Espionage is a Family Affair

by nagapdragon

Summary

It's common knowledge that angels make good weapons and terrible soldiers. They're hard to kill, hard to catch, and leave a swathe of destruction wherever they go. That's why MI6 likes them.

James Bond, Agent 007, is one of the most devastating weapons MI6 will admit to having. Explosions follow his every whim and he's nearly impossible to kill, despite the best efforts of terrorists worldwide. He's second only to the weapons MI6 pretends don't exist- archangels are only a theory, after all.

Aren't they?

Notes

So, this universe is a pet project of mine and I'm always happy to clear up any points of confusion on it- if it's something that will be important later, I won't spoil it. I'm also happy to chitchat on Tumblr- I'm nagapdragon there, too, though I do a lot more of my blogging as notsocivilengineering. And, as always, this isn't beta read or anything, so please please PLEASE tell me if there are any glaring mistakes so I can go back and fix them.

Thank you so much for reading! You guys warm my heart, you really do.
Human children grow up on tales of princesses and dragons.

They have the Princess and the Frog and Snow White and the Sword in the Stone. They learn that no monster is without a weakness, that every evil stepmother gets caught and that the good and the pure will always prevail in the end. They learn that magic can be a good thing, that fairy godmothers and genies in lamps are outside forces that can never be the center of the story from Cinderella and Aladdin. They learn that magic is a bad thing used only by the forces of evil from Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel. They learn that the underdog will always win against a seemingly unbeatable enemy if they just believe in themselves and in the power of friendship and true love from Pinocchio and Beauty and the Beast.

Angel fledglings grow up on the legends of their ancestors.

They learn of the Blood of Azrael and the first Angel Lords, the first of their kind. They learn of the value of power and of keeping it hidden, of responsibility and non-interference. They have legendary healers and legendary warriors, saving lives at impossible odds and manipulating the elements. They learn of the things they can and cannot do with their power and that every angel parent is irratically fond of the tale of Icarus.

Children don’t understand that they’re told different things. They don’t understand the social divides that will guide one to be a paramedic or a vaguely mortal killing machine while the other is a politician or a small business owner. Their games, taught by the eldest to the youngest and passed down to children by children, become a strange amalgam of the two. The prince doesn’t need to climb Rapunzel’s hair, not when he can fly, so of course there are obstacle courses and jump rope challenges and silly traps set by the witch. Magic isn’t a child’s dream, it’s Susie from down the road making sparks when she’s angry and John the school bully who can make patches of ice appear under the feet of those who irritate him and everybody goes to four-year-old Agatha when they’re hurt because she can make it go away.

And when they grow up, they learn the difference between real magic and story magic. They learn that real magic is the paramedics who can stabilize anyone without any equipment at all and the special forces on television who can pull impossible feats and the actors who play them in the movies. That’s real magic. It has rules and limitations that are well-known to anyone who paid attention in class. It isn’t the tales of the archangels who bent the world to their will.

They grow up. They move on. The memories of childhood games are set aside for surprise reunions and bonding with their own children, listening to the clamor of new voices telling them how the Three Little Pigs are clearly supposed to be archangels because nobody can build a house that fast. Can pigs be archangels? I don’t know, honey, they answer, but I’ll ask one the next time I see one.

They forget about it almost as soon as they say it.

Archangels are a fairy tale, after all.

Excerpt from A Comprehensive History of Archangels: From Myth to Science
“Ronson’s down. He needs medical evac.”

007’s voice echoes around the Situation Room at MI6, the first thing he’s said in long minutes of clearing the building. M paces back and forth, high heels click click clicking across the tile. Where she passes, faces are buried back in computer screens with a clatter of hurried typing. Nobody wants to draw her attention right now.

“Where is it? Is it there?”

It’s the sign for everyone else to start talking again.

“Vivian, get Retrieval on their way,” Major Boothroyd orders, sliding between computers to look at Medical’s reports on all of their agents in the field. “How long for Bond to stabilize him?”

“Based on our most recent tests of 007’s healing ability,” Laura from Medical lists off, “Five minutes to stabilize Ronson and he’s not capable of healing him completely. And that’s if he’s not healing any of his own wounds at the time.”

“Hard drive’s gone,” 007 replies over the speakers.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s gone. Give me a minute.”

“They must have it.” There’s a split second while M’s making a decision. “Get after them.”

“I’m stabilizing Ronson.”

M glances over at Major Boothroyd, who shakes his head. They don’t have the time. The hard drive is encrypted, but according to Sebastian, the list of people who are capable of decrypting it is too long for comfort. If they lose this, it will be a disaster on the scale of very little they’ve ever seen. M nods, turning back to the microphone without hesitation.

“We don’t have the time.”

“I have to stop the bleeding!”

The entire room falls silent again, not all at once but rather with bursts of conversation getting quieter and further apart. It’s easy to forget, sometimes, that the Double-0s are people. They’re weapons, MI6’s strongest weapons. Destruction follows where they walk and nobody blinks an eye. It’s an uncomfortable reminder, the frustration in Bond’s voice- 007’s voice.

Easier to think of him by his service number. Easier to pretend he doesn’t feel, that they all don’t feel, while they make decisions with a man’s life in the balance.

“Leave him!”

“Moneypenny has a vehicle,” Sebastian reports. “She’s outside with eyes on the target.”

“Have you got him?” 007 demands.

“He’s in the black Audi.”
“What about Ronson? He’s been hit.”

M looks to Vivian, who mutes the microphone on her earwig. “Retrieval is on their way, M. Five minutes, tops. They have O’Brien with them- if there’s even a spark left in Ronson when they get there, O’Brien can stabilize him.”

“We’re sending an emergency evacuation squad,” she informs 007 coolly.

“They’ll be too bloody late!” 007 snaps.

“Sebastian,” Major Boothroyd orders, “I need all CCTV coverage in the area that you can find. Try to get us visuals on 007 and on the target.”

“Yes, sir.” He starts pulling up dozens of grainy camera feeds to the main screen, showing a car chase into a market square, feeds replaced by new ones the minute they’re no longer useful. There’s crashing cars and gunfire and a few well-timed explosions of Bond’s making. Business as usual, when they put angels in the field.

Every single Double-0 is an angel. They’re hard to kill, they fly, and they wield destruction with a wave of their hands. It’s a useful system, and MI6 is all about wringing the most efficiency out of every single employee.

007 takes off after the target on a motorcycle, ignoring anything M shouts over his comms, and Vivian hands Moneypenny’s comms over to M instead. She stares out the window, pointedly ignoring any of the agents clamoring for her attention while Tanner directs Moneypenny through the streets of Istanbul.

Sebastian lets himself tune everything else out, everything but the click of keys as he hunts for the next camera and the one after that and the one after that. He finishes his cup of tea and someone refills it, someone must have because he has more tea now and M isn’t giving him the look that screams you’ve made a mistake, what happened to playing normal?

He still gets that look occasionally, forgets that his cup has to be refilled and he has to use his hands to pick things up and all that nonsense. Vivian’s better at it than he is, says it was the extra five minutes she had before he was born.

Eventually, he runs out of cameras. 007 is on a train, Moneypenny trailing along in the right of way putting her vehicle’s all terrain capabilities to test, and there aren’t any more cameras.

“We’ve lost tracking,” he tells Major Boothroyd. “Going blind.”

“Get my CCTV, satellite, anything!” M snaps at him, back to her pacing. Her steps are crisp, perfectly equidistant with a pause and a scrape as she makes a sharp 180 when she runs out of room. The humans in the room can’t tell yet, but M’s wings are just outside of tangibility, snapping out on the edges of his senses. Major Boothroyd watches her, moving everything he doesn’t want to risk replacing to the edges of the room and sending a couple of baby Q Branch techs to remove the prototypes he was tinkering with back to his lab.

“I’ve got nothing, M,” Sebastian answers, pushing his keyboard away. “Even if I did, the train’s moving too fast for us to see much of anything.”

Step, step, step and turn. M ignores him, returning to the microphone as there’s a nasty crumpling sound and the screech of metal-on-metal. Major Boothroyd is slipping between computers again, checking on all the little details now, the details M doesn’t have the time nor the patience for.
Retrieval got to Ronson.

Ronson was a good agent. He was human, which right now Sebastian can’t help but see as a flaw. Had Ronson been an angel, he would have survived that. Of course, had Ronson been an angel, he wouldn’t have been on that mission anyways. Humans go unseen in the underworld, unsuspected, because the most well-known of agents are angels.

They would have never gotten this close to the stolen hard drive without Ronson, and they let him die for it.

Such is the business.

Sebastian will be upset about it later, but for now he has a job to do.

“007, are you all right?”

“Just changing carriages,” 007 replies. He’s back to sounding unruffled, the veneer of calm that all the best agents have. And despite M’s frustrations with him- the Le Chiffre incident, for one, and everything that happened with Quantum after that- 007 has become one of the best.

“What’s going on? Report!”

“It’s rather hard to explain, ma’am,” Moneypenny quips.

The entire room is watching M at the front of the room now. Tanner sits on one side of her empty chair, Boothroyd sliding into the chair on the other side, while she paces. Up on the wall of the Situation Room, the last camera feeds of Istanbul watch a bridge over empty railroad tracks, the market where people are only now starting to pick up the mess with a resigned sort of patience, and a lone camera carried by one of the members of the Retrieval team watching as they bag up Ronson’s body for transport. Sebastian hasn’t shut them off yet. It’s important to remember what this is costing them.

“Looks like there isn’t much more road,” Moneypenny finally says. “I don’t think I can go any further. I may have a shot. It’s not clean. Repeat, I do not have a clean shot.”

The train horn blares, drowning out the sound of Moneypenny getting into position.

Nobody speaks.

“There’s a tunnel ahead. I’m gonna lose them.”

“Can you get into a better position?”

It’s a reasonable question. Moneypenny’s an angel, too. She can leave the car, open her wings, and find a shot. She’s one of the strongest angels they have in the field, destined for the Double-0 Program one of these days. M wouldn’t have it any other way. Mi6 needs everyone at their fullest potential, and that’s the end of it.

“Negative. There’s no time.”

“Take the shot.”

The Situation Room falls dead silent. M is leaning on the back of her chair now, microphone out in front of her. Major Boothroyd lifts a hand, resting it almost absentmindedly on the back of M’s for a moment before she shrugs him away.
“I said, take the shot.”

“I can’t! I may hit Bond.”

“Take the bloody shot!”

The gunshot echoes off the walls, fading away to the hiss of the wind and the distant rattle of the train on the tracks. Everyone knows, without saying, but they all hold their breath and wait. The train horn sounds again, the drawn out long long short long of a train approaching a crossing.

“Agent down.”
Chapter 2

Commander James Bond, C.M.G., R.N.

Obituary

A senior officer of the Ministry of Defence, Commander James Bond, C.M.G., R.N. is missing, believed killed, while on an official mission to Turkey. Commander Bond was a Class Two angel and a respected member of the community. He gave his life in the service of Queen and Country and shall be accorded all honors.

Commander Bond is not survived by any family, but will be mourned by his colleagues.

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MI6 is in shambles.

Sebastian has walked this hallway a thousand times. He sprinted it as a child, chasing Vivian down to Q Branch and following Eve reluctantly back to Management when Mum sent her to fetch them. He carted armloads of books down to Q Branch this way, stealing workspace from the newest techs to spread his schoolwork out next to Uncle Geoffrey. He raced robots down the hall and set up barricades to prevent nosy Double-0s from visiting and drifted through with three steaming cups of coffee in the middle of the night. He knows every tile and every scratch and he’s walked it blindfolded more than once.

He’s never seen it quite like this.

He’s as far as the agents could get. Behind him, the hallway is mostly clear, only a couple piles of rubble blocking it and all of them passable. The walls are on the verge of caving in and ahead of him, the hallway has collapsed. It’s the clearest route in to Q Branch and the Agent Training Sector, or at least what’s left of them.

One bomb went off in M’s corner office for dramatic effect. The other went off in Q Branch to try and cripple MI6.

“Authorization granted for codenames Azrael and Israfil under the Archangel Protocols.” M’s voice rings out over the open comms channel, audible to all MI6 agents with their earwigs in. “All restrictions removed.”

Sebastian cracks his joints, stretching his wings as far as he can in the hallway. Magic hums just under his skin, thrumming in time with his heartbeat, a crackle of power disturbing the air around him. This is what the stories talk about, the aurora of magic that surrounds powerful angels, and what angels use to gauge each others’ strength. Scholars theorize that if archangels existed, the aurora of their power would be tangible even to humans.
They’re not wrong.

*Let me through,* he commands, *shore up the walls.*

Shattered stone leaps into a rough facsimile of a hallway, a bubble of reconstruction where nobody else could pass. With a thought, rebar rips free of the concrete, linking together in a web of metal that helps support the structure as he continues into the depths of the building. Cables and wires curl into the gaps between the stones, safely out of the way. He’s not terribly fond of electric shocks.

There are twelve dead techs in the main part of Q Branch. This is where the second bomb went off, here in the main area. The techs in the workrooms were protected—those walls are blast-proof for accidents, it’s just their construction standard.

“Sending survivors your way,” he reports as the workroom doors snap open, ripping free of their damaged locks. “Q Branch clear, moving on to ATS.”

Nobody recognizes him. Sebastian Boothroyd is rumpled cardigans and heavy glasses and too many cups of tea. Azrael is special ops, a supernova of power wrapped up in black-and-silver body armor. They don’t look past the inky wings to see familiar features.

“Medical is on standby. Any critical injuries?”

“Twelve dead, nobody incapable of walking out.”

“Proceed to ATS, Azrael.”

Debris leaps out of his way as he crosses Q Branch, clearing away from the corpses and making relatively neat paths to them. He’s always believed in making it as easy as possible for Retrieval. They have a hard job.

The firing range has three agents in it, two of them hunkered down in a closet and talking about past ops. One of them is young, new enough to have only heard whispers about Azrael and Israfil, and the other one chivvies him out with a few hushed words about *classified* and *way over your pay grade, kiddo.* There’s traces of ice all over the walls where, when the bomb went off, 006 threw up a massive igloo that saved the other two’s lives.

Sebastian’s seen him pull the same trick a dozen times to save his own life on missions. It’s hell on the tech they assign him.

“Agent 006,” he reports in to his earwig. The Double-0s tend to wear them all the time, the better to make mischief with. “Permission to accompany Azrael?”

“Status report on 006?”

“Scratches and bruises. I didn’t want to waste my energy healing them, just in case.”

“Permission granted, Agent 006.”

Sebastian rests a gloved hand on Trevelyan’s shoulder, closing his eyes and pushing his will out in a wave of *heal* *fix* *healthy* that erases all his cuts and bruises. Healing isn’t his specialty. Far from it, really. He and Vivian never specialized. Their magic warps the world around them, imposes their will on it and makes it so.

Uncle Geoffrey says it’s a very jarring way to be healed. Instead of the tingle of Medical’s angels fixing only what needs to be fixed, Sebastian and Vivian’s magic is an overwhelming wave that
demands they be fixed.

The building doesn’t seem to mind.

“There’s a class of trainees in the sparring room,” Trevelyan reports to him. “002 and 003 were scheduled to do a demonstration.”

“Air and electricity aren’t much use against a collapsing building.”

“I don’t know, air’s a precious commodity when you’re buried,” Trevelyan quips. “Richard’s a decent hand at healing, though.”

“Gym first. It’s on the way.”

Trevelyan doesn’t say anything as they approach the pile of rubble and it begins to reorganize itself. He’s seen Azrael deployed before, though if Sebastian remembers right, last time he was rescuing an ambassador. Much less rebuilding a building from the bottom floor, much more stopping bullets the minute they got within a ten foot radius of him. He may or may not have broken a few necks with a look. Hard to tell when there’s no official reports on his activities, just a note that he was deployed.

There are six agents in the gym and free weights everywhere. A couple of them are nursing broken arms, but the one angel in the room fixed someone’s broken leg before hitting the end of their strength.

The sparring room is a different story.

There’s the remnants of an ice shield, much like the one Trevelyan used, against the collapsing far wall. The trainees are sitting in a semicircle around 003 while she explains the basics of hiding weaponry and not making it obvious at the first checkpoint that stops you. 002 is in what looks like the stablest corner with the injured. Sebastian shores up all the walls immediately, just holding them in place without trying to rebuild anything.

“Azrael,” 003 greets him, rising smoothly to her feet. “006.”

“Status report, 003?” he asks.

“Nine injured, 002 has them all stabilized, and the rest of us have minor injuries. One dead. The rest of the floor is clear, it was only our way out that was impassable.”

“Can your injured walk?”

“All but two,” 002 says, joining them. “I don’t have the strength to fix a broken leg right now, not after the internal bleeding.”

“Take me to them. 006, 003, coordinate the rest of them and get them out.”

Whichever trainee put that wall up ought to be fast-tracked to the Double-0 candidate pool. Ice users are rare- the only ones in MI6 are Trevelyan and Major Boothroyd- and that was a major project. It probably saved several lives, if not all of them in the room.

“How promising was the trainee we lost?” he asks 002 as they kneel next to the two with broken legs. Sebastian heals them with a touch, suppressing a wince as the one’s compound fracture snaps audibly back into place. He’s a weapon, pure and simple. He can force healing on someone, but his skills lie in death and destruction, not creation.
It’s why he likes Q Branch, likes creating things in opposition to what comes so easily to him. It takes work and so he knows his results are real, not conjured up by magic he can barely control because it will please him.

“Irreplaceable,” 002 says sadly. “The Quartermaster saved us all.”

Sebastian doesn’t remember closing the distance to the corpse, checking to see if what 002 said was true. He doesn’t remember 002 hurrying the last two trainees out of the room with 006 to lead the way, leaving 003 to stand watch over him.

He pours his magic into his Quartermaster, into his uncle, only to see it catalogue existing wounds and bounce back uselessly.

“Go,” he tells 003. “I’ll bring the Quartermaster in.”

“Azrael,” she begins, stepping closer.

“GO!”

The far corner of the room explodes.

003 goes.

Sebastian closes his eyes and lets a slow breath out. He can’t let himself feel right now. He has to be MI6’s weapon, has to be the untouchable angel.

Azrael scoops his Quartermaster up into his arms and leaves.

“Azrael reporting. The Quartermaster is dead. I repeat, the Quartermaster is dead.”
Major Geoffrey Matthew Boothroyd:

A Memoir to the MI6 Quartermaster

Major Boothroyd, who made history as the first angelic Quartermaster of MI6, is confirmed deceased after the explosion at MI6 Headquarters earlier this week. Boothroyd was a pioneer in the field of mechanical engineering and a respected member of the espionage community for his work on the miniaturization of machines.

Geoffrey Boothroyd joined MI6 as part of the Angel Initiative, a program which sought to get more angels in the management and research and development sectors of the government. Traditionally, angels were only considered for positions in the field or as medical support. As was the fashion of the time, angels working alongside humans typically did not use their gifts. This changed a few years later when Boothroyd’s gift contained an accidental explosion, saving twelve lives and beginning the conversation about using angelic gifts in the workplace, not just the battlefield.

It was the first time Boothroyd made the front page, but it wouldn’t be the last.

Geoffrey Boothroyd wed Barbara Eldridge in an arranged match when the pair were twenty-seven. The match was the news of angelic society at the time as Eldridge’s bloodline is one of the few in Britain going back as far as Boothroyd’s own. The couple were reportedly inseparable despite their busy schedules- she was a prominent figure in medicine and continued her career after marriage. In a tragedy writ across the pages of the newspapers, Barbara Boothroyd was murdered in her hospital bed hours after the birth of their daughter.

Boothroyd became much more private after that, rarely making appearances in the angelic community or at conferences with his peers. His sister Margaret, a secretary with MI6, lived with him to help raise Charlotte. He was appointed Quartermaster three years after Barbara’s death and his public appearances ceased entirely.

His legacy with MI6 is classified, but we are assured that his innovations have protected Britain a thousand times over and saved the lives of millions. A MI6 spokesperson tells us that even on his final day, Major Geoffrey Boothroyd saved over a dozen people trapped in the bottom of the collapsing building at the cost of his own life. Today, we remember a man whose incredible contributions to our safety go unspoken and whose public legacy is the stuff of tragedies.

Major Geoffrey Matthew Boothroyd is survived by his twin sister Margaret Katherine, his daughter Charlotte Eve, his niece Adelaide Vivian, and his nephew Dominic Sebastian.

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Sebastian drifts through the funeral.
There are speeches, endless speeches about *contribution to society* and *loss of a great mind*, and none of them capture who Uncle Geoffrey was. They talk about inventions and mission logs and inter-agency diplomacy, not the permanent ink stains on his fingers and the way there was usually a smudge of grease on the back of his neck. They talk about *innovations* and *social change* and *the end of an era*, they call him a visionary and a genius. These people, these representatives from around the world come to pay their respects to Major Geoffrey M. Boothroyd, Quartermaster of MI6. They aren’t here to mourn the angel behind the title, the man who lost his temper and cuffed someone with a wing at least twice a month.

Mum isn’t crying. She can’t. She has to be M, the Head of MI6 who lost her Quartermaster in a tragedy, not Margaret Boothroyd, the woman who lost her twin brother. Uncle Geoffrey was more than just her brother, though. They were each others’ only support in a world determined to tear them down. Uncle Geoffrey was the closest thing Sebastian and Vivian had to a father the same way that Mum was the closest thing Eve had to a mother.

They sit at home and cling to each other, then walk into the new MI6 and stand tall. Someone has to be a leader right now. There are too many gaps in the chain of command for everything to flow smoothly otherwise. Uncle Geoffrey isn’t the only one they lost, though his funeral is turning into the biggest event. They also lost R-no, Justine Saunders, because the title lives on even when its owner is dead- as well as a handful of agents, a solid quarter of Q Branch, and five of Medical’s best. They ran into the building while it was still collapsing to save as many as they could.

They stand on one side of the grave as the Double-0s carry Uncle Geoffrey’s casket over, lowering it to the straps and folding his flag with slow, ceremonial motions and handing it to Mum. They are all in the rarely-used MI6 dress uniforms, the ones rarely used for anything except funerals. The eight of them insisted on giving this one last honor to Uncle Geoffrey. Nobody argued it, not even with the risk of acknowledging their identities in such a public event.

Mum accepts the flag.

Eve takes the proffered shovel with steady hands, tossing the first dirt with a hollow patter of sound. She passes it to Vivian, who passes it to Sebastian. Mum doesn’t want to participate in this part. Her hands tighten against Uncle Geoffrey’s flag, folded into a neat triangle, but she keeps her face impassive.

Sebastian gives the shovel to Melissa Brune. The Double-0s agreed to go in numerical order for simplicity. Sarah Adair, the final one, passes it to Tanner. The rest of MI6 is going by rank. Mum and Eve were willing to let the rest of MI6 participate, but drew the line at the outsiders coming to pay their final respects to him. This is personal. MI6 is their family.

“Be strong,” Mum tells them, the Double-0s circling around in a menacing privacy barrier. “Split up at the reception, let everyone have their chance to give condolences to the family, and send a Double-0 if you need anything to eat or drink. Once this is over, we can grieve in peace.”

They don’t reply. There’s nothing more to say.

Richard Milligan and Ananth Patil escort Mum away to a car first. 002 and 004 are the longest-serving Double-0s- they were present as Mum’s guards at Sebastian and Vivian’s birth and have been their second-favorite uncles ever since. When Mum first proposed this plan, there was no doubt as to who she would trust to guard her back in the absence of her twin.

Melissa Brune and Sarah Adair escort Eve away to the second car. Brune started mentoring Eve when she was put on-track to be a Double-0 someday, so 001 insisted on being assigned to her now. 009 is likely to leave MI6 soon- she wants to start a family and doesn’t want the difficulty of raising
children in MI6- but she’s good at engaging groups of people in conversation. She’ll draw the attention away from Eve when she gets overwhelmed.

Charles Blake takes Vivian’s hand, squeezing it, while Akane Wakahisa trails behind them. Vivian delivered tech in the field to Blake two years ago and she and 005 have been inseparable ever since. 008 doesn’t mind playing the bodyguard while Blake is emotional support- if Sebastian had to guess, she’s probably listening to an audiobook on her not-quite-invisible earwig right now.

That leaves Sebastian standing between Alec Trevelyan and Malaika El-Hashem. He’s fine with that. They’re two of his favorites to work with. Trevelyan, once he gets past flirting with everything that moves, is generally everyone’s favorite Double-0. 006 is witty and always up to something, dragging them out to do everything from go bowling to a night out at a club. He’s the ultimate people person. 003 is very different- El-Hashem is much more introverted, skipping activities like that altogether in favor of showing up in offices in Q Branch in the middle of the night with coffee from the nice shop down the street, whatever food catches her fancy at the time, and a book. She’s perfectly content to sit nearby and read while they run missions or work on the next big tech innovation.

“Shall we?”

“If we must,” Sebastian answers, letting them slide in on either side of him in the car. The explosion at MI6 seems to have triggered the protective instincts in all of the Double-0s- he’s pretty sure Trevelyan would wrap a wing around him, if Sebastian would let him. El-Hashem seems to have settled for testing the edges on all of her knives when anyone looks sideways at them.

“I don’t like the way they all look at you,” El-Hashem remarks as the car pulls out into traffic. “Like your pain is a show for them.”

“They’re here to see if MI6 is broken,” Trevelyan answers darkly.

“Vultures.”

“Be fair,” Sebastian offers, “there are some of the top engineers in the world here to mourn the passing of one of their own.”

“Not enough of them. They’re all here because M’s hands were tied. She can’t force any of the other families to go through this circus, but she has no way to protect her own from it without seeming weak.” Trevelyan shifts closer, glaring out the window. “Times like this I miss James. He would cause a scene to end this madness and somehow come out of it looking like a saint.”

“We’ve lost too many of our own lately,” Sebastian agrees, thinking about Bond and Ronson and all the agents who are in danger if their mystery hacker manages to decrypt the stolen hard drive.

“We regroup, we rebuild, and then we hunt them down.” El-Hashem twirls her knife as she finishes inspecting it, sheathing it in her sleeve.

“Who’s leading Q Branch?” Trevelyan is quiet, asking the question everyone wants to know and nobody dares to ask Mum about yet.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?”
Chapter 4

There are three primary theories on how to make an archangel.

The most common theory, especially prevalent among the old angel families, is that archangels are born of the oldest bloodlines. They believe that by wedding together bloodlines that have rarely, if ever, included humans, they will bring in stronger and stronger generations of angels. This theory is supported by the fact that more Class Two angels—those who wield elemental powers in addition to the healing abilities all angels possess—are born to the families with higher percentages of angel blood. Detractors argue that this phenomenon is due to children born to angelic families learning to use their powers before those born to mixed angel-human families.

