson to get you,” Q remarked.

Stark’s face brightened at the mere mention of the SHIELD agent. “He’s been at this job since World War Two. If he was anything but fantastic at it, he would have long since bitten the dust.”

Q hummed.
Stark suspiciously glared at him. “Fury isn’t one of yours… right?”

Q smirked and vanished.

He received mail.

It wasn’t completely unprecedented, but this time it was not an advertisement or some underhanded scheme to squeeze his money out of him, and it wasn’t addressed to Tom Anderson either. The envelope had his London address on it, but the name was ‘John Smith.’

It contained a red-and-gold invitation to a gala held by the Stark Industries, although Q could read ‘SHIELD organised’ all over it. Fury was a warrior, a leader and a consummate politician, and in the endless game of give and take he could get just about anything he really wanted. Q was fairly sure that what Tony had gotten out of lending his name for legitimacy had been worth it, but he was also certain that it had not been the proverbial ‘an arm and a leg’.

Q had the odd thought that it was a good thing that neither Stark nor Fury were female. Because he was so not interested in what either of them got up to in their free time (and despite that had a pretty well-formed idea of Stark’s interests), but if they had a child, that thing would have been either the meekest being in this realm or a legendary terror.

That was not a comforting thought to fall asleep to, so he went to work instead.

Unfortunately, after he saved double-oh-four (the even numbers, he noticed, tended to have all the bad luck to make up for the good luck of the odd numbers – and, consequently, he shivered thinking of what he thought had happened to double-oh-two) and with him the Danish monarchy, he was pulled to the side by Winters.

She had bruises under her eyes and looked fit to be fitted for a strait jacket.

“Boss, I’ve sent the general update to your inbox,” she said, “but just in case you haven’t read it—” which she knew exactly he hadn’t, because he had been real-time hacking an embassy in Coppenhagen, which strangely led to the conclusion that Fury’s and Stark’s impossible child had saved the regime in Denmark, “-M wants to see you at your convenience. Yes, I know it’s never convenient to see M, but he had the ‘workplace ethics seminar’ look in his eyes—”

“Say no more,” Q cut her off. He tried – unsuccessfully – to re-summon the slight buzz he had once managed to accrue from Stark’s scrumpy and went.

“Hey, boffin!” Moneypenny greeted him, tapping on the keyboard.

Q clenched his jaw at the sight – she was slow, and her nails got in the way and just… no. He had seen a keyboard for the first time about a year ago, but he liked to think that he had never been this awkward around it.

“She’s in a good mood today,” the woman informed him benignly.

Q grimaced. “Must have found something to hang over my head.” He was curious about what it was – there wasn’t a lot, and whatever Mallory had would probably be only worth it for the comic relief.

Moneypenny laughed and pointed her nail-file at him. “Something more than that you’re an alien who’s taken a shine to this world and isn’t dividing and conquering it just ‘cause he’s too damn busy making eyes at—”
“And that is why you never would have made an effective field agent,” Q cut her off. “You tip your hand too early, for the shock value. Good reason but poor professionalism, Miss Moneypenny.”

“Oh, go,” she said laughingly. “Next time the first round is on me.”

It was a figure of speech at best, because when she and Q went drinking, every round was on the British government anyway.

Mallory was looking better than he had two weeks ago, but there were still bags under his eyes and his cheekbones were poking out through paper-white skin. A similar change had come over his desk; it actually looked like it was being used as a work desk instead of a piece of M’s generic yet Secret-Service-y setting for the videoconferences.

Set in the middle of all that suddenly available horizontal space was a document Q didn’t recognise, but which was for his convenience was labelled ‘Q Branch Budget.’ That was… embarrassingly transparent. But M obviously wasn’t going for subtle. Had he presented the original paper, Q wouldn’t have known what it was and his whole upcoming act would have fallen through. Good thinking, there, based on quality intel; not many outside of the Q Branch knew that Q didn’t do administrative.

If they were going to be threatening one another this early in the morning, Q would have taken his laptop. He, too, could be unsubtle if the circumstances called for it.

“I am sending Bond to a Stark Industries gala on Friday,” Mallory said without bothering to preface the information with any context. He pulled the remastered documentation closer and initialled a couple of pages.

Q played along. “He did volunteer as a liaison – but the task was not assigned to him, if I remember correctly.” Which he did.

Mallory’s pen stopped just short of signing the budget. “You will accompany him.”

Q understood the threat, of course, but it was absurd. It was in the interest of the whole agency to keep its assets alive, and Q Branch was essential for their survival. All the equipment, all the programming, all the damn herding and cajoling and pacifying they did was not for their own good – they were doing it for the field agents. Cutting their funding made no sense.

Q wondered if Mallory imagined that he was a lot more emotionally invested in the double-ohs than he actually was. That could have explained the logic – some strange idea that Q would have continued working, even accepting more work, despite lowered pay and diminished resources (and despite the fact that Fury might have growled and grumbled, but he would offer Q a very cushy job with the SHIELD if he ever even suggested that he might be interested). Perhaps M believed he would be able to extort Q into using magic for the MI-6.

“Has he received an invitation, then?” Q inquired. If he was being sent as a plus one, it was quite possible that Mallory was trying to push him into Bond’s bed. That would not make either of them more loyal to the British crown so, as Stark had been heard saying, tough cookies.

“No,” Mallory replied, setting the pen down and pulling a standard paper envelope from the uppermost drawer of his desk. “He is going as the representative of the British nation.”

Q raised his eyebrows. “And I am going as the representative of…?”

“Friday, six o’clock Pacific Daylight Time, Quartermaster. That is-"
“Two a.m. on Saturday, I’m aware,” Q bit off. He kept the time zones inside his head – needed it, because MI-6 had agents all over the world, involved in operation that often needed direct contact or supervision. Q Branch wasn’t working round-the-clock because the so-called lab rats got a kick out of night shifts. “I will inform double-oh-seven.”

He took his leave, brushing Moneypenny’s desk with his fingertips as he passed it. Let the world see how M would deal with sharing his insulated office with mice. Or, mice-like creatures. He couldn’t quite make them alive. Yet. He would get there one day.

Winters’ ‘general update’ included info on Bond, who had come in from Russia and was being detained by Medical for no discernible reason. Q checked the rest of his incoming post and found an email he had dismissed as routine that claimed that ‘Bond had exhibited unusual behaviour after his close encounter with aliens-’

Q didn’t read any further. If some jumped-up medics thought they could do tests on his agent just because he had been near something worth publication, they were very much mistaken.

The most prominent sensory input about Medical was the smell. Q could not say it was familiar, but it was certainly unique. He fancied it had a certain ominous quality. There were orderlies and nurses and doctors, not quite milling around, but exhibiting enough movement to at a first glance seem like they were busy. They were not. Q was familiar with their crisis scenarios and with the optimalised numbers of the staff, and he was also aware that aside from Bond they had two other patients, only one of whom was in critical condition.

“Where’s Bond?” he asked, walking straight up to the first doctor whom he spotted.

“And you are?” the man asked smarmily.

“Going to make you a nonentity before my shift ends,” Q promised.

“IT?” the man guessed, narrowing his eyes.

“I want to speak with Dr Denvers,” Q retorted. He knew Denvers. She had done some relatively minor patching up on some of the double-ohs over the course of past few months. Despite being stationed at the Headquarters, she was more of a field medic than an elite surgeon, but she was neither a simpering idiot, nor a self-important jerkwad, and the double-ohs reacted to that… not well, of course, but less catastrophically.

“Dr Denvers is not on shift,” the man informed him smugly.

Damn. So the staff at Medical was not actually living here. Well, that was inconvenient.

“In that case,” Q announced, and simply walked through, by-passing the sorry excuse for a medical professional. He ignored the first and second doors, well-aware that they were offices, and started opening rooms one by one. There was the ICU behind the first door (which he had known in general, but not actually considered while searching for Bond – and was that agent missing a limb?) and the second one revealed an empty room that was also prepared for emergency.

Medical’s records were a combination of paperwork and a virtual database, so Q wasn’t actually aware that he would find Bond behind the fifth door. He took some minor satisfaction from the doctor following him around, shutting the doors and yelling at him. Also, Q strongly suspected that the moron’s colleagues had set him up for this somehow, and that the security camera feed was going to ‘mysteriously’ find its way to M’s inbox.

Admittedly, he ceased giving a damn about the idiot mere seconds after he had zoned in on Bond,
who seemed like he was inches away from pulling out his IV and disappearing into the shadows (after procuring a couple of scalpels to reach the amplitude of his homicidal capability).

“Do they even have an anesthesiologist in this place?” Q inquired.

Bond threw him a half-hearted smirk, like he was trying to pretend that anyone coming to rescue him from the paws of merciless medical professionals was a great joke.

“They wanted to do tests on you,” Q asserted.

Bond honest-to-Norns shrugged.

Q opened his mouth to say that he needed to touch bases with Bond, but there was innuendo and then there was *innuendo*. He could to better than that, regardless of the fact that he actually honestly needed to touch bases with the man about how they were going to counter M’s newest scheme. “Friday,” he said instead.

Bond pulled out the IV.

Q resolutely did not flinch. He could imagine that the pain was negligible, but the visuals were disgusting, so it took some effort on his part.

“I was invited,” Bond informed him.

“I suspected.” Q returned. He watched Bond get dressed and fell into step with him as they left Medical, representing a shield to one another, from busybodies and publication-eager researchers alike. Q dropped a couple of hints of Mallory’s idea that the official MI-6 representatives for the supranational intelligence meet-and-greet disguised as a party should be Q and Bond.

“You were invited, too,” Bond guessed as they entered the lobby. “And, with the offer of a plus one as well. All added, instead of six people from Britain, two will be attending.”

“No.” Q shook his head and ignored the security guard trying to hail him. “Instead of five Brits, one will attend. I am not, as a matter of fact, British.”

“Your passport says otherwise,” Bond protested. It sounded quite absurd coming from a man who received a new passport with a different data set every month.

“My passport says my name is Thomas A. Anderson,” Q pointed out, because saying that Bond was only ever as real a person as he felt, regardless of his ever-fake paperwork, seemed like the gateway to a philosophical discussion he didn’t feel like having.

Bond shrugged. “Your passport is untrustworthy.”

“My people made it.” Meaning at the same time ‘obviously’ and ‘it is exactly as trustworthy as it needs to be.’

“Even worse.”

The bustle of the Q Branch washed over Q as he stepped out of the generic corridor and faced a row of desks. Heads turned and when his employees spotted him, they hastily returned to their respective occupations with redoubled effort.

“Well, double-oh-seven,” Q said, crossing his arms and standing in front of the agent to block his path, indicating clearly that he had outstayed his welcome, “if you have such objections to how I
have handled M’s orders, you are welcome to go and snitch on me. I have work to do.”

“Are we flying, Q?” Bond inquired, not doing a good job of hiding his schadenfreude.

Q quirked an eyebrow. “I am just the tech support, Agent. Why don’t you go ask Logistics?”

Bond frowned, as if it just now occurred to him that Q was peeved at him. A set of lines on his face deepened like he only allowed it when he deliberately wanted someone to notice how hard he was thinking.

Q suppressed a scoff. There was no need to let the mortal know that he had the power to offend Q.

“Are you pouting because I called your minions untrustworthy?”

The bustle quieted. The entire hall ceased doing anything constructive and collectively eavesdropped on the stand-off.

Q glared at Bond. “Go on, shout about it some more. Call the IA down on us. Have us all go through the polygraph again, re-do the background checks, have your forensic psychologists interrogate us.” He could tell the air had gone cold around him again. He wished Bond would suffer some mild frostbite from it – it would have been nothing less than what he deserved for being such a self-centered, self-important knob.

Bond blinked. “I did not mean-”

“And I do not care what you meant. I know what you said, and I know what that word means inside this building.” There had been people who had gone home one evening, never turned up the next day, and whose files had been marked with an MIA stamp despite the fact that they had not been field agents.

But the Q Branch was Q’s – the same way Bond was his. It was a more intense responsibility than what he felt to the rest of this world, and he had, and would again, kill for them if necessary but much rather just lie and cheat and manipulate for them. That was why the next thing he said to Bond was: “Out of my Branch, double-oh-seven, before I decide that your character might be improved with a nasty case of Tourette’s.”
Q let the mangled remains of his bowtie fall to the floor. He took a deep breath and stepped out of the shadow, appearing seemingly out of nowhere to stand at Stark’s shoulder. “Why is this happening in L.A.?”

Stark jumped a little – yes, PTSD and paranoia, nothing unexpected, nothing embarrassing – and after a moment returned to the present. He recognised Q and exhaled with audible relief. “All the starlets-”

“You’re a happily taken man,” Q cut him off, glancing around the hall. He glimpsed Potts talking to a group that might have been Asian diplomats or Yakuza or both. He didn’t see Coulson, but that was not surprising at all.

“There’s something to be said for exclusivity,” Stark admitted, sending a professional smile in the direction of a chattering huddle passing them by on a quest for the open bar.

“And that something is?”

After a short contemplation and a tiny sip from his champagne flute, Stark shrugged. “…it’s worth trying. And do not quote Star Wars at me.”