A second theory posits that if all it took to create an archangel was the mingling of the oldest angel families’ blood, there would be historical evidence to support the birth of archangels to these families. Instead, they theorize that the right ratio of human to angel blood would unlock the raw creative power behind angel magic. This theory is considered the least controversial due to the lack of evidence pointing either way.

The third theory is one that modern science prefers not to speak of. This is the theory that archangels are not naturally possible but, with the assistance of genetic engineering and experimental medicine, an archangel could be created. This theory was a favorite of preeminent scientists for decades, but after the horrors of the Third Reich’s Erzengel Versuch, there are few who even dare consider this theory.

Excerpt from A Comprehensive History of Archangels: From Myth to Science

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The night comes to a close by increments.

Eve leaves first, though ‘left’ isn’t quite the right phrasing. Brune and Adair sneak her out when she’s a little too drunk to be presentable, promising to take her to one of their apartments and send her home in the morning. An hour or so later, Wakahisa joins Trevelyan and El-Hashem in trailing Sebastian, explaining that Vivian took off with Blake and that they shouldn’t expect her back tonight. It’s an entirely predictable thing for her to do. Vivian wants some time to be herself, to focus on living, and she’s not going to get that with the family right now.

In the end, it’s Tanner who sends him and Mum home. He calls a car and tosses Patil the keys, instructing Milligan that the two of them are permitted to escort M and Sebastian home, but not to linger. Trevelyan sulks and El-Hashem looks mutinous, but they not-so-graciously accept that they need to be a distraction for the remaining guests.

Sebastian’s glad to have the Double-0s along. Milligan and Patil keep the conversation going so he and Mum don’t have to sit in silence. There’s nothing to say right now. Today has been a day of empty platitudes and false grief and too many words to echo the emptiness where he’s still expecting
Uncle Geoffrey to fill the silence.

“We’re here, M.”

“Thank you.”

They all know it’s thanks for more than just the ride.

Sebastian follows Mum into the building. They don’t have the most secure home- Mum won’t let him add vocal prints and retina scans, says it’s unnecessary when they’re all perfectly capable of defending themselves. Sebastian himself has two knives and three cell phones on his person right now despite the fact that he can stop an attacker with a mere thought. Mum insists on it.

There’s a light on when Mum opens the door.

She walks in, unconcerned. It’s a facade, but their intruder would have seen the door open and know somebody’s there, so she’d rather confront them with confidence. Sebastian slips in behind her, staying to the shadows and willing them to cover him. It’s not the most natural hiding place, but he’s broadcasting *don’t see me, nothing to see* with the barest thread of his power. Any more and he’ll actually warp the world around him which has the side effect of being incredibly un-subtle.

“Where the hell have you been?”

Sebastian relaxes just a hair. He still doesn’t step out of the shadows, but he does sheath the knife from his sleeve. Mum shucks her coat, hanging it up in the closet and signing *stay on guard* behind the cover of the black wool.

“Enjoying death,” their intruder replies. Sebastian frowns. He knows the voice.

“Why didn’t you call?”

“You didn’t get the postcard?” Ice clinks in a glass. “You should try it sometime. Get away from it all. It really lends perspective.”

*Fucking 007.*

“Ran out of drink where you were, did they?”

Bond picked the absolute worst time to come back from the dead. Mum’s in a terrible mood to begin with after the public spectacle of Uncle Geoffrey’s funeral. Bond should count himself lucky that she doesn’t just shoot him now or worse, incinerate him. She’d regret it later when she’d have to refinish the living room.

“What was it you said? ‘Take the bloody shot.’”

“I made a judgment call.” Mum pours herself a drink, strolling across the living room. Bond is standing at the window with a drink of his own, watching her. Sebastian slips out of the shadows, burying his magic deep inside himself again and straightening his suit jacket. Bond spares him a curious glance before focusing on Mum again.

“You should have trusted me to finish the job.”

“It was the possibility of losing you or the certainty of losing all those other agents. I made the only decision I could and you know it.”

“I think you lost your nerve.”
“And I thought you were an angel. What happened to bloody flying?”

Bond glares. Sebastian steps into the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. He kept sending Trevelyan to get him food, but Trevelyan kept eating half the food off Sebastian’s plate and El-Hashem half of what remained. They claimed to be hungry, but Sebastian’s pretty sure they were being overprotective and testing for poison.

“You had me shot off a bridge.”

“What do you expect, a bloody apology? You know the rules of the game. You’ve been playing it long enough. We both have.”

“Maybe too long.”

“Speak for yourself.”

Sebastian shakes his head, smoothing mustard over his bread. He would have thought that Bond would be smart enough not to poke at M like this. Then again, Bond’s always been a bold one. That’s why M likes him half the time and wants to put a bullet in his brain the other half, why he’s so successful.

“Ronson didn’t make it, did he?”

“No.”

“So this is it. We’re both played out.”

“Well, if you believe that, why did you come back?”

Sebastian hums to himself while he fishes the salami and cheese out of the refrigerator. Mum can deal with an irritable Double-0. If she couldn’t, well, Milligan and Patil are only a few keystrokes away.

“Good question.”

Bond sounds more amused by the proceedings now, which is a good thing for Sebastian’s chances of getting into bed any time soon. He’ll take his sleep while he can get it. He and Vivian are the clear choices for Q and R- Mum won’t tell them who will be who, but they’re both about to lose their names, have their identities subsumed by who MI6 needs them to be.

It’ll keep them very busy, helping Mum to rebuild MI6.

“Because we’re under attack.” Mum pauses, hand tightening on her glass. “And you know we need you.”

Bond sighs, draining his glass.

“Well, I’m here.”

Mum makes him wait. Sebastian finishes his sandwich and puts the kettle on. Mum doesn’t like to drink this late at night- she’s only doing so to preserve her image in front of a somewhat renegade agent. The minute she gets rid of Bond, she’ll want a cup of tea.

“You’ll have to be debriefed and declared fit for active service.” Mum is all business now, and Bond responds accordingly. “You can only return to duty when you’ve passed the tests, so take them seriously.” Mum sniffs, turning away and setting her glass down. “And a shower might be in order.”
“I’ll go home and change.” Bond is much more malleable now, slipping back into the role of the Double-0 following orders.

“Oh, we’ve sold your flat, put your things into storage.” Mum is downright gleeful now at this little piece of normalcy, the ability to drop the emotionless facade and displace some of the anger building up inside of her. “Standard procedure on the death of an unmarried employee with no next of kin. You should have called.”

“I’ll find a hotel.”

“Well, you’re bloody well not sleeping here.”

Bond leaves without so much as a sideways glance at Sebastian, which of course is exactly what Mum wanted. He has his marching orders- hotel, shower, call in to report in the morning, grovel. Mum collapses into a chair when the door closes.

“Dominic, love, a cup of tea?”

“Sebastian, Mum.”

“I know.” Mum scowls at him. “I named you, Dominic Sebastian Boothroyd. I would have written your name on your birth certificate, if you had one. I would think that on the very day I buried my brother, I can call my children as I please.”

Sebastian smiles, carrying out a cup of tea and a second sandwich. “I’d like to see you tell Vivi that.”

“Don’t be silly. Adelaide has always been much more reasonable than you. She takes after me.”

Sebastian rolls his eyes, stretching out on the couch across from Mum. “You know, telling me I take after my father means absolutely nothing given that I’ve never met the man.”

“Well, you do. You’ve got his pigheaded stubbornness and lack of respect for authority.”

“Says the woman who is famous in the British government for her pigheaded stubbornness and lack of respect for authority.”

“Enough out of you. Go to bed, Dominic.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mum throws a pillow at him when he salutes.
Summary of Test Results

Submitted To: M

Subject: Bond, James

Codename: 007

Recommendation: Not Fit for Active Service

Tests performed in MI6 Headquarters upon revocation of KIA status on one Agent James Bond, codenamed 007, under authorization DSB2103. Test criteria are as written in Requirements for Active Duty, chapter two, subsection Double-0 Qualification. Tests supervised by one William Tanner, Chief of Staff.

Physical condition is subpar. Damage to the shoulder and wing consistent with untreated gunshot wound, hand-eye coordination and flight affected. Damage to rib cage consistent with fall from a height broken by water, also untreated, breathing affected under physical stress. All untreated wounds consistent with estimations of injuries sustained in last mission as reported by accompanying agent Moneypenny, Charlotte Eve. Muscle deterioration consistent with sedentary lifestyle in months since reported KIA, the demands of healing own wounds with Agent Bond’s limited ability, and diet as reported by Agent Bond upon his return.

Recommendation based on physical condition is consultation with Medical on fixing poorly healed wounds and a physical regime similar to that of trainee agents.

Weapons proficiency affected by shoulder injury, especially prominent in marksmanship tests with handheld firearms. Proficiency with sniper rifle nearly unaffected when shooting from prone position. Displays signs of temper beyond that normally associated with this agent when at the firing range.

Psychological profile inconclusive. Agent Bond answers by rote, has foreknowledge of the expected answers. Unresolved childhood trauma, as outlined in Agent Bond’s file, continues to be a point of contention. Agent Bond refused to complete psychological evaluation after mention of childhood home, one Skyfall Lodge.

In conclusion, Agent Bond does not meet the criteria for a return to active service under the guidelines governing Double-0 status. It is recommended that he be removed from service until such time as his injuries are dealt with and he may be retested.

Report compiled by:

Dr. Vanessa Deacon

Medical Branch, Double-0 Coordinator
He knows the Double-0s.

Sebastian—*Q now, if you don't live it they won't believe it*- grew up in MI6. The eldest of this generation of Double-0s, 001 and 002 and 004, were Aunt Mel and Uncle Rich and Uncle An. 005 is likely to be his brother-in-law any day now when Vivian gets her nerve up to tell Mum. 003 and 006 and 008 were his bodyguards through university—Mum wouldn’t let him attend without a Double-0 lurking over his shoulder and they’re roughly of an age. He still catches himself slipping, sometimes, almost calls them Malaika and Alec and Akane when they’re chatting away, waiting for something to happen.

He doesn’t know 009, but that’s because Adair is new and she’s wanted to leave almost since the beginning.

And then there’s 007.

Mum was going to invite him over for dinner after his first official mission as a Double-0. That’s when Bond was going to learn the truths people don’t talk about in MI6, get to know the family at the heart of the organization. That’s when he would have learned that Mum and Uncle Geoffrey were twins and Class Two angels in their own right, that Eve is Uncle Geoffrey’s daughter and that Vivian and Sebastian are Mum’s.

Those are all the small secrets, the ones almost everyone at MI6 knows anyways. If those went well, if Mum and Uncle Geoffrey decided that he was trustworthy, that’s when Bond would have been told about the existence of Azrael and Israfil. That archangels are more than a theory. He wouldn’t have been told the biggest secret— that Azrael and Israfil are sitting at that very table— but he would have been told enough.

007 never reported back from that mission. He chased a lead on his own, a lead that led to Le Chiffre’s poker game and Vesper Lynd, to the mission that broke James Bond. When he came back, he was very much not the same man who Mum was going to tell their secrets to. He had no interest in polite dinners with M and Q after that, which was fine by Mum, since she had no desire to tell him any longer.

“007 has been instructed to meet you at the National Gallery, Q. I would look to find him by something melancholy. It would suit his attitude.”

“The National Gallery? Lovely, M, except for the piece where he didn’t pass the tests. He’s not ready for active duty.”

M leans back from her desk, signing for Eve to close the door. Q doesn’t miss that Eve puts herself on the other side of it. She’s clever, but more importantly than that, she’s watched M and Q butt
heads over everything from what to have for dinner to the Q Branch budget to Q’s fondness for rumpled cardigans even in meetings of the senior staff. There’s been more door slamming and walking out in the middle of dinner since she appointed him to Quartermaster than in his teenage years.

“And that, Dominic Sebastian Boothroyd, is classified. For my eyes only.”

“What happened to being formal at work, Mum?”

“I can have you court-martialed for that. I don’t care that there hasn’t been a firewall designed that could keep you out, classified means classified.”

Q waves that away. “If you were going to have me court-martialed, you would have done so when I was accessing information four clearance levels over my own, not one. And I wouldn’t have to hack through my own firewall if you didn’t deny me information about my agents.”

“That’s my prerogative.”

“He’s unfit for duty, Mum. I’m the Quartermaster— it’s my responsibility to be absolutely certain that my agents are prepared for their missions. It’s my responsibility to keep them alive.” Q slams his hand down on Mum’s desk, on top of the file with the details of the mission she wants him to equip Bond for. “I will not lose a Double-0 on my watch because you’re too bloody scared to tell him no.”

Mum stands, leaning within an inch of his face, wings snapping out in anger behind her. In the corner, a potted plant that Tanner thought made her office more welcoming bursts into flames. “Don’t push me, Dominic. I will wash your mouth out with soap in this bloody office.”

“Evading the question.”

M steps away, tucking her wings away and pacing. “I didn’t have a choice. If I hide the results and qualify him anyways, then we control the mission. Bond gets the best equipment and the best mission handlers, a Retrieval team on backup and a chance at survival. If I tell him no, he disappears tomorrow and tries to do it on his own, we find his body within a month.”

Q folds his arms. She’s right, of course, but that doesn’t mean he has to like it.

“Fine.”

“The National Gallery, Quartermaster. You’re late.”

Shit.

He knows the Double-0s, and most of them know him. They’ve made the transition to Quartermaster remarkably smooth. Q Branch accepts him as Uncle Geoffrey’s natural successor and all of the agents follow where the Double-0s lead, so their acceptance has gone a long way. 007, though… he’s never quite played well with the internal politics of MI6.

He’ll have to make an impression on 007 if he ever intends for Bond to listen to him.

“Trevelyan,” he starts, “you know Bond.”

“Nervous, are you?” Trevelyan laughs. He’s playing bodyguard today- M’s orders. All of MI6 is still on edge and it seems to make everyone more comfortable if he’s trailed by a Double-0 at all times. Including the other Double-0s. Especially the Double-0s.
They’re downright possessive these days.

Vivi says that sometimes, when he gets home before her, whichever Double-0 was on duty will still be lurking outside the door, unwilling to leave.

“Bond isn’t attached to me like the rest of you limpets. I have to make an impression.”

“Trust me, Q, you’ll make an impression on James.” Trevelyan pulls up to the curb, flicking the door lock. “I’ll be circling. Call me when you’re ready to go. And don’t tell Ananth that I let you go in alone- he’ll have me cleaning toilets instead of shooting people.”

Q grins, adjusts the cuffs of his coat, and heads into the gallery.

He finds Bond, as M predicted, in front of a rather melancholy painting. Turner’s *The Fighting Temeraire tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838* wouldn’t be his first choice of a meeting spot, but there’s Bond looking rather frustrated with the whole thing.

M’s right. He’ll go off on his own at the first sign of reluctance from MI6.

And they can’t have that.

“Always makes me feel a little melancholy,” Q begins, sitting down next to Bond. “A grand old warship being ignominiously hauled away for scrap.”

Bond gives him a brief once-over. Q knows what Bond sees. He sees a slip of a thing with the features of an angel, but doesn’t feel any projection of his magic. He sees messy hair that resists all attempts to be tamed and clothes that shout *student*, not *senior staff in a powerful intelligence agency*. He sees the glasses and the demure fold of his hands and that Q doesn’t so much as twitch his wings out of hiding for a moment. He sees *boring* and *normal* and *young*.

Q cultivates that image on purpose. He’d rather be underestimated. Nobody looks at him and wonders if they’re looking at an archangel. He continues on as if he doesn’t see Bond judging him, sighing.

“The inevitability of time, don’t you think? What do you see?”

Supposedly, the man’s one of the brightest Double-0s and well-versed in culture. To be perfectly honest, Q isn’t seeing it. Sure, perhaps he can charm and bluff his way through charming a woman at a high-society party, but he always has Q Branch murmuring in his ear for that. Maybe he was just Uncle Geoffrey’s favorite because they shared a passion for explosions.

“A bloody big ship,” Bond clips out, making to stand up. “Excuse me.”

Q doesn’t go so far as to snap out his wings, but he lets his power shine through until every damn angel in the building had to have felt something. Heads turn all through the gallery, unable to pinpoint the source of the power radiating all around them. With a little luck, Trevelyan can’t feel it from the car.

Maybe Q can bribe him into not telling M. She’d put him on house arrest for risking exposure like this.

“I’m your new Quartermaster.”

Bond sits back down, covering his shock well, and Q hides his power again. The rest of the angel patrons glance around a little more, then return to their business.
“You must be joking.”

“Why, because I’m not wearing a lab coat?”

“Because you still have spots.”

“My complexion is hardly relevant.” Q looks at the painting, allowing him to watch Bond on one side of his peripheral vision and Trevelyan lurking around the corner on the other. Damn. He’s going to have some explaining to do. This would have been so much simpler had Trevelyan not noticed his little… well, it wasn’t quite a display, he didn’t do anything. He just showed the potential for him to do something.

“Your competence is.”

By my wings, he’s irritating.

“Age is no guarantee of efficiency.”

“And youth is no guarantee of innovation.”

If only, if only. If Bond had gotten those secrets, he’d not challenge Q like this. He’d know that Q’s the best there is, at least until it comes to materials science. Then Vivi’s the best there is.

Q likes the challenge.

“I’ll hazard I can do more damage on my laptop, sitting in my pajamas before my first cup of Earl Grey, than you can do in a year in the field.” It’s a bet he’d be willing to make. Double-0s rack up quite a body count, but he can match that with a well-timed explosion in a compound somewhere, especially with the new tricks he learned from their hacker’s explosion in MI6.

“Oh, so why do you need me?”

Trevelyan, around the corner, gives him a thumbs up. Q suppresses the urge to roll his eyes. Yes, Bond’s opening up, but he’s still hostile and unconvinced. He settles for raising an eyebrow instead and shrugging.

“Every now and then a trigger has to be pulled.”

“Or not pulled. It’s hard to know which in your pajamas.” Bond leans in closer, nearly whispering the last words in his ear. “Q.”

“Ticket to Shanghai.” Professional, professional. Don’t do anything Vivi wouldn’t let him live down. “Documentation and passport.”

Bond retreats into his own space, accepting the envelope. “Thank you.”

“And this.” He pulls the slim black box out of his coat, keeping it hidden from the security cameras in the corner. “Walther PPK/S 9mm short. There’s a micro-dermal sensor in the grip. It’s been coded to your palm print so only you can fire it.”

Bond doesn’t even have the wherewithal to look impressed. Rude. This is his pet project and it is rather impressive, if he says so himself.

“Less of a random killing machine, more of a personal statement,” he finishes, relinquishing his grip on the box. Bond strokes a finger along the line of it, then touches the empty slot below.
“And this?”

Q hands over his new radio transmitter design, a sleeker one than the standard Uncle Geoffrey was using. It’s far more pocket-sized which means there’s half a chance that the Double-0s might not ‘lose’ it at the first opportunity.

“Standard issue radio transmitter.” Or at least it will be, once M sees that the Double-0s won’t ditch it. If Bond screws this up for him—screws up either one of his pet projects—Q will send him out with a water pistol full of cat pee and his best wishes. “Activate it and it broadcasts your location.”

“Distress signal,” Bond clarifies, tucking it in the slot with more than a little disgust.

“And that’s it.”

“A gun… and a radio. Not exactly Christmas, is it?”

“Were you expecting an exploding pen?” Q shakes his head. “We don’t really do in for that any more.”

Bond makes a sound that might be a laugh, if the agent had shown any signs of having a sense of humor.

“Good luck out there in the field.”

Please don’t die, I don’t want to replace a Double-0 right now.

“And please return the equipment in one piece.”

Or at all.
Chapter 6

The de facto leaders of angel society have always been the ‘old blood’, or those families able to trace their lineage directly back to the Angel Lords. Angel society, being a nebulous thing, tends to congregate around individuals with this lineage.

This effect caused many of the angel villages that still exist in the countryside today, small communities populated nearly entirely by angels. Oftentimes, this is similar to villages born of a nearby manor and a family to serve, as is the case with the angel village of Skyfall in Scotland. This village sprung up around Skyfall Lodge and the old blood family living there. Despite the death of the family decades ago, the village continues to thrive. It was the old blood that brought them there, but they have become a community in their own right.

The same effect began some of the most notorious crime syndicates through history. The family at the heart of, for example, the Sicilian Mafia ‘Cosa Nostra’ began with a single old blood family and the families of angels attracted to their presence. This is the most well-known example, but many of the close-knit crime syndicates worldwide do show interestingly high percentages of angels in the upper ranks.

Known old blood families are few and far between in this day and age. Many of the historical ones have died out and many others have gone underground, changing their name and eschewing the role society would have them play for their own protection. The old blood families may hold a powerful role in angel society and the public consciousness, but it was they who were hardest hit in Germany’s Erzengel Versuch and similar experiments carried out in wartime.

**Excerpt from Angel Society: Insights into Modern Conflicts**

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Q Branch is silent.

That’s not to say that it’s quiet. There’s the ever present clatter of typing and the scratch of pencil, the tap of ceramic cups against their mismatched desks of wood and metal and plastic, the muffled sound of too-loud music drifting from single earbuds sitting on desks to make room for their headsets. Every now and then there’s the crumpling of paper or the buzz of a phone, the scrape of a chair against concrete and the myriad of nervous tics- fingers tapping and people readjusting in their chairs, the click of a tongue and the crunch of crisps. It’s the constant undercurrent of noise, of what’s left of Q Branch all trying to work without twitching every time the fans come on overhead, and yet nobody says a word.

He remembers what it used to be like when there was a mission to run, especially when there was a Double-0 mission to run. People would gather around Uncle Geoffrey, a bubble of conversation about the mission and the agent and how their tech is doing in the field, coming bearing tea and chocolate and the occasional sandwich when a mission went long. Missions were the most exciting
thing in their day.

Q can only hope that Bond is successful, that finding a thread to pull will help revitalize Q Branch. He and Vivi are doing their best, but the survivors of the explosion still shiver when the fans turn on overhead and they are all overworked trying to fill the empty spaces. The surviving angels stay within a wingspan of their human colleagues, the ones they managed to save, unwilling to risk being too far away.

The Double-0s aren’t much better, for all that they know he and Vivi can protect themselves. M’s keeping them close for the time being, letting them wander the tunnels freely and be seen, help raise morale and all that. They think that’s free reign to be underfoot all the time.

Akane and Alec and Malaika take shifts, two of them trailing him at all times, going so far as to sit in the corner chair in his bedroom when he bothers to sleep. And they are Akane and Alec and Malaika to him again- they insist on the informality, but he made them agree to be formal when out on mission.

Uncle Geoffrey always said that compromising with Double-0s is a dangerous thing, that they’ll get what they want and give you nothing you didn’t already have. Q’s starting to think he was right.

Malaika and Alec are camped out in his office right now, doing a very poor job of pretending not to be on guard. Akane just switched out half an hour or so again, heading to the Double-0s’ private locker room that everyone pretends not to know is where they sleep when they don’t feel like going home. They’re polar opposites at the moment- Malaika dressed to go out, hijab and all, loaded down with more weapons than normal people would consider reasonable and Alec in sweats and a tee, relying on his magic instead of weapons.

Q alternates between melting the ice sculptures Alec forms between his palms and shattering them. It’s about the most fun he can have while listening in on Eve. She’s waiting in the hotel bar for confirmation that Bond’s in his room, flirting to pass the time, and there’s always been something weird about listening to his cousin turn on the charm.

“Hands,” he warns her, watching the businessman next to her’s hand creep closer to her hip. She’s planted herself at the center of the bar, directly in line of the security camera because unlike half the agents in this place, Eve can manage to be considerate to her handler.

“What is with men these days?” she gripes to the trainee agent on her left, a petite brunette who nods too quickly and looks like she’s about to fall off her stool. Q makes a note in her file. Not ready-unless she manages to overcome her awe of the angelic agents, field work will be extremely difficult. Recommending a little more training, possibly transfer to MI5.

“Let me see… midlife crisis, wife just left him for a younger man, started drinking at the casinos today. Sobered up enough to realize how much he lost and decided to get wasted again.” Q pans the room, taking a good look at the rest of the bar’s occupants while the trainee tries not to stare directly at the camera. He probably should have given her a separate handler, someone to tell her the basics of what she’s expected to know and do without all the conversation. Uncle Geoffrey would have known better. He was good at all this nonsense with people.

Eve holds up a finger when the trainee starts to speak, waiting.

“At a glance, I’d say three prostitutes, two of them working for the same person by the way they glare at each other. Two happy couples, one honeymooning and one who left the children behind for an anniversary trip. Three of the businessmen are happily married with families back home, one is unhappily married, two single, and the rest are divorced.”
Alec whistles in appreciation, watching the feed projected on the far wall of his office. Malaika switches out her book for the trainee’s file, taking the sticky notes from his desk to edit with. It probably won’t be flattering—Malaika believes that other skills can be taught, but that adaptability must be there first. Guns and knives and wings are all good, but spies tend to fail when their targets spot them first. She’d also rather fail them now rather than put their lives or the lives of others at risk.

Eve gives the trainee a look. The trainee stares back blankly. Q sighs.

“It’s a conversation…” he pauses, searching for her name.

“Helen Bright,” Malaika offers, tossing the file and the pen to Alec to add his thoughts.

“Agent Bright,” he continues with barely a hitch in his speech, “and not one with me. That’s why we sent two of you.”

Agent Bright looks more terrified, which is a little silly. Better to hear it from him than from M. She’d be a lot harsher with her words. She’s got an agency to run—Q’s just got this mission to run, at the moment.

“Laugh, Agent Bright, like Agent Moneypenny said something funny.”

She laughs, managing to smile while she does so. Q doesn’t like walking agents through step by step like this, but at least she takes instruction well.

“Repeat after me. I bet it’s the dress, Eve, where did you get it?”

“I bet it’s the dress, Eve, where did you get it?” Agent Bright mirrors, reaching up to touch Eve’s shoulder. Eve launches into some epic and completely fabricated tale of finding the perfect dress in a tiny shop off the main drag in Thailand that has the secondary benefit of boring her suitors into moving on.

“I have confirmation that 007 is in his room,” Q informs them in the middle of Eve’s explanations that shopping in Thailand is a lot better if you make sure to stop for a mani-pedi in the middle. Eve complains that she found so many green dresses, but it just isn’t her color. Message confirmed, good to go.

“Agent Bright, you’re not feeling well and think you should retire for the night.”

“Helen, you’re looking a little peaky,” Eve interjects when Agent Bright doesn’t say anything. “Maybe it’s time to retire upstairs. I’m thinking a massage sounds absolutely fabulous tomorrow, maybe some shopping before we hit the casino?”

“Now that you mention it,” Agent Bright laughs, a little bit hollow, and pushes her drink away. “I think I might have had too much to drink. A glass of water and a dark room sounds like just the thing right now.”

Eve slides enough cash to cover their tab and a tip over the bar with a wink, throwing her arm around Agent Bright to support her. “I have the best hangover cure, Helen, you wouldn’t even believe it.”

“Would you blame me if I said I’m reluctant to see it?”

“Trust me, you never want to see it, but it works.”

“Does it?” Alec asks him.
“Eve’s hangover cure? Can’t say I’ve had the occasion to try it.” He and Vivi are lucky that way. His magic treats hangovers as a minor issue to be remedied, same as paper cuts and scraped knees and all that. Paper cuts are gone almost the second they occur, but his magic takes care of hangovers before he has a chance to feel them. Makes it stupidly difficult to get drunk, but hey, that’s not the worst thing in the world. He’s got bigger issues than his magic keeping him clear-headed and making sure he doesn’t keel over when he forgets to eat anything that isn’t shoved in front of him while working on a new project.

“My hangover cure is the best, I’ll have you know,” Eve snaps.

“Yes, yes,” he placates. “Agent Bright, stay in the room and do research. The room isn’t bugged, but we’re dealing with a hacker who could easily find your search history. Look up restaurants, shops, whatever fits with your cover story. Order room service for two. We need them to have no doubt that you and Eve are having an evening in, figuring out what you’re doing tomorrow.”

“I’m going to order in,” Agent Bright tells Eve when conversation dwindles. “I’m thinking pasta and breadsticks. Nice and simple. How about you?”

“Alec,” Q says, “mark down on Agent Bright’s file that she learns quickly.”

Alec glances up from scrawling something across yet another sticky note. Helen Bright’s file has green sticky notes poking out of every side of it and Alec’s moved on to the pink ones, reminding Q of exactly why the Double-0s aren’t allowed to do evaluations. They’re the top of their field and incredibly picky, for people who can’t be bothered to fill out their own paperwork. They like to hijack everybody else’s paperwork instead.

“And please write in English.”

Q remembers asking Alec to proofread a paper for him once. It came back covered in red ink and Alec’s chicken scratch handwriting… in Cyrillic script. Languages are one of the things he has to work at- he can change the sound of a voice or physical phenomena like that, but not languages. He’s got the basics in almost every language- stop, drop the gun, basic directions, anything he might need in a pinch- but that’s about it.

He won’t have visual once Eve goes to meet with Bond, so Q settles for pulling up feeds on the lobby and the bar and anywhere else people are congregating. It probably won’t come to anything, but Q hates sitting useless on just an audio feed. Multitasking is the name of the game, especially on a high-profile, low control mission like this. He’s good at noticing patterns in crowds, seeing awkward run-ins after a breakup and the missus meeting the mistress and all sorts of very human moments that he knows in theory but doesn’t understand. Angels don’t do that.

It’s one of the reasons they’ll always need human agents. Humans are less durable, far more likely to be killed in the line of action, but they can respond to an entirely different set of experiences.

Plus, they’re constantly underestimated. No terrorist worth their salt underestimates an angel- they’ve all heard the whispers about the destruction an angel can rain down on them- but a human can walk uncontested.

He’s only half listening to Eve greet 007. He has faith in her to deal with a recalcitrant Double-0. She’s more like M than either he or Vivi are, has the same sort of pigheaded refusal to submit couched in more of Uncle Geoffrey’s tact and a glib tongue all her own. He does tune in when he hears his name. His new one, at least.

“And Q’s afraid of flying,” Eve practically purrs. Alec laughs.
“Of course he is,” comes the reply from 007, muffled by the distance from Eve’s mike. He sounds faintly amused by the whole thing which is entirely like him to frustrate his handler as much as possible. In this case, that’s Q, not that 007’s bothered with even putting his earwig in for more than to report having taken Patrice down. Q ought to be grateful that the arse bothered to report that he was going to Macau instead of just going dark.

“That was uncalled for, Charlotte,” he snaps. It’s also completely untrue. Sure, he might have expressed his distaste for airplanes once or twice due to the myriad of things that can go wrong with them, but that’s not to say that he's afraid. Were he to be in a plane that fell from the sky, he can will it to stay airborne and if that doesn’t work, he has his own wings. He’s completely safe- absolutely no reason to be afraid.

“I don’t remember James being this much of an idiot,” Malaika comments.

“I’m not entirely sure he is,” Alec answers, tossing Helen Bright’s file back on Q’s desk while they listen to Eve give her report. Bond, of course, is incredibly unconcerned by the fact that their hacker has decrypted the list and he’s the only one with any kind of a lead on them. Q doesn’t know what else he expected. Bond’s entire MO is explosions where there shouldn’t be any, not worrying about things like urgency, and ignoring the secret part of secret agent and all with a stiff drink and a hot date. It makes for good anecdotes about what not to do in the field, kids, and even better reading while waiting for an agent to check in at 3 AM. It does not make for happy mission handlers, unfortunately, which makes for an unhappy Quartermaster.

And then Eve starts flirting, which snaps him out of his contemplation of the problems Bond is likely to cause him if survives this mission and MI6 doesn’t manage to implode in the not-too-distant future between oddly silent Q Branch and Mum fighting with Gareth Mallory over scraps of power and the fact that they have no windows and nobody’s happy with it.

“No no no no no,” he tells her. “We have a deal. It’s actually in my contract. I’m not required to be on your comms any time you’re doing that voice because of all the things I’ve done for MI6, listening to my cousin be seductive is like fourteen steps too far.”

“My official directive was to help,” Eve says, completely ignoring Q. It’s not like she can’t talk- Bond’s supposed to be wired up, too, but he refuses to talk to anyone until something goes horribly wrong. He’d be a fool not to expect that she’s got a handler listening in. Not that either of them care.

He’s going to put molasses in Eve’s pillow. And possibly make her favorite pair of heels disappear. And if she makes him listen to her seducing Bond- there’s no doubt she will, he’s not exactly known for playing hard to get- he will hide every single one of her favorite weapons. She thinks he doesn’t know that she keeps them in the box she made in kindergarten in the upper corner of her closet. She’s wrong.

“In any way I can,” Eve finishes.

Q buries his face in his arms. "I hate my job."
CONFIDENTIAL

CLEARANCE LEVEL ALPHA

AGENT: RODRIGUEZ, TIAGO

ALIAS: SILVA, RAOUl

STATUS: INACTIVE SINCE 1997, SUSPECTED DEFECTION

SUMMARY OF SERVICE

Tiago Rodriguez was recruited to MI6 in 1986 as an operative in the Hong Kong office. He is classified as a Class Two angel with a specialization. Rodriguez earned his field medic designation based on his healing ability in 1988 at the same time as he received full agent status. He was promoted to section chief of the Hong Kong office in 1993, at which point he was given a new identity and began operating as Raoul Silva.

Silva was reported operating outside his brief in several missions in 1995 and disciplined for it- see Report 1995HK-RAS032: Disciplinary Action. The follow-up hearing in 1996 showed Silva following all parameters set for him and no further disciplinary action was deemed necessary. In 1997, Silva began operating beyond his brief again, jeopardizing the transition in Hong Kong from British colony to special administrative regime. Under authorization MKB2103 from Boothroyd, Margaret Katherine, Agent 002 gave the Chinese government Silva’s identity as their hacker in exchange for six agents imprisoned by the Chinese. See Mission Report 1997-002-027: Operation Dragonfly Whisper for full details.

Silva failed to report in for the section chief conference call in September of 1997 and was reported missing by the Hong Kong second-in-command. As following MI6 policy, after three months of no contact and no leads Silva was presumed dead and his official status was changed to KIA.


File reopened in 2012 by M due to new information as seen in Mission Report 2012-007-040: Operation Komodo Dragon and his interrogation as in Report 2012HQ-RAS001: Interrogation Report. Silva’s status was changed accordingly from killed in action to inactive upon the reopening of this file, awaiting consideration on his status as to whether he is considered a traitor or an agent who defected.

Silva’s name is to be removed from the memorial wall of agents who gave their lives in the line of duty. He is to be imprisoned in a high-security facility in HQ until such time as he can be transferred
to Belmarsh Prison and remanded in custody until the Crown Prosecution Service deem him fit to stand trial for his crimes against Queen and Country.

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“Now, looking at Silva’s computer, it seems to me he’s done a number of slightly unusual things.” Q lets his fingers fly across the keyboard, checking the basic ways to circumvent Silva’s security protocols. He’s unsuccessful, but that was only to be expected. Silva’s records say he’s a skilled hacker, so Q doubted that the standard methods would work.

Doesn’t matter much. He’ll get in eventually. Silva may be good, but Q’s the best.

He’d just prefer to have this done before Mum gets back from the Board of Inquiry. She’ll be in a rotten enough mood as is- Mallory’s gradual takeover has her absolutely furious and their mystery hacker being one of her lost agents is going to make her completely intolerable. If he can’t get into these files tonight, he’ll sleep in his office.

Bond crosses his arms, clearly waiting for Q to continue and ignoring his colleagues on the other side of the table. Akane whispered something, most likely something vaguely threatening, in Bond’s ear before she left to track down Q’s current tea minion. Alec settled for looming protectively, wings folded against his back as he dismantles, cleans, and reassembles each one of the guns Q doesn’t remember assigning him.

“He’s established failsafe protocols to wipe the memory if there’s any attempt to access certain files,” he explains, exploring what he can find of the security system before he does any poking at it. “Only six people in the world could program safeguards like that.”

“Of course there are,” Bond grumbles. “Can you get past them?”

Q permits himself a smile, glancing up from the screen.

“I invented them.”

Alec chokes back a laugh.

Bond looks vaguely mutinous, but doesn’t leave him to his work like most of the agents would. There’s really no reason for Bond to still be here- Q’s betting it’s because Alec and Akane are showing no signs of leaving. They’re nothing if not competitive.

“Right, then,” he says to himself, hooking Silva’s laptop up to the MI6 systems so he can override Silva’s security. “Let’s see what you’ve got for us, Mr. Silva.”

His own programs take over, worming through Silva’s computer and exposing the coding behind his security, finding loopholes and weak points for him to exploit. It becomes a beautiful puzzle- if he pokes here, Silva’s systems respond this way, but if he shifts his attention to a different part, the entire system behaves differently. If he weren’t in a hurry with Double-0s looming over him- Bond is just looming, Akane’s curious, and Alec will complain about being hungry any minute now- this would be the highlight of his day. No, the highlight of his month. This is beautiful.

Q knows that he keeps talking as he works. It’s a habit he picked up from Uncle Geoffrey, who always had a tape recorder on hand while he tinkereded to get his entire thought process. The
Obfuscated code writhes on the screen, preventing him from even finding a starting place to unravel it with. It’s almost as good as his personal system at home. He’d love to do something like this to the MI6 systems, make it nigh on unbreakable, but MI6 doesn’t approve of systems that only one person understands.

It makes him too valuable and too much of a risk, should he defect. They worry that he’d shut down the entire system from the outside and nobody would be able to undo his work.

They’re also blind if they think he couldn’t do that anyways.

Not that he would. He and Vivi and Eve were born into espionage, bred on secrets and danger and stress. They understood the imperative to serve Queen and Country before they knew what that meant. They’re just about the last people MI6 should be worried about.

“He’s using a polymorphic engine to mutate the code,” he rattles off. “Whenever I try to gain access, it changes. It’s like solving a Rubik’s cube that’s fighting back.” Which is a fantastic idea for Vivi’s Christmas gift, if he can figure out a way to build it. Maybe if he puts screens on all the facets, some sort of micro-computer in the very center of the cube, has it change the colors as someone solves it.

Of course, a Rubik’s cube is meant to be solved. He’d have to limit the possible patterns to the set of patterns possible on a standard Rubik’s cube, which means he’d have to figure out if there are any that aren’t. He’d also want to make it possible to solve—perhaps he could limit how drastic the changes are and set a random number generator to decide how many turns of the cube until the next shift. It would be a difficult build— he would have to avoid physical connections between the computer at the heart and the screens so they could move and twist without compromising the size of it.

Ceramic clinks against the wood laminate as someone—Alec or Akane, most likely—delivers a fresh cup of tea. Every time they relax on one aspect of his safety, they go overboard on another. He got them to let him back in his workshop—by the end, Alec had taken to pulling increasingly heavy things in front of the door and Q isn’t willing to expose himself as Azrael just to tinker—but it came at the cost of the poison testing. The constant poison testing. If one of the three of them didn’t make his food or drink, they test it.

They don’t even let him make his own tea.

Vivi’s amused by it all. Charles is at her side at every waking hour, only ever sleeping when she’s in close enough proximity to Q to be under the Three Musketeers’ protection. He’s being reasonable about it all, insomuch as refusing to leave her side is reasonable. Q was counting on Mum to get frustrated with them—she’s always demanded limits between work and home, limits that do not include Double-0s playing Xbox in the living room all night and setting traps at the windows and cooking at all hours of the day when people are hungry.

There’s been a lot of stew. Akane and Malaika are a little more creative, but Alec makes some variation on stew every time he cooks. Every. Single. Time.

They would permit Charles to cook—apparently, their permission is a factor of time spent guarding the family since the explosion at MI6— but nobody ever wants Charles to cook. He can burn cereal.

Cereal.

“Stop.”

That wasn’t him.
Q’s head snaps up. He’s been working steadily- he designed these protocols, he can break through them, but it’s a slow process. He glances over at Akane, who twitches one finger towards Bond, letting him reorient himself. They’ve seen him lose track of the outside world plenty of times now.

“Go in on that,” Bond demands, pointing at a specific spot on the matrix. “Granborough. Granborough Road. It’s an old Tube station on the Metropolitan Line. Been closed for years.”

He pauses, watching Bond. The rest of Q Branch is pretending not to look- it’s a subtle different between pretending not to look and not looking, but an easy one to spot if he listens closely. There’s almost no typing in the background.

“Use that as a key.”

Q sighs. That isn’t how this works. A system as complicated as Silva’s doesn’t have a single override code, not at this point. He’s fighting off the computer trying to shut itself down already, blocking attempts to destroy the data while he tinkers with it. He doesn’t really have time to deal with MI6’s most stubborn.

Akane shrugs when he glances at her and Alec nods, both of them in tiny twitches of movement that Bond doesn’t notice. **Humor him**, they’re saying, **he’s bound to be frustrating if he’s ignored. You know how it is.**

Fine.

**GRANBOROUGH-**, he types, leaving his decryption programs running in the background. They won’t make much progress without his manual input, but at least he won’t lose too much time humoring Bond. The code twists again in response to his input, laying itself flat in-

“Oh, look, it’s a map!”

Not the data he wanted, but this might be useful.

“It’s London,” Akane offers, lifting her own cup to the screen. “Subterranean London.”

Bond nods, the first kind of acknowledgment he’s given the other Double-0s since storming in. Q frowns. That was too easy, too nonsensical. The name of an abandoned Tube station unlocking a map of subterranean London? It’s like a game and he doesn’t know the rules.

The hatches running the length of the room hiss open one after another.

“What’s going on? Why are the doors open?”

Bond looks at the doors with an expression that can only be called dawning horror, then sprints off into the distance. Q barely has a moment to realize the implications before he’s tugged back against Alec’s body, tawny wings folding around him.

“Oh, no,” he complains, digging nails into Alec’s forearm when he isn’t immediately released. A little push with his magic and Alec’s stumbling backwards, catching himself on the table. That was a bad idea, it was a bad idea in a day made up of bad ideas, but hopefully nobody noticed that he shouldn’t be able to do that.

“Can someone tell me how the hell he got into our system?” Q paces, not standing still long enough for Alec to corral him again. Akane is checking entrances and exits, sealing any doors she can and setting guard pairs to watch the others. He runs through the afternoon, swearing as the pieces come together.
“He hacked us.” It’s the only explanation. Silva managed to hack them—hack his system, and he will rip it to shreds to figure out how—and open the doors. All the doors. He doesn’t even have the entire thing hooked up electronically yet, but everything with an electronic lock snapped open.

Q cuts a corner sharp and stumbles into the table. His wings snap out, one of them curving around to keep the laptop on the table while he catches himself on the edge, hand tangled in the cords connecting Silva’s computer to the MI6 network.

Shit.

He tears the cables out, uncaring about damage to the ports on the table or the cables themselves.

He made a mistake.

He doesn’t make mistakes.

“R,” he commands, “lock down the building. All entries and exits must be verified by authorization number and voiceprint analysis, access to the armory limited to senior staff authorization.”

This is all his fault. Whatever happens, whatever goes wrong, it is all his fault.

Q takes a deep breath. He has a crisis to manage. Panic and blame can come later, after Mum’s had a good chance to shout at him for being a fool and Silva’s back in custody, this time with a Double-0 or two watching him. He straightens, double-checks that his earwig is active, and gets to work.

“Here’s what we’re going to do.”
One of the hallmarks of the modern era is soaring divorce rates and the relative impermanence of marriage. With the growing disparity of partnerships, from those who never intend to marry to those who do not believe in divorce, it calls attention to the differences between the concept of marriage in human society and in angel society.

Historically, marriage was forever, or at least until death do we part. Even in recent history, divorce was a taboo subject and a rarity among couples. This, coupled with the secrecy of extramarital affairs, hid what may be one of the biggest differences between humans and angels.

Angels mate for life.

On the surface, this sounds like any rom-com cliche, the idea of an entire race that will love once and only once in their life. It sounds like an ideal world, where two people fall in love and never fall out of it, where happily-ever-after is exactly that. It sounds like the kind of thing humans aspire to. A human couple replies without a thought when asked how long they’ve been together because it’s something to be counted, something to be celebrated, while an angel couple doesn’t count the years because they know they’ll be together until one of them breathes their last. Angels have long been the source of romantic imagery due to their devotion to their mates—go to the shop this Valentine’s Day and see how many of the cards have a winged Cupid on them.

Sociologically, it makes for a fascinating insight into the differences between angel and human culture. Angels don’t have a concept of divorce or breaking up. They barely have a concept of marriage. They tend to be more or less uninterested in dating, preferring the closeness of family and friends.

It is a reversal of how human society functions, in which romantic attractions take primacy over time spent with friends and family. Humans spend their time actively searching for someone to spent their time with, whether for a month or for a lifetime. Angels do not have the same drive to search for their mate. Love is a distant thing, an eventuality that does not subsume the more immediate connections to others. Friends are a precious thing, but not quite as precious as family.

Excerpt from Angel Society: Insights into Modern Conflicts

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“He’s gone.”

Q expected as much. If Silva could manage a sophisticated enough hack waiting in his computer to open only his door, setting off no alarms, he would have done so. All the alarms blared, all the doors opened— it’s the same principle as his magic, honestly. Simple commands with a lot of power behind them are easiest.

It’s why Mum only ever lets him heal people in an emergency. She says it’s like being dunked in ice
water, an overwhelming wave of magic demanding that her wounds seal over, fixing everything in its wake until there’s no more damage to be fixed. He’s no good at delicate work, not with his magic.

That’s what Silva did to his system. One simple command—open the door—and no qualifiers to tell it which door.

“I’m in a stairwell below isolation. Do you read me, Q?”

“Trevelyan, my laptop is in my office. I need it here. R, get a team making sure that Silva hasn’t left us any other surprises. Wakahisa, contact the other Double-0s and get the senior staff protected, then sweep the building. Send Adair to Medical, get them ready for crisis response.” He snaps orders out, channeling Mum to the best of his ability, and nobody questions him. He’s not Q in this moment, not the boy who grew up here, not even the tech Sebastian Boothroyd who was their peer not too long ago.

He’s the Quartermaster, and he will be obeyed.

Everyone snaps to like they haven’t since the explosion, a flurry of conversation and movement. R starts calling orders out behind him, all the things he asked her to do and the things he didn’t have to say that she knows he wants done. Blake waits for Trevelyan to return with Q’s laptop before he goes to his own tasks, the two of them slipping into an easy rhythm to there’s always a Double-0 watching over Q and R.

“I can hear you,” he replies to 007, hooking his laptop up to the main screen and hunting for the signal from the tracker Bond doesn’t know exists. He doesn’t take chances, not after Istanbul. “I’m looking for you.”

Bond grunts something noncommittal as his tracker pops up on Q’s screen, a steady dot blinking on the screen with the rest of the information appearing in a sidebar—Bond’s vitals, depth below ground, strength of the tracker signal, anything he could program on a short notice while Medical was sticking enough needles in Bond for him not to notice one more. It’s not as sophisticated as the ones he has on most of the other Double-0s, but most of the others are relatively willing to be his guinea pigs. Bond is not, which makes it all the more important to get a tracker on him because Q is not losing an agent this early into his time as Quartermaster.

“Got you. Tracking your location.” He pulls up the old plans for the bunker, cross-referencing with sewer tunnels and Tube lines and anything else that might be under their feet. “Just keep moving forward. Enter the next service door on your right.”

Charles Blake slides a cup of tea in next to his keyboard. Q’s tracking Bond and trying to figure out where to send him next—a single wrong move and they’ll lose Silva into London. He has to want something, there has to be something he’s getting from being in MI6 custody, because if he wanted to just be in London he could have done that on his own.

“If you’re through the door,” he says once he hears the creaking complaint of rarely-used hinges, “you should be in the Tube.”

“I’m in the Tube,” 007 confirms, and isn’t that a novel thing, 007 actually working with his handler instead of harrying off blindly.

“Bond, this isn’t an escape. This was years in the planning.” Q isn’t seeing a pattern, but maybe Bond will. He’s better at those kind of things in the field, knows how agents think and all that nonsense. “He wanted us to capture him he wanted us to access his computer. It was all planned.
Blowing up HQ. Knowing the emergency protocols. Knowing we’d retreat down here.”

The second bomb in Q Branch. Silva was a section chief, he probably knew the M and Uncle Geoffrey were twins- it was a poorly concealed secret, one of the things nobody really talked about but everybody knew. That bomb was the piece that didn’t make sense- the first one was to make a scene, to make M watch her building explode, but it didn’t cause much damage. If the second was intended to cause damage, it would have better been planted in the weapons silo or the bio labs or Catering or Medical or any of a dozen other places with more people and less areas designed to resist explosions. Q Branch was a poor choice, an anomaly in the plan, until this became personal. Silva needed M not thinking straight, he needed her upset, and that meant targeting Uncle Geoffrey.

With that much knowledge, with that much access to their lives, Q fears what else Silva might know. If he might know about Q and Vivi, if he knows about Eve. If he knew so much about the emergency protocols despite never being stationed in London, what might he know about the Archangel Protocols?

“I’ve got all that,” Bond answers, which is good because Q’s caught up in his own fears and could really use an outside perspective. “It’s what he’s got planned next that worries me.”

Information. Give Bond the information, and he can make the leaps of intuition that Q isn’t managing right now.

“District Line is the closest. There’s a service door on your left.”

“Got it.” Bond pauses. “It won’t open.”

“It will. Put your back into it.”

Trevelyan chuckles, watching Q work from just over his left shoulder.

“Why don’t you come down here and put your back into it?”

There he is. Q was worried that they wouldn’t get James Bond, one of the most adaptable Double-0s in the business, but rather that they’d be stuck with this automaton with most of his skills and all of his disdain for anyone who doesn’t have a license to kill. Q flexes his fingers, wondering if he can snap the door open at this distance without opening all the others in his wake. Vivi was always better at the working at a distance thing.

“No, it’s stuck.”

Q’s betting Silva messed with it. He didn’t have time to actually melt the hinges into the frame, which tends to be the fire-wielding angels’ favorite trick, or Bond would have caught him at it. It means they’re either on the right track or Silva’s bluffing. It would be quite a risky bluff, trying to seal the door and get to the next one in either direction with no idea of how close pursuit is. Too much risk, therefore- unlikely.

“Oh, good,” Bond says, sounding faintly amused in the facing down certain doom way that the Double-0s all have. “There’s a train coming.”

“Hmm,” Q answers, working on tracking trains in the Tube and where Silva might be going. “That’s vexing.”

Only the newest agents flinch at the gunshots.

“I’m through.”
“Told you. We alerted security. Police are on their way.” At least, he hopes they did. He doesn’t remember if he told Vivian that he wanted that done or not.

“Police are en route to his location and all field agents not necessary to secure MI6 are being spread through the area. Give the word, Q, and they’ll be there.”

“Where are you now?” he asks instead of thanking Vivian for the update.

“Temple Tube station. Along with half of London.”

The timing’s just working out absolutely peachy for Silva, isn’t it? Why couldn’t he have waited a couple more hours to work on Silva’s laptop, run all the security checks thrice over?

He grabs the feed from every security camera in the station, setting a facial recognition program to help while he scans for Bond. Facial recognition will be better at finding Silva- Q isn’t familiar with the man, but he can spot his own agent in a crowd.

“Oh, I see you. There you are.”

“I know where I am, Q,” Bond remarks, giving the security camera an irritated look. “Where’s he?”

“Give us a second. I’m looking for him.”

Crowds surge around him, exchanging places in and out of the train in a mob of people pretending not to be surrounded by quite so many other people. Q frowns. This would be much easier without all the people getting off the train and fouling up his view, blocking faces and making him lose track of who he’s cleared so far.

“There’s too many people. I can’t see him.” Bond sounds every inch the uncomfortable angel from a good family, they type of person who takes nice cars when they’re earthbound and flies the rest of the time, uncomfortable underground where he can’t escape straight up.

“Welcome to rush hour on the Tube. Not something you’d know much about.”

He can’t help needling the agent. A bit of revenge for the comments about his age.

“The train’s leaving. Do I get on the train?”

Time, time, he needs more time!

“Don’t get on it. I’m not sure he’s on it.” He can always send one of Vivian’s agents to the next stops along the line, try to send Bond by sky to wherever Silva will end up. “Give us a minute.”

“Do I get on the train?”

“Bond.”

“What?”

“Get on the train.”

Bond swears and there’s a screech of wheels against rails, followed by a thump as Bond goes off-camera, taking a flying leap.

“Will you open the door please?”
“Yes, yes, because everyone opens doors when you ask politely. I’ll remember that for my nightly escapades as a burglar.”

“Open the door,” Bond continues. “Health and Safety. Carry on.”

“I’m always surprised that works. Where are you?”

“Take a wild guess, Q.”

Good. Q pulls up the feeds for the next station, prepared if Silva tries to make a move. “He’s in disguise, dressed as a policeman.”

“Of course he is.”

Q pulls up his maps again, trying to figure out Silva’s play. The Tube wasn’t his wisest choice- Bond’s essentially caught up now and there’s a limited number of places he can go. What’s his play? Where’s he going?

“He’s going for M,” Bond announces, making the same leap. He’s coldly calm now, the killer and not the agent. “Tell Tanner. Get her out of there.”

“Trevelyan, who’s guarding M?”

Trevelyan glances up, figuring something out. “Milligan.”

“Get him on comms. R, alert Tanner. She won’t have allowed 002 in the room with her- it would be a show of ill faith, to have him standing guard during the Board of Inquiry. He needs to get the exits covered.”