“I would not,” Q replied, and it was the truth, because he had not had the time to watch the saga yet. Now that he had his magic back and was not using it for world-saving purposes, he could dedicate a construct to reviewing the more culturally relevant cinematography. Also, from what he had seen, Midgardian culture was often entertaining.

“You could try it for yourself,” Stark suggested, and he too cast a significant look across the room to where Bond and Romanov were in the midst of some unspoken one-upmanship about who could charm most relevant intelligence out of foreign dignitaries.

Q was surprised there even were any dignitaries there. He had expected this ‘party’ to be a seething mass of espionage and counterespionage, held together at the seams with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and alcohol. Although, perhaps he was too used to the double-ohs and fell prey to the expectation that all agents were like them. A hazard of his chosen profession.

“It’s a work in progress,” Q admitted, because he couldn’t come up with a reason why not.

“These secret agents can be tough nuts to crack,” Stark agreed, partly sympathetic, partly royally amused. “But once you get in, you’ll find the core’s delicious.”

If he had said anything more, Q didn’t hear it over his own laughter. Heads turned to him because, frankly, nobody counted on there transpiring any kind of genuine expression of glee at one of these dos.

“So,” the man continued once Q had calmed down enough to sip his champagne without asphyxiating on it, “can’t help but notice you’re one another’s plus one, while I know for a fact that each of you got an invite. Must not be going too poorly.”

Q hesitated for an instance about whether to share a little about the inner workings of the MI-6, and then decided that he might as well, since Stark would get a snigger out of it. “There’s a story behind
“Do tell!” Stark egged him on, and with a gesture flagged down Potts to come stand by them and look official so they could pretend like they were discussing business. That would throw most of the spies in the room for a loop, more so because they – hopefully – had no idea about who Q actually was in either of his identities.

“I imagine you know our Boss received an invitation, too.” Q’s audience did not move a facial muscle between them, which was as good as an admission and practically confirmed that they had been part of the planning committee, and that Stark had his fingers deep, deep in SHIELD (personnel), “We were, let us say, volunteered to attend. At that point, neither of us saw fit to mention the personal invitations.”

Stark tried to hide his hilarity behind his glass, and failed. Even Potts’ lips quirked a smidgen, before she announced: “Well, they skimmed themselves on that one.”

They looked like the perfect corporate couple standing there, but Q had seen them before, in their home, relaxed and free of these masks, so he couldn’t help but see how incomplete they were.

“Where’s the third power of your triumvirate?”

Potts’ lips formed a polite ‘o’ and she whispered: “Triumvirate. I like that.”

Stark smothered the laughter bubbling in his throat and shrugged the shoulder that Potts wasn’t touching with her soft little hand. “Somewhere around. He’s on chaperoning duty tonight – he and his class of wannabe agents.”

“Don’t be mean, Tony,” Potts admonished him.

“Biologically and physically impossible,” said another voice, and then, out of thin air, there stood Clint Barton next to them.

“How come he gets to be mean?” Stark turned his faux-injured query to his lady friend and CEO.

“How come he doesn’t have to schmooze?” Barton complained, monkey-suited to the nines and looking as fantastically put together as any dressed up elite secret agent. He tried to jab Q into the side, but jumped, scowled and manfully quelled his yelp when Q surreptitiously gave him a jolt.

Electricity was always going to be Thor’s domain, and Q had no particular talent for it, but he had learnt more about wielding it than he ever had been interested in over the many, many lessons he had been forced to attend with his ‘brother.’

“Because I’m not an Avenger,” Q reminded them.

“Bullshit,” Stark reacted promptly.

Potts rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, right,” Barton added sarcastically.

“I’m just arm candy tonight.” He hoped that his melancholia didn’t show. This was not what he wanted to be doing. He did, however, accept it as a little hitch in the plan, and resolved to discourage Mallory from giving him any other similar assignments. That was, he believed, best done by being incompetent at it.

“Says the demigod whose day job is executive officer for one of the longest-established secret
services in the world,” Romanov deadpanned, having made her way to them while Q had been otherwise occupied.

He inclined his head in tacit acceptance of what he decided to take as a compliment.

“Mr Stark!” A woman from the crowd – a journalist if Q ever saw one – tried to shoulder in on the group.

“We’re having a private conversation,” Potts mentioned, with daggers in her eyes.

As was typical for reporters, this did not discourage the interloper in the least. In fact, seeing her success prompted several other ‘interested parties’ to try and crash the little powwow that had begun to coalesce.

Then Sitwell was there, offering a glass of something sweet-smelling and his elbow and leading the woman away without giving her a chance to protest, while Hill (hilariously stiff) and her mini-me of a junior agent, both in provocatively short dresses, stood between the Avengers and the oncoming wave of working people on the clock.

The wave crashed and broke, as if the two were immovable objects rather than fragile women in two-inch heels, suffering a desperate shortage of fabric.

“I have to learn that,” Potts whispered covetously.

“Don’t learn Hill’s ways, Pep!” Stark protested. “Hill has no soul and I like you with your soul. I think you have a beautiful soul.”

It was at the same time incredibly lame and incredibly romantic, and Potts herself seemed torn about how to react to the statement. The corners of her mouth twitched, but it wasn’t clear whether she was suppressing a smile (in the effort to not encourage Stark) or a grimace.

“A ten on execution, but two on content,” Barton commented, earning himself a pinch from Romanov.

“You were aware that Hill and Coulson are… friends,” Romanov pointed out, gleeful and intimating a lot more than friendship.

Stark narrowed his eyes, but before he could start an argument over his potentially hurt feelings, Hill stepped aside and let Banner through, careful to move far enough so that he wouldn’t brush her when he moved past.

“Brucie-bear!” Stark exclaimed, deliberately letting the new presence distract him from the previous topic, while Romanov and Barton urgently discussed something in undertone – in Russian. “Come be one of the cool kids!”

“I wouldn’t know how,” Banner replied, sheepishly smiling. “Never been anything even approaching the ‘cool’ status. But thanks for inviting me.”

“You are one of us, Doctor,” Romanov assured him, despite being strategically positioned as far away from him as possible.

“You know you’re always welcome, Bruce,” Potts told him, practically brimming with sincerity.

“Besides, Doc,” Barton said, “you ask any four-year-old who the coolest Avenger is, betcha they’ll say the Hulk.”
“Then you may want to have a chat with my alter-ego instead,” Banner said, and suddenly all that was enjoyable in the evening drained away.

Q stiffened, and it was all he could do not to take a step away. The allusion that the monster was sentient did not help quell his anxiety in the least. All the highly trained people around him oversensitive to social cues noticed, of course. He was not trying to hide it – it had not even occurred to him – but it would have made the situation less awkward if he had.

“Sorry,” the man housing the beast said, optically shrinking, as if he could hide from the consequences of his past actions.

“No,” Stark said in a low, uncompromising voice. “You’ve got nothing to apologise for, Bruce-”

“And we will remind you of that as often as it will be necessary,” Romanov finished… and flinched when Banner threw her a disbelieving yet somewhat grateful glance.

Q remained silent. He met Stark’s reproachful, ticked off look evenly, not apologising for feeling fear in the presence of danger. He was not going to feel guilty for having a healthy emotional reaction to a threat. Stark was certifiably insane and Q liked him very much, but he wasn’t going to be giving up his sanity because ‘all the cool kids did it.’

No, he respected Banner’s work, and would probably find his personality acceptable, but the beast he housed inspired wariness in him, and he was not going to hide it in fear of offending anyone’s sensibilities.

“Fair enough,” Stark admitted. “You’re missing out on a *banner* science bro.”

Banner flushed.

Q tilted his head to the side. “That may be the case. But, should we meet again, Dr Foster is undoubtedly going to wish harm on me, and I doubt you would begrudge her.” No, they would say she was entitled to her feelings about what Q had attempted to do to Thor, never mind that Q’s actions had saved two realms from potential annihilation. It must have been very simple to live unimpeachable lives, but Q had lost interest in such black-and-whiteness about that time when he had first found that he was a natural at using seiðr.

“To be honest, you were kind of an asshole,” Stark proclaimed.

Q blinked. “The irony.”

“Priceless,” Potts agreed with him.

“God, Stark, you nailed that one,” Barton added.

Banner’s guilty expression intensified. “I hate to admit it, Tony…”

“Fiends!” Stark protested. “You have all betrayed me!”

Romanov flicked his ear.

Before Q had been revealed as an alien, just a few months after he had joined MI-6, he had noticed a similar trend: he saw it daily, in Winters’ shameless, exaggerated flirting, in the furtive looks and the overtimes and the way some of the techs tried to *write legibly* whenever forced to resort to handwriting, the poor things.
He knew, of course, that this effect followed Bond around wherever he went and accounted for, to be honest, a good third of his espionage acumen. Bond, like most double-ohs, was alluring. Mysterious. Had a fantastic body and a state of mind that appealed to everyone bored with their life. Bond was beautiful and exciting and dangerous, and a lot of people liked that.

Q had not exactly expected to be dealt the same treatment, but there was no hiding from it. He was learning the correct responses to minimise damage, even though, after such a long period of open shunning, he was enjoying the positive attention a lot.

Either way, the point he was chasing through his meandering thought-track was that Anthony Edward Stark very obviously suffered the same effect.

None of these people would ever betray him. It would take time for Stark to realise this, come to terms with it and trust it. Of course, he had been betrayed in the past, in many cruel ways, some stretched out over years and some sudden, shocking and shattering.

“Uhm… is this a closed group or can I join?” someone asked from behind Q, which was never a good idea, but the reflexive elbow-jab didn’t connect.

Heads turned to Rogers, who looked delightfully anachronistic in his fashionable suit (patently not his own choice of eveningwear), with his parted hair and a wristwatch that looked like it might have been hundred years old.

“The more the merrier, Cap,” Stark decreed, falling naturally into the position of the team’s leader in Roger’s stead. “And since we’re already absolutely not doing what we’re supposed to do, I’ve got a private jet and does anyone feel like blowing this popsicle stand for a marathon of reality TV-”

“No!”

“Absolutely not!”

“Not on your life, Stark!”

“I know where your baby photos are, Tony.”

“Dunno…I kind of missed the latest season of American Idol-”

“And all the previous ones. Don’t encourage him, Clint.”

“Alright, fine,” Stark grumbled.

Potts, however, looked intrigued rather than dejected. “Did you know that JARVIS has the database of just about every movie ever shot?”

For a few seconds silence settled over the group. Several glances of mutual comprehension were exchanged and, in the end, it was Romanov who spoke for them all: “We’re in.”

x

Q startled into wakefulness, rolling off the sofa and to his knees, and jostling the snoozing Bond. Double-oh-seven had turned out to not be so entranced by the Kidon agent’s backless dress as to not notice Q leaving with the Avengers, and had followed the group.

Q rapidly inhaled and searched for the source of his unrest.

“Easy, champ, everything’s under control,” assured him Stark, who was standing with his back
turned to the collage of somnolent superheroes, watching a moving model on one of his holographic screens that cast a blue light on the room, uncomfortably reminiscent of the Hypercube.

“That is not a natural storm,” Q protested and, as if the nature itself agreed with him, his statement was punctuated with the vicious bolt of lightning splitting the New York sky. It was still dark outside, although that might have had more to do with the heavy rainclouds than the early hour. It was about time for the dawn.

“Of course it isn’t,” Stark agreed. “Didn’t I mention? Yeah, Thor’s scheduled to get in today in the early morning. It’s actually why Fury hurried with the gala so much. Didn’t want other agencies getting the specs on our resident god.”

“Thank Norns for all reprieve,” Q groused. He ignored Stark’s weird look the same way he ignored tripe soup, Angry Birds, and the knowledge that such a thing as infomercials existed.

“You have the most epic sibling rivalry I’ve ever seen,” the man remarked.

Q shrugged. That was the outcome of childhood and youth spent in court, being fed visions of becoming king only to find out that one of them was a monster most definitely unrelated to the royal family. There were some details interspersed in between, but what hit the hardest to this day was the fact that it had all been a game played by the Allfather, with only one possible outcome – a broken heart for both Thor and Q. So yes, Thor was a victim, too, but he was the victim who had a family that cared about him and who would become king one day. He was the universally loved hero.

Q was an outlaw, alone in the Realms.

Well, alone but for Thor, who refused to stop clinging to him.

“I am the Prince John to his Richard Lionheart,” Q explained without explaining.

“This analogy would make Fury Robin Hood, and I’m so not down with that,” Stark dismissed, confident as if he had any idea of what had actually transpired on Asgard during Q’s brief yet eventful reign. As if he understood what had led to the episode and what were its consequences.

“Q?” Bond inquired sleepily – why the Hel did he trust anyone here enough to let his guard down? – and Q offhandedly cast a spell that sent him right back to dreamland. Later, he knew, he would blame himself for it a little, as if he was tarnishing one of the few real things in his life, but that was an absurd notion and he was too peeved right now to pay it any mind.

“I told Thor that his father was dead and that he would never be allowed to return to Asgard.”

Stark smacked Q’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “We’ve already established that you’re an asshole.”

Q shook his head. Someone who had been betrayed should not react to treachery with such lukewarm reproach. Apparently Stark liked him, too, enough to overlook whatever might have precluded a ‘friendship’ between them.

Had he been speaking with anyone else, his next argument would have been that his actions had killed people, and that he was not sorry for it.

But saying that to Anthony Stark – well, there was little point to it, and it would have been heartless. Apparently, Stark had become one of the people heartlessness toward whom Q would not abide.
“There was no choice,” Q admitted quietly. “There was only ever one path availed to me, and whenever I had attempted to stray from it, I was punished. It is the easiest thing to make a scapegoat of a child if you start when the child is young enough. And I was but a babe when he took me in.”

“Brother!”

Q had failed to notice when the storm outside had quieted.

He gritted his teeth and turned around to face Thor, who was standing on the backdrop of the dark grey mass of rainclouds outside the floor-length windows.

Thor’s expression was as full of pain as Q had ever seen it. This was not an ideal place for a confrontation, and having Stark witness it was less than desirable, but Q was in a way glad that they were going to speak their minds and finally clear the air between them, that they would discover a new balance and understand their respective positions in this new world. It had to come, and better it came swiftly – like ripping off a band-aid, as the mortals described such catharsis.

Thor set Mjölnir down and reached out both hands toward Q, not with the intention to touch him but in a gesture that stated its own declaration. “I never understood what made you so angry. I tried, believe me. I became fearful that I have never truly known you, but that cannot be right. Your mind may forever remain mysterious to me, brother, but your heart is familiar. I know your cruelty and your kindness. You remain one of the best men I have been privileged to know.”

Stark swallowed. He backed away and sat down, removing himself from the conversation as obviously as he could without leaving the room or placing his hands over his ears and singing at the top of his voice.

“Angry,” Q repeated softly. His eyes strayed to the floor, but a moment later he looked up again. This was Thor. “I was angry to find out my whole life has been a lie. The Allfather adopted me expecting me to one day betray you. He took me into his household with the intention to make me a lesson for you.” Q blinked away furious tears. “And I was foolish. All this time I thought I thirsted for power, when what I truly desired was freedom. Living on Asgard, as the Allfather’s alleged ‘son,’ I never even knew that freedom existed. You must know of what I speak; you may be a king on the other side of Bifröst-”

“Not yet.”

“-but here you are just like everyone else.”

“I like Midgard, too, brother,” Thor said, with a smile that showed his mind lingered on the woman he had chosen for himself.

It was not Midgard – or not only Midgard – that had burrowed under their skins and into their hearts. Just like Thor, Q too was ensnared by the Midgardians.

This time when Thor stepped forward, Q did not try to evade him. He let himself be enveloped in huge arms, pulled against a hard chest. Feeling safe, he allowed himself to lean his forehead against Thor’s temple.

Thor exhaled.

This was the moment when either of them could pull out a knife and stab it into the other’s side. Q even had a knife on himself that he could easily reach.

But Thor’s hands were warm, and he was… not the object of Q’s ire anymore.
“Brother,” Q said. That was the extent of what he could offer.

“Brother,” Thor replied, content and moved at the same time.

Q squirmed and was summarily released. He shook off any embarrassment he might have accrued over the scene – and if Stark wanted to tease him about it, he would find quickly that Q felt no shame.

Stark just watched them for a while, and then he climbed to his feet and extended his hand to Thor. “Welcome back, Point Break.”

“It is indeed a pleasure to be in your presence, my friend.” Thor said solemnly, shaking the hand, careful not to put too much pressure on it. That delicacy was new, most likely learnt through interactions with Foster.

Q knew how many times his bones were broken or dislocated in Thor’s mindless grip.

“Pop a squat,” Stark bade him, on purpose being as colloquial as he possibly could, unaware yet that Allspeak conceived gobbledegook easily.

“I was a poor guest last time,” Thor confessed, chagrined, “and I must make up for it on this golden day.” Never mind the rainclouds outside, apparently. “I have brought gifts. If you would aid me in carrying them-”

“Yeah, let’s,” Stark agreed, reluctantly. He was not the kind of man who often lowered himself to menial work, not unless the cargo was precious to him, but now he nudged Q to precede him – apparently the glee of observing someone far more glaringly unsuited to physical effort suffer along made up for his qualms.

Outside on the terrace they found a sleigh packed to the height of an adult man with boxes, containers and packages. Q could see Frigga’s hand in it as clearly as if she had signed a delivery note. However, his attention was almost immediately drawn to an object wedged in between two crates of what was indubitably mead.

It was long and thin, wrapped in dark purple fabric. Thor, of course, reached for it first and heavy-handedly pulled off the wrapping.

Q felt as though someone had punched him in the chest. Breathing suddenly became next to impossible. Wind picked up and smacked him in the face with the smell of ozone, rain and smog.

“Pookie?” Stark asked, anxious.

“I will not go back,” Q stated definitively once he succeeded in making his lungs cooperate. He turned his eyes to Thor, urging him to comprehend or, if that was impossible for him, at least accept his decision. “I practice seidr. They call me argr. How many holmgangs have I fought, brother – how many mead-suffused hammerheads have I burnt to crisp with nary a word? To scoff at power – what a folly! There is no dishonour in power, only in its application.” Q was certainly no less a man for the magic he practiced, or for whom he took to bed.

“There is much prejudice and distrust against your craft at home, brother,” Thor said solemnly, with regret, as if the ignorance of masses was his personal failing. “Yet you know I would have gladly fought each of the challengers for you-”

“And so affirm my accusers’ opinion of their superiority. I have never needed your coddling, Thor.”
Thor grinned for a split second, before the mirth became crushed under the weight of the situation. “Indeed not. For your perceived frailty, you are of Asgard’s deadliest warriors.”

“I can sorta imagine being scared of you,” Stark offered, “and that’s no mean feat. I mean, I called the Congress a bunch of assclowns.”

Q’s gaze was drawn to the glinting tip of the spear in Thor’s hands. “Funny, how no one bothers the Allfather about *his* knowledge of seiðr.”

“None would dare!” Thor exclaimed. “The Allfather knows all, and thus it cannot be expected that his knowledge of seiðr would be less. He never doubted your value and skill as a warrior. Indeed, Father tasked me to bring the Gugnir to you.” He extended his hands hopefully, as if he expected Q to just take the poison.

Q scoffed and took a step back. He clenched his jaw and felt his expression harden. “And what price does the Allfather ask for this… boon?”

“None,” Thor replied resolutely.

“None that he mentioned to you,” Q amended. “It is a geas.”

Thor hung his head, and then raised it again. “Nay. It is a gift.”

“A reminder that I am still beholden to him.”

“A gesture of affection.”

“A tie.”

“To your family.” Thor took a step forwards to bridge the space Q had put between them. “Throughout my childhood and my youth you were by my side – my friend, my guardian and advisor, my ally and rival. My brother. Nothing you or the Allfather tells me will negate the bond of family between us.”

Q closed his eyes and took a deep breath. However much he yearned to disagree, he could not. Cursing himself for the folly, he extended his hands and blindly touched the shaft. It recognised him, and after a few instances of reprimand and distrust it accepted his magic. Gugnir, the famed spear of the Allfather, became Q’s once again.

Q nodded to Thor.

“Let us be merry!” Thor exclaimed, shattering the heavy moment, and without waiting for a response from anyone hefted two boxes off the sleigh and went inside to deposit them out of direct influence of elements.

Stark and Q watched him go for a moment. Then Stark picked up a package and settled it on his shoulder, wincing at the weight. “You want to put that somewhere it won’t get rained on?”

Q nodded. He pointed Gugnir at the sleigh; his free hand he fisted at his side, then raised and made a grabbing motion.

A trio of ghostly wolves appeared harnessed to the sleigh; without being bidden they dragged it inside the penthouse, whereupon they disintegrated.

Stark stared, open-mouthed. His teeth clacked when he finally thought to close it, and he mumbled:
“I hate magic.”

Q’s amusement drained from him when he noticed Bond, reawakened, standing in front of the windows and watching him. The agent’s expression was rigid, eyes flinty. Q confronted him as soon as he was close enough to speak without raising his voice. “Is there a problem, double-oh-seven?”

“You were being quite alien there,” Bond stated, faux-nonchalant, nearly as pale as his shirt.

“Ah.” Q raised his eyebrow since, as far as he was concerned, Bond had not actually answered his question.

The agent turned away.

Q swallowed a sigh. It tasted bitter.

Instead of allowing them to scatter on their individual ways, Rogers stood in the middle of what passed for kitchen at the penthouse, and declared that the whole day would be spent on teambuilding.

Strangely, the Avengers listened to him.

Q once again protested that he wasn’t an Avenger.

Barton let down the carton of milk out of which he had been drinking and declared loudly: “My ass!” inspiring chuckles and eye-rolls all around.

Rogers quailed, bit his tongue to strangle a comment about mixed company and appropriate vocabulary, and when Barton’s back was turned pointed at the man. “What he said.”

Stark stared at him as if Rogers had just casually broken a law of nature. Or, alternatively, it might have been because Rogers was wearing a pair of denims that accentuated his derriere very nicely. Q did a little appreciative observing himself because, well… Rogers definitely kept showing himself off.

It was understandable that a man who had for a long time felt physically undesirable, and now possessed the ideal body, would want to display it. The Captain America spandex was a little too much, but jeans and a white shirt were a Midgardian classic, and Rogers wore them well.

Romanov looked too and, unless Q was much mistaken, so did Bond.

“Besides,” Potts said from the table, where she was sitting with an empty cup and a half-full pot of coffee, “it’s not an Avengers-only do.”

“Yes,” Romanov agreed quickly, “please don’t leave, Pepper. You are a calming influence on Stark.”

“Also, the candyman is definitely not an Avenger, and no one’s sending him away.” Stark pointed out.

Potts and Q burst into laughter, however unwilling it was. It had been a horrible designation when Stark had spontaneously assigned it the first time, and now it sounded even worse.

“Can-dy-man…” Barton repeated slowly.
Romanov caught on first. “Bond?” She blinked and then snorted while covering her eyes with her hand – as ambivalent a reaction as anyone who knew Bond the slightest bit would have.

Bond opened his mouth but did not get a chance to say anything, because then there was Coulson standing in the doorway and biting the (already quite chewed up, due to Stark) inside of his cheek to maintain a semblance of seriousness. “Is that Bond’s call-sign?”

Bond still glared at Q.

Q gave him an innocent expression.

Bond frowned, came to the conclusion that he was wrong, and looked around for the true perpetrator.

Potts caught her breath, just to start giggling anew. Coulson went to sit next to her, but with his back to the table so that he could keep both eyes on Stark, who usually liked to move around but seemed presently content to occupy his seat on the counter next to the stove.

“Hello, Pepper,” Coulson said dryly.

Potts, in between chuckles, managed to say: “Iron Man,” by way of explanation, and then: “Hi, Phil.”

“Yeah, hi, Phil,” Stark repeated mockingly, but it was sheer posturing, and everyone present knew it.

“Hi, sir,” Barton added, earning himself a cuff from Romanov, who apparently routinely used him as a target for mild violence. By the fond look he bestowed upon her, he took it as a sign of affection. He might even have been right.

“Agent,” Rogers greeted.

“Captain.”

“Good morning,” Banner said neutrally from his corner where he lounged with his bowl of oatmeal, in a tiny pool of sunlight like a lizard seeking out the warmest patch.

“Doctor.”

“Phil!”

“Darcy.”

“Phil.”

“Dr Foster.”

“Jane! Did they let you go or have you broken out again?”

Foster and Stark grinned at one another.

“Did someone say- Jane!” Thor leapt from the doorway to the woman in a single move and he snatched her up into his unique, over-exuberant embrace.

She knew him well, because she had managed to take a deep breath in time to save herself from suffocating.
“And we’re only missing-”

“Dr Selvig,” Coulson provided, right on time to serve as an introduction for the scientist.

Selvig briefly reared back, intimidated by the congregation inside Stark’s kitchen, but then recovered and stepped in. He accepted greetings and a cup of coffee (reluctantly provided by Potts, who parted with it gamely but watched it leave her possession with sorrow) and refused food stating that they had stopped for breakfast on the way.

Q closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they still looked like a family gathering together for a festive occasion. This was a place where he very obviously didn’t belong.

Thus he took his leave.

“x

“You too, huh?” Stark remarked and folded himself onto a bench. “They’re a little too much.”

Q continued perusing the matrices of Stark’s smaller artificial intelligences, which were freely accessible from the workshop terminal.

The resident billionaire managed to remain gloomy for all of ten seconds before something occurred to him, and then he was on his feet again, snapping instructions at his machine.

An image appeared on the holographic projection and Q started paying attention. “The Destroyer?”

Stark emphatically groaned. “The Destroyer? Really? That’s what you call this thing of beauty and elegance and oodles of destructive power?”

“I wasn’t the one to name it.”

“Let me guess – Thor? I adore the big guy to bits, but he’s kind of a… a straightforward thinker.”

“A simpleton, you mean.”

“No.” Stark called up a virtual keyboard on the holo-screen, one that contained symbols Q wasn’t familiar with, despite his knowledge of Allspeak. He began touching keys, and the artificial intelligence reacted by editing the equations that spread over the rest of the display. “No, I don’t mean that.”