Petty revenge. It’s almost a relief. They’ve got guards on M- this will make the Double-0s insufferable for a while, but it’s worth it to have Silva back in custody and M safe- and it means their secrets are safe. If Silva knew about the Archangel Protocols, if he connected the dots between M’s twin children and the appearance of Azrael and Israfil, this would be the absolute worst way for him to use that information.

Bond shoots.

“I won’t miss next time, Mr. Silva.”

There’s a pause, presumably while Silva speaks, too far away for Q to pick up, and then an explosion.

“I do hope that wasn’t for me,” Bond says. His vitals are still steady- not a close call, just a surprise, still in control.

Emergency alarms flash all over the Tube as something goes wrong right there un top of where Bond’s tracker is signaling.

“Bond? Bond? Agent 007, sitrep, now!”

Nothing but static.

He’s alive. They know that much.

Q slams his palms against his desk, careful not to damage his computer. The entire situation just got ripped from his control.
Shit.
To: Senior Staff  [ m@mi6.uk.gov, tannerwi@mi6.uk.gov, malloryg@mi6.uk.gov, … ]

From: Q  [ q@mi6.uk.gov ]

Re: Double-0s

CAN SOMEONE MAKE THEM STOP BREAKING THEIR DAMN EARPIECES?

—

Quartermaster of MI6

Email: q@mi6.uk.gov

To: Senior Staff  [ m@mi6.uk.gov, tannerwi@mi6.uk.gov, malloryg@mi6.uk.gov, … ]

From: Trevelyan, Alec  [ trevelya@mi6.uk.gov ]

Re: Double-0s

Ignore the Quartermaster’s last memo. 007 went incommunicado and we might have accidentally let him have too much caffeine. Laura, does Medical have any decaf tea on hand? All of it in Q Branch mysteriously caught fire after the first time we tried to give Q a cup of it.

—

Alec Trevelyan

Agent 006

Email: trevelya@mi6.uk.gov
That was a bad idea. Do not, I repeat, do NOT try to give the Quartermaster decaf in the middle of a crisis. Learn from my mistakes, everyone. You can’t even comprehend of how bad of a bad idea it is. You’ll have to trust me when I say that it’s bad. Really bad.

Anyone else want to take over on guard duty?

Please?

—

Alec Trevelyan

Agent 006

Email: trevelya@mi6.uk.gov

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“Q? I need help.”

“About bloody time,” Q grumbles off-mike. He’s one of the last people here- he sent most of the Branch home or to set up surveillance on every single way in and out of MI6 around the same time as what Alec’s taking to calling The Great Decaf Disaster.

Ok. Comm link opened to voiceprint Bond, James from one of Uncle Geoffrey’s most recently upgraded cars. Passcode on the tracker and… voila.

“I’m tracking the car. Where are you going?”

“I’ve got M. We’re about to disappear.”

“What?” He can’t do that. M needs to be home. Bond’s a powerful angel and M is, too, but this situation warrants overkill and that means Q and Vivi. Bond’s good, but he can’t stop a bullet in its tracks or heal practically anything short of death. He can take M and go to ground- Q and Vivi can render the need to go to ground completely obsolete.

“I need you to lay a trail of breadcrumbs impossible to follow for anyone except Silva. Think you can do it?”
“I’m guessing this isn’t strictly official.”

“Not even remotely.”

“Ma’am, may I ask why you aren’t activating the Archangel Protocols and returning to London?”

“Archangel Protocols?” Bond asks. Q ignores him. If he doesn’t know, he doesn’t need to know. Not right now. Though telling him might make him turn the car around and return to somewhere where Q can have Azrael and Israfil waiting.

“Enough, Quartermaster.”

“It seems a waste of Azrael and Israfil’s talents not to use them now.”

“Dominic Sebastian Boothroyd.”

Q pauses, reluctant to give up a good point despite the clear order in M’s voice. That was more than a warning to him- a warning that she made him Quartermaster and she can unmake him just as quickly- combined with the Mom Voice. Trevelyan ghosts up behind him, laying a hand on his shoulder before beating a hasty retreat.

“So much for my brilliant career in espionage,” he grumbles. Perhaps the next Quartermaster will have better luck. If he doesn’t do as Mum says, he’ll be scrubbing down used body armor for the rest of his career. If he does, Mallory will have him court-martialed. “Right, then. Breadcrumbs.”

Bond ditches the car.

He doesn’t tell Q that, but luckily for all of them, Q’s still watching Bond’s tracker. It’s the only information he has right now, the sole connection to his mission. He works quickly, but not so quickly that his trail appears immediately. Tanner joins him, Ananth Patil joining Trevelyan in the back of the room, and they work in a bubble of quiet conversation.

“It’s a fine line,” he explains. “Make the breadcrumb too small and he might miss it. Too big and Silva will smell a rat.”

“Do you think even Silva will be able to spot that?”

“He’s the only one who could.”

They lapse back into silence after that, letting Trevelyan and Patil’s conversation about the relative merits of various firearms as blunt weapons wash over them in a susurrus echoing around the empty room. The sound of footsteps is clear-too heavy to be Vivi, regularity says military training, assumption of who’s still here says Charles Blake coming to make him eat again.

“Sir,” Patil says, Trevelyan echoing him a moment later.

That’s not good.

“What are you doing?” Gareth Mallory asks. He’s equally as terrifying as Mum when he does that, perhaps because he’s more likely to shoot them for misbehavior while Mum cuffs them with a wing. Well, him. She tends to scorch Double-0s, but that does absolutely nothing to Q.

“We’re just… monitoring.” Smooth, Q, real smooth.

“Creating a false tracking signal for Silva to follow.”
“Well, sir, um… Well, no.”

“Excellent thinking. Get him isolated.” Mallory steps up behind Tanner as the Double-0s fall entirely silent. “Send him on the A9. It’s the direct route. You can monitor his progress more accurately and confirm it with the traffic cameras.”

Done and done. Q wasn’t going to use the direct route- it feels too direct, he’d rather lead Silva on a wild goose chase through the countryside where he could really have to stretch his abilities to find the next clue- but if it keeps him from getting thrown in some hole-in-the-wall prison for treason, he’ll do as the boss man wants.

“But what if the PM finds out?”

“Then we’re all buggered.”

Q smiles.

He could come to like Gareth Mallory.

It takes all night before Bond’s tracker- his secret tracker, the one he snuck into Bond’s arm, which Mallory seems to find greatly amusing- settles in Scotland.

“Where is that?” Mallory demands.

“Skyfall,” Trevelyan answers. “He went to Skyfall.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that this is a short one, but it was a natural break in the story. Also, I'm too lazy to un-hyperlink the email addresses, they're just made up.
Chapter 10

Skyfall Lodge.

The name used to be synonymous with luxury. To be a Bond of Skyfall was to be at the center of a prosperous angel community, to be one of the most respected old blood angels in the United Kingdom. Andrew Bond was known for being the steady heart of Scotland’s angels, the bastion of tradition and power. His wedding to Monique Delacroix, an angel of an equally famous bloodline in Switzerland, was the talk of angel society for months.

The Bonds were more private after the birth of their son, the very picture of a happy angel family. They were often seen at philanthropic events, both with and without their son, and the community flourished.

That was what made the tragedy so much more shocking.

Skyfall Lodge stands empty now, the sumptuous furnishings covered in dust cloths and the parties that would last all night naught but a distant memory. It is a ghost in the community, a constant reminder of the old blood family they lost, and the village falters and dies around the canker at its heart. They have no more need for groundskeepers and cooks and bodyguards, for all the people who grew up serving the family just as their parents and their parents’ parents did, yet they are the last to leave all the same.

The name is now synonymous with tragedy, with the destruction of the old way and the ravages of time. It’s a study in what happens when the driving force behind the economy is ripped out and nothing comes in to replace it. It’s a village still in mourning for the life they once had and for the losses they suffered, both culturally, socially, and economically. Skyfall is a desolate place, devoid of the life it once held.

There will always be a Bond in Skyfall until, of course, there isn’t.

Excerpt from Skyfall Lodge: A Look Back

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Three angels and a human aren’t exactly the cavalry, but they’re the best 007’s going to get.

Mallory makes the call when neither Bond nor M calls in. A small team, composed entirely of people who already knew that Bond had taken M, with Tanner and R and 005 left behind to cover for them. That means 004 and 006, Q, and Mallory himself.

Stay to the back, Malloy tells him, run comms from a distance and keep in cover.

My apologies, sir, but that’s bullshit, he replies, pulling Azrael’s body armor out of the locker in his office. Mum hated him keeping it there- too risky, you are aware they can all pick locks?- but it
made him feel better to have it close. The explosion at MI6 only proved that they never knew when they’d need Azrael and Israfil.

He and Vivian don’t talk about it, but he knows Israfil’s armor is similarly hidden in her office.

Trevelyan glances at the armor, then at Q, giving him a look that clearly says *we’ll talk later.* Patil doesn’t say anything. He’s not been told, officially, but Uncle An was there for the harsh years of his youth where he couldn't manage to hide his magic properly. He’s not blind. He can put the pieces together.

Mallory, of course, doesn’t understand the importance of Q’s actions. He hasn't had time to learn all MI6’s secrets and Q’s certain that Azrael, Israfil, and the Archangel Protocols will be one of the last ones to go.

So, maybe they are the cavalry. One human with extensive experience in politics and military action, two Class Two angels trained to be some of the deadliest people on the planet, and one rather clever archangel. It certainly isn’t the worst rescue mission in the history of MI6. Mum will skin him alive for revealing Azrael without authorization through the Archangel Protocols, meaning without her explicit permission, but he won’t let Mallory keep him next to the chopper when there’s work he can do.

“Here’s the plan,” Mallory says as they approach the airfield. “004, 006, scout to either side and deal with anyone you encounter. No deaths, but we can’t be see and identified lest MI5 get involved.”

Q rolls his eyes. It’s a solid plan, a good military plan, but he can do one better.

“George! Marcus!” He loops the duffel bag with Azrael's armor over one arm, strolling straight into the first guard booth while Mallory tries not to look murderous. Trevelyan and Patil trail behind him, covering their amusement.

“Q? Is that you?” George steps out of the office, beaming. “What’re you doing up so early? I haven't seen you out here this early since Major Boothroyd was teaching you to fly!”

Q hefts his bag up for a moment. “I finally got some time to tinker and the Branch is settled enough for me to run my own tests. Retrieval will love these, if I can get them to work consistently.”

George chuckles. “I know how it is. The Major, he was always the same. What can I do for you, Q?”

“I'd like one of the birds for the day. Number 5’s big enough and nobody’s scheduled for it until Friday.” He leans in, stage whispering in the man's ear. “Have to impress the new boss, you know. I fear for my funding.”

Trevelyan tries to stifle a laugh and ends up coughing. Patil slaps him on the back until he’s breathing right again.

George winks. "I know what you mean, Q. The Major was just the same. Keeping the bodyguards with you?"

“Unfortunately.” Q shrugs. “They make a halfway decent cup of tea, with a little training. You should try getting one sometime.”

“Go on, you,” George chivvies him back out towards the airfield, greeting Mallory as he does so. “Kids these days. Anything else I can do for you, sir?”
"Carry on." Mallory shakes his hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

Q’s halfway to the chopper by the time Mallory catches up, very pointedly not hurrying. It’s not one of the largest ones MI6 has—those are reserved for Retrieval and are all tricked out with medical equipment and enough communications equipment to keep them in touch anywhere in the world—but it’s sizable enough for the four of them plus 007 and M. Besides, this way they have no awkward unconscious bodies in their wake and an actual excuse for them to be missing from MI6.

“You know the guards in charge of the airfield.”

“Old friends of my predecessor’s.”

“You were close with Major Boothroyd?” Mallory sounds genuinely curious, which means Mum hasn’t told him yet, which is rather rude, honestly. Not terribly surprising—she's been in a mood about being replaced, even if Mallory is just the kind of person she’d want as her successor since Eve isn’t willing to take up the mantle, and Mum's petty when she’s angry.

“You could say that. He taught me everything I know.” There. Sufficiently vague as not to spoil Mum’s secret, but entirely truthful.

Trevelyan starts coughing again. Patil ignores him this time, sliding in behind the controls with Mallory on the other side. They don’t waste time getting into the air—perfunctory safety checks, that’s all—and Q unzips his duffel bag to start changing.

Trevelyan waits until he’s half-dressed to say anything. Q’s shimmied into Azrael’s trousers, a reinforced material of Vivi’s design that is always uncomfortably stiff after the comfortable softness of his favorite corduroys, but it is still in experimental stages. Vivi tends to be a believer that if material can stand up to the rigors of not getting shredded by the kind of situations she and Q get called into, then it’s good enough for production. He’s lacing up his boots, sitting shirtless while Trevelyan inspects the rest of Azrael’s armor.

“It’s a completely different design than anything we’re issued.”

Not the question he was expecting, but he’ll run with it. It's a much easier question to deal with than the one he was expecting, mostly because it deals with a lot of things that are so classified they can't even be listed as classified lest people get interested. And isn’t that something he doesn’t really want to teach the Double-0s, that there are things so classified they can’t be classified because too many people would have access to them then.

“Vivi’s pet project. She does all of your armor designs, too, but they have to be generic enough for any MI6 agent to use them. This is designed solely for Azrael.”

Trevelyan pauses in his inspection of the elbows, where Vivi switches to a sturdier material instead of the rigid plates squishes in between the layers on the rest of his arm, glancing up from the dark material. He’s closed off, more of the agent as icy cold as his magic than the angel Q befriended when he was a mouthy teenager and Trevelyan barely any older, and it stings. Q knows he screwed up, but there's nothing more he can do about it right now. He’ll request that Trevelyan be taken off his unofficial protection duty of Q when they return to MI6, maybe that will help.

“Designed for you, you mean.”

Q sighs. He wishes it were that simple. His entire life is based on different names and different identities—Mum and M are technically the same person, but they aren’t interchangeable. Uncle Geoffrey and Major Boothroyd nearly were, but even that wasn’t quite the same.
“Alec Trevelyan and Agent 006. Are they one and the same?”

“Of course not. You know that.”

“This is Azrael's armor. It's the best Vivi can make, but it's also almost entirely for show. Azrael doesn’t need armor, Azrael needs a disguise that makes him look completely different from, well, me.” Q waves down at himself. His favorite cardigan is folded on top of the rest of his clothes, comfortable enough for him to sleep in when he’s late in the office and yet proper enough that Mum doesn’t send him home to change. He'd work in his pajamas, if he could.

He can’t. Mum made that abundantly clear.

Trevelyan mulls that over, handing Q his armor back. Q slips into it with practiced ease, doing up zippers and buckles and adjusting everything to lay just right across his chest and shoulders. It doesn’t bother him if they’re just a little askew normally, but if he has to snap his wings out then the straps and harnesses need to be exactly right. Mum made him practice until he could do it all up on his own, again and again and again until it became muscle memory.

“Then Vivian...”

“Not my secret to tell.”

“You don’t really need our protection, do you?”

“It's complicated.”

He doesn’t, not in the manner they thought he did. There are ways to incapacitate angels—Q's a master in all of them, most of which include some sort of poison to cripple their magic. Trying to take out an angel without taking out their healing first is difficult. Trying to take one out without dealing with their healing or their offensive capabilities is an utter disaster.

The Double-0s can manage without their magic, if not without quite a bit of whining. Uncle Geoffrey made a habit of regularly sneaking anti-magic toxins into the Double-0s, making them run drills as usual and spar without their magic. He had Q and Vivi helping him from the time they could walk- the Double-0s would suspect anyone else touching their food, but not toddlers stealing from their plate.

That’s on the list of things he doesn't talk about, but just so he can use them for blackmail later. Eve's the queen of blackmail, mostly because she notices things about people without being told, but Q and Vivi have plenty of their own.

“Stick to Mallory,” Trevelyan advises. “He's good, but he’s got no defenses against angel warfare.”

“If it comes to that.”

“When it comes to that. Silva’s not going down easy, Q, and Azrael's the best defense we can give him.”

"You adjusted to the idea quickly.” Q’s not entirely happy to have this many people knowing his secret. It was always the five of them, and blood never betrays blood. He's only too aware that he doesn’t really know Gareth Mallory.

“I always knew you were strong.” Trevelyan shrugs. “I just always thought you had limits.”

Q tries, he really does, but he grins anyways. “Limits? When have you ever known me to have
limits, Trevelyan?"

“I was there for your university years. Akane and I never figured out how-"

Q puts a hand up, cutting Alec off. It’s a favorite trick of his- any kind of sound is vibrations in the air, stop the vibrations and stop the sound- and always one of the most impressive things in Azrael’s arsenal. Worked wonders as a kid to stop Eve from tattling on them. It’s the entire reason why she learned sign language.

“I thought we weren’t talking about Vivi’s quest to make liquor strong enough to get even the two of us drunk.”

Alec scoffs. “Your healing is good but it isn’t… oh, shit. Your healing is that strong?”

“There’s a reason we never let anyone else touch the stuff she made.” Q makes a face. “Vivi’s a genius, but she couldn’t make it not taste like jet fuel.”

Alec shakes his head, playing with one of his knives. It’s a nervous tic of his, Uncle Geoffrey read him the riot act over it more times than Q cares to count. Secret agents don’t get nervous tics. Q ought to know- half his job is to know all the ones they haven’t broken their agents of yet and reminding them not to give themselves away on mission.

“Save it for later,” Mallory interjects when Alec starts to argue that he’s a grown man, a grown man with a high alcohol tolerance, and therefore should be allowed to try Vivi’s hellish brew. “We’re here.”
To: Q [q@mi6.uk.gov]

From: R [r@mi6.uk.gov]

CC: Moneypenny, Eve [moneypen@mi6.uk.gov]

Re: Why are you MISSING?

Sebby,

Where the hell are you when I need you? And don’t give me that line about testing prototypes, Sebby, because I know you and you never take anything out for show and tell until you’ve blown it up at least thrice and the last time I checked, you’ve only had me redesign the casing once on the project for Retrieval. You’re not ready to field test that one for at least a month, longer if this mess continues, and you promised to send it with Retrieval Team Two next time they have to fetch a Double-0 for its field test. I checked your office, because Tanner sounded like he was choking when he said you’d gone to play show and tell and it’s the same way he sounded when you threatened to have Uncle Richard sneak you out of MI6 for lunch if he didn’t let us play hide and seek in Mum’s office. Your locker’s empty, you know the one, and that worries me because nobody bothered to call me and if we don’t do everything together, what’s the point of all those years of shared birthday parties attended by the finest killers in the country wearing frilly dresses and party hats?

I need you back, Sebby. We need you back, because there’s only so long Eve can distract Charlie for before he notices that I’m hiding in bloody closets from Medical. The minions are all working on projects because I really can’t wrangle them into any semblance of order right now. So, if you owe me any favors right now, which I know you do, just come home.

-Vivi

Attached: Medical Report 2012HQ-AVB003

—

R

Email: r@mi6.uk.gov

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Q can do a lot of things.

He can destroy a building by willing it down, by looking at support beams and load-bearing walls and wanting them gone or by picturing the building as rubble and making it so. He can rebuild a structure much the same way, picturing the beams back in place and whole or simply letting it shape new walls around him, pushed aside by the simple fact that he doesn't want it there. He can create fire and ice and storms out of nothing, he can change the physical properties of the world around him by his merest whim, and he can heal almost anything by pouring magic on it and accelerating the healing process.

Almost anything.

There's too much magic here. This place will be the next mystery spot, the next place that feels haunted and where even humans can feel the prickle under their skin of wild magic. It hangs in the air like the static waiting to be energized into lightning, suffocatingly heavy and yet completely intangible.

He isn't the most powerful presence here.

That honor belongs to the dead.

Eyes closed, he traces the residue of his mother’s magic, blood calling to blood, following a trail none of the others can sense. It’s a thin thread, but the only chance he has. Most likely, he’s following it the wrong way, to the house in rubble behind him and the corpses too charred to identify, to Gareth Mallory’s platitudes and Ananth Patil’s quiet grief and Alec Trevelyan’s anxiety to leave, to get them somewhere safe.

He can’t do that right now. Not so soon after Uncle Geoffrey.

Not when there’s a wound in his heart, the absence of something he never conceived of losing. The tears have gone, the long days of sitting in shock whenever someone called for the Quartermaster and meant him, but the loss is still sharp, cutting a jagged gash through his life.

He follows the trail, a mostly-straight line slowly climbing an incline, trusting his magic to make every foot fall on solid ground and move tree roots and thorny plants away from him. The last crackling of the flames fades away from his hearing, the murmur of his companions’ voices and the worst of the magical cesspool with it.

There’s magic up ahead. Strong magic, uncontrolled magic. It’s the familiar magic of a child throwing a tantrum, magic stretched beyond the angel’s limits by the sheer force of their emotional distress. Q jerks his head up, staring at the light coming from the chapel, and breaks into a run.

The doors are open.

Raoul Silva lies prone on the ground, the last sluggish streams of blood dribbling from his wound, eyes glazing over. Q could save him. He reaches down to do just that, to heal him enough to stand trial for his crimes, when the rest of the picture clicks into place.

There’s a man by the front, an older angel with sorrow lining his features. Class One, at a guess, definitely not aggressive. No threat. Another angel kneels at the front, back to him, cradling a still form. He recognizes the back of the man’s head, the patterning of his wings, from the times he assisted Uncle Geoffrey with 007’s missions. Which makes the person in his arms…
“Who the hell are you?” Bond growls, not bothering to turn around. “No, never mind that. Your boss is dead. Get the hell out before I decide to finish you off, too.”

“Azrael,” Q snaps, “MI6.”

“007,” Bond answers, “Stronger part of MI6.”

Q crosses the distance, crouching beside Bond and laying a hand on M. She’s not breathing, not moving, but that doesn’t mean dead. If there’s even a spark left, even a flicker of neural activity, he can save her.

“Hands off, 007.”

“She’s gone, agent.”

“I said hands off!”

Magic tears down the pathway of his anger to a moment of crystalline intent- away away away get them away- and explodes out of him. Bond’s muffled curse is almost hidden by the shatter of the pews tearing away from the bolts holding them down, throwing everything within a wing’s length of him towards the walls. The comms crackle with interference, earning demands for sitrep, Azrael and what the hell was that shit?

One spark. That’s all he needs.

He pours every bit of magic he can into M, searching, searching, searching for something, for any little response. Distantly, he’s aware of the footsteps behind him, shaky with injury, and the soft thump of knees against the cracked stone floor. Someone touches his shoulder, finds him unresponsive, and stills his hands, loosening his grip on M’s shirt finger by finger.

“Stop,” he murmurs in Q’s ear, the hand on his shoulder turning him into a broad chest and the partial embrace of unfamiliar wings. “There’s nothing you can do but give her the rest she deserves. Give her that honor, at least.”

There’s nothing there.

He was too late.

Again.

Q sags, his wings folding back into nothingness and his legs no longer enough to support him. He hasn’t used this much of his strength since Silva blew up MI6, and probably not even then, and he failed. He failed Uncle Geoffrey, took a day off when he could have saved everyone in Q Branch, and he failed Mum.

It’s him and Vivian and Eve, now.

He doesn’t know how he’ll stand by another grave so soon without collapsing.

“Azrael, what’s going on?”

“Five minutes to location, Mallory.”

“Come in, Azrael. Report.”

Fingers pluck his earpiece out, one arm keeping him tight to 007’s chest, wings wrapping all the way
around his shoulders now that his wings are tucked away. He knows he ought to resist, ought to
snatch his tech back and leave, be the good soldier to the end. He can mourn later— still not done
mourning, what’s a little more pain— but he has to be Azrael right now.

“Agent 007 on the line. I need backup to the chapel on the hill. Silva is dead, I repeat, Raoul Silva is
dead.” 007 pauses, and Q doesn’t imagine the way his hand tightens reflexively on Q’s shoulder.
“And so is M.”

“Backup is on its way, 007. Status on Azrael?”

“He’s powerful, I’ll give you that, but not ready for this line of work. Where’d you find an angel like
that, anyways?” Bond’s tone is utterly nonchalant, but he tenses further as he looks down at Q. He
must have the same protective instincts as the other Double-0s do— Q’s never spent much time with
Bond, M and Uncle Geoffrey kept them apart because they hadn’t vetted him— because he still isn’t
letting go.

Q shivers.

Bond listens, head cocked to one side, and Q takes deep, shaky breaths. He can’t fall apart now, no
matter how incredibly easy it would be to collapse under the pressures of being… well, not being
him, but being Azrael. Azrael doesn’t have attachments to the world around him. Azrael doesn’t
care. He’s a weapon to be pulled out when England has need of him, nothing more.

“One civilian, sir, but he can be trusted. You have my word on it.”

He matches his breathing to Bond’s, a steady one two three in and one two three out. Bond’s chest
dips with every breath, the motion carried through his shoulders and down to the hand on his back.
It’s a subtly soothing gesture, Bond’s palm flat between his shoulderblades, deliberately between his
wing joints, a steady weight keeping him out of his thoughts.

“Azrael, is it?”

It takes Q a moment to realize that Bond is addressing him directly.

“As much as you’re 007.”

“I haven’t heard of an agent codenamed Azrael.”

“Few have.”

Bond pauses for a while, flexing the wing wrapped around Q. The civilian steps out of the doorway
cautiously, footfalls heavy on the stone floors, taking a seat against the altar. Bond watches him, not
releasing Q, leaving him to track him by sound and a memory of the layout.

“The lad’s old blood, I’d stake money on it.”

“Brave new world, Kincade. Strength is not the prerogative of the old blood.”

The civilian sighs, heaving himself back to his feet and coming into Q’s space slowly, walking
around M’s body. He crouches next to them— older, unwilling to kneel, Q presumes, therefore
arthritic— and very cautiously lays a hand on Q’s shoulder. Bond shifts just a hair, letting Kincade do
as he wishes.

“A moment, James, if you would.”
Bond freezes, then slowly releases Q. “Of course. I’ll check the grounds while we wait for backup.”

Bond stalks off without a backward glance, leaving Q with the older man. Q examines him with that in mind—whatever else he may see, Bond trusts this man enough to leave him alone with a valuable MI6 asset. He’s worn and weathered from a life spent outside, but he has the mannerisms of an angel accustomed to the angelic elite. Some sort of trusted family servant, then, from before the fall of the Bond family.

“Ye have the look of yer mother, lad,” he rumbles, accent stronger than when he spoke to Bond. “James introduced her as Emma, but I accompanied the master and the missus often enough back in the boy’s youth. I know Maggie Boothroyd when I see her.”

“That’s about seventeen different types of classified.”

“I won’t be telling anyone.”

“Thank you.”
CONFIDENTIAL

MISSION REPORT 2012-007-041: Operation Skyfall

Summary

The primary objective of Operation Skyfall was the protection of MI6 assets and intelligence, including but not limited to M, with the secondary objective of the recapture of prisoner Raoul Silva. The lead operative on Operation Skyfall was James Bond, codenamed 007. 007 was assisted by operatives Richard Milligan, codenamed 002, Ananth Patil, codenamed 004, and Alec Trevelyan, codenamed 006. Field support was given by Gareth Mallory, Azrael, and the Quartermaster. Operation Skyfall began with the escape of Raoul Silva from MI6 custody and ended with the retrieval of agents 004, 006, and 007 from Skyfall Lodge.

Primary objective was failed, with the body of Margaret Katherine Boothroyd, codenamed M, retrieved from the site.

Secondary objective partially met. The body of Raoul Silva, formerly Tiago Rodriguez, was also retrieved from the site.

Agent 007 is on reserve pending evaluation from Medical. Agents 004 and 006 have returned to their self-assigned protection details until such time as standard missions resume. Agent 002 is joining 004 on protection detail for Gareth Mallory, awaiting his instatement as M. The Quartermaster is back on active service.

Records are to be sealed on authorization of Gareth Mallory, accessible to senior staff only.

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Q is barely functioning.

He goes to work, tinkers with R&D until he can’t look at another wire without screaming, and then buries himself in the mindless paperwork typically finished by someone else in the Branch and brought for his signature. Somewhere in the middle of all this, whoever his current guard is brings him food and caffeine and endless bottles of water. He eats what is put in front of him. He sleeps when he keels over at his desk, only to wake in his own bed the next morning. Once a week, he’s guided away from his work and up to Medical to check that he is physically healthy. He works on his tablet while they run through a physical exam and draw blood and hand him vitamins and a cup
of water.

The work makes sense. The work saves lives. He rewrites the entire network security one week, replacing the firewalls Silva breached with ones of his own design. He takes the concept of the malleable defenses, long considered one of his greatest achievements, and pushes it one step further— not just a Rubik’s cube that fights back, but one that locks everything down if a hacker who can get past the initial defenses doesn’t try to crack it a certain way. He writes a system that only he understands and doesn’t try to teach it to anyone else—MI6 is safest if nobody but him knows how to even go about breaking their system.

Vivian designs a lightweight body armor at the same time, designed to lie perfectly hidden under clothing. It’s too restrictive for wearing during active combat, and too expensive for the field, but she tests it beyond her normally stringent standards and presents the first finished product to Mallory—no, to M.

Q works on the prototype for a nanobot tracker that would move through the bloodstream, making it impossible to remove without an aphaeresis machine.

Vivian spends days going through the testing done on the cyanide capsules and works on designing something more assuredly lethal that won’t break on accident.

Nobody comments that there’s a very clear trend to their projects.

Tanner goes back through the records of agents presumed killed in action and starts following up on them, sending Double-0s out two at a time to find some kind of proof.

Everyone sleeps a bit easier each time Tanner confirms a KIA.

Bond joins the rotation on unofficial guard-slash-keep-Q-alive duty, though he never seems to be assigned to Eve or Vivian or M, the new M. Akane gives her place up to him, joining Vivian’s guards, though it takes Q a week and a half to notice. Bond is subdued by Q’s side, a contrast to Malaika’s steady constancy and Alec’s forced cheer.

He makes steak and potatoes on the rare evenings they convince Q to leave MI6, with too much butter to be healthy in the potatoes and grilled asparagus. Malaika is usually sleeping by then, curled up in Q’s bed—they’re long past sleeping in the chair in the corner, he doesn’t mind—while Alec tries to get him to take a turn with the current video game. Choices range from all sorts of genres, but they avoid anything hyper-realistic. It’s aliens, most of the time. Aliens seem to be safe, and Alec and Bond will while the evening away criticizing each others’ tactical choices.

When Q joins in, he doesn’t trash talk, but wipes the floor with them all the same.

He knows their tactics, and he knows how to turn them to get what he needs done.

Vivian lives at Charles’ flat and Eve moves in with another agent, sharing a cozy flat that’s worlds apart from the one where they all grew up. They can’t bear the silences in their old home, the memories around every corner. Q doesn’t know how he survives.

He drifts through the funeral, guided by a hand on his back and an endless litany of thank you for your kindness and we miss her too and yes, she was a lovely person. Mum’s will splits everything evenly between the three of them, with a few special concessions for everyone else, and Eve and Vivian sell him their share on the flat for a cup of coffee. Missions resume, and the Double-0s no longer guard him every moment of every day, but they don’t leave him alone in his flat, either.

In the end, it’s Vivian who snaps him back to reality with six words and a photograph.
“You’re going to be an uncle.”

Q stares at the sonograph, at the two circles in red marker, feeling wholly alert for the first time since he walked into that chapel at Skyfall. Malaika, who just finished debriefing and immediately showed up in Q’s office to claim one of the books she keeps there, leans over his shoulder to see.

“Twins?”

Vivian laughs, a dry sort of sound that he hasn’t heard enough lately. “They run in the family, Sebby, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Q smiles back at her. They’re not as identical as they once were- age has softened Vivian’s features, with smile lines and gentle curves, while Q is skin and bones even still- but the resemblance is still clear to anyone who takes more than a passing glance at them. Vivian’s better dressed than he is. She took to Mum’s lessons about how to dress far better than he did, with his preference for cozy over matching.

“No now that you mention it, we do look rather similar.”

“I want you to be my chief bridesmaid.”

“I’m sure the dress will look fabulous on me.”

“I also want you to take over as head of the family.”

“You know, yellow or orange look absolutely horrid with my skin- what?”

“I want you to be the head of the family. My children will be under enough scrutiny as is, I don’t want the pressure of being the heir to the family on them.”

Vivian twists the family ring on her finger, the one she inherited when Mum died. The Boothroyd family parted with male primogeniture in Mum’s generation, when Mum inherited as the eldest child despite Uncle Geoffrey’s presence, and there was never any doubt that Vivian would lead the family. It was part of the reason that Q took over Q Branch instead of her- they’ve always been fond of equality between the two of them.

“There’ll be a lot of questions. Mum made it clear from the very beginning that you were eldest and that she intended you to be Lady Boothroyd after her.”

Vivian shrugs. “We’re Boothroyds. There’s only a handful of families left who would question our judgement.”

Q reaches out, waiting for permission before laying his hand next to Vivian’s on the fabric of her jacket. Vivian covers his hand with her own, taking a quiet moment secluded from the hustle and bustle of the Branch.

“I’ll do it. Only for you, Vivi.”

That night, Malaika helps him sort through Uncle Geoffrey’s room. Most of it gets sent back to MI6, to be locked up in their archives, and much of the rest is donated to schools in need. They pick out a shade of dark green paint that will go well with white trim and gold accessories. They put fresh sheets on the bed, plain white ones for now, and Malaika moves her belongings in there.

It’s the first time since the explosion that Q’s been alone in his room at night.
He’s gotten so used to the rustle of pages as he drifts off to sleep and the steady in and out of someone else’s breathing, the quiet knowledge that he isn’t alone. Even with Malaika here, it’s the end of an era, with Vivian and Eve contemplating making their moves for good.

Q wonders how one asks their Double-0 bodyguards if they’d consider staying. He loves the flat, but it’s a little too big for him alone, and certainly too fraught with memories. At least for now.

It’s almost a relief when Bond slips in the door, settling in the chair in the corner and stitching up a gash along his thigh.

“Please tell me that isn’t the dental floss.”

Bond pauses mid-stitch, then pulls the needle free and removes the two stitches he’d managed. He returns with the fully-stocked medical kit from the kitchen and begins again. He clearly hasn’t checked in with MI6. Technically, he could have just lied to Medical about having any injuries- it would be very much something the Double-0s would do- but Q’s betting on hasn’t checked in.

“You’re reporting to M first thing in the morning.”

“Yes, Q,” Bond agrees. “I’ll make pancakes in the morning.”

“You better,” he grumbles, rolling over to put his back to the agent. “Blueberry.”

Chapter End Notes

And now we depart from Skyfall and I get to do my own thing. Thank you so much for the love, guys! It makes me so happy to have heard from a couple of you.
To: M [m@mi6.uk.gov]

From: R [r@mi6.uk.gov]

CC: Moneypenny, Eve [moneypen@mi6.uk.gov], Tanner, William [tannerwi@mi6.uk.gov]

Re: Division of Labor

M,

Is there any way you can divert a little bit of the labor from the renovations on the new MI6 building and send some painters to finish Q’s flat? He’s driving us all crazy designing a painting machine such that he can avoid doing it himself or admitting that he doesn’t want to do it himself. It’s unconventional, yes, but think about how much more productive Q could be on developing the programming behind the new comm links if he wasn’t worried about getting the exact right shade of green before 003 returns from her mission.

Also, could you try and suggest that the Double-0s stop stalking us in Q Branch? We’re perfectly safe down there now and Q promised to call them when he’s leaving the building. They’re scaring the techs, at this point, and Q’s got his nose buried in the new firewalls too much to notice.

Thank you for your time, sir, and I hope to receive a prompt response.

R

—

R

Email: r@mi6.uk.gov

***

Ali Aperte is, on the surface, a fairly standard organization. Money laundering, protection, the promotion of old blood angel interests- all in all, boring. Mum estimated that of all the old blood families, about a third of them did underworld dealings, another third rest on their wealth and influence, and the final third work with government and other military organizations.

Common.
Anyone could have done the research this far.

Q has reports from the Rome office dating back to 1933 that detail surveillance on *Ali Aperte*, most of which say the exact same thing. Old blood family, minor danger, good as an indicator of bigger issues in the underworld. Their central family, the Corvi family, has a bloodline that goes as far back as the Boothroyd’s own, but they rarely produce Class Two angels of more than middling strength.

From 1933 to 1974, the reports all say the same thing. Adriano Rafaello Corvi, as both Lord Corvi and head of *Ali Aperte*, is a weak Class Two angel with a silver tongue. Combined with his bloodline, that gives him influence in their social circles. His wife, one Sara Filomena Corvi, is old blood, but a Class One angel who does a lot of humanitarian work. Keeps the community neutral about *Ali Aperte* - one day, they might be the threat in the back alley, but the next they’ll be responsible for saving lives.

And then, in 1974, Adriano Corvi is killed in a skirmish with a rival group, leaving the title of Lord Corvi and *Ali Aperte* to his eldest son, Alessandro.

Something’s hidden in the records here.

The mission reports from 1975 to 1979 show an agent infiltrating *Ali Aperte* at the highest levels, feeding information back to MI6 the entire time. It’s not unusual - turmoil and a change in leadership are the perfect time to slip in an agent, but he ought to have some sort of identification. Names, codenames, authorizations numbers… anything he could use to identify the agent or their handlers is removed from the official documents.

Q doesn’t get given the edited reports, and for this one, there are no digital reports for him to hack into.

It’s frustrating, to say the least.

After 1979, the reports drop off, back to outside surveillance. Their agent’s cover was blown, most likely, because there are three years of massive security changes and whispers about *Ali Aperte* searching for someone. And after a while, even that drops off.

Alessandro Corvi turns into a shrewd leader, the heart and soul of angel society, with his siblings Marco and Valentina ruling *Ali Aperte* by his side. The organization thrives, but continues to keep its influence at more of a distance, staying out of anything big enough to draw the interference of MI6. Now, reports say that his nieces have taken over the day-to-day operations of *Ali Aperte*, but Alessandro retains his throne.

Influential, but not a problem.

Not until now.

*Ali Aperte* has been moving. There are whispers in the dark, conversations in restaurants that lead to bombings and late nights at events attended by the angelic elite. MI6 has been paying attention, but it took until now to get kicked up from the Rome office to Headquarters.

Some of these files have Mum’s looping script on them, but she never mentioned it.

Q tosses the file to his desk, groaning. He doesn’t really mind research. He grew up discussing issues in the espionage community with Mum and Uncle Geoffrey, learning the background that shapes the espionage community today. He knows the big players, he knows the main events, so it’s rare to come across a situation with this much background that he knows *absolutely nothing* about.
“R,” he calls out into the main body of Q Branch, “a word, if you would?”

“One moment, Q,” she replies, shouting over the murmur of Tanner running 006’s mission. Trevelyan was sent to Russia, as he often is, to seduce an official’s wife for information and neither Q nor Vivian speak enough Russian for this one.

Missions have resumed in full force, putting an end to the Double-0s’ unofficial bodyguard duties. Not that they’re convinced of that- they still spend quite a bit of time camped out in his office between missions, and that’s not counting the fact that he now has three of them living with him. The minute Alec saw what he and Malaika did to Malaika’s new room, he started making plans of his own, dragging them all in their wake, and the flat is suddenly crucially different from his childhood home such that he’s no longer haunted by memories around every corner.

“What can I do for you, Q?” Vivian slides into his office, standing at the edge of his desk. For once, she too is alone- Charles Blake isn’t out on mission, which means he should be trailing behind her, glaring at anyone who dares look at her too long.

“What’s the shadow?”

“Sent him to get us some lunch.” Vivian takes a seat, waving a hand at the door and slamming it shut. “I know that face, Sebby. I don’t like that face.”

“What do you know about the Corvi family?”

Vivian plucks a file from his desk, flipping through it. “Old blood family on the wrong side of the law, not really famous but pretty influential. They invited us to a gathering that’s coming up soon even though everyone knows the Boothroyds stay out of the social scene.”

“Nothing about Ali Aperte?”

“Isn’t that one of those minor irritants we watch to see if the big fish are doing anything?”

Q frowns. So it isn’t that he forgot a lesson or two.

“No reason I should have the edited copies of most of these reports and one entirely missing?”

“What’s missing?”

“Mission Report 1979-002-013, the extraction of an agent from Ali Aperte. It’s completely missing, along with any information on the agent, their handlers, whether they survived or not. Anything.”

“Uncle Richard?”

“Uncle Richard.”

Vivian stands, dusting nonexistent dirt off her slacks. “That settles it, Sebby. Go talk to Uncle Richard about it, find out what really happened. The file was probably just destroyed in the explosion.”

Maybe. It’s a theory, at least, and Vivian’s always liked to think the best of people. That’s why she makes the tools to protect people and Q makes the tools to kill people. Q, he’s a little less trusting. He knows when something’s being hidden from him. If this report was important enough to warrant one copy held in M’s office, then it would have been digitized and hidden under Q’s best firewalls with other top-secret events like all records of his own birth. The fact that it’s entirely missing, along with communications logs leading up to the mission... It’s suspicious.
Uncle Richard, he texts, we need to talk about Rome, 1979.

Three hours later, Uncle Richard hands him a sealed envelope.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the short chapter, but I promise there's a very good reason for ending there!
Chapter 14

My dearest children,

I haven’t had much occasion to call you that in these recent years, and for that I am sorry. They say that life gets away from you, and never more than when you have children of your own. It seems only a few years ago that I first held you in my arms and yet an eternity has gone by since those days. I am so very proud of you both. You will achieve great things, my loves, of that I have no doubt.

As I write this letter, you are fighting over dinner in the kitchen, arguing the merits of homemade alfredo sauce versus the convenience of sauce from the jar. You’re going to lose the argument, Dominic, because I’ve heard you and Adelaide argue this one a dozen times over and you always let her have her way. It’s the first time I’ve seen you two this lively since Geoffrey’s funeral.

That’s why I’m writing, of course. I never expected to be separated from Geoffrey. We were the last of our bloodline until you three came along, and we only had each other. Certainly, there were times I thought I was done for, back in my field days, back before your birth, but I never really thought I’d be separated from Geoffrey. I’m certain, Addy and Dom, that you know the feeling. Nobody was more surprised that I was to see you carry Geoffrey out, to have to stand by my twin brother’s grave.

I always thought that if one of us were to die first, it would be Geoffrey standing by my grave.

We never meant to leave you alone and now. I’m the only one left.

There are some things we always planned to tell you someday, things too secret to even dare put to paper. If you’re receiving this letter now, it means my past has finally come back to haunt us all, that you’re asking questions about things I hid when you were an infant in my arms. Things involving a mission that should have been my legacy as a field agent, but instead has been scratched from the books.

I infiltrated Ali Aperte upon the death of Adriano Corvi. At this time, nobody knew that I worked for MI6. I was a nameless agent in the field and Lady Boothroyd in the social circles, and it was as Lady Boothroyd that they took me in. I was the feather in their cap, the proof that Ali Aperte was still strong, because Alessandro Corvi had managed to find his mate in a bloodline even older than his own. And that’s what I was, of course. Alessandro was glorious and what began as a trick became reality over the course of our relationship. I fed information back to MI6 the entire time, but I told myself that someday, I would make Ali Aperte go clean so I could stay with Alessandro forever.

In 1979, we were to be wed, and I told your Uncle Michael that I would not feed anymore information unless Queen and Country were at risk. He was M at the time, your Uncle Michael. Alessandro was no danger to England. His focus was on retribution against those who decimated his family trying to create an archangel, on using every power at his disposal to find them and kill
them. I told him it was too far, it was too much, but I loved him all the same.

A month before our wedding, I found out I was pregnant.

I didn’t tell him immediately. I wanted to wait for the perfect time.

And two days after I found out about you two, Alessandro tracked down one of the scientists involved with the Erzengel Versuch, one of the scientists who personally administered the last dose of a magic-accelerator toxin that killed Alessandro’s grandmother. I found him torturing the man, more furious than I had ever seen him, screaming that archangels were only to ever come naturally, that someday they would all see.

A week later, I felt your magic for the first time. If I wanted something that pertained to you—food, drink, a better pillow behind my back, anything—it happened. It was far beyond the scope of my abilities. I was frightened. I called back to MI6 for immediate extraction, assuming that if I was overreacting, I could return and tell Alessandro that I panicked and needed time alone. Richard arrived in Rome within hours, pulled off another mission to make sure I returned to MI6 safely.

I never returned. My wedding day came and went, and I wasn’t there.

Alessandro had all of Ali Aperte searching for me for years. Geoffrey had already gone into hiding to deal with Barbara’s death and raising Charlotte, so I moved in with him and we vowed to do our best to raise the three of you. All records of your birth, of your real age, were destroyed. We couldn’t risk Alessandro finding any of that information and doing the math.

I hope you will never need to see this letter. I hope someday, I will be brave enough to tell you this myself, but I fear I’ve spent too long living buried in secrets to be entirely comfortable sharing them. I hope Ali Aperte or even Alessandro himself will never do anything to make you ask the type of questions that would make Richard give this to you.

If you’re reading this letter, my loves, then I am so terribly sorry. Please remember that I love you above all else and that I have always been so incredibly proud of you. Adelaide, Dominic, you always have each other. You have never needed me. If you care to keep digging, the rest of the information regarding your birth and my time in Ali Aperte is hidden in the safe behind the fireplace, the one I never let you touch. The combination is Charlotte’s birthday.

Love,

Mum

***

They argue about opening the safe or not for five days.

Q wants to know. He wants to fill in a gap that’s always been in their life, all the times Mum would look at him and say you’re more like your father, Dominic and he didn’t know what that meant. He wants to open the safe, find out everything Mum put in it, and then figure out what to do from there.

Vivian wants to move on with their lives. They’ve gone this long not knowing and she has children
on the way. She doesn’t want to risk stirring up trouble and they’re fine. MI6 doesn’t care who their father is, now they know a name and enough information to be going by on. What does it matter if their real birth certificates are in there? They’re supposed to be nameless now, anyways- Dominic and Adelaide Boothroyd died to make way for Q and R.

Eve becomes the deciding factor. Professionally, they ought to look into anything that might help. Ali Aperte is more active than they’ve been since Mum fled from them and anything that might help deal with them is important. Personally, she knows that knowledge is sometimes better left in the past, that knowing everything about her own mother’s death didn’t make anything easier.

After five days, she rules that they open the safe privately, just the three of them, and that they discuss with each other whether they can share any of this information with others. They slide back the hidden panel and open the safe, going through the contents all together, piece by dusty piece.

Marriage license, issued to one Margaret Katherine Boothroyd and Alessandro Luciano Corvi, papers unsigned.

A series of love letters dating from 1979 all the way to one from a week before Mum’s death, all addressed to Alessandro Corvi. The creases are still sharp even in the oldest ones- Mum didn’t read and re-read these after she finished them.

Medical records from Mum’s pregnancy, Sebastian and Vivian’s birth, and their health checkups up until they were five years old. All of them are from the senior staff in Medical, the only people Mum ever trusted to deal with them. After five, Medical has their official records in their files- Dominic and Adelaide Boothroyd were around often enough for them to justify having marginally forged records.

Birth certificates for Adelaide Vivian Boothroyd and Dominic Sebastian Boothroyd, mother Margaret Katherine Boothroyd and father unknown.

Birth certificates from the same dates, timed moments earlier, for Adelaide Viviana and Domenico Sebastiano, mother Margaret Katherine Boothroyd and father Alessandro Luciano Corvi.

“I can’t believe she even had these made.” Q holds his up to the light, comparing it to the other one. It’s perfectly legitimate, or at least as authentic as the other one. Vivian traces her name on her second- first?- birth certificate, letting Eve examine the other one.

“These are the names she and Alessandro Corvi must have picked out,” Vivian says, somewhat subdued. “She just anglicized them later.”

“Do you think he’s still looking? If Mum was his mate…”

Vivian doesn’t need to finish the sentence. If Mum was his mate, this is utterly unheard of. Angels don’t leave their mates. It’s why marriage is considered just a show of a couple’s devotion, used more for legal reasons than any social commitment, among the old blood families. It would explain why, according to the MI6 reports, he hasn’t made any attempts to find a partner and, more importantly to the head of the family, an heir.

It also explains why they might now be active again.

“The obituaries,” he says, breaking the quiet. “That’s why Ali Aperte is active again. Their first lead in years.”

“Why would they be active if he just got confirmation that his mate is dead?”
Q pulls his laptop out from under the pile of papers, pulling up Mum’s obituary. “Margaret Katherine Boothroyd is survived by her daughter, Adelaide Vivian, her son, Dominic Sebastian, and her niece, Charlotte Eve. Days later, an invitation arrives for us to come to an abruptly planned gathering in Italy. He wants to know who his mate had children with, and we’re the only link.”

“We can’t go.”

“We have to go. We take two Double-0s with us as our escorts, give them a chance to find something out while the Corvi family is all focused on the two of us.”

Vivian folds her birth certificate, setting it back in the safe. “That’s too dangerous.”

“Then I’ll go alone.”

Vivian glares at him. Eve quietly excuses herself to get something to drink and leaves the flat entirely. Vivi knows he’s right- they’ve always been stronger together.

Q’s never sure if it’s actually a natural fact of their magic or a matter of learning control by each others’ sides, but he and Vivian are two sides of the same coin. They can both do offense, and they can both do defense, but it takes concentration, a complete flip in their focus from do not touch me to destroy. For Q, it has always been incredibly easy to take things apart into their component parts, to tear and destroy and hurt. He’s the ultimate offense, able to destroy any defenses and do what needs to be done, the same way he designs computer viruses and guns and bombs. Vivian is the ultimate defense, the untouchable ice queen, preferring the protection and healing of herself and her allies to attacking.

Together, they would be safe. On their own, not so much, but he’ll do it if he has to.

Vivi won’t let him go alone. It would be too much of a risk that he might get caught, that someone might find out that archangels are real.

Then they’d both be done for.

“One party. That’s all. We go, we socialize for long enough for the Double-0s to get information about Ali Aperte, and then we leave. No heroics.”

Chapter End Notes

And, welcome to the second act of this fic. You’ve all been so lovely- It’s been fantastic getting your thoughts. Hope you enjoy!
If angels make the best rom-coms, the stories of couples who against all odds are destined to be and will love each other forever, then they also make the best tragedies.

Human tragedies end one of two ways. There are the tragedies that end in hope, that once the grief of losing a friend or family or a lover has faded, there is the hope for a brand new day. That is the central characteristic of human tales- that there is always hope, no matter the reality of their final chapter. And for those writers and directors who want to deprive their characters of that last thread of hope, there waits death on the last page.

Angel tragedies as simple, but devastating. An angel who loses their mate loses the other half of their soul, condemned not only to remember the one they have lost but also to know that there will never be another. They are snippets from true stories, ending with an angel ripped apart from the inside as the camera freezes and the white text rolls.

Suicide, two years later.

Overdose, six months.

Triple homicide, six years.

Never painted another picture, never designed another machine, never wrote another article. Creative spirit ripped out, lifespan shortened. Lived only for their children, died once they were grown.

Angels make the best tragedies because, despite the undeniable power at their fingertips, they are so easily broken beyond all repair. And that, in the same voyeuristic way that we as a society watch a car crumble into a barrier wall or a train tip off its tracks, is why we love them.

Excerpt from Angels and the Entertainment Industry: Why So Many Angel Stories?

***

Malaika’s in Saudi Arabia, as she often is these days, where a woman in a hijab can walk unnoticed through the streets and listen to all the whispers. She’s practiced at being invisible there, at being just another face in a crowd, and then switching immediately to the glitz and glamour of high-society events.

Alec’s in Russia, where a simple information drop turned into explosions and gunfire and he vanished into the tundra. They won’t see him for a while. Alec can survive the tundra. He has plenty of times before. It’s a favorite trick of his- escape into the cold and the ice where his magic thrives and everyone else is limited.

Uncle Richard and Uncle Ananth are too old to be his bodyguard at a society event like this. He’s
Lord Boothroyd now, he has to *be* impressive, and for all he loves Uncle Richard and Uncle Ananth, they wouldn’t have the society ‘wow’ factor.

Charles will be there as Vivian’s fiancé.

Melissa Brune is in Venezuela. Akane was requested to help train bodyguards for ambassadors. Q doesn’t trust Sarah Adair with this mission.

There isn’t really a choice, but Q acts like there is. He puts off saying anything to Bond while the wing wrapped around his shoulders and the arm holding him to a chest are too fresh of memories, while they both know that he stays up to all hours of the night unless one of the Double-0s sits in his room and keeps watch while he sleeps.

So he focuses on the little details. Wardrobe- he stopped having clothes appropriate for a society party made years back, so none of his fit, and a party requires *a lot* of clothes. Vivian does have an appropriate wardrobe, but none of it fits now that she’s started showing. They need clothes for all occasions, most of them incredibly fancy, and enough for several changes of clothes a day. Society parties, as best he remembers, are an exhausting business of different outfits for different events and changing the moment they have a single wrinkle in their shirt.