“I don’t know who named it,” Q professed. “The concept has existed for a long time before I had use for it. Its function is to destroy, so why not name it for what it does?”

Stark glanced back over his shoulder, affronted. “Because it’s unimaginative.”

Q scoffed. “The Æsir are not generally rewarding of imagination. It’s all about who has the biggest sword-”

“Or hammer.”

“-with them. I have never striven to be big, strong and uncultured, and many have looked down upon me for it.”

“And your reaction to that was to build a giant robot?” Stark tried hard to smirk, but the attempt fell flat. Of course, he would know all there was to know about being the victim of those with brute strength and being forced to do what he didn’t wish to do – and reacting to such degradation by
building robots.

“Robots are fun,” Q said instead. Admittedly, the Destroyer was originally the Allfather’s design, and Q had merely reverse-engineered it and adapted it for his own purposes. Also, Stark would probably be unhappy to hear that instead of an artificial intelligence, the Destroyer was guided by spells.

“Amen to that, my friend.” Stark’s smirk became more genuine. “You ready to get back out there?”

Q grimaced. “Must I?”

“You would leave your ca- I mean, Bond, all on his own?”

“He can take care of himself.”

Boy, could he ever. And if he, once in a blue moon, needed aid, he never hesitated to ask for it, or manipulate, seduce or extort it out of people. He threw his whole being into his work and spared himself the liability of emotional attachments whenever possible. His presence here at the StarkTower was not because he, too, felt some bizarre kinship with the rest of these weirdoes, but because it had been an assigned reconnaissance mission.

Speaking of workaholics… “You haven’t invited Fury. Or have you?”

Stark scowled and scratched his chin. “That’s different. Letting him have free access would defeat the purpose of making the Tower a safe place for us, and he knows it.”

Q absolutely agreed. He could imagine giving Mallory the keys to his flat and… no. Just no. Sadly, this cat was already out of the bag to some of the concerned. “Then I guess I shouldn’t have told anyone he has the overrides.”

Stark waved his hand. “They would have figured it out sooner or later. Come on, Johnny-boy. We need to take part in this team-building exercise, or else the Capsicle will come down on us with the full power of his disappointed face.”

“What constituted teambuilding in the forties?” Q inquired as they entered the lift, because going by what he had learnt from Zola Hawley, it was drinking and whoring and singing vulgar songs. That was a slight step up from the drinking, feasting, raping and pillaging that he recalled from the Æsir warriors’ stories, but still not something he desired to engage in.

“Shit,” Stark muttered and nervously tapped his fingers against the wall. “I thought he’s just read some kind of self-help psycho-babble textbook. Trust falls and heart-to-hearts and… whatever other crap people do. Is that what people do? It sounds horrifying enough, but I betcha it was worse in the war. I think everything was worse in the war.”

Q gulped. He was still stuck on the vision of Bond’s reaction to being ordered to do a trust fall.

Hysterical laughter, maybe. Wait, no – Bond didn’t do laughter.

Graphic threats of grievous bodily harm?

The penthouse wasn’t nearly as much of a disaster zone as they had feared it would have become. Thor and Foster were, very predictably, canoodling; Foster, despite being curled up against Thor’s chest, multitasked with a tablet, a stylus, a stack of periodicals and Selvig seated next to her. The rest of the occupants were scattered around: Banner with a book and poorly pretending that he wasn’t listening to Foster; Lewis and Barton flirting; Romanov and Coulson being suckered in by Potts’ into
revealing more than they strictly should have about their work.

Rogers had been ostensibly left out, and Bond had taken the opportunity to get close enough to the man to fleece him for all intel he might have had. They looked like they were getting along – Rogers tentatively smiled, and Q had to wonder if the Captain America even recalled that he was talking to a foreign secret agent.

Romanov leant in to Potts’ ear and explained: “Of course I can pilot the jet. Although I may have hedged with the Cap, to make sure he let Clint come along.”

“I feel so sorry for him,” Potts said, heart-felt and a little guilty. “He’s been put into such a horrible position-”

“He’s their leader,” Coulson protested. “I am the one responsible for them.”

Romanov pursed her lips.

Potts patted Coulson’s shoulder in faux-sympathy. “But you love your job, Phil.”

When Q glanced to the side, Stark wasn’t there anymore. He was half-way to the table, then leaning over Potts’ other shoulder to whisper something to her and Coulson at the same time. Potts coloured; Coulson ducked his head to hide his expression.

Q took a deep, bracing breath, moved to Banner, sat down and asked: “So, Doctor… how would you go about creating a prosthetic eye?”

And damn if his hands weren’t shaking.

But Banner only gave him a look of surprise, crows’ feet around his eyes tightening, and then he launched into an on-the-fly brainstorming session, just like that.

x

“Thor was the one who always broke our toys. I am the responsible one,” Q claimed with barely suppressed smugness.

He accepted another glass of Asgardian mead from Potts, who was trying quite insistently to loosen Coulson enough that he would allow her to sit in his lap regardless of the witnesses. It had been a long day spent chiefly socialising, and even the seemingly unflappable man had to be tired.

Q was exhausted. He welcomed the alcohol; he downed the glass and gave it back to Potts for a refill.

“Dish,” Foster demanded, sinking into a chair by Q’s left arm. There was wariness in her expression, but she was metaphorically extending a hand in a truce, and after a whole constructive, creative, enjoyable conversation Q had had with the man who housed the beast, this was a walk in the park.

“Most of those memories are not funny at all,” Q warned her. There were horses with broken legs, dogs caught in bear traps and teachers walking away wounded and filled with resentment. There were a boy’s lips sewn together, pets disemboweled in petty revenge, slurs scarred into a man’s skin. Q disliked thinking on his childhood – in retrospect, a lot of it sounded like a tale of continuous horror.

“Just pick something good,” Foster replied tentatively and huffed when he didn’t immediately acquiesce.
Q checked that Thor was otherwise occupied – teaching Lewis, Romanov, Barton and Banner to dance his favourite Bygdedans – and would not hear. “All Æsir children must learn to swim before they are allowed to leave the palace unsupervised. Thor had, one day, decided that he was old enough to learn, and that, being the Allfather’s son and heir, swimming would come as naturally to him as everything else did.”

Which was an over-exaggeration at best, and a blatant lie if anyone asked Q.

“I see where this is going.” Potts nodded knowingly, not even trying to be inconspicuous as she looked at Stark.

“Have you ever dived into ice-cold water?” Q asked rhetorically, noting how Stark stiffened and how Coulson’s hand on his back allowed him to release the breath he was holding. “He went down like a stone.”

“You’re right,” Foster said quietly, frowning. “This isn’t funny.”

Q shook his head. “It wasn’t then, either. I was the only one present far as eye could see, as ear could hear. There was no one within shouting distance, no hope of help. And if you think the idea of my lifting Thor’s weight laughable now… when we were children, the difference was yet greater.”

“But you saved him,” Coulson said, interested enough to join the conversation. Obviously, he was working, too, gauging Q for Fury.

Q waved his hand. “Thor owes me his life hundred times over, and of most of those occasions he is not even aware.” Valaskjálf was just as full of conspiracy and intrigue as any other court, and Thor’s ingenuity had made him an easy target. Q to this day wondered if the Allfather had known and deliberately let Q become a murderer at such an early age. “He lost a hunting knife in the river – a gift from his parents. But yes, obviously I saved him.”

“Using magic,” Stark noted, because he was a genius.

Q nodded. “Thereupon we returned to the palace, Thor soaked and shivering with cold, myself dry and comfortable. Concerned adults descended upon us and, since Thor was the trustworthy one between us, asked him what happened.” Q bit his lip and blinked. Then, in an even voice he was proud of, he added: “He always hated disappointing his father.”

“He said you pushed him in,” Stark guessed.

Foster’s eyes were wide and hurt. Potts seemed appalled, but Coulson looked rather like Q had confirmed his suppositions.

Q shrugged. “We were but children.”

“But he did the same thing again,” Stark pointed out viciously. “He always got away with it, so why not? No wonder you were so pissed at him.”

Q chuckled. “It is what he was taught. I have forgiven him for seeking his Father’s acknowledgment heedlessly of others’ pain. He has overcome his teachings in the end – and even before, he had been far more protective of me than the Allfather ever apprehended.”

“The magic thing,” Stark said knowingly. He pulled another jug of mead from under the table and started filling glasses one by one. “Yeah, I had JARVIS find it for me after your touching little scene in the morning. You were basically like accused of being queer in Nazi Germany.”
“Not just accused,” Potts pointed out. “He is a magician.”

“Well…” Foster ran her tongue along her teeth in a quirky contemplative gesture, and then concluded: “Fuck.”

“Indeed,” Q agreed, feeling the corners of his mouth twitch.

“Alright,” she said, and clapped Q on the arm. “After that, I totally get why you’d gone a little wacko. Just don’t do it again, okay?”

Q noncommittally inclined his head, and wondered if it had occurred to her that he could have just made up the whole story. He hadn’t, but he could have. Also, he might have left out a couple of details – like the fact that it was him who had goaded Thor into doing it all in the first place.

“I want to see some magic!” Foster announced.

It seemed like it came out of blue, but Q realised that this was the point of the whole conversation, and it had been Foster’s curiosity that had overcome her pique at him rather than any Thor-related wish for peace in the family. He understood the reasoning too well to hold it ill of her, and he had drunk a few (more than strictly advisable) glasses of mead, so he stood up and relocated to the middle of the empty space that wasn’t being used by the jocund dancers.

He forewent Gugnir – it was not necessary, and often turned out to be impractical in enclosed spaces – and simply closed his eyes. His magic manifested around him, re-clothing him, crafting the illusion of his armour, and then seemingly dispersed.

He felt the pull on his head and stubbornly held it straight as his hair grew out and fell in rich waves over his shoulders; his internal organs expanded and shrank and rearranged, conforming to a new bone-structure. The hair began to twist upon itself and formed a thick, solid braid that hung down to his widened hips and, finally, his shirt and slacks reformed into a green floor-length dress.

He opened his eyes.

Stark was once again gaping at him, muttering a mantra of ‘hate, hate, hate magic!’ The other occupants of the room did not fare much better.

Only Thor, who was somewhat accustomed to Q’s prowess at spellcraft and at catching people off guard, reacted by laughing merrily and clapping his hands.

Q pulled his shoulders back, emphasising his healthy cleavage, and basked in the appreciative ogling.

“Oh Hell,” Barton breathed.

Romanov, instead of cuffing him, nodded in assent.

Thor finished clapping and thundered over to grip Q’s hand in his paws and raise it to his lips for some stagey kissing. “Sister! It has been long since your presence soothed my soul! As ever, you are the balm for sore eyes and the Valkyrie that strikes terror in the hearts of the dishonourable curs!”

Q grinned. He even let Thor bear-hug him again. He had not done this often on Asgard, fearing for his life (and virtue), should anyone find out. Of course Thor had found out, and he had been just as puppyishly eager about it as he was about everything new and exciting and potentially harmful.

Q leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Thor’s stubbled cheek.
That was the final sign of acceptance between them, and they both knew it. All hurt was healed, and their affection and Thor’s loyalty had overcome the Allfather’s scheming. Q was… glad.

“I need a drink,” Stark announced.

“Me too,” Barton agreed.

“Right,” Banner joined them.

Soon enough the whole company was partaking in Thor’s gift. Or, rather, almost the whole company.

Bond was missing.

x

Bond was the only one with whom Q hadn’t spoken all day long. Q did, however, receive his regularly scheduled updates on all the double-ohs, including Bond, so he had a fairly good idea of what the man had been up to.

He located the agent easily in the neon-lit kitchen, nursing a glass of bourbon and ruminating.

Q belatedly became aware that he was still a woman. That was an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time, while dealing with the double-oh-seven. Occasionally he made himself into an object of lust to divert his foes’ attention, but the thought of Bond objectifying him in this manner tasted bitter on his tongue.

“That is sexy,” Bond informed him tonelessly.

Q pressed his palm to his forehead. “Double-oh-seven…”

Bond huffed a laugh utterly devoid of mirth – as if Q had intentionally antagonised him by choosing this spell for his exhibition. “What are you, even? A few weeks ago I thought you were a squint that was too bloody smart for his own good and too bloody young for his job. But you aren’t, are you?”

“Not too young,” Q admitted. On some days he felt ancient. On others he believed it would be centuries yet before he had enough experience to stop stumbling over his own ignorance.


“If it bothers you, I can turn back,” Q offered, and then could have kicked himself. Was he truly kowtowing to this mortal’s discomfort? It was one thing to risk his life for another’s – it was a whole other game of dice to censor himself.

Q never wanted to censor himself.

“Don’t.” Bond gave him a rictus grin. “I like it.” His eyes followed Q’s neckline.

“Have you changed your mind, then?” Q inquired. He did not think that was the case, rather the opposite – whatever trust, whatever unspoken mutual alliance they had formed between them, it was falling apart.

“Changed my mind?”

Q was not in the mood for games. Bond’s wariness of him was, naturally, understandable, even rational, but still surprising (Bond was not famous for his rationality) and, most importantly, it
smarted. Q had become vulnerable to his mortal, and was now reaping what he had sown.