They spend hours on colors and patterns and cuts- Q prefers grey and black and green, when it comes to dress clothes, while Vivian prefers violet and blue and grey. Q argues that grey is the obvious choice, the one thing they can agree on, but Vivi refuses to wear nothing but grey for the duration of their visit. They pick things out to mirror each other because if the Boothroyd Twins are making a return to society, even for just this one party, *they are making a return.*

Q teaches Charles how to put Vivian’s hair up with a minimum of pins and keep it secure, making him practice brushing it out and twisting it up. Charles is, for all his hand-eye coordination, absolutely atrocious at it. He can manage a serviceable twist that will be sufficient until Vivi can get to Q, at least. Mum taught Q to do Vivi’s hair- *you are a facade, my loves, so we shan’t be relying on outsiders to see us until we’re ready. Yes, sweetheart, I know it’s difficult, but if your Uncle Geoffrey could learn to do my hair, you can learn to do your sister’s.*

In the end, it’s Eve who takes care of it. She’s settling into her role of... well, M’s PA is the official title, but she’s more of the smiling face that finagles everyone into accidentally doing what M wants them to anyways. It’s working for her, whatever it is, and she’s genuinely happier than she ever was in the field and exactly as terrifyingly efficient as Mum was. She brushes through Q Branch to deliver an almost cruel amount of paperwork that Q swears Uncle Geoffrey never had to do when he was taking a few days off from the Branch, handing Charles his markedly smaller pile of paperwork, and mentions that she gave Bond his.

The minions all perk up at the hint of what might be good gossip. Vivian fails to hide a smile behind her cup and Charles shows an inordinate amount of interest in his paperwork for a man who not two minutes ago was deep in discussion about how to babyproof MI6. Charles is of the opinion that they need a designated area for the baby that can be kept secure. Vivian- and quietly Eve and Q, because they aren’t getting involved in this argument until they have to- think they turned out *just fine* with freedom to wander MI6.

Q’s on edge for the rest of the day, waiting for Bond to come demand answers. He’s in Medical for once, practically chained to the room while they run a battery of tests. Some lab tech tagged him with an experimental anti-magic toxin that temporarily nixed all his angel abilities- his fire, healing, even flight- and they want to reverse-engineer it from his bloodwork. Eve bet that he’d break out of Medical immediately upon reading the paperwork she handed him. Vivian bet he’d wait until the change of shift. Q just hid in his office and set enough security protocols to warn him before anyone
approaches.

They’re both wrong. Bond waits until 2:45 AM, give or take fifteen minutes, when Q usually gets up for a snack or to tinker with something because he’s never been good at sleeping for very long. He also waits in Q’s bedroom, breaking down and reassembling his weaponry in the dark, which is rather ominous when one lives a life where murder by secret agent is actually not out of the question.

“Your official MI6 file is three volumes long and says absolutely nothing at all.”

“That seems like a waste of paper.”

“Medical has records on you going back nearly thirty years. They’ve run every test I’ve heard of on you and then some, but they all say one of three things: you’re in good health, you’re perfectly sane, or the test was inconclusive.”

“You should try the Q Branch diet someday. Caffeine and sugar and takeout. Fantastic for the immune system.” Q scrubs at his eyes with one hand, reaching blindly for his glasses. If they’re going to have this conversation now, he might as well get something to eat.

“Stay.” Bond steps in front of the door. “I know how society parties work, Q. Bodyguards don’t get access to the kind of information we want to gather and I’m going to need a hell of a lot more information to play devoted boyfriend.”

Let me through, he demands, slipping past Bond while the angel’s trying to figure out why he moved half a step over. In the kitchen, he starts the kettle and starts assembling the batter for blueberry pancakes. It takes him a minute or two of digging around in the freezer to find the blueberries while Bond watches him almost curiously from the border between rooms. Q likes to make pancakes when he can’t sleep, so he tries to keep all his ingredients in the same places, but the Double-0s have been moving things.

“What is it you think you need to know?”

“Let’s start with your name.”

“Sebastian. Dominic Sebastian Boothroyd, in full, but I stopped going by Dominic years ago. Family and friends all call me Sebastian.”

“Angelic strength classification.”

“Class Two, unspecialized. And no, I don’t like to talk about it.” Q flicks water off his fingertips, testing the oil on the pan, and pours his pancake batter in.

“Childhood pets.”

“Double-0 agents.”

“This isn’t a joke, Q. Missions are life or death.”

“Lesley Wren, 1983.” Q eases the spatula around the edges of his pancake, pointedly not looking at Bond. He remembers a shadow of a woman, a child’s insistence that she bring them candy when she returned from her trip. He remembers sneaking in to the Situation Room because Mum and Uncle Geoffrey had left them with babysitting agents for too long and he was bored, hiding behind a desk while the figure on screen took one too many bullets.
“Don’t know her.”

“Ian MacKinney, 1985. Harold Johnson, also 1985. Lawrence Nielson, 1986. Catherine Pool and the entire Retrieval squad sent to help her, 1987. That one happened in the middle of my seventh birthday party. Nothing quite as cheery as opening gifts when a mission goes critical. Some junior agents, several of whom were in tears because they trained under Pool, were left to play party games with us while everyone else dealt with the crisis.”

He flips his pancake with only a little bit of oh god don’t screw this up help from his magic. It was an awful birthday, their seventh. Eve was going through a phase where she was so much older and couldn’t be bothered with the antics of her cousins, so she mostly ignored them while Uncle Ananth tried to keep them entertained. Uncle Geoffrey and Mum tried to drop in when they had a moment, but they were so guilty when they were away from damage control that it was miserable. Plus, it wasn’t even their birthday, since Mum moved their official birthday two months and sixteen days back from their actual birthday because she’s paranoid like that and… well, it actually makes a lot more sense now, what with the whole Corvi situation.

“Don’t tell me how serious missions are, 007. I know that better than most.”

If his pancakes are ready a little early, well, he doesn’t have the best control when he’s stressed. Q Branch jokes about how, in the middle of a crisis, the tea gnomes make sure that Q’s mug always has about three more sips left in it. His magic is almost an entity of its own, one he usually keeps a tight leash. When he’s stressed, his control frays and his magic fixes trivialities around him, trying to get him back to some kind of equilibrium.

Pancakes to the plate. Don’t let them snap there on their own, control it, use his hands. It’s a familiar litany of steps as he turns the cooktop off and moves his dishes to the sink, resisting the urge to just will them clean. Dishes are possibly his least favorite thing about living in a situation where he can’t use his magic freely- more than once, he’s found himself pretending to wash dishes in the sink and willing them clean as soon as he has them under the suds.

“You’re deflecting,” Bond finally replies. “If you know this is serious, then why are you hiding things from me?”

Q hops up on the counter and plucks a fork from the corner drawer, digging in to his pancakes. He’s deflecting. That’s funny. As if Bond wouldn’t do the exact same thing were Q to mention topics he doesn’t like talking about. Skyfall. Quantum. The lovely Miss Vesper Lynd, who wore her human lack of magic as a veneer of trustworthiness, yet slipped potent anti-magic toxins in Bond’s drink all the same. As if Bond hasn’t done the very same thing in every debrief and every interaction with his coworkers, turning on the empty smile and the witty turn of phrase, using insults to turn the tide of conversation away from questions he doesn’t want to face.

“I’ve told you more than I should.”

“You’ve told me nothing of importance.”

“No. Stop right there.” Q jabs his fork at Bond for emphasis, almost losing a piece of pancake to the floor. “Answer me this. In our line of work, are families a liability? Yes or no.”

“Yes.”

“And M. Would the terrorists like to have leverage to use against the Director of MI6?”

“Yes.”
“What about the Quartermaster?”

“Yes.”

With each successive answer, Bond’s reply has gotten clipped, the single syllable forced out between gritted teeth. He’s too controlled to snap his wings open in a classic intimidation technique, but the temperature in the room climbs a degree or two. There’s a dark wariness in his eyes, a reminder that Bond hasn’t forgotten Q’s little display in the National Gallery.

“And a child, an infant, son to the Director and nephew to the Quartermaster. Would that child not be the perfect leverage to use against MI6? Can’t you see it? My entire life is classified information because my very existence jeopardizes our secrecy.” Q glances over Bond’s shoulder to the layers of photographs on the wall behind him, to the photographs used for Uncle Geoffrey and Mum’s obituaries.

“Secrecy,” Bond scoffs. “It’s a poorly kept one, if that.”

Q takes the moment to finish off his pancakes and set that plate in the sink with the rest, working to contain the irritation picking at his control. There’s enough magic in the room to choke on as is. No need for him to let Bond rile him up, lash out and make a silly mistake. He’s the Quartermaster of MI6. He can deal with a stubborn agent digging his heels in.

“Teachers. Classmates. Administrators. Athletic coaches, tutors, advisors, lunch ladies, janitors. There are an frankly incredibly number of people children come into contact with on a regular basis unsupervised by their parents, and that’s only the ones at school. For someone like you, it would be a simple matter to track down leverage that way. For someone like me, there’s all the accompanying paperwork to look into, records and grades stored online. People live transparent lives, 007. Brave new world. Do catch up.”

Q stalks back to his room when his speech winds down. He didn’t quite get to his point, but maybe if he breezes by like he did, Bond won’t challenge it. He intended to point out that his life is exponentially more secret than most others, especially since everyone who was involved with his childhood had undergone MI6’s rigorous background checks and had non-disclosure clauses in their contracts. He got a half-garbled example with no conclusion.

Well, it is the middle of the night. He has an excuse.

He’s across the room before Bond speaks up.

“The blueberries.”

Q stops, turning on his heel. “What about the blueberries?”

“It’s my turn to do the grocery shopping. They were on my list after I made you pancakes the other morning.”

“I’m not following.”

“You just made blueberry pancakes.”

“Must’ve been another bag in the back of the freezer.” Q shrugs, turning back towards the siren call of his rumpled blankets. He doesn’t know if Bond will go back to watching over him or not- he and Alec and Malaika all have their own bedrooms, but Bond sits watch more often than the others these days.
“Q,” Bond calls, “you’ll have to do better than that if we’re to fool Alessandro Corvi.”

“Are pancakes in the middle of the night not romantic enough for you, Bond?”

“I never forget a face, you know.” Bond smiles, tapping his temple, but his eyes have gone cold and flinty. “Call me James, Azrael.”
Try to use angels in war is like trying to use an atomic bomb with a conscience. They are capable of incredible feats, particularly under the stresses of wartime. Historically, many of these feats were suspected to have been exaggerated, especially given that angels refuse to participate in civil wars. In modern times, the military applications of angels has been proven in extremely drastic ways.

Due to the private nature of the angel community, most military angels prior to World War II were occupied as healers. There were some notable uses of angels as weapons: the Armenian Genocide is rumored to have been carried out by angels, for one example, and the Spanish Civil War brought with it a mass exodus of angels who refused to take a side and fight their families. The most drastic examples, however, occur in World War II.

The atrocities of the Third Reich’s Erzengel Versuch and the Japanese Unit 731’s Senso no Tenshi experiments angered the angel community worldwide, leading to angel-wrought devastation late in the war. Fire-wielding angels walked through live minefields, exploding everything in their path. Electric angels restored power to bombed-out cities and, by the side of their contemporaries controlling stone and metal, made the streets safe again. They saved as many lives as they took in their angel, the fury and the pain fueling their power.

One of the most notable stories from the war is that of two brave teens in late September of 1943. Adriana Marek and Yachna Salomon were Polish Jews who let themselves be taken and hid their magic for the entire train ride, becoming two of the few angels to manage to hide. Other angels who had attempted to hide, avoiding the Erzengel Versuch, were caught on the trains because they healed their fellow prisoners, resulting in carriages with far fewer casualties than the others.

Adriana and Yachna were told that they were being taken to Ober Majdan, a transit camp for deportations to Ukraine, where they would be required to shower and have their clothes disinfected. The camp Ober Majdan, of course, is in reality the Vernichtungslagen known as Treblinka II. Adriana and Yachna were taken with the rest of the women and children to the barber barracks, their hair shorn off, believing that they would make their move in their final camp in Ukraine. They were taken to wait outside of the gas chambers while the men were gassed first, at which point they realized what awaited them.

Adriana, an earth-wielding angel, tore apart the gas chambers and the cremation pyres. She walled off Camp 1, preventing reinforcements from arriving, and knocked down the fences to create a way out before she was shot and killed. Yachna, a fire angel, dealt with the guards, most of which were burnt beyond recognition. Yachna then helped hide the remaining women and children before flying for reinforcements from the angel community, who then razed Treblinka II and liberated Treblinka I, fighting their way out with the survivors in tow. Yachna died from wounds taken at Treblinka, having refused to heal herself and instead expending her magic saving as many lives as she could.

Adriana Marek and Yachna Salomon are credited with saving nearly six thousand lives, at Treblinka that day. Their actions led to the attacks at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz II-Birkenau when angels intentionally infiltrated prisoner trains, though none of the attacks were as effective as the one at Treblinka II.
When she first came here, Maggie suggested what would become their weekly *pranzo delle donne* as a way to try and get information without making Alessandro suspicious. Valentina Corvi, Alessandro’s sister, is no innocent flower kept away from the dark side of the Corvi’s activities, but Marco’s wife Serafina Corvi is from an old blood family is known for their humanitarian efforts. MI6 identified Serafina as a possible informant, depending on how much she knows about the family’s… extracurricular activities.

Maggie’s not sure if she’d still be here, if it weren’t for Serafina and Valentina. Alessandro can be difficult, sometimes, and Maggie’s stubborn. Valentina has a near-uncanny sense of when they need a few days at the spa, just the three of them, and Serafina’s a veritable tornado of activity, dragging anyone nearby into her excitement. She loved them first, before she saw the heart behind the criminal.

“Can you pass the bread, Margherita? The little one is quiet.”

Valentina caresses the swell of her stomach, smiling faintly. Her little girl is due in a little over a month, but fledglings develop their magic early on and Valentina’s *bambino* is only too accomplished in lashing out with her magic when she kicks.

“*Naturalmente,*” she replies, carefully not letting her hand fall to her own stomach. Maggie hates keeping secrets from her soon-to-be-sisters, but she can’t quite shake the cold echo of Alessandro’s voice- *rompere il polso, Marco, parlerà*- or reconcile it with the way he stretched out next to her on the couch and read for the rest of the evening. She meant to tell him that night, to offer him the ultrasound photo and remind him of the names they spent so many evenings dreaming of, but she couldn’t do it with hesitance in her heart.

She loves Alessandro. She wouldn’t still be here if she didn’t, wouldn’t be drafting her letter of resignation to MI6 in the middle of finalizing wedding details. For all that she loves Alessandro, Maggie isn’t blind and she certainly isn’t stupid. Alessandro is obsessed with bringing down those responsible for the decimation of his family in World War II, as is Marco. He will go to any lengths necessary. It scares her, and Maggie takes pride in not scaring easily.

“Have you thought about more names for the little one?”

“Too many. Mama has new ideas to share every day,” Valentina sighs, touching the side of Maggie’s glass of lemonade to chill it again. “Just wait your turn, Maggie, Sera. Mama will be telling you what you can or cannot eat soon enough.”

“Not me,” Serafina says archly, waving a hand around them at the gardens and the distant river. “The two of you can do all the discipline and the diapers while I’ll be Aunt Sera and give them cookies.”

“What makes you think *I* won’t be the favorite aunt?” Maggie retorts, filching the last chocolate
cookie from Serafina’s plate and taking a bite before Sera can make a grab for it. Valentina watches
them both with the air of detached dignity that is her right as the eldest by a whole four months.

Their conversation rises and falls, arguments dissipating as quickly as they spark into existence,
switching smoothly from English to Italian and back again mid-sentence. It’s a throwback to when
Maggie first arrived here- she had only a tenuous grasp of Italian, and Serafina and Valentina’s
English wasn’t much better.

She can imagine their future only too easily. Valentina’s little girl in Serafina’s lap, cradled in the
shade of her wings, while Maggie’s the one reclining against a pile of pillows hoping the babies will
stop kicking for a while. The three of them on a blanket in the grass instead of sitting around the table
on the patio, laughing as they each try to feed a squirming toddler. Sara, the Corvi matriarch,
gathering her grandchildren at her knee to tell them the legends of Azrael and the first Angel Lords.

Alessandro. He wants a veritable army of children, Alessandro does. He wants to leave the running
of Ali Aperte to Marco, who enjoys it far more than he does, and live out their life chasing fledglings
around the villa. Knowing that twins run in the Boothroyd family, they’re likely to be overrun before
they know it.

Valentina doesn’t mention when Maggie’s hand drifts to her stomach and Serafina doesn’t notice.
Serafina’s young, in mind if not in years, and she chatters away about her meeting with the caterer
for Maggie’s wedding and the meraviglioso gift she has, just you wait and see.

“Margherita, cara, we need to change if we’re to keep our dinner reservations.”

Maggie doesn’t know how long Alessandro’s been standing there watching them. He’s leaning over
the balcony, dark curls a tousled mess and an affectionate smile warming his features, and she’s hit
but a sudden wave of oh my god, I’m pregnant and our children are going to be beautiful.

“What happened to not interrupting il pranzo delle donne, Ale?”

Alessandro reaches over the edge of the balcony, opening his palm to her. Valentina laughs,
murmuring something that sounds like l’amore pazzo ubriaco to Serafina and waving Maggie away.
She’s airborne before she thinks about it, squeezing Alessandro’s hand, and he yanks her to him.
Maggie tumbles from the sky, taking him to the floor with her, laughing as he intentionally cushions
her fall.

“And how was your day, innamorata?”

“If I have to try one more flavor of cake, caro, we’re running away to get married. I’ll even face
down your Mama’s wrath over canceling the big wedding if it gets me out of trying yet another
obscure flavor of cake.” Maggie drops a kiss to his nose, drunk on affection and the overwhelming
force of loving Alessandro, and she’s going to tell him tonight.

For all Alessandro’s faults, most of what he does is done for love of his family, and he will never let
anything harm the little ones growing inside her.

“Go on, Maggie. Shower’s all yours.”

“Not going to join me?”

Alessandro kisses her one more time, a brief brush of his lips over hers, and shakes his head. “Not
unless we want to miss our reservations.”

“Wouldn’t be so bad.”
“And have to face the ridicule of my siblings over dinner here.”

Maggie laughs. “Mi arrendo, mi arrendo. Will you help Valentina back to her room, Ale? The little one is kicking today.”

“She’s a feisty one, just like her Mama,” Alessandro comments, accepting the hand Maggie offers to pull him to his feet. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“None of us can wait to meet her,” Maggie agrees, and if Alessandro’s hand lingers overlong on her stomach, it’s just hope. She isn’t really showing, she knows that. She hasn’t even felt the babies’ magic yet!

She double-checks in the bathroom anyways, turning from one side to the other. Sure, there’s a slight curve to her stomach, but only because she knows what she’s looking for. Nothing Alessandro should be able to notice. Besides, it’s not like he’s quiet- if Alessandro noticed, he would have said something.

The water warms up faster than usual, settling on Maggie’s favorite temperature without and of the usual finagling with the taps. She frowns. There’s magic hanging around her- not an active spell, just the residual that any angel leaves behind unless they’re actively suppressing their powers. Villa Corvi is positively humming with it- they’re far enough from town that none of them bother suppressing their magic. Still, in their private rooms, it’s usually only the hum of her own magic and Alessandro’s, and this is neither.

Someone’s been in here.

The bottle of shampoo slips from her hand.

Maggie flinches- didn’t mean to do that, please don’t hit my feet- and the bottle is suddenly in her hand again, the spilled shampoo gone from the outside.

That isn’t her magic. She’s a fire angel. She can’t do that.

Nobody can do that. Air or water or ice could lift it, but nobody can make it just appear back in her hand. That’s… that’s legendary levels of power. That’s archangelic levels of power, changing the world itself.

The Erzengel Versuch, Alessandro hisses in her memories. You who would call yourself a doctor, you who stole my relatives away in the dark of night and sacrificed them to try and create the impossible. Your methods will never create an archangel. When that power comes, it will come from the old blood angels, and we will raze vermin like you from the land.

How did an archangel infiltrate this far into Villa Corvi without being noticed?

Maggie’s hand drops protectively onto her stomach. The magic whirls in agitation once more, splitting into two distinct magical signatures, and then settles. It’s less powerful now, but Maggie can still feel the sense-memory of the magic in the air, the jolt of heat-light-cold-static across her skin as the shampoo appeared back in her hand. She can feel them, two magical signatures, and she is afraid.

She doesn’t remember finishing her shower. She braids her hair by rote, slipping into the gorgeous green silk dress she planned on wearing out to dinner, and gathers the few personal belongings she can’t live without. There’s a silk scarf from Serafina, all the love letters Alessandro’s written her over the course of their courtship, the cookbook Valentina wrote out of all the recipes Maggie liked. She doesn’t bother with her clothes, the photographs on the dresser, none of it.
At the last minute, she slips into Alessandro’s favorite coat, secures the leather satchel against her body, and takes flight from a secluded corner of the villa.

Her emergency comm unit is dusty. She’s kept it hidden for years, never needing it, but she clicks it on now, getting the grainy static of a poor connection.

“Q Branch, what is your emergency?”

“This is Agent Margaret Boothroyd. I need to disappear.”
The legend of Azrael is divided into two distinct eras.

The first half is the legend all children learn, the tale of a young angel who could do anything and the trouble he got himself into, followed by the tales of Azrael fighting against a myriad of challenges to find true love and end up ruling over the angelic nations. These are the embellished tales of bravery and adventure that have been adapted into a variety of television programs worldwide and a dozen major motion pictures in Hollywood alone. These are the legacy of Azrael as the public knows it, the history that ends with a crown, a mate, and a happily ever after.

The second half has been banished to the history books.

Azrael’s power was unmatched by any in the land. The Angel Lords were powerful, the strongest of their kind and well-practiced in their arts, but the world changed to suit Azrael’s whim. Flames wouldn’t touch him, ice would shatter before it got close, and his own magic works by completely different rules. They called him The Archangel, the first known use of the term.

And the Angel Lords watched, and the Angel Lords waited, and finally they decided that Azrael was too powerful to be left alone.

Excerpt from The Death of a Legend: The Truth Behind the Myth

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Q escapes out his bedroom window.

The last time he did that, Mum had trapped him in his room during a Level Twelve Home Invasion Drill, also known as the What-If-We-Were-Attacked-By-Human-Assailants-With-Paramilitary-Training Drill. As not to be confused with the Level Eleven Drill, for human assailants with moderate military or equivalent training, or the Level Thirteen Drill, for Class Two angelic assailants with any form of military training. Anything over a ten was always irritating since they’d have to keep their magic within regular limits. This qualifies as a Sixteen-R at the very least: Bond has full-well, almost full- security clearance in Q’s home, he knows about Azrael, and he’s definitely a highly trained Class Two angel.
So he runs, not bothering to disable his own security system.

He slipped up.

Damn it.

He’s not hiding. That’s clearly not what’s happening here. He just has a pressing need to go work on… something… in his office. With full security lockdown. Alec and Malaika will like him taking precautions with his safety. And if he happens to sneak a week’s worth of food and bottled water out of Catering while he’s at it, well, something’s sure to come up that needs his attention. Paperwork. He’s always behind on paperwork.

Q lands once he’s sure Bond isn’t following him, catching a cab most of the way and walking the rest. He usually prefers the Tube for the anonymity it affords him, but there are still massive rerouting problems where they’re rebuilding the collapsed tunnel. It takes forever- he’s too paranoid to actually have a cab drop him right at MI6 because clearly, having the whole world know where they were headquartered was a great idea and he honestly doesn’t want all of London to know he works there. Anonymity equals safety, and skinny bespectacled kid who’s good with a computer is a lot more anonymous than MI6 employee.

“Late night, Quartermaster?”

Q flattens his palm on the scanner, scrubbing his other hand through his hair. He must look a disaster. It says quite about his work habits that Security doesn’t question him showing up at three thirty? Four? He lost track of time making his escape. He’s still in his pajamas.

“There are no hours on espionage,” he answers, which is complete and utter bullshit because the new M has very strict ideas on how many hours people- namely Q, because M isn’t blind- are allowed to work without rest. Apparently, naps on his couch don’t count, nor do experimental drugs that allow his healing factor to override any kind of need for sleep.

Not that he actually got around to trying the latter option. Eve tipped Malaika off while she was on a Chinese takeout run and Malaika proceeded to be completely terrifying and confiscated all the samples.

“Oh course, Q. I’ll have Catering’s night staff send down a pot of coffee, shall I?”

“Thanks.”

This late-slash-early, in the gap after the night owls have left and before the early birds return to work, MI6 is nearly silent. There’s the occasional person sitting at a computer, scrolling slowly through reports, and more than a few sleeping at their stations. Q Branch has a skeleton crew working, doing routine mission handling and watching the emergency line while they fiddle with their own projects. He’s probably the highest-ranked official in the building. M also has very strong ideas about his senior staff being available for meetings during regular business hours.

Best to get to his office before someone tells M- or worse, Vivi- that he’s here late when he has meetings all day tomorrow. Today. Something. Somewhen.

Maybe M has a point about him not being fully functional in the middle of the night.

Well, at least he can blame Bond for this one.

He wishes he could be more surprised when he walks into his office to find Bond leaning against his desk, arms crossed.
“In what way did leaving through my bedroom window say I wanted your company?”

“You came here, didn’t you? If you wanted to get away from me, you would have run to your sister or checked in to a hotel where I couldn’t find you.” Bond shrugs. “Not without quite a bit of effort, at least.”

“What do you want, Bond?”

“James.”

Q takes another look at Bond. He’s always a bit stubborn, pushing the limits of what Q will permit when at home and intentionally misunderstanding M’s orders on mission, but Bond’s looking downright insubordinate now. Well. Q expected that they’d have to hash this out- Bond isn’t one to take orders well, and Q’s little show at the National Gallery was only bound to last so long before Bond started questioning his authority. He just wasn’t expecting it to take place with Bond aware of Azrael.

“Move.”

“You can’t run away from me, Q.”

“Don’t try me.” Q shoos Bond away, banishing him to the couch. “I need to disable the cameras in Sparring Room 1.”

Bond leaps up from the couch like he’s been scalded. Q hides a smile behind his computer screen. He’s allowed to take a little vindictive pleasure in discomfiting Bond after the angel effectively chased him from his bed at a frankly stupid hour of the morning.

“Why?”

Q enters an override code to shut down the cameras, pushing his keyboard away.

“Because, James, a demonstration will make you leave me alone faster.”

Eve is going to kill him for this, if Vivian doesn’t get to him first.

Sparring Room 1 is all gleaming chrome and tile, perfectly washable and pristine. There are cameras on every inch of it and a viewing gallery up above, all of them protected against both magical and physical attacks. It doesn’t have any of the holograms and training toys built for the other sparring rooms- the people authorized to use this room would break them too fast. No, this is almost exclusively the domain of the Double-0s, designed for them to batter each other while every angle is captured for teaching purposes.

Mostly for teaching purposes. There’s the occasional intimidation factor when they need to show someone exactly why the Double-0s are so sparingly deployed.