“I see,” Q said quietly. He was familiar with this feeling from decades of hiding in the pillars’ shadows at Thor’s feasts. He gathered Stark’s discarded tablet from the counter and stepped backwards. “Short of an emergency, I shall collect you tomorrow, double-oh-seven. Good night.”

“Q!” Bond called out to him after he had gotten over whatever had startled him, but by that time Q was stepping into the lift and instructing the AI to take him to ‘his’ rooms. Stark wanted to be generous, so Q could at least surround himself with luxury and technology if he had to remain alone for the night.

“Can’t sleep?” Stark asked without turning around when Q stepped into his workshop.

The artificial intelligence must have snitched on him.

“You neither?” Q counter-questioned. He had returned to his male appearance, for a multitude of reasons, the most important of which was that the Avengers had known and accepted him like this. He did not want to stir up trouble this early, while the nascent bonds were still so fragile.

Many opportunities for trouble would come later, when the chaos would not result in ostracism.

“That a normal thing?” Stark returned, setting his wrench-like instrument onto the bench and nudging one of his bots away when it came whirring about.

“For you?”

“Yeah.” The man sat down, rested his elbows on his knees, leaned forwards and rubbed the back of his neck. “Pep says my circadian rhythm’s messed up, but I don’t think I’ve got one.” He looked up, grinning. “I’ve got sex, alcohol, rock, and the Iron Man – who needs that crap?”

“Not I,” Q agreed, already feeling better after his catastrophic encounter with double-oh-seven.

“No. But you’re not lurking because you can’t sleep.”

“No,” Q admitted. He could sleep. He just didn’t want to.

“I see.” Stark stood and beckoned Q closer. “Come take a look at something. I want to build another bot, but it’s not coming together the way I’d like – you’ve got a few hours to kill, might as well have fun.”
Morning announced itself with an invasion of busybodies into Stark’s workshop. Q had seen the plans Stark had drawn for people-proofing this place, and he could read in the tension of Stark’s demeanour that they would be implemented very, very soon.

The man was already stretching the limits of his hospitality by not kicking them out.

Banner and Selvig made themselves comfortable on a mattress by the door and quietly watched.

A while later Stark seemed to have completely forgotten their presence.

Q had never before built a robot purely of science, without the slightest bit of magic. He was enjoying himself. He was especially interested in its sensory perception, although that might have been a side-effect of his yesterday’s debate with the man who housed the beast.

The body of the future bot was half-standing, half-strung up on top of a table-like structure hastily cobbled together from scrap material. Usually Stark would have done the construction more hands-on, as he had explained, but this was supposed to be a joint effort between them, so they had to come up with a different modus operandi. They were standing vis-à-vis, working four-handed or alternating their additions, based on how much space was needed.

“Miss Potts will be arriving in thirty-one seconds,” the central AI informed them.

Stark grimaced and set down the tin solder.

Q reached for a tangle of cables, selected one and unbraided the end.

“Resistance?” Stark asked just as Potts entered.

The AI displayed a series of calculations on the nearest screen.

Stark grumbled. “Go through all available materials, J, and give me numbers I’ll like.”

“Really, Bruce?” Potts asked under her breath.

Banner craned his neck to look up at her. “It’s like Jenga, only they’re building it instead of taking it apart, and it’s going to be a robot rather than a tower.”

“It’s fascinating to watch,” Selvig added. “They have completely different styles – different ways of thinking, I suppose-”

“I’ll take your word on it, Doctor.” Potts sighed. “JARVIS, how long have they been at it?”

“Four hours and twenty-eight minutes, Miss Potts.”

“Let me guess: without a break.”

Stark met Q’s eyes over their unfinished creation and squared his shoulders, like a child caught doing something it was most definitely not supposed to be doing. Q gained the distinct impression that this was yet another thing that could be said about committed relationships, but he kept it private.
Let Stark lie in the bed he had made for himself.

“Indeed,” the machine confirmed.

Q straightened. “I have to go, anyway. Work to do.”

“I’ll finish here,” Stark assured him. “It’s just the other limb and the casing now.”

“The program?” Q inquired.

“It’s a cyberdate.” Stark grinned at him and offered his hand.

Q shook it and made a tactical retreat. He was almost out of earshot when Potts began presenting her guilt trip. He made a detour for Gugnir, and once he held it in his hand, he surveyed the empty corridor and requested information on Bond’s whereabouts.

“Agent Bond is breakfasting in the kitchen, Mr Smith,” the AI replied. “Mr Odinson and Dr Foster are present as well.”

The kitchen was, much to Q’s surprise, clean. Apparently, Stark paid sneaky staff, who had managed to come in at an unreasonable hour and remove every last trace of last night’s… soiree. It had been too mellow an occasion to call it a party.

“Double-oh-seven,” Q said tartly in lieu of a ‘good morning.’ He had not chosen the tone intentionally; apparently the shadow of last night’s confrontation was still very dark upon them.

“Q,” the man returned, with the exact same expression and in the exact same voice as he had spoken at the gallery, upon their first meeting. An icy hand gripped Q’s heart, and he automatically accepted the cup Bond handed him.

It contained tea, and embodied an apology as clear as Bond could make it.

Q took a sip. It was hot and bitter.

“Brother!” Thor rumbled, tearing himself away from his lover and walking over to rummage in the drawers. “And Bond, my brother’s shield brother! A most fortuitous morn!”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Q muttered dryly. He and Bond still had a way to go before they could call themselves that, if they ever even got so far. He wouldn’t put a wager on it.

Thor returned to the table, proffering a tiny knife. “I hope this shall suffice, my Jane! I would be happy to cut your fruit for you, but I shall never doubt your prowess.”

“Mhmmm…” Foster concurred, obviously only partially awake, and pulled Thor down by his absurdly Midgardian undershirt so she could kiss him.

“Dr Foster is obviously a dog person,” Q shared under his breath, watching the interaction.

“That did look like obedience training, didn’t it?” Bond agreed.

Q set down the cup. It was empty. When had that happened?

Bond looked away, understanding that the rift between them had not yet been bridged to the point that he could resume acting as if he had never let his guard down enough to show Q his distrust. “London?”
“Yes,” Q agreed and extended his hand.

They materialised in Marylebone, in Q’s flat. He needed a change of clothes, and Bond could damn well do whatever he wanted. It was not as though he hadn’t known where Q lived, anyway.

Q ripped his hand away as soon as he could without risking that he would scatter Bond over several planes of existence. “You can make your way home, double-oh-seven? I am not overestimating you by assuming that?” Without waiting for a response, he shut the door of his bedroom behind himself.

When he came out ten minutes later, Bond was still standing in his living room, staring blankly through the unadorned wall.

“I haven’t ceased being an alien god in the past twelve hours,” Q informed the man, once again showing more emotion than he necessarily wanted to. He tried to mitigate it with a grin – being a god was a viable source of pride.

“I hate that smile,” Bond said.

Q quirked an eyebrow. “What smile?”

“That one,” Bond looked at his lips. “That smile on your face that looks like you are half-expecting everyone to strike you.”

Q felt that very smile stretching his mouth. No one had pegged him that well since the woman he used to call ‘mother.’ He despised anyone having that much power over him; worse yet, someone who had already used similar knowledge to hurt him, and someone against whom Q could not sufficiently defend himself. He recalled with sharp pain how hard it had been to strike out at Thor’s soft spots, and Thor had used to off-handedly bully him without realising it. For decades.

Bond raised his hand, palm-open, to touch him.

Q hastily stepped away.

Bond flinched, as if it were him who had been struck. However, he really was not the type of man that would back down after a single blow, so he came forward, crowding Q up against an empty bookcase. “I am not going to sodding hit you, Q. God, even if I tried, I know nine double-ohs who’d kill me for it, and they would succeed.” He thought about it for a moment. “If they worked together. And they would, because they think you’re the best thing that’s happened to this agency since cell phones.”

Q huffed through gritted teeth. “I have taken a hit from Mjölnir before, double-oh-seven. If Thor’s not even trying, that much force can level a city block. Your fists don’t scare me. Neither do your knives or the guns you keep stealing from the armoury.”

“But you are… nervous,” Bond pointed out.

Q did not bother trying to deny it.

Bond had the eyes of a beast that would never crawl off to die quietly. It would live on forever or be ripped into shreds and feasted upon by the new apex predator. The eyes seared.

Q rarely genuinely desired something, and never dealt well with being denied.

“I have work to do. As you have pointed out, there are nine double-ohs who need me.” He didn’t give Bond a chance to argue and kicked him out of the flat, without even resorting to magic. If the
agent straggled after him all the way to MI-6 like a stray dog he had once taken home and fed dinner scraps… well, that was Bond’s problem.

x

“Are you busy?” Winters asked from the threshold to Q’s personal office.

“Having a three-way,” Q replied absently, too preoccupied with coding. It was a unique experience to cooperate this way. Usually his program was his own, or alternatively he was fighting against an enemy. This time, however, he and Stark were pooling their code and Stark’s AI was combing through it after them and flagging problems.

Winters could have done striptease on the desk and he wouldn’t have noticed.

“I’m sorry I asked,” the woman said wryly and stepped inside to deposit a stack of forms on top of another stack of forms. “It’s past twelve.”

Q hummed.

“Can I get you anything? Tea? Sandwich?” she inquired, and her voice was so dreary that Q for a moment looked away from the screen.

He held her eyes and shook his head.

Winters nodded and took her leave. That, Q suspected, was the end of that. Her last-ditch effort had been repealed like all previous attempts, and she was finally accepting it. With a little luck, next time she might latch on someone more available.

- Have you fallen asleep? – Stark asked.

- No. – Q replied and moved to go back to typing, only to realise that he had lost the thread. Stark was doing just fine without him. He went back and started reviewing the flagged points, editing typos here and there and leaving notes on a few stickier points.

- You’re not home. –

- No. –

- Wow, don’t overwhelm me with that torrent of eloquence, – Stark retorted. – Why aren’t you home? Is the Magnificent Seven stalking you? –

- Bond is deployed, – Q informed the man, even though it technically constituted treason.

- You brooding? Why the fuck aren’t you over here? –

Q rolled his eyes. – I am on call. – Double-oh-eight was on a mission that looked like it might become red-hot any minute now. It had been looking that way for four hours. Q’s nerves were strung taut.

- You can be on call from here, – Stark offered. – Instantaneous travel. –

Q considered it.

The door to his office flew open and a technician fell through it. “Lost contact with double-oh-eight, sir!”
Q hastily typed: – g2g – and logged off.

\[x\]

Q’s phone rang in the afternoon and woke him up.

“Tell me one thing,” Stark spoke without preamble, “did I somehow mysteriously piss you off? Because it happens, believe you me, it happens more than you would think. Or I would think. Which is exactly the issue.”

Q smiled. “No. I really had an emergency, which was the reason why I was on call in the first place.”

“Your Agent?” Stark inquired gingerly.

“One of mine. Not the one you mean.” Q rolled over on the sofa straight onto something hard-edged that stuck its corner just next to his hipbone. “Ow.” It was a book. What was it doing on his sofa?

“You alright?”

“They tell me he’s going to make it.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes, I agree,” Q said with palpable irony.

“Bitch, bitch, bitch.”

“You called me for a reason,” Q reminded the man before he got so tangled in his own hedging that he would give up on his objective.

“Yeah. Remember Fitz and Simmons? Cute kids, sharp as tacks, too bad they’re on Fury’s payroll, ‘cause I would employ them in a snap?”

Q did remember them. “Dr Selvig’s fans.”

Stark laughed. “That’s nothing compared to the science hard-on they’ve got for Bruce. And Brucie kinda mentioned your ocular inquiry to them and guess what?” He paused, giving Q the time to guess, which Q wasn’t going to use. Audibly pouting, he provided: “They’ve got a working prototype for you.”

Q was stunned. He had only approached the man that housed the beast because… well, out of curiosity and morbid fascination, after his rational mind overpowered his primal fear of the abomination. The man had himself mostly under control and Q had his magic, so the danger to him was negligible. And Dr Banner was indisputably a genius himself, and a third-millennium Renaissance man. Q knew that Stark had been right in alluding that he was missing out.

He had not expected Banner to go to such lengths for him.

Perhaps this was all Stark’s doing, and the man was trying to disguise it, but Stark had never been timid about admitting to his accomplishments, be they scientific or charitable, or both.

“You still there, el-e-dee?”

“Present and shiny,” Q quipped, climbing off his sofa, fortunately without sustaining any further injuries. His bruise was already gone anyway.
“On call?”

“Nope.” Plus, if anything necessitating his attention happened, he carried at least two phones on his person, one of which was a Starkphone that – credit where credit was due – had coverage globe-over.

“See you on the Helicarrier in twenty, then.”

--

Fitz and Simmons met Q in a laboratory that they shared, tripped while introducing one another in a somewhat embarrassing routine, and in a unison that might actually have been spontaneous, but which Q believed was rehearsed asked:

“Are you really a god?”

“Are you really an alien?”

Q adjusted his glasses and glanced to the side at Stark.

“Aren’t they cute?” Stark exclaimed. “I wanted them, but Pepper said it would be my responsibility to feed and walk them every day and I couldn’t pay other people to do it for me.”

Fitz and Simmons redirected their gazes from Q to Stark, and then looked at each other.

“So,” Simmons said, “Dr Banner gave me all these notes and I tried to go with it, but then it didn’t work, so I had to improvise a bit and tell him I’m sorry because-”

“What she’s trying to say,” Fitz cut in, “is that Dr Banner’s like the best gamma physicist there is-”

“The best,” Simmons echoed, “but he’s only like, above average in medicine.” She cringed, as though it was a sacrilege to admit such a thing about one of her idols.

“So we had to improvise,” Fitz spurred her on, and went over to a metal cabinet. He unlocked it and from the inside pulled out a box, which he set on the counter.

“We’ve seen similar stuff before, but there’s always the difficulty with integration, like you have the human body and then you have the tech, and you’ve gotta have an interface and pray it’s not gonna take you over Matrix-style.”

“So, only simple programming, non-editable,” Fitz simplified.

“That means we’ve gotta get it right on the first try. Who’s our vic?” Simmons paused and then amended: “I mean, our test subject?” She smiled widely, showing two rows of unnaturally white teeth.

Q turned to Stark and nodded. They were cute.

He left for Trevelyan, deciding that they might just as well do the operation immediately.

--

“Status?” Q inquired.

There was a tiny little window in the corner of his screen displaying the security camera feed from the operating room, but he couldn’t see any details. There was no point to watching more closely –
he wouldn’t have been able to help with the procedure.

“You know, for missing half his face, this guy is kinda handsome,” Simmons cooed, patting the unconscious double-oh agent on the surviving patch of buzz-cut.

Q continued programming without a hitch. Perhaps he was becoming inundated to the pair.

“He’s beeping like a metronome,” Fitz assured him proudly. “He’s got a fantastic heart, I kid you not.”

“Just don’t try to get your hands on it,” Q warned the boy.

“I wouldn’t, sir,” Fitz assured him. “Only, we’ve got this release form for when a person dies, so they can donate their body to research…” He looked into the camera hopefully.

“Ask Trevelyan when he wakes up,” Q retorted.

Stark, standing two yards to his right, sniggered. The occupants of the HelicarrierBridge had initially covertly observed them, but after the first few shivers of revulsion tried not to listen.

“Duuude…” Fitz exclaimed.

“Yep!” Simmons agreed happily. “Extraocular muscles. Mostly gone. This is art!”

Stark suppressed a chuckle, fingers dancing over his virtual keyboard.

“That is not funny,” Hill informed him quietly.

Stark snorted. “I’m in! Hey, Pookie, say hi to Munchkin!”

- Hi, Munchkin, – Q typed, greeting the robot he and Stark had cobbled together. He forgot to be annoyed by being called ‘Pookie.’ He preferred ‘L-E-D’ or even the trivial ‘Johnny-boy,’ but Stark had somehow worn him down through sheer grittiness of personality.

“Hi, Munchkin!” Fitz and Simmons echoed, although they couldn’t have any idea about what was actually going on up here on the Bridge.

Q pressed enter. “There goes the Chinese member of the WSC,” he said faux-mournfully.

Fury and Hill did not dignify his report with a response.

“Damn, we’re good,” Stark praised them in the absence of praise from an external source.

“What now?” Q asked. “South Africa? Colombia?”

“Colombia,” Stark decided. “Oh yeah! This is the life, baby!”

Hill shuddered. Fury, standing next to her, looked down at her and scowled. That was, scowled more intensely than his default expression.

“It’s just… sir, are we promoting this unholy alliance?”

Fury snorted. “I want to give them a venue to go a little crazy. That way they won’t do this shit out of our sight.”

Q and Stark, both still typing, shared a lightning fast glance. Oh well, what SHIELD didn’t know
wouldn’t hurt them. If the two of them took over Midgard quietly, no one had to notice.

“Hey, Agent,” Stark said out of blue. “How’s it hanging?”

“Mr Stark,” Coulson said professionally, crossing the Bridge from the stairs to Fury’s rostrum. “Director, these are for you.” He handed over a couple of folders and remained rooted to the spot, mesmerised by one of Fury’s screens. “Is that Munchkin?”

“Possibly,” Stark allowed.

Coulson took a deep breath and released it in a very controlled fashion.

“What is it?” Fury asked under his breath, although far from quietly enough to remain unheard by Q.

“They built that one night because they couldn’t sleep,” Coulson explained with fond exasperation.

“You’re the Terror Twins’ handler-”

“No,” Coulson shot Fury down. With wicked satisfaction, he stated: “Smith is not an Avenger.”

“Bullshit,” Stark whispered, and shut off his program. “It’ll take Munchkin a while to get back and recharge. Celebratory lunch at the Tower with whomever we can hunt down?” His eyes were boring through Coulson.

Q did not mind. Certainly, the StarkTower was one of his favourite places on this planet. Still, he had obligations, so before he erased the traces of his presence from the terminal, he asked: “How’s Trevelyan?”

“Alive and close to symmetrical again,” Simmons reported cheerfully.

“Don’t let him die. I’ll be back for him.”

Foster, Lewis and Selvig were off on an expedition, so Thor was practically beside himself with excitement when Q came in the door. It took a while to calm him down enough to make him pass for an integrated member of society – a while which Stark, Potts and Coulson used well, judging by the shortness of breath and widened pupils Q noticed while Potts touched up her make-up.

“American Idol? Really, Thor?” Stark asked dubiously, glaring at the TV Thor had been watching prior to Q’s entrance.

“Friend Clint suggested this contest of talent and perseverance,” Thor replied. “I regret that the time has passed and I cannot offer my support to the brave candidates anymore.”

Q eyed him contemplatively. “You know, if you like the music, you can listen to it sung by actual musicians, and without the annoying bits in between the songs.” Q had once been exposed to roughly fifteen minutes of the show (by Moneypenny). He hoped never to repeat the experience.

“That would be praiseworthy indeed!” Thor proclaimed, and asked ‘his friend JARVIS’ to turn off the TV for him. That was good thinking: Thor’s close relationship with electricity was probably a murder on all manner of appliances.

“I have twenty minutes left of my lunch break, Tony,” Potts tried to curb his enthusiasm.

“You can be late,” Stark assured her.

“In that case,” Potts allowed, “I have thirty-five minutes.”

“Speed-eating is unhealthy, Pep. You’re going to give yourself an ulcer—”

“Says the man who eats while working, motor oil and all.”

Engaged in an argument, they let themselves be led by Coulson toward the lift. Q and Thor followed them, and Q for the first time experienced that even StarkTower lifts could become crowded, especially when one was accompanied by Thor.

“Business level twenty-three, please, JARVIS,” Coulson requested.

“As you wish, Agent Coulson,” the AI replied, and the lift moved.

“Seriously?” Stark whined. “That’s where all the paper-pushers eat. I can afford better.”

“Shawarma,” Potts reminded him.

“You just want to humanize me for the PR,” the man complained, but he pulled her closer and, judging by the offended look Coulson cast at him, attempted to do the same thing with him.

Business level twenty-three, Q found out, was a floor-wide eatery available to all those employed within the StarkTower. He was not certain of the capacity, but since it was early, the place was less than half-full.

On the other hand, once the presence of two Avengers (one of whom was Anthony Stark) and three affiliates was noticed, there was suddenly as much noise as if the hall was bursting at the seams. Stark ignored the uproar with aplomb gained from a lifetime of experience and Thor seemed to enjoy it, and the two of them created enough of a shield. No one dared approach them anyway, and Stark steered them toward the back corner, where a table for six waited to be commandeered by them.

“What is on the menu?” Coulson asked.

Stark waved his hand. “We can have whatever the Hell we want. I own this place. I pay these people’s wages. That entitles me to putting them out.”

“Incorrigible,” Potts sighed, but then a waitress was there and they all pretended that they weren’t in the midst of a debate on whether she was supposed to come to them to take their orders or if they should have gone and stood in the line like everyone else.

“What do you want, big guy?” Stark asked Thor.

“I will have the same fare as my brother chooses!” Thor boomed, causing the waitress to jump and nearly sprain her ankle, since she wasn’t too stable on her high heels.

“Crêpes,” Q decided.

“Crêpes?” Stark repeated. “Seriously?!?”

Q set his elbows on the plastic tabletop and laced his fingers together. “Do you have a problem with that?”
Stark raised both hands palms-out. “I just expected something more along the lines of… wild boar.” He gestured wildly to illustrate just how wild the boar should have been. “Or at least a goose.”

“I grew up eating boars and geese,” Q assured him, supported by Thor’s eager nods. “But crêpes? There is not a single one to be had in the whole of Asgard, and never has been. There were no strawberries, no whipped cream, no chocolate.”

“Damn it, now I want crêpes, too,” Stark announced plaintively. He turned to the waitress. “But with blueberries.”

Potts decided that ordering a relatively simple food was a reasonable compromise between acting like the retinue of a multibillionaire and integrating with the plebeians. “For me, too – with blueberries, please.”

“I suppose I am outvoted,” Coulson said and sighed.

Potts scoffed. “You’ve got thirty-two sweet teeth, Phil, so stop fronting.”

Coulson bestowed half a smile upon her. “Fine.”

Seeing as that was sorted, Thor beamed at the four people around the table and the waitress, and exclaimed: “I will be most delighted to taste these crêpes in your company!”

“Trevelyan?” Q inquired, perching on an ottoman in the rec room and munching on peanuts.

“Twenty-ten, or I’ll return my diploma,” Simmons assured him, and then frowned. “Well, one of them, anyway.”

“Is it true about Agent Coulson?” Fitz asked eagerly.

“What about Agent Coulson?” Sitwell chipped in, ghosting into the room and aiming straight for the water dispenser.

“He’s dating,” Fitz shared with the class.

Q looked at the boy, tilted his head to the side and shrugged. “You should have asked him while he was still free if you were interested.”

Fitz went ashen and then crimson in the face, spluttered and dissolved into a coughing fit. “No… I … no… I’d never… I’m sure he… but…”

Simmons watched him suffer for a while, and then took pity on him. “There’s like, this line they tell you when you’re a junior agent, about how you’re not allowed to fraternize. And then,” she lowered her voice, “a senior agent takes you to the side and they tell you that people do it anyway, because there’s no other option. Like it’s impossible to date anyone outside. Like we’re all… I dunno…”

“Doomed to life of perpetual unattachedness!” Fitz supplied woefully. “But if Agent Coulson can do it-”

“That means nothing,” Sitwell assured him. “We suspect that Coulson’s more or less omnipotent, so he can do pretty much anything.”

Fitz’ and Simmons’ faces fell.
“On top of that,” Sitwell continued blithely, although now that he was watching, Q detected a spark of humour in his eyes, “the pool’s fairly sure that Coulson’s dating an Avenger, so that just goes right on to the sphere of legend and has no influence on us, normal people.”

Fitz sniffled.

Simmons handed him a paper tissue and with equal parts tentativeness and eagerness asked: “Agent Coulson and the Black Widow?” Her expression was hungry for scandal, and Q wished he could throw Winters at her just so she would chill the Hel out.

“Sentence structure,” a new voice chided her. Romanov descended from the ceiling.

Simmons yelped and plastered herself against the wall in vain effort to become one with it.

“You’re missing a constituent,” Romanov informed her.

“I- I- I didn’t mean it!” Simmons stammered.

Romanov shrugged. “If you say so. For the record, no. Just thinking of going there is courting a swift death you’ll never see coming.” She managed to say this in such a funereal voice that even Q had to work hard to keep a straight face.

Fitz, however, was scowling contemplatively. “Is he dating the Hulk then?”

Q choked on nothing.

Sitwell, on the other hand, choked on his water and sprayed it, having just enough self-preservation instinct to turn away from Romanov.

Romanov herself spun on her heel, solemnly mimed zipping her lips, and sat down next to Q. She was recreationally evil and got on with Bond, and Q decided he liked her, too.

He offered her a peanut.

The acoustics of the penthouse were abominable, but Q liked the jazz.

“Green.” Stark grinned, poking Banner’s side.

“Gamma,” the Doctor returned, exasperatedly, and drank.

“Delta,” Q said and without waiting for a reaction gulped down a bit of his cocktail – it was too trivial a response to give anyone pause. He absolutely was not going to say anything that could be a source of discontent to the monster that sat less than a yard away from him. Even if he were to lose, that was a better alternative than rousing that creature.

“Vega,” Stark jumped in, eliciting eye-rolls and causing Q to take another sip from his disgusting mixture of vodka and carcinogenic materials.

“Singularity,” Banner continued.

“What are they doing now?” Barton asked, bemused.

Potts turned a page of her magazine. “Playing a word-association drinking game for geniuses.”
Romanov stretched out on the sofa. “Bozhe, spasi menya. Virginia, tell me there’s some of that Stoli left.”

“Phil’s taken custody of the bottles, so there should be.”

“Never thought I’d see the day,” Barton said quietly.

“Me neither,” Romanov agreed. “It’s a good day.”

“Chronicles,” Stark said, causing Q to sip again.

Q promptly retorted with: “Kalevala.”

Banner saved him from another sip by being unexpectedly well-read.

Stark drank.

“Tolkien,” Banner tried.

Q mentally thanked Winters.