Q drops the duffel with Azrael’s armor to the ground, waiting to hear Bond’s steps behind him before he wills the door to snap shut. Electronic locks engage automatically, a faint beep-click of machinery, while the rarely-used deadbolts screech in protest as they all slide from their housings. He’ll pretend again tomorrow, when everyone’s watching, but Bond dragged his secret out into the open and Q’s going to make a bloody point.

“I left the changing room doors unlocked. Go pick out whatever gear you want.”

“To fight a boy in his pajamas? Seems a bit unfair.”
Q grins, reaching for his magic. *Change*, he wills it, *I want the armor on*. He focuses on exactly what he wants— a one-for-one shift, armor replacing pajamas, not for his clothes to start undressing him while his armor waits its turn- and his pajamas fold themselves as they fall neatly into his duffel. He rolls his shoulders, making sure that the armor is sitting right, and gives Bond a cocky ta-da!

“007, nothing’s unfair against me.” Q leans back against the wall, letting his smile fall away. “The game starts when you step back out here. I won’t use lethal force against you. You’re welcome to try whatever you want. If you’d like to tap out, say seraphim. Am I understood?”

“When you want to tap out, Azrael,” Bond says, matching Q’s return to pointed formality, “I want to hear you say that I’ve won.”

“Keep dreaming.”

Bond won’t follow the rules. That much is obvious. He’ll attack from the shadows of the locker room, something ranged to try and catch Q off his guard. He’ll use every dirty trick in the books and then a few he makes up on the spot because if anything, Bond is competitive, and Q’s intentionally pushed him to that edge.

If Q loses, Bond will never respect his authority again.

If Q wins, he might crack the confidence of one of Mi6’s best.

Nothing for it but to play the game.

And Q doesn’t intend to lose.

Bond begins with fire and smoke. Q banishes it before Bond can use it for any kind of cover, fixing an image in his head, *Sparring Room 1, gleaming chrome and matte white tiles, free of flame and smoke and damage*. Bond circles the edge of the room, stalking behind Q, and there’s barely a whisper of his boots as he attacks.

Trip.

Bond crashes to the floor. He’s on his feet again in seconds, slightly more cautious this time, lunging towards one side.

*Two steps over,* Q pushes, sliding Bond just far enough away to miss him.

Simple things won’t work, Bond. Figure it out. Don’t be *boring*, prove that Q was right to give him this chance, a chance to spar with an archangel. A chance to play, where Q isn’t going to just deal with him as efficiently as possible. He doesn’t do this often- he and Vivian spar to keep their skills up, occasionally, but he’s always been the ultimate offense while she’s the ultimate defense. It’d be easier to slam Bond into the ground, hold him immobile and turn his own magic back against him, than to play around like this.

Bond doesn’t disappoint. This time, he comes in with firing, ducking as Q flicks the bullets lazily away, burying them in the tile. He’ll fix it later. Bond tosses his guns aside— he and Vivian spare to keep their skills up, occasionally, but he’s always been the ultimate offense while she’s the ultimate defense. It’d be easier to slam Bond into the ground, hold him immobile and turn his own magic back against him, than to play around like this.

Bond doesn’t disappoint. This time, he comes in with firing, ducking as Q flicks the bullets lazily away, burying them in the tile. He’ll fix it later. Bond tosses his guns aside— they’re some of Q’s palmprint encoded ones, he notes, so Bond can toss them aside without worry that they’ll be used against him- and pulls a blade out.

Q dodges a few times, slipping like water through Bond’s attempts to corner him mostly because he doesn’t want to admit to Vivi that he did this. He can’t fix his armor like he would his clothes- his magic relies on knowing the composition of something to actually fix it seamlessly, and only Vivi knows the composition of their armor. Even the cloth parts are some special blend reinforced against
the shifting of the world around them. Turns out there’s an actual, faintly pseudo-science reason why
his favorite sweaters are always faintly frayed despite his best efforts.

Bond gets close while Q’s thinking, jabbing a needle into his neck.

Whoops.

Q knows what it is before it starts to burn. It’s the best strategic move Bond could have made. If anti-
magic toxin hurts a Class Two angel more than a Class One angel, what would it do to an archangel?
Q’s entire existence thrives on his magic, so what is he without it?

Shit. He forgot how much anti-magic toxin hurts. Mum had him and Vivi regularly exposed so
they’d learn to compensate without it, but he’s never built up any tolerance to it. It rages through his
veins, burning-cold-sharp-empty, and Q can feel all the sleepless nights and skipped meals that his
healing factor’s been protecting him from. He’s got one more move before his magic gives out
completely, and only about ten second to make it in.

Down, he demands, slamming Bond to the ground. Q puts a knee on his ribs, leaving the other
planted on the ground, and closes his hands around the grip of Bond’s guns. He clicks the safety off
on both of them, one pressing sharply into the undersize of Bond’s jaw and the other safely out of his
reach.

“Give up now and I won’t break your wrist,” Bond offers, smiling with too many teeth.

Q considers for a moment before the nausea makes him sway. No, he’s not playing nice. Last time
he was dosed with this much anti-magic toxin, he was sick for a solid week and his magic was more
unpredictable than usual for a month. So he lifts the other gun, tipping his hand so Bond can see the
little green light shining above his hand.

“So much for those being coded to my palmprint and mine alone.”

“I left myself an override. Don’t take it personally. Now, if you submit, I won’t shoot you. Do it
nicely and I might even call Israfil to fix you up.”

Bond laughs, gasping slightly as Q digs the gun into his windpipe, and he tenses. “You’re what, a
hundred pounds soaking wet? We both know you’re not combat trained, not the way I am, and now
I’m the one with magic. You lose.”

“Have it your way.”

Q shoots him just above his left hip and the laughter cuts out. He reaches for the pouch at Bond’s
waist- there’s another syringe of anti-magic toxin there, he can even the playing field a little, and
that’s when the darkness catches up with him.

“Override delta-sierra-bravo-two-niner-niner-seven,” he whispers as he finds himself right next to
Bond’s ear, collapsed across his chest in an ungainly sprawl of limbs too weak to hold him up any
longer.

There’s going to be no good way to explain this one- Sparring Room 1 destroyed, Bond with a hole
through his middle, and Q unconscious and dosed up with anti-magic toxin.

Good thing he’ll be too unconscious to do the explaining.
Ah, sorry, guys. School and Canoe and life just all exploded. This chapter is known as The Chapter That Wouldn't Be Written. I restarted this four times and I'm still not terribly happy with it, but it serves its purpose. I promise better is coming, and hopefully soon!

Knowledge is power.

It comes from the Latin ‘scientia potentia est’, in Thomas Hobbes’ writings, or possibly earlier from ‘ipsa scientia potestas est’, meaning ‘knowledge itself is power’, from Sir Francis Bacon’s. The related phrase ‘sapienta est potentia’ is often translated as ‘wisdom is power’. Similar concepts have been found in Persian epic poetry, in the Hebrew Book of Proverbs, and in a plethora of other places.

It’s a phrase of relatively uncertain origin that has come to uncontested use, but recent work in excavating ruins dating back to the reign of Azrael suggest a different theory.

Knowledge is an archangel’s power.

If authenticated, it would be the oldest recorded usage of a variant of the phrase. The discovery and recent research into the mechanics of angel magic are theorized to have implications about the nature of Azrael’s power. Scientists hope that this might lead them to a breakthrough on the relationship between magic and the laws of physics it seems to break and possibly to an answer on whether archangels are physically possible.

Practical studies on Class Two angels say that angelic magic is dependent on two concepts: desire and visualization. An angel’s own healing factor bypasses this step, functioning autonomously to bolster and accelerate natural processes. All other manifestations of their power follow this formula.

Fire. The angel’s desire creates the spark, the change, and they visualize the resulting flame or explosion they want it to create. Tests done on dozens of fire-gifted angels have proven that angels with a working knowledge of the chemistry of combustion tend to have much more precise control over their abilities, regardless of any other outside influences.

Healing. All angels can accelerate their own healing to a degree, but not all of them have the empathy to push their magic out and desire that another person is healed. This ability is especially prevalent among medical personnel. It is unclear whether the prevalence at the time of the test is due to their medical knowledge or that particularly empathic individuals with a talent for healing tend to go into medicine.

It would naturally follow that an archangel’s nigh on unlimited power obeys the same rules, with the sole difference that they are not limited to one or two narrow abilities. An archangel could, theoretically, do anything so long as they knew enough to visualize it. A building, after all, is nothing but the simple physics of trusses and beams. Food and drink are chemical reactions, sound and light
are waves, and the world is their playground.

Or, as was carved into the center of Azrael’s empire, knowledge is an archagel’s power.

***

The airport is awkward.

It’s not the usual awkwardness everyone else thinks about, with security checks and long lines and terrible airport food. They’re all powerful angels from old blood families, so they get fast-tracked to private security checks, two well-placed bribe-slash-gifts, and a flash of Bond and Blake’s MI6 IDs. It’s all private lounges with decent food, comfortable couches, and some much vaunted privacy.

Charles and Vivian like the privacy. They’re curled up together, poring over a guidebook, the very picture of domestic bliss. Charles’ hand rests overtop Vivian’s on her stomach while they whisper to each other and he’s been carrying her laptop bag for her. In a word- sappy.

He’s glad to see it.

It’s more affectionate than they’d usually be in public. Mum taught them to be reserved and distant in public, put on a facade so nobody finds their weaknesses. Charles has undergone similar training to be a Double-0, so they barely so much as hold hands in public, but they’re expecting the Corvis to have spies watching. It’s what they’d do, if they were inviting the reclusive children of their long-lost secret agent mate to a party. They need to make it look genuine, especially Charles and Vivian, and hopefully that will take attention away from Q and Bond’s uncomfortable attempts at not killing each other.

Q leans against Bond’s side, catching his wince. He isn’t completely healed from where Q shot him-Bond did a half-assed job of healing himself, which stopped the bleeding, but the complications from his magic made it so Medical couldn’t touch it with their own magic. It’s all about visualization, and Bond screwed it up enough that they couldn’t safely fix it. He’s stuck with stitches and his regular accelerated healing, for now.

Q’s fine with that, which is perhaps a little vindictive of him.

On the other hand, he did just recover from enough Killjoy to permanently incapacitate almost any angel and probably kill a human. It trashed his immune system, let him catch a nasty cold, and then hung around in his system long enough to give even Vivian a nasty headache if she so much as tried to heal him. He has a stellar excuse to be a little vindictive.

“You’re a little heavy, Sebastian,” Bond grits out, teeth bared in a rictus of a smile. “I know we’re in private, dear, but a little decorum might be called for.”

“I’m feeling a little under the weather, sweetheart,” Q answers, letting Bond support a little more of his weight. “I was just sick, you remember.”

Vivian glances up from the guidebook, an admonishment on her lips, and Q shushes her with a brush of his magic against hers, a sharp-shock moment of worry-care-stop, emotions laid bare without letting the world change around either one of them. She shakes her head, making her disapproval clear, and turns back to listing sights she and Charles would like to see if they get time to themselves.
It’s unlikely that they will. If Q was in Alessandro Corvi’s position, if he had one week to spend with the children of his dead mate, he wouldn’t let them go wandering the local countryside. He’d also be doing extensive background checks, finding a whole lot of nothing in Q and Vivian’s and a whole lot of contradictions in Charles and Bond’s, and having people try to watch them in London. Not that it would tell him anything compromising: Vivian lives with Charles now, Bond lives in Q’s flat. Alec and Malaika have been out of the country, so it looks like they live alone, and the two of them have been basically on house arrest since the fight in Sparring Room 1.

But then again, maybe that’s just Q knowing both sides of the story, knowing that they’re MI6 trying to figure out more about Ali Aperte. Knowing that he and Vivian will have to look their father in the eyes and pretend he’s just another old blood angel lord. Which he is- Alessandro Corvi had nothing to do with raising them, that was all Mum and Uncle Geoffrey and the MI6 senior staff, but they may or may not be starved for family after recent events.

“Enough of the passive-aggressive pet names,” Charles says, not bothering to look away from the guidebook. “If you’re going to kill each other, please wait until you won’t make a scene. And watch yourself, Sebastian. The lights have started to flicker.”

Stop that, he orders, and the lights flicker once more in defiance before evening out.

“Briefing,” Q says. “We’re ourselves, or at least as much of ourselves as possible. Vivian and I are artistic recluses, living off the family fortune. She’s musical, violin and cello and piano, and I’m artistic, drawing and painting mostly. Yes, we actually have those skills- ask 002 about the time Vivian played elevator music into his comms for two hours.”

“It was one hour.”

“It was two. I was there.”

Vivian rolls her eyes and yanks the file from his hands, flipping open to their cover stories. “Charles and James are MI6, we met you at a social event of Mum’s, they basically get to be themselves. We aren’t talking about the fledglings unless someone else brings it up first, we’ve lost contact with our cousin Eve after the funeral.”

It’s simple enough. There’s more information about Charles Blake and James Bond available, since they haven’t lived their entire lives in a sort of partial seclusion. They grew up in the angel community, they have friends who knew them and school records and military service records, and enough of their missions are on record for someone with power and money to find out about them. So they leave those histories alone, acknowledge them, and hide the truth behind the two people Alessandro Corvi can’t find anything out about because there isn’t any information about them.

It’s an elegant plan.

Which means something is going to fail.

This is the stage of a mission that Q can usually delegate, the point between equipment on a stainless steel tray and clipped instructions in some agent’s ear. Retrieval usually deals with transportation on both sides of a mission, coordinating with low-level Q Branch agents who can follow directions on Mapquest. He never had to do that, skipped straight to missions handling thanks to years of working by Uncle Geoffrey’s side.

He’s bored to death.

He pulls up the specs Vivi sent him for the new body armor, twirling the 3D mockup to check the
joints, doing rapidfire calculations about mobility and chafing. This particular model is designed for snipers doing extreme shots, combining the best in body armor with protection against sunstroke, weather, and other problems when they're laying prone for hours waiting for the shot. On top of all that, it has to be light enough for them to hike into position.

It's one of Vivian's more radical designs, since it doesn't have to hide under other clothes or fit in with the body armor used by military and law enforcement. An overlapping series of segmented plates ripple down along the spine, permitting a full range of movement without compromising protection. The front has more padding and less plating for comfort, since they're most worried about someone trying to snipe the sniper while they're immobile.

“There’s a gap between the plates over the lumbar and thoracic spine.”

“Only under full extension.”

“Why would you leave a gap when the rest is designed to never leave a gap?”

“Low percentage shot, not lethal with angelic healing factor, and adjusting the plates allows for the wearer to do a full backbend.”

“Very useful for a sniper.”

“I thought so, too.”

This time, when Q leans into his shoulder, Bond just readjusts to keep the weight away from his injured side and watch him work.
August 27, 1979

Alessandro,

The summer is dying and some days, I feel like I am, too.

Three months ago, I fled from your side without a word, and with every day the world is a little dimmer. I ask myself every day if it’s worth it, if the pain of losing you is worth the slightest chance that your obsession might harm the children growing inside me, and every day a little piece of me dies as I say I’m afraid of you knowing them.

On June 29th, I cried into Geoffrey’s shoulder, claiming pregnancy hormones. He didn’t mention that I was supposed to be in Italy with you, walking down the aisle, putting together a beautiful nursery for our children.

Oh, the things we dreamed, Alessandro.

Geoffrey wants me to give them family names, told me that under no circumstances should I name them anything you might recognize. They’ll be Boothroyds, of course, and I’ll have to obscure their age and get rid of all records so you can’t find them. I’ll do everything I can to hide them from you, and that means I’ll have to disappear, too, because you’ll never stop looking.

I love you for that, but I hate you a little, too. If you’d forget about me, my love, our lives would be so much easier. You could find someone to rule alongside you and I could raise our children in peace, give them the life they deserve. Instead, they will get a life of secrecy, of secrets kept from the world and secrets I’ll keep from you.

So I’ll name them like we talked about. I’ll have to Anglicize it, you understand, but they will be ours as much as I can make them.

But you can never know.

So I’ll seal up this letter and hide it somewhere, pretend that if it isn’t sitting on my nightstand then you must have it, and with time the pain of our separation will fade.

It will have to.

Yours, always,

Maggie
Serafina Corvi is everything Mum’s reports said she dreaded being.

She waits for them at Arrivals, white hair braided down her back and a fledgling clinging to her knee, everything that a proper angel of the elite should be. Poised, elegant, publicly comfortable with her family without being overly affectionate. From Mum’s notes, Serafina was the Corvi wild child, uninterested in her duties to the family. Now, in the absence of Alessandro’s mate, she and Valentina have functioned jointly as the matriarch of the family since 1979.

“You look like her,” Serafina says in lieu of a greeting, stretching out one hand to cup Vivian’s cheek. “Both of you do, but you especially.”

“Adelaide Boothroyd,” Vivian introduces herself. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Serafina’s eyes skim over Vivian’s stomach, but she doesn’t say anything. The boy clinging to her knee peeks out around her, hiding again as soon as Q looks at him. Bond and Charles don’t say anything, staying within arm’s reach and carrying all of the luggage. Around them all, the airport bustle flows in ebbing tides of rolling suitcases and duffelbags and chauffeurs with neatly typed signs. There is a bubble of space around them that’s rare for an airport—unless, of course, dealing with five very strong adult angels who aren’t exactly terribly happy with each other.

Their displeasure is palpable, and that’s even without Q and Vivian allowing their magic to snake out and change the environment.

“Dominic Boothroyd,” Q offers when the silence stretches too long. “This is my partner, James, and Adelaide’s fiancé Charles.”

He’s proud of himself for not stumbling over either his or Vivian’s first name. It’s been years since she was Addy to him. Slipping back into those habits, their teenage terms for each other, has taken most of the plane ride, whispering into each other’s ears in first class while Bond and Charles sit across the aisle and take turns sleeping.


She turns on her heel, sweeping the boy up into her arms and leading the way. The crowd doesn’t quite part before her, but they certainly don’t stand in her way. Vivian gives Q a faintly pitying look before following Serafina to the waiting limousine. Bond and Charles sit on either side of Q, leaving Vivian to slide in next to Giancarlo. The boy pokes at her stomach, silently asking for permission first, far more interested in the prospect of little fledglings than in the other adults.

Q takes the time to examine Serafina herself, comparing the woman he sees before him with the woman in the files. She carries herself with the same unconscious elegance as the rest of the angelic elite, the aches and pains of age wiped clean by her magic, and her clothes are understated but designer. There’s a glint of bright intelligence and a faint amusement with the world that Q tends to associate with Eve making mischief, but a sort of sad solemnity overlays it all. All in all, concurrent with Mum’s notes on Serafina Corvi, except for the solemnity.

That, according to what the Rome office has, is a personality change dating back to 1979, 1980 at the latest. Q doesn’t think the timing is a coincidence.

He doesn’t believe in coincidences like that.

“Wear blue,” Serafina tells them, watching the cars outside the window stream by in a blur of silver-red-black. “Dominic and Adelaide, I mean. Blue was your mother’s color. All the cool colors were,
blue and purple and a pale dove grey.”

She doesn’t so much as look at them while she says that, running a hand through Giancarlo’s curls to soothe herself. The boy snuggles up against his grandmother’s side, straining to wrap his arms around her waist. He’s shaking just a little bit, burying his face in her side. Q closes his eyes, suppressing a sigh.

Fledglings are particularly sensitive to the emotional climate, their magic active enough to respond to it and yet not controlled enough to block out the emotions that don’t belong to them. Q remembers only too well the days when a mission went poorly and he and Vivian just sobbed into each other’s arms, unable to cope with the anger and frustration coming off all the others. He won’t do that to the poor kid.

_Get yourself under control, Q._

“I would think that you’d be advising us against wearing her colors,” Vivian states coolly, getting herself under control, too. They at least have practice shielding off all of their magic, which comes with the uncomfortable side-effect of shutting themselves off emotionally, too. Bond and Charles can’t do that. It’s not something regular angels ever have a reason to learn. Great minds think alike, and all that- he and Vivian can deal with a little discomfort if it means sparing Giancarlo some.

“Avoid wearing green and black together. Those was always his colors,” Serafina hedges the question, half-drifting into memory. “My brother-in-law may be desperate to meet you, but Valentina and I would like to protect him as best we can. Margherita’s absence hurt us all.”

_Don’t remind him of what he could’ve had._ It’s implicit in what she doesn’t say, and Serafina doesn’t even know the whole of it. For a quiet few minutes, he’s almost overwhelmingly guilty- they didn’t just deprive Alessandro Corvi of the chance to raise children with Mum, they deprived him of the children he never knew existed. There’s not anything he could have changed- he could tell Corvi the truth, expose Mum’s last secret, but it wouldn’t take away the decades without his mate and never getting to know his children.

Kinder, really, to not let him know.

It’s Charles who changes the subject with a quick smile, steering it back to safer territory. “Will there be any other guests at the villa with us?”

“Just the family, for now. We thought it best not to overwhelm the famously reclusive Boothroyds. If you stay a little longer, we may hold a party, celebrate your return to angel society.” She ruffles Giancarlo’s hair, smiling down at him. “Should we have a party, Gianni? Would you like that?”

The boy nods, peeking back over at Q and deciding he’s no threat. He’s not quite so convinced about the Double-0s, which just goes to show that the boy has good instincts. Or bad ones, to disregard Q, but half his life has been spent making people underestimate him.

“The fledgling has spoken,” Bond intones gravely. “Who would we be to deny him?”

“Wise.”

Q and Vivian don’t talk much for the rest of the drive, letting Bond and Charles carry the conversation and probe for information. Serafina is perfectly willing to talk about her family so long as they skirt around the twin topics of Alessandro and Mum, telling them not to underestimate Giancarlo- _I don’t know how he gets into half the places he gets into, he can barely keep his feet off the ground trying to fly-_ and that her nieces spent the first two years of her nephew’s life hiding him.
in increasingly improbably places, all sorts of little tidbits about life at Villa Corvi.

It’s a beautiful life that unfolds across the bounds of his imagination, spellbound by Serafina’s tales of chasing children around the villa and teaching them to fly in the gardens. It’s a beautiful lie underneath it all, snippets of the bloody aftermath of Alessandro’s failure to find Mum and trying to rebuild their connections, the social stigmas that tar her child and her nieces and nephew’s prospects—who are they, he can imagine the whispers, *do you really want your children associating with them?*

He’s glad to have a little bit of space when they arrive at the villa. Giancarlo climbs over Serafina’s lap to escape, tearing off and calling for Zia Carolina, as they all do the overly polite sideways shuffle to the doors. Serafina waits until the limousine has pulled away, the staff carrying their bags inside, to turn back to her guests.

“Welcome,” she smiles, throwing her arms dramatically wide, “to Villa Corvi.”
Studies done in Boston had fledglings, unmated angels, and mated pairs run through a series of tests on their physical fitness, mental acuity, and magical capabilities. They were taken from a range of strength levels and specializations, ages, races, genders, and relative percentage of angel to human blood. Each angel was run through the tests alone, then in the presence of angels they’d never met before, then again in the presence of family members or their mates.

The intent of the study was to find tangible evidence of the magical bond between mates. Angels have long claimed that there is such a bond between not only mates, but to a lesser extent family members and close friends. Similar studies were going on concurrently in Tokyo, Madrid, and Tripoli, focused on the influence of magical and emotional bonds in shaping angel society.

Findings in the Boston study were surprisingly conclusive. Angels performed similarly on all tests, within a range of error, when alone or in the presence of strangers. When in the presence of family members, there was an upward trend in some, but not all, cases. Mated angels, on the other hand, performed significantly better across the board when in the presence of their mate. It’s the most conclusive evidence of a metaphysical ‘mate bond’ between angels.

A study done in Amsterdam followed a group of fledglings from birth, running them through a comparable series of tests on a twice-yearly basis. This study found an increase in magical strength after an angel found their mate that is separate from the increase in strength when their mate is present.

These join studies on the rare pairs of separated mates that show chronic depression, a weakening of their magical powers, and a propensity to illness after their separation. For angels, mates aren’t just a social phenomenon- they’re now proven to be a physical one.

-Excerpt from Mates and Magic: Metaphysical Links Behind the Social Contract

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Q breathes a little easier the minute he and Bond are alone in their suite.

Old houses carry memories. Old houses that have been inhabited by angels for centuries carry an imprint of their bloodline, the collective magic of generations enough to make them nearly haunted. Doors slam, candles light, and the house itself resonates almost like an angel itself. In the old legends, the castles of old blood families would defend their family to the last stone.

The house recognizes them as a part of the bloodline.

Sure, the villa is probably the most powerful entity here- apart from himself and Vivi, of course- but
magic’s fickle when it comes to bloodline. The actual bloodline’s only half of it, useless without recognition and acceptance. They were taking the risk that their own knowledge of their parentage wouldn’t be enough to resonate with the family, assuming that the implicit rejection would keep them safe. Secret. They’re synonymous, at the moment.

“Nice of them to give us some alone time,” Bond remarks, pacing the edge of the room. *Play along,* he mouths silently to Q, *looking for bugs.*

Q rolls his eyes. He’s *not new* at this, much as his work is usually behind a desk. If he so desired- if he wasn’t worried about exposing himself- he could short out any bugs with a thought. If he weren’t worried about demonstrating his computer skills, he could do nearly the same thing, albeit a little slower, from his laptop. A lot slower. Slower to some degree relative to the speed of his magic.

Irrelevant.

Q flops back onto the bed, bouncing a little to test the springs, and takes a good look around at his new home away from home. It’s the type of place that appeals to his sense of aesthetics and simultaneously horrifies him from a security perspective: a wall of windows with French doors out onto a wide balcony, high ceilings, and absolutely nowhere to hide. The ensuite bathroom is probably much the same, tile floors that are slightly not-smooth to the touch and warm colors on the walls and expensive furnishings. Cozy, but at the same time slick and expensive.

“Go wash up,” Bond murmurs, leaning over him to check the side tables and the headboard. “I’ll join you in a minute.”

“Too tired to move.”

“You’ll feel better after a hot shower.” Bond drops down to his elbows, almost putting his weight on Q, and snaps his wings out to curve around them. “Three bugs in the room. Video over the doorframe, audio in the lamp and under the left side table.”

“Obvious locations.” Q considers for a moment, reaching up to straighten a few of Bond’s feathers in that awkward spot just behind his shoulder where he knows Bond can’t see. “And rather voyeuristic of them, using video. Meant for us to find, then, if we are any kind of competent. There’ll be others.”

“I know.” Bond shifts a little to the side, keeping his wings curled around them both. “Hence the cover of my wings. And don’t do that, Q, it tickles.”

“You probably shouldn’t call me that here.”

“Don’t do that, Sebastian, it tickles.” Bond rolls away, wings tucking away before he hits the bed, and brushes his knuckles against Q’s cheekbone. “Go wash up. I wasn’t kidding about that.”

It’s a perfect facade. At the airport, they had a sort of distant affection appropriate for angels of the elite, where their lives could too easily become the target of paparazzi if they acted out. Now, it’s a slightly more intimate affection, a quiet moment taken in private before they face the world again. Q’s letting Bond lead this- he’s far more aware of appropriate social nuances and misleading perceptions than Q is.

Bond is, in some ways, a better actor. Enough of himself shines through in any role to make it perfectly convincing, a skin he slips into rather than a costume, and yet he is distinctly different. There’s the James Bond whose mission records are a source of constant amusement to younger employees of MI6 and equally constant exasperation to anyone who deals with him, a construction of witty one-liners and bold machismo. There’s the James Bond who held Q when Mum died, the
James Bond who has drinking competitions with Alec over Mario Kart until it’s 4 AM and they’re both utterly smashed, and the James Bond who occasionally still feels the need to stand guard over Q while he sleeps. They’re all completely different and they all wear the same face.

Q and Vivian are a different kind of actor. There are two of him: Q, the brilliant engineer and one of MI6’s youngest ever Quartermasters, and Azrael, the archangel who changes the world to suit himself. They’re distinctly different, different enough that very few in MI6 have ever connected Q and Azrael. Vivian is the same, though MI6 has more often needed Azrael’s destructive magic than Israfil’s defensive kind.

It makes them particularly ill-suited to this task, since the only thing worse than revealing themselves as MI6’s Q and R would be revealing themselves as MI6’s legendary Azrael and Israfil. It might be even more of a risk than Alessandro figuring out that no, his mate didn’t go have an affair. If they can call it an affair when he and Mum were never legally married, despite the fact that an angel finding their mate is far more binding than marriage.

He tips his face up into the spray, letting a tendril of his magic thread out and fix the not-quite-right temperature and pressure. He thinks privacy and feels the lock click and all the bugs in their suite fizzle and die.

This was a bad idea.

They’ve lost so much, him and Vivian. They grew up children without a childhood, without any playmates beyond their own cousin and a parade of paid killers-slash-babysitters, and they began losing their family the moment Eve changed her name to blaze her own path. Uncle Geoffrey, bloodied and broken when MI6 collapsed, and Mum, bleeding out across Bond’s ancestral lands, were just the most visceral losses.

This was a bad, bad idea.

Vivian has Charles, and sooner than they’ll all be ready for, the fledglings. She pulls away day by day, and that might be the most terrible loss of all. She’s the only thing he has, on the bad days, the days when Malaika and Alec’s coaxing isn’t enough to make him stop working. He’s going to be alone only too soon, when Vivian and Charles are living their life and nobody will remember him as anyone other than the nameless Quartermaster.

“Sebastian.”

He was curious, it’s that simple. Curiosity mixed with the recent loss of close family members and the discovery of ones he never expected to know. He made what should’ve been a rational, informed decision for a MI6 operation and based it on impulsive emotion, in full knowledge that taking both him and Vivian into the field would require an escort and make it a full-blown operation.

“Sebastian.”

He knows better than to use curiosity as a rationale behind important decisions. Mum made sure of that. Logic is paramount in their business and excess emotion gets people killed.

“Adelaide is going to murder me brutally if I let you drown, Sebastian.”

“Vivian,” he corrects absently. “Adelaide in public, Vivian in private. Like me, but with more her.”

“So you are alive in there.”

Q frowns, reviewing the last few minutes. “Why are you leaning against the glass shower wall?
While I’m showering?”

“Because I said I’d be joining you.” Bond shrugs, a dark shadow against the frosted glass. “Stay in the bathroom while I wash up, just in case I missed anything.”

Q rinses the last of the suds out of his hair and accepts the towel Bond holds out. He has his eyes closed, head tipped back against the glass enclosure, a small flame dancing between the fingers of his free hand. It’s a common habit among the old blood angels, one of the few that the Double-0s maintain. A small display of power, the casual use of magic enough to display their strength.

He perches on the countertop, towel wrapped around his waist, and reaches out into thin air to grab a second one to dry his hair with. The counter faces the shower, but he can do this much blindly. He’s seen Bond naked before, of course- none of the Double-0s can afford modesty, not when Q Branch has to keep them safe even on honeypot missions- but it feels only right to afford Bond the same privacy that he himself was afforded. When the water keeps running, he drapes his towel around his neck and pulls one wing around his shoulder, teasing his fingers through his feathers and putting them to rights.

“Adelaide and Dominic in public, Vivian and Sebastian in private. Why?”

Q glances up from his wing. He doesn’t think Bond is looking at him, though it’s admittedly hard to tell through the steam. It’s a reasonable question, he supposes, just not one he expected. Alec and Malaika and Akane never questioned it, Uncle Richard and Uncle Ananth always knew.

“Mum’s idea.”

“You don’t call her that much.”

Q shrugs, smoothing the final feathers back into place and banishing his wings. “She was M to me for half my childhood and most of my adulthood. There rarely seems to be a point, when speaking to people who only ever knew her as M.”

Bond turns off the water and steps around the glass. Q snaps for drama, sending a towel flying across the bathroom, managing to avoid Bond’s upraised hand and flop it over his head. Bond frowns at him the minute he digs himself out from underneath the terrycloth.

“Was that necessary?”

“Completely.”

Bond scowls, drying off perfunctorily. “Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to mess with trained killers?”

“Quite the contrary. Ask Uncle Richard about the Great Paintball Fiasco of 1991, when you get a chance.”

“The Great Paintball Fiasco of 1991,” Bond queries, stepping closer and knotting his towel around his waist. “You were what, three?”

“Ten,” he answers automatically, though it isn’t true. He and Vivian have the dubious honor of getting to be five for two whole years before Mum let them have their sixth birthday, and it’s stuck. “Eleven, really,” he corrects himself, even though he really shouldn’t.

What the hell is wrong with him? He told Alec and M about Azrael, he showed Azrael to Bond, and now he’s admitting- albeit obliquely- that his age isn’t the one on the records. He hasn’t spent his
entire life lying about the details just to start slipping now.

The press of calloused fingers to his cheekbone startles him out of his self-recrimination, back to sharp blue eyes and what the hell is Bond doing touching him? Bond drags his fingertips down to follow the line of his carotid, coming to rest on his collarbone, never breaking eye contact.

“How convincing do you want this to be?”

“You want boundaries.”

“I need to know how far you’re willing to go, Q,” he answers, voice dropping to a murmur on Q’s name. “I need to know what you’re uncomfortable with and how you’ll let me know to back off. I need a rough background on your sister and Blake, enough that I can meld seamlessly with the three of you. And I need it all quickly. If I missed any surveillance devices out there, then it’ll look suspicious the longer we stay in here without the shower running.”

Q sighs. “Very well. Listen close, because a lot of this I won’t repeat.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally getting into real plot! Slowly, but it's happening. As always, I'd love to hear your thoughts!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Angelic classifications are, in the most marginal sense, based on power.

Class One angels are named thusly because they only have one ability. They are almost exclusively healers with varying degrees of power – some Class One angels can barely heal a papercut, with wings that are more vestigial than functional, while other Class One angels can save someone from anything short of death.

Class Two angels, correspondingly, have two abilities. In the majority of cases, they have a healing ability similar to that of the Class One angels and an elemental gift. Fire is the most common and the easiest to learn to use, followed by earth, air, electricity, and ice. These gifts also function at differing levels of strength and control, though there is a correlation between rarer gifts and better control.

The exceptions, apart from the theoretical possibility of an archangel, are the Class One Non-Healers and the Class Two Janus angels. The Non-Healing angels are Class One angels who have elemental magic instead of a healing ability. Janus angels are Class Two angels who, similarly to Non-Healers, have a second elemental ability instead of a healing one.

-Excerpt from Angelic Physiology and Magic: A Summary

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Q isn’t used to this much touching.

As a rule, most of MI6 doesn’t touch. There are too many jumpy agents and even jumpier techs, so they exist in the strange area of not touching without acknowledging that they’re not touching. In Q Branch, that means passing prototypes and equipment out on trays, sliding files across tabletops, and setting cups at people’s elbows in passing. He’s spent his entire life surrounded by a culture of not touching, where Vivian is the only one who regularly reaches past that invisible boundary.

James Bond has warm hands.

It’s simple touches, barely-not-innocent touches. Q steals a forkful of pasta from Bond’s plate, Bond wipes a smear of sauce from the corner of Q’s mouth. Their hands lie side-by-side on the table, pinkies overlapping, and it’s horribly sappy and probably some sort of cliche, but nobody mentions it. They’re playing at something innocent and affectionate that’s more like the human idea of puppy love than anything angels do – old blood angels marry for love, true love with their mates, or they marry for politics.

One is rarer than the other, which makes the Corvis particularly interesting.
Mum left Alessandro Corvi, and the man is clearly broken. Old reports speak of a man as clever as he was handsome, a man with a quicksilver temper who loved and hated with the same passion. The man in front of them is withdrawn and bitter, a counterpart to Mum’s high expectations and cold detachment, the two of them together a textbook example of why angels don’t leave their mates. He looks at Q and Vivian with a mix of longing and hatred in his eyes and doesn’t say a single word.

Serafina and Marco pretend they’re a mated pair, but they don’t move around each other like mates do. They barely pay any attention to each other, they don’t even speak to each other- if Q were advising on a human couple, he’d say marital problems, most likely a serial adulterer. On an angel couple, he’d change that to a couple pretending to be mates for political reasons who aren’t, one of whom has found their actual mate.

Valentina has three children and no mate. Her eldest, Carolina, has a different father than her siblings Elisabetta and Riccardo. Carolina’s also the only Class One angel with Corvi blood, and not a particularly strong one at that- compared to her mother and siblings, she’s downright weak, and that means her father wasn’t an angel.

For an old blood family, especially one as respected as the Corvis, it’s surprising that Annamaria and Rinaldo Sciacca- Giancarlo’s parents- are the only ones in a standard mated pair. The Boothroyds were considered odd enough, with Mum raising her children unmated and Uncle Geoffrey a widower. The Corvis are an outright surprise.

Bond’s fingers, calloused by years of triggers and explosives and crawling out of various tight places, stroke across the thin skin on the inside of his wrist. Like Mum, like other fire-wielding angels, Bond’s touch is almost a little too warm, almost fever-hot. Q focuses on that, on the overheated patterns Bond traces across his skin, instead of the unquiet humming of his magic pressing against the confines of his form.

F-O-C-U-S, Bond taps out in Morse code before he returns to the seemingly random patterns, light twists and turns with the occasional press to feel his pulse.

“Sorry, James,” he murmurs. “Distracted.”

The room is steeped in magic. He and Vivi have a tight leash on their magic- it wouldn’t do to have the curtains change color or the glass of white wine Vivi’s been eyeing mournfully turn into sparkling apple cider. They’re used to suppressing magical resonance, too. Resonance is based on blood, on the tie between magic and biology, and so nobody resonates more strongly than twins do. It makes people uncomfortable in their presence.

The Corvis are all resonating with each other in a amalgam of hot-cold-spark-breeze that tugs at his own magic, the same magical signature that he can feel in the stones of the villa and the land itself. It’s the same principle behind which houses have ghosts, that the living presence leaves an imprint that outlasts it. Humans leave ghosts. Angels leave a more tangible imprint of their magic that, theoretically, obscures any imprint of their personality.

He can feel it at home, sometimes, late at night when Bond and Alec and Malaika aren’t there. It’s the tink of Uncle Geoffrey making drinks after a particularly rough mission, conjuring ice out of nothing and making them a little stronger than usual, and the lilting songs Mum would hum when she cooked with magic after a long day. It’s feeling their magic just around the corner when they aren’t there, the resonance that doesn’t fit with any of his new housemates.

It’s powerful, being here, surrounded by more familial resonance than he ever expected.

It’s deeply uncomfortable.
Q tightens his grip on Bond’s hand. Bond squeezes his hand in return, shifting his fork to his other hand smoothly, and leans in to bump their shoulders together.

“Are you thinking about names yet?” Annamaria asks Vivian, eyes flicking between Vivian’s baby bump and her own squirming fledgling. Rinaldo, on her other side, is fighting to get Giancarlo to sit still and finish his dinner.

Vivian laughs. “Too many to count. The very day I found out, Charlie bought every book on baby names in the store and a dozen highlighters—red for names he liked, blue for names I liked, and purple for the names that the both of us liked.”

“We’ve since had to buy more highlighters,” Charles adds.

“I think we own every book on baby names in the country now.”

Vivian is in her element here, offering up just enough of herself to be open and social and to draw them in. She has Serafina, Annamaria, Rinaldo and Valentina all so focused on her that they ignore the way Charles’ eyes hunt around the room in between his additions to the conversation. She has Mum’s ability to command the attention of a room, that natural charisma that Q never quite managed.

“And what do you do with your time, Dominic?” Marco probes for the thousandth time tonight, each iteration getting more and more direct.

“Live off the family fortune, mostly.”

He might be a little sick of the question.

“Dominic is an artist,” Bond interjects. “If old blood money can’t pay for an artist to realize their vision, what is it good for?”

Marco leans back in his chair, unimpressed. “An artist, is it? I can’t say I’ve seen any of your work. What’s your medium?”

“A bit of this and a bit of that.” He has the technical skill to back it up—years of drafting his own projects has made sure of that—but only if he’s pretending to be a mediocre artist using it as an excuse to live off the family fortune. They didn’t really talk about this. They assumed that they’d be most interested in Mum or, if not, then interested in Charles and Bond as the heads of Ali Aperte.

New plan, then.

They can’t let on that Q is, well, Q. He’s far too valuable to MI6 to blow his cover like that. That means they don’t want to hint at his technical skills: engineering, hacking, fabricating his designs, any of it. They can’t get into his childhood and his schooling—official records say he was homeschooled, but the Corvis know Mum was MI6, so that’s too much information—but he can’t name-drop a school. Add that on top of pretending to be a regular Class Two angel, and he’s got a pile of secrets and no facts to work from.

Artist, then.

Can’t hurt. Better than anything he’s got on his mind right now, and isn’t that why he brought Bond with him anyways? For the messy bits of fieldwork, the think-on-his-feet bits?

“You should see his work. He’s a genius with a piece of metal.”
That sounded genuine, too, and as much as Q likes a compliment it means he can’t play it off as an inside joke. And what would Bond know about Q’s work? Since he joined the Bodyguard Brigade, Q hasn’t had much of a chance to get his hands dirty. There’s enough people in Q Branch who can piece together a weapon, but nobody can write code quite as elegantly fluid as he can.

“Earth-wielder, then?” Marco asks, tsking disdainfully. “Rather common, no?”

Q suppresses a sigh of relief. Questions about his magic he can work with. He’s been engaging in that type of misdirection his entire life, faking elemental abilities to make people disregard him as something boring. He sets his fork down a little harder than necessary just for the audible clink of polished silver on porcelain and raises his free hand, thinking localized snow, 10% hail crystals to catch the light and glitter, limit extent to within two-point-five centimeters of my hand.

“Oh, of course,” he replies. “It wouldn’t do to be common.”

He closes his hand, vanishing the snow. His magic isn’t particularly suited to faking elemental abilities, forcing him to focus on the details of what he wants and especially to focus on not changing the rest of the room. That’ll have to do for now.

It seems to shut Marco up, at least, and sends Elisabetta, Carolina, and Riccardo into another round of whispers. Alessandro gives his brother a sideways look, returning to his plate without a word.

“Oh, I didn’t know that ice was a Boothroyd talent,” Marco begins again, as belligerently as old blood manners would permit.

“Clearly you never met Geoffrey Boothroyd.”

The room goes frostily quiet but for the scrape of silverware against plates and the clink of ice on crystal, conversation stutter-stopping at the other end of the table as they try to ignore the stifling tension.

“Sufficientemente, Marco.” Alessandro lays a hand on his brother’s elbow, acting as the head of the family for the first time since they’ve arrived. “My apologies, Lord Boothroyd. My brother would do well to remember to whom he speaks, no matter your youth.”

“No offense taken, Lord Corvi,” Q returns in kind, relaxing his grasp on Bond’s hand just a hair. “I am well aware that my family’s recent reclusiveness has made for some terribly strange rumors. I assure you, we are as terribly boring as all the other old blood families, unless they ask, in which case we lead incredibly fascinating lives.”

“Of course.” Alessandro Corvi smiles the empty smile of the true socialite, standing up from the table with an unnecessary flourish of his own magic. “Shall we retreat to the parlor, Lord Boothroyd? I believe we have much to talk about.”

Q returns his false smile, buttoning his suit jacket as he stands up and tugging at his sleeves to straighten them. Bond releases his hand, remaining seated with the rest of the table and pretending not to watch.

“By all means, lead the way.”
Chapter End Notes

Sorry 'bout the wait!
Sorry about the wait, awesome people! The comments have been lovely while I've been so busy— they help me to find that little extra time to write.

<3 <3 <3

CONFIDENTIAL

MISSION REPORT 2013-007-010: Operation Ravenswood

ALTERNATIVELY KNOWN AS:

Mission Report 2013-005-009: Operation Ravenswood
Mission Report 2013RI-DSB019: Operation Ravenswood
Mission Report 2013RI-AVB016: Operation Ravenswood

LEAD AGENT: Quartermaster Dominic Boothroyd, codename Q

SUPPORT AGENTS:

Relief Quartermaster Adelaide Boothroyd, codename R
Agent James Bond, codename 007
Agent Charles Blake, codename 005

Intermediate Report

Operation Ravenswood has two primary objectives: determining the motivations behind Ali Aperte’s recent movements and obtaining any and all information the Corvi family has about the Boothroyd family and their role in MI6. Q and R are deployed as the bait, with Agents 007 and 005 defending MI6 assets.

As of Day Three, the primary objective is stalled. We have been unable to locate any documents pertaining to Ali Aperte and the Corvi family doesn’t mention it. There is to be a gathering of local old blood families in honor of the Boothroyds in two days time, at which point at least Agent 007 ought to be able to slip away and do a more thorough search.
As for the secondary objective, the Corvi family does not have any information beyond what the media specialists have fed the public about Adelaide and Dominic Boothroyd. This permits Q and R to utilize the Corvi reputation and the old blood penchant for gossip to build the outward personas of Adelaide and Dominic Boothroyd. Full reports are to be submitted to the Media Specialists with the final mission reports for Operation Ravenswood.

Direct any issues to operative Eve Moneypenny, the official mission handler for Operation Ravenswood.

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“I don’t know how you bear it.”

“Hm?” Bond doesn’t bother turning from the mirror, drawing the razor across his skin in a single smooth movement. Q’s draped diagonally across ‘their’ bed, fishing through Marco Corvi’s email account for anything interesting—interesting in the criminal underworld way, not interesting in the whole he’s cheating on his wife bit.

Somehow, he doesn’t think Serafina would be surprised. Marco Corvi isn’t exactly what Q would call a stellar example of an old blood gentlemen, but he is very definitely the man in charge of Ali Aperte’s day-to-day workings. Hence the sorting through his dirty laundry, though thankfully not literally.

Not yet, at the very least.

“I said, I don’t know how you bear it. All the attention, I mean, everyone looking at you all the time.” Q shakes his head. “Give me my laptop and a drafting pad any day and I’d be perfectly content.”

“You’re the belle of the ball, Sebastian,” Bond calls over his shoulder. “Everyone thinks you’re the prettiest. Enjoy it.”

Q wrinkles his nose and shuts down his laptop, running an automated shutdown sequence that covers his tracks on the off chance that anyone here could manage to get into his system. As far as anyone else is concerned, he spent his morning checking his email, Googling sights to see in Tivoli, and reading aerial crime reports. Apparently, Tivoli is a perfectly safe place to fly, with no angels shot out of the sky in three whole years.

“No, Vivi’s definitely the prettiest.”

“How modest of you, giving the honor to your identical twin instead.”

Q shrugs, letting his wings ripple out. Bond’s insistence on shaving with a straight razor makes it take positively forever, and Marco’s affair is a rather boring one. The unfortunate thing about doing this the traditional way, trying to get an ill-timed slip of the tongue rather than rooting through their computers for what he needs, is that he can’t mess with the asshole.

Sly words and backhanded compliments are one thing. That’s the language of what used to be the nobility, the language bred into old blood children whether they speak French or Russian or Punjabi. They learned to smile and speak sweet nothings sitting at Mum’s knee, learned how to turn a phrase so the insult wouldn’t be discovered until later, and they learned how to recognize the same things
when done to them. Q loves the weave of words into insults that don’t sound like insults, but it does get tiring.

He’d love to ruin Marco’s perfect little world for some of the things he’s said.

That would be the one benefit of not admitting his parentage. He can ruin Marco Corvi with relatively little backlash, but he can’t do the same to dear old Uncle Marco. Family is one thing even the old blood holds sacred.

The edge of the bed dips on his far side, partially hidden by his outstretched wing, and Bond reaches out to straighten feathers without so much as a by-your-leave. Q drops his laptop the last few inches to the floor, startled, and scrambles after it to make sure he didn’t damage his equipment.

“Easy, Sebastian,” Bond says, his hand closing fast on the bones of Q’s wing to keep him from tumbling off the bed reaching for his laptop because, of all the flattering things agents have told him in the pursuit of new weapons, graceful has never been one of them. Vivi got all of that.

“Bond?”

He doesn’t mean it to come out as a question.

“Your wings are a mess.” Bond keeps one hand tight on Q’s right wing and returns to straightening feathers, combing through Q’s wing. “Try to relax, Sebastian. I don’t fancy the sharp edge of your magic today and I’d rather have you be presentable.”

“You don’t need to use my name in every sentence,” he snipes back, pretending like he’s not doing exactly as Bond said and relaxing into Bond’s hands.

“And you can use mine when we’re alone,” Bond replies, digging his thumb into a tense muscle at the base of Q’s wing. “James. Not too difficult.”

“It would be unprofessional of me.”

“Charles. Malaika. Alec. Even the others, occasionally. Awfully unprofessional of you, using all those names.” Bond stills his hands, leaning forward and stopping just a hair short of draping himself across Q’s back. “Seems like I’m the only one you won’t be unprofessional with, Quartermaster. I’m trying not to be offended.”

This is James Bond, Q reminds himself, who flirts with everyone.

“And perhaps that’s because the rest of them know something about professional boundaries, 007.”

“Professional boundaries? Don’t try to be funny. There’s no such thing as that in our world.” Bond laughs. “Professional boundaries. We live in the same flat. Alec and Malaika check in on you in the middle of the night as often as I do.”

Q scowls at the other side of the room, unwilling to trade the grooming of his wings for actually sharing his displeasure.

“I ought to find that stranger than I do.”

“You’re ours to protect.” Bond goes quieter at that. “After Silva, after Skyfall… family is important to angels, and for most of the Double-0s, you and your kin are all we have.”

Q doesn’t answer. There isn’t anything he can say, anything that wouldn’t sully Bond’s truth.
Bond’s saying that Q and Vivi and Eve are the most important things in the world to the unmated Double-0s, that they’d do absolutely anything to protect them. It’s not completely unheard of, for angels without a family to find a new one, but it is rare. Magic doesn’t just bond to magic without a blood tie— that’s why true mates are a once in a lifetime effect.

Bond’s hands shift to Q’s other wing, gentle when straightening his feathers and firmer on the knots in his muscles, drifting over the prominent bones of his spine in a gentle touch every time he reaches the edge. It’s a familiar feeling, if a very distant sense of it— Mum and Uncle Geoffrey groomed his wings as a child, but once he had better control of his magic he simply willed them back into place. It isn’t a terribly complicated trick, but it is more of his magic than he’d like to reveal right now.

“James,” he says into the silence. Bond’s hands still again.

“Mmm?”

“Just proving I can say it.”

“Of course.”

Bond taps Q’s spine as he finishes grooming his wing, the universal command to put his wings away. Q arches his back, snapping his wings away, and Bond’s hands fall to rest on Q’s bare shoulders instead.

Bond doesn’t remove them.

Q doesn’t shake him off.

It’s a charged moment, one where they barely move, barely breathe, letting the quiet of their room and the distant hum of the other inhabitants’ resonance against the house wash around them. It isn’t like he’s a prude— Alec and Malaika and Akane were there for the hell stills of his university years, Uncle Richard and Uncle Ananth never let him forget that they changed his diapers, and there were years of pranks from his sister that resulted in security footage in MI6 that’s locked down forever. He’s bandaged up wounds when agents refuse to go to Medical and bullied them into going anyways when they hand him embroidery floss and a needle.

“You asked how I bear it? I shut people out, I bothered M and Q for attention and then hid myself away with a bottle of scotch, and I did my job. I watched people bleed out and I don’t care, I cauterize my own wounds and keep moving, and I lived alone where nobody could ask the hard questions.” Bond pauses for a few slow breaths, his exhale tickling the ends of Q’s curls against the back of his neck. “We thought we were protecting you. Alec and Malaika and the rest longer than me, but we thought we were doing good.”

He falls silent again, hands dropping to frame either side of Q’s hips instead. He doesn’t touch, but it’s a close thing. If Q shifts an inch back or to either side, he’ll find himself in contact with Bond again.

Three choices.

He can lean back into Bond’s touch, snuggling himself back against Bond’s chest in a more intimate touch than before. He can slide forward off the edge of the bed, freeing himself, and Bond will let him.

Stay or go. Mutually exclusive.

Q doesn’t move at all, avoiding the decision, and waits.
“What changed?”

One more deep breath, out and in, a perfect count of *one-two-three-in, one-two-three-out.*

“Moneypenny.”

“Eve,” he murmurs, mostly to himself.

“She unsealed the summary of Azrael’s service record.”

Q squeezes his eyes shut. He knows what that says. He has two service records, one for Dominic Boothroyd and one for Azrael, and both of them with rather high body counts. He wasn’t kidding, all those months ago, when he told Bond that he could do more damage from his computer than Bond could do in a year, but it was a twofold assessment. He’s devastating with his computer, working from a distance, but the missions with the most danger and the highest body count come to Azrael and Israfil by default.

They’re the hardest to kill.

“Your service record-“

“Is long, I know. High-risk, high-reward missions where we can afford to leave no witnesses. MI6’s best murderer.”

“I can do the math, Sebastian.”

*No. Oh, no no no no no. He doesn’t want Bond’s judgment, the righteous holier than thou that he sees every time Azrael submits a mission report. He’s well aware that he- as Azrael, not counting his work as himself- kills more in a year than the average MI6 agent does in their career. It isn’t a statistic he’s proud of. With his magic, it’s so easy to take a life, to reverse the path of a bullet or to deflect a knife away from him. It’s far more difficult to find a way to escape unseen, to allow someone to survive because they can’t possibly compromise his mission.*

“You couldn’t have been more than four or five the first time you accompanied 002 and 004 as part of their cover identities, six or seven the first time Azrael has a kill attributed to him.”

If possible, Q freezes up even more. He doesn't think of it like that. It was a game, accompanying Uncle Ananth and Uncle Richard, a test of their ability