Under the expectant looks of Q and Banner, Stark took another swallow. “I’m not sure I like this game anymore.”

Q glanced at the time on his phone and decided that he might as well take the cue. “I’ll be going.”

Stark tapped his knee. “Pity it didn’t work out.”

“Do I look like the type to give up after the first setback, Iron Man?” Q scoffed and cast a spell that tied the man’s shoelaces together. It was juvenile of him, certainly, but Stark had asked for it. “I have contingencies.”

The contingencies were summarily scrapped, because a blink later Q opened his eyes to discover Bond lazily sprawled on his sofa, thumbing through the book that had bruised Q after infiltrating his living room. At least Q finally knew how the bloody thing even got there.

It raised a whole host of other questions.

“Made yourself right at home, have you,” Q sniped. Too late it occurred to him that if he had just ignored the agent, he could have gotten away with pretending that he hadn’t noticed the hulking form in the middle of his living room. Whatever – Q never was prone to crying, much less over spilt milk.

“You were gone,” Bond complained.

There were scuff marks on the hardwood floor near the bedroom door. Q’s runes remained, unsurprisingly, intact. He kept Gungnir in there, so naturally the chamber was far better defended than to allow anyone to traipse in.

“What do you need someone to tie your shoelaces, double-oh-seven?” Q mocked. He could do it. The spell was already on the tip of his tongue.

Bond’s brow furrowed. “You were with Stark.”

“Can you smell his cologne, or did you just guess based on my positive mood?” Q retorted with as much bite as he could muster.
Implying that he was sleeping with Stark shouldn’t have worked – Bond was better than that at
reading people, and there was absolutely nothing carnal happening between Q and Stark, with no
regrets on either side. Bond had seen them together. He should have known.

Except that, apparently, even the cavalier double-oh-seven was subject to irrational jealousy.

Q mentally congratulated himself on getting even that much of a reaction from the man. It was yet
another step closer to his goal.

Bond lumbered to his feet with the elegance of a lame rhinoceros. “Why don’t you just stay there if
you like it so much better? You have no loyalty to this country-”

The only reason why Q glued the man’s mouth shut rather than punched him in the windpipe was
that he disagreed with physical abuse within partnership on principle, and he still harboured hope. It
was a small, shrivelled, battered thing, but it was not dead yet.

There was the telltale itch in his eyes, and he knew that they had briefly turned their natural red.

“Go, double-oh-seven. Go; get the Hel out of here.” He pointed at the door and remained motionless
until Bond complied.

Then he flopped down onto the sofa, willfully ignored the fact that a spot of it had been warmed by
the body he had just exiled, and re-summoned the mild drunkenness he would have accrued from his
visit to the Stark Tower had he been human. Sleep came soon.

x

“Absolutely not!” Q barked. It felt like a defeat when he had to raise his voice, but apparently that
was necessary to impart upon this herd of simpletons the measure of idiocy they were about to
commit.

Mallory had the gall to fold his hands together and look at Q as if he were an errant toddler.

“The double-ohs specialise in this,” Tanner informed him as if, oh Norns, Q weren’t perfectly
aware of that.

Q leant back against a chest of drawers, almost displacing a plant, and glared around Moneypenny’s
office at the impromptu committee. He had to wonder if this was Winters’ revenge – if she had
helped plan it to soothe her hurt feelings because Q was not interested in her. If so, then she had once
again proven herself a capable purveyor of mischief and he was somewhat proud. And annoyed –
which in turn made him yet prouder.

“They do,” Moneypenny agreed with a faraway look in her eyes.

Q pursed his lips. “Who here is from Intentions?”

A young woman whom he vaguely recognised from the mess-hall brainstorming session raised her
hand.

“Explain to the bigwigs why I have a problem with this. Or, rather, who would have a problem if
they went through with this.”

“Oh… uhm…” She took a deep breath and pointedly looked straight ahead rather than anywhere
near Mallory, Tanner or the weasel-faced head of Legal. “Theo dormiens nunquam… that is, we are
contemplating an indirect attack on a subject with confirmed superhuman powers. And while we
think we know what he, personally, can do – and I would still not be so sure about that – he’s got
friends. With superhuman powers. And not just the Avengers Initiative.”

Q tilted his head to the side in lieu of a ‘thank you,’ and glared at Mallory. “If you harm a hair on
Foster’s head, Thor will call his cohorts and burn London down around your ears. And if you
actually manage to hurt her, it might just be the end of the British monarchy altogether.”

“It’s an unprecedented imbalance of power,” the Intentions envoy added, tapping her lips with one
ring-adorned finger. “We’re going to need whole new protocols for this.”

Q felt it was about the highest time to shut down this insanity. “I am responsible for rational
allocation of assets, and I will not permit using the double-ohs against the Avengers, much less
against the combined force of the Avengers and the Æsir.” The double-ohs were his, and he was not
going to let them be senselessly slaughtered just because Mallory and Tanner thought that Q had too
much influence over them and it would be prudent to have them tragically killed in action while
defending their fatherland from an extraterrestrial threat.

The plan was logical, but it hinged on Q not ripping it apart in front of witnesses. And if Mallory
thought that Q wasn’t willing to go toe to toe with him, he had another thing coming.

It was far more likely that the new M wanted Q to fight him – and to do so with magic. MI-6 was
still doing recon on the superpowered individuals, and for all his protests about not being an
Avenger, Q certainly fit into the Midgardian category of ‘superpowered.’ This, too, was a good plan
in theory.

They just somehow missed the fact that Q had grown up in the midst of court intrigue and didn’t
actually need magic to get his way. For whatever reason, Bond must not have reported that Q hadn’t
been able to access his magic prior to the Pottersville fiasco.

“You are not indispensable, Quartermaster,” Mallory warned him.

Several men and women around the room shifted, surprised by the directness. The one from
Intentions scratched her temple with the back of her mechanical pencil, and then jotted down a note
into her pocket-sized diary.

Q quirked his lips. “Let us not pretend that you haven’t terminated my employment only because you
believe you may find a way to control me.” Or at the very, very least, and with absolutely no grace,
at least to monitor him. “All the skill in the Realms would not convince you to allow me to retain my
job.”

“You fulfill none of the prerequisites of potential employees of this agency,” said a tall, thin man,
presumably from HR.

“And yet I do your job better than you,” Q retorted, and then shrugged, because if saving all of them
and their entire way of life was not enough to impart this lesson, then nothing would be. “But what
do I know? I’m just an Æsir expat. It’s not like I have options.”

Q might or might not have left one of his constructs on the SHIELD Helicarrier last time he had
dropped by. He was not saying either way. If, incidentally, he came into possession of some sensitive
information… well, he was in the counterespionage business, wasn’t he? That sort of thing was
expected of him.

He walked out of the room backwards through the chest of drawers and the wall, simply because he
could. It came with the added benefit of giving them a cause to think once more on whether they
wanted to provoke him into becoming their enemy. They had no defenses against him.

He walked into the Q Branch through the door, but it took him less than a second to figure out that he might as well have taken the shortcut. A lot of these people did not belong into the IT centre: the digerati were squeezed in between inventors and engineers, and interspersed among them, sticking out like sore thumbs despite their efforts at camouflage, were three double-ohs.

Double-oh-eight was even costumed in a white lab coat, perhaps under the mistaken impression that it hid his bandages.

Trevelyan, too, lurked there, wearing the mask Fitz and Simmons had fashioned for him to keep the contents of his skull together until he was healed and the technology integrated.

They were all, collectively, watching him as if he was about to call lightning down from the sky.

“I wouldn’t mind a little one-on-one with the Black Widow,” double-oh-eight said facetiously, breaking the silence.

Bond snorted.

Hurtfew came forwards and handed Q his mug full of steaming Earl Grey. “If you defect to SHIELD, take me with you,” she implored.

A moment later the occupants of the room started cajoling over one another, demanding that Q not leave them behind to be stepped on by an irate Norse god.

Q narrowed his eyes. He was going to have to monitor the servers more closely, and every employee he would catch hacking the security feeds would be made example of. Perhaps moving targets for accuracy testing? Or antidote research?

The mortals’ governments did keep saying that it was inhumane to test poisons on animals. Who was Q to argue against the opinion of the society?

Besides, if they wanted to be hackers, they should be good enough not to get caught.

“Just biding your time,” Bond said softly, turning up by Q’s side once the clamour dissolved into intermingled arguments on how to optimally deal with M.

“Hmm?”

Lab rats and IT nerds plotted the take-over of the British Intelligence Service, and Q was grimly certain that the other two double-ohs were pouring oil onto the fire of mutiny.

Bond rotated his bad shoulder and grimaced when it made an awful cracking sound. “Why should you hurry? You will be here long after all of us will be dead. You and Stark are taking over the world.”

Damn the man, Q thought furiously. Just when he should have made acted meek and apologetic, he forced his way through Q’s walls by being observant, intuitive and too damn irritating to disregard.

“To whatever end?” Q asked, projecting indifference. “To set ourselves up as benevolent dictators? I thought it was infamous all over the MI-6 how much I hate paperwork.” He fiddled with his phone. It became visibly pointless within a few moments, and he switched to the Starkphone. Stark’s AI had noticed that Q was receiving sitreps on the double-ohs in real time and – after a brief conversation about privacy and classification – started sending him updates on the Avengers and other members of
the pseudo-family. Q was certain that the idea had not come from Stark – it was the machine’s initiative. In the weeks past they had spent a lot of time working together, and Q was actually beginning to think of it as a separate entity.

There were three of them: Q, Stark and the AI.

“But you want to rule Earth,” Bond protested, as if that was a given.

Q did not particularly desire to rule, but he felt responsibility, and that responsibility demanded that he give his best protection and guidance to his people. It would have been more fitting to say that he had an obligation to rule Earth.

What Bond had failed to notice was that, for all intents and purposes, Q already did. Well, he shared the reign with Stark and his AI, but they were both limited in their initiative and understanding of the realities of absolutistic reign, which basically just left Q with less of the odious bureaucratic duties.

The racket in the open office space gradually quieted as the original enthusiasm gave way to rational thinking. Q understood enough of human mentality to know that just being what they considered supernatural did not automatically give him sway over them. The Q Branch had lately started behaving somewhat like a sect, but definitely not to the point that all these people would up and abandon their lives on Q’s say so.

That would have been creepy.

On the other hand, they were already so accustomed to looking to him for guidance that their loyalty to him was growing stronger than their loyalty to their Queen and country.

“You are made to be ruled,” Q observed, looking around himself at his first, half-formed court. He was certain that Bond followed his eyes; surely he saw the same thing Q saw? “In the end, you will always kneel.”

Bond made a humming sound, leant closer – too close for any illusion of propriety to survive – and whispered: “That is still not the most unusual seduction strategy I’ve had used on me.”

x

The Helicarrier was not SHIELD’s Headquarters, Q was sure. If nothing else, it was too vulnerable to serve as Headquarters. It, however, seemed to be Nick Fury’s home and thus a hub of activity.

Stark had it virtually staked out, of course.

Q had it staked out magically.

He did not keep watch twenty-four hours a day – that was hardly feasible – but his spell alerted him whenever something especially interesting or entertaining was going on. Since at the moment Q was procrastinating on essential paperwork – the sort of paperwork that made it through Moneypenny and Winters and Hurtfew and still absolutely needed to be done for the continuous functioning of the Q Branch – Q gladly delved into the construct’s consciousness.

He assumed he was in Fury’s living space, although aside from a bed lost under stacks of flotsam (files, writing and eating utensils, used plastic and paper cups, newspapers, books and pieces of technology, weapons and discarded clothing) and a sagging hammock that Fury presumably used in its stead, on the assumption that Fury did sleep at all, it looked just like an office. The Director himself was ensconced in a black leather armchair to make up for his lack of black leather cloak, looking surprisingly civil in only a black turtleneck, black trousers and black army boots kicked up
Q agreed with Stark that Fury was his own caricature, but he also agreed with Coulson, who pointedly did not spread around his belief that Fury did it on purpose.

Coulson, incidentally, entered a moment later without any verbal invitation and with ease that suggested he was a regular visitor to these quarters.

“Tell me the bad news first,” Fury prompted him.

“And what second?” Coulson inquired sardonically.

“I knew it.” Fury closed his eye.

Coulson half-sat, half-leant on the edge of the desk and twisted his torso to face the SHIELD Director. “He’s not an enemy.” He traced the edge of his tie with the fingers and inclined his head to one side, then to the other. “Well. It depends.”

“On?” Fury did look then.

“What we’re fighting against,” Coulson replied. “He will protect this planet and its people – he already did that – but he might just decide to take it over one day if he gets bored with espionage or if someone dares him or… I don’t know. He and Stark are practically having a competition in childishness. What he does, it’s all harmless, at worst annoying. He is personable, amusing, reasonably friendly. He seems to genuinely care about Thor.”

Aside from the last statement, Q was content with the assessment. Coulson had done a good work for one of his youth (relative youth, Q reminded himself; time on Midgard was measured differently, as the mortals were so short-lived). He was confused, because Q’s motivations did not seem plausible to him.

Plausible was boring. One needed the perspective of a couple of centuries under their belt to properly appreciate inanity.

“What of his magic?” Fury asked.

Coulson shook his head. “What he’s shown so far are parlor tricks. We haven’t seen a serious spell from him since New Mexico. Like it’s all just a game to him.”

Bravo, Q mused. Coulson had a phenomenal talent for observation, and his reasoning ability was just as extraordinary.

The agent only missed experience. Fury proved as much when he replied: “It might well be.”

Both men fell quiet, contemplating the ramifications of having a bored ‘demigod’ entertaining himself on their turf. They probably imagined someone akin to Stark, but with less of a conscience and more whimsicality.

A minute or so later, Fury let his feet down onto the floor and spoke: “About Stark-”

“No, sir,” Coulson cut him off. He stepped away from the desk and remained standing freely, not quite assuming a battle-ready stance, but visibly bracing himself for the impending clash. “If I cross that line once, I’ll cross it again, and that would just defeat everything I’ve been working for.”

Fury set his hands onto the desk and leaned forwards to more closely survey his agent – and
apparently a friend, for a given value of friendship. “You want me to pull you out?”

“At this point…” Coulson looked down, but a moment later he recovered and faced his boss head-on. “I expect you to cut me loose when it comes down to it.”

Fury hunched and sank back into the armchair. “Stark, then.”

An emotion broke through Coulson’s mask of unflappability: a mixture of anger and amazement, and he gestured with his hands, expressing stark bafflement. “The only thing more infuriating than his ego is the fact that it’s completely justified.”

Fury groaned and covered his face with his hand. “Never tell me.”

Coulson’s cringe limited itself to his facial muscles. For a man who specialised in keeping his face straight, his expressions were unexpectedly eloquent.

Choosing to take Fury’s statement as dismissal, he turned away to leave.

“Phil.”

The agent stopped and glanced back.

Fury touched the tips of his fingers to what once might have been his hairline. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

x

The purge of the World Security Council continued with such viciousness that Q was honestly surprised the organisation hadn’t just disbanded so that its members could run for the hills.

Q kept close tabs on all of them that had been identified and were yet living. That was how he knew that double-oh-seven had been dispatched sometime in the past twelve hours, and no one had told him. A part of his mind was coming up with several schemes for negative reinforcement when Tanner and the familiar woman from Intentions stepped into the main office.

On the screen Bond made his way around a hotel. He seemed to have lost his jacket and gained a pair of admirers who claimed to be twins but probably weren’t even related… no, they weren’t – according to the databases both had undergone plastic surgeries to make it appear so, and one had legally changed her name to complete the illusion. Bond had his hands full with them. Literally.

Q determined with sufficient likelihood that they were not spies or assassins, merely prostitutes, and briefly gave his attention to Tanner’s companion.

She wordlessly handed over a folder.

Q carried it to his private office, mildly disconcerted that both she and Tanner followed him; when the Chief of Staff closed the door, Q knew he wouldn’t like what he was about to learn.

He only needed to glance at the first few pages to form an idea of what was going on. “Bodyguard duty? Tanner, this is MI-5 purview, and even if it wasn’t, you have dozens of agents on your roster. Denied.”

Tanner crossed his arms. “It was not a question, Quartermaster.”

Q gritted his teeth. Tanner was lucky that he wasn’t dealing with Thor, because at this point Thor would have smashed him head-first into the nearest wall. Or into the grille that covered the floor.
That would have made for an interesting scar.

The Intentions damsel took a couple of steps backwards to get out of his reach – a gesture rather than feasible defence, as she must have known.

“Let me guess,” Q spoke in a quiet, mocking tone, “members of the World Security Council start dropping dead, and Mrs Nottingham begins to worry about her personal safety.” He brushed nonexistent lint off of the lapel of his jacket. “Funny how she wasn’t worried when she wanted to annihilate New York.”

Tanner let his hands down, not as a sign of confidence or approachability, but to be able to reach for his sidearm, should it become prudent. “You are blinded by your monomania, Quartermaster. There are other considerations-”

“Yes, there are,” Q cut him off. “Whenever you feel like recalling that we still work for the same organisation, toward the same goal, I will be prepared to discuss the use of my agents with you.” And discuss he would, at length, concentrating on who had the authority to send his agents into field without consulting him. Without even informing him, until after the fact. There would be visual demonstrations. Perhaps physical demonstrations, too, if Bond came to harm over the course of this poppycock of a mission.

Tanner stared at Q like he was expecting Q to turn him into an amphibian. It was the same problem over and over again – with Moneypenny, with Bond, and now with M’s office. Any day now Q would be called before the Queen. They would, he suspected, offer him Knighthood in return for some inconveniently limiting oaths.

Tanner was, aside from his other motivations, vetting Q to make sure that it was safe to allow him into the royal family’s presence. After all, Q had already attacked one royal family.

“Are we working toward the same goal?” Tanner picked up the hint Q had so bluntly offered.

“Hmm…” Q decided not to prevaricate on this issue. It would be more trouble than fun in the long run. “Mostly. I will alert you when there is a conflict of interest.” He reconsidered, took the folder out of Tanner’s hand, deftly evaded the man and returned to the main office where he could establish a connection to his agent with a mere flip of a switch. “Double-oh-seven, I’ve just received the file on your mission. Ignore the crap about the cover story and treat it like a hit.”

Tanner, who came out behind him, rolled his eyes but did not protest. Obviously, the bodyguard scheme had been included solely as politics.

On the other end of the line Bond chuckled. “I will bring you back a rose.”

Q scoffed at the gratuitous Beauty and the Beast reference. If this was the result of taking Bond to an Avengers’ chill-out (as coined by Stark), Q would reconsider next time. “Just try and bring back your equipment.”

“I’m statistically due a mission that won’t go to shit.” Bond replied, letting Q know he had ditched the prostitutes and was on his own, in transit. “I might just bring back everything this time.”

Q melted a little, charmed. “You might just be my favourite killing machine in this world.”

Bond laughed out loud, and showed off his newfound knowledge of Norse mythology; “You are my doomsday device of choice.”

The woman from Intentions choked and scrambled for her notebook to make a record of the
momentous occasion when two MI-6 agents made two truly morbid jokes in a row.

Tanner groaned. “Please… please, for the love of my sanity… stop flirting!”

Q took the hush that fell all over the room as a hint that his minions were also disconcerted. Nonetheless, it was better that they know about this potential entanglement in advance, rather than ex post. At least this way there would be no injured sensibilities and betrayed confidences.

Since Bond didn’t need anyone to hold his hand for a task this basic, Q turned off the microphone again and retorted: “Do not infringe upon my fundamental civil rights. The Charter frowns upon that sort of thing.”

Tanner might or might not have been mentally showing Q a very vulgar gesture as he took his quick yet dignified exit.

“You never stood a chance,” the Intentions woman whispered to Winters.

Winters looked at the screen, where Bond was casually walking along the corridor of a mansion, and mused for a few moments. Then she nodded to herself and said: “This is just a temporary setback. Bond will get himself killed on a mission soon enough, and then my time will come!”

The other woman shook her head, sympathetic and exasperated at the same time. “Can you sound more like a stereotypical soap opera villain?”

“Of course I can. But most days it’s not worth the effort.”

When Q concentrated, he saw in Winters’ mind a cool acceptance, with a bit of glee on top of it for the situation Q and Bond had found themselves in. it was as though she had wanted to see him humanised, and it did not matter that much in the end that it was not her doing the humanising. She would not willfully see Bond – or any other agent – harmed, much less deliberately orchestrate such an event.

Q was unaccountably reassured.

x

Q decided to attend the funeral of the last of the permanent members of the World Security Council.

The institution had survived, but the powers behind it had been warned that they were not untouchable, and that the Avengers and MI-6 were watching them. And they were watching – there could be no doubt about that when Q was accompanied to the funeral by the Black Widow on his arm. A good dozen men from the opposite side of the crowd kept throwing nervous glances their way all through the lowering of the coffin.

Stark had sent a congratulatory text message, because the late Mrs Nottingham had been solely Bond’s achievement, and Bond was Q’s.

That assumption was confirmed when Q returned home after the funeral and found his agent loitering around the living room, book abandoned and a take-out dinner for two set up on the table in the kitchen.

Q hung up his coat and decided that he might just keep the suit on for the time being.

“So…” Bond opened, drying his hands on a dish towel. He left the cloth on the counter and turned to face Q, chin high and expression determined. “So you’re a god.”
“In a matter of speaking,” Q admitted, glad that Bond was over his freak-out and yet a little concerned about the lengths the man was going to make that known.

Bond smirked. “I’ve never had a god.”

Q laughed, pressing a palm to his shaking belly. The man truly was hilarious. “You’ll have to try harder than that, double-oh-seven.”

“You’re encouraging me.”

“I’m curious to see how far you would take it-”

“I’m not Stark,” Bond cut him off, mostly challenging but also with uncharacteristic self-consciousness.

“More’s the pity,” Q retorted. He did not think there was room in Stark’s bed for him, and he was rather too selfish to accept not being his lover’s sole focus, but Bond didn’t need to know that.

“Stark sees the world through a lens of zeroes and ones – through money and laws of physics at best. Have you ever seen how people live, Q?” Bond inquired.

Q, intrigued by the prospect, shook his head.

“I’ll take you. I’ve got enough leave accumulated to…”

Retire, would have been the expected end of the sentence, but Q realised with sharpness that itched in the vicinity of his heart that there would be no retirement for Bond – that the mortal would run and run until that one lucky bullet got him.

That was what made him walk over and press his forehead to the man’s temple. He was the one who accepted the lost existences into his arms, the granter of fool’s hopes (perhaps even his own), the player of tricks, the indeliberate destroyer of worlds.

“Stark doesn’t need you,” Bond concluded acutely, wrapping an arm around Q’s torso. “He’s got all the crazy inside him already – he needs two of the most down-to-earth people to keep him from floating away to pixie land.”

“He’s so much fun…” Q admitted. He had never met his equal – only gods to look down on him and mortals to look up to him. In Stark he saw kin, a twin separated millennia ago from him, a presence he had been missing and yet not missing at all. He was determined, for his own sake, to curse the man with immortality.

Perhaps, if he had an apple left over, he would give that to Bond. Bond was… the arms that enveloped him, the strength that he could lean on, the joke in the face of death on the other end of the phone line. He was what Q had found worthwhile in the ephemeral mortals of Midgard.

“I’d like to keep you,” he confessed.

Bond shrugged. “My life belongs to the Union Jack. I’ve sold my soul long ago. Nothing you can do about it-”

“-but occasionally take you home,” Q filled in. A mental calculation informed him that, statistically, Bond had a good seven years in him still, before age and medical complications would slow him down too much for him to survive in the field. Seven years were like the blink of an eye to an immortal.
Funny, how being a god meant little in the greater scheme of things. Sentiment was still inadvisable.

Q was reminded of the myth of Apollo and Hyacinthus. He wasn’t going to kill Bond through negligence, that was certain, but otherwise he could see the parallel.

Could he live with tricking Bond into unwanted immortality? Of course he could. But could he trick Bond? The thought hadn’t occurred to him and, to be truthful, he wasn’t sure.

He thought of Stark and Coulson, both so naively certain that they had the better of one another, and both hopelessly tangled in the emotion that tied them together. He thought of Potts, who had been born under a lucky star, and needed but impetuousness to become one of the most influential women in the world. He thought of Fury, of his two-dimensional rendition of the four-dimensional world, and in the end he thought about families and the inevitability of death accepted by children.

He came to the conclusion that a child's love was different from an adult’s love, and therefore it was not a failing of his that made him think of the Allfather with affection. He was but a creature, too, created with all the instincts of a breathing babe and left to fend for itself in the ice. The Allfather had been merciful. More merciful than could have been expected of him, truly.

“What…” Bond pulled him closer. “What’s wrong?”

“What isn’t?” Q replied.

“You saved the world,” Bond said.

Q didn’t feel like it. He had worked to stop the WSC’s choice to deploy a nuclear weapon; he had bodily protected Coulson, following some instinct he hadn’t been aware that he had; he had collaborated on assassinating the would-be mass-murderers, but he was no hero in this fight. That designation was freely distributed amongst the newly established Avengers.

“You saved me,” Bond added, grimacing as if it physically hurt him.

Q shook his head.

“You did,” Bond assured him. A tremor came through his body, so easy to feel against Q’s skin, a reminder of how much mind-control was worse than death. Bond would have known.

There was only one question on Q’s mind, but he could not ask it, because that would have defeated the whole point. He had wanted Bond to come to him, to be acknowledged by this one human being that acknowledged only those who were useful to him, and only on a temporary basis. The Allfather’s punishment had thus fucked Q over quite thoroughly.

“I have come home with you,” Bond assured him, and stood solid while Q became putty in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your support. This is the last of this story and I don’t expect that there should be more. RL is strangely exhausting at the moment, so any and all encouragement is doubly welcome. Signing out,

Brynn
End Notes

Warnings: hints of slash, het and polyamory; violence; mind-control; sociopathic mentality (cheerfulness about real tragic events!); implied child abuse; genii at play; Anthony Edward Stark (he gets his own warning, because he really deserves it this time)... now, looking at it, I should have just put in ‘Avengers’ and ‘Skyfall’ and I think that’s covered each of those warnings. Polyamory debatable.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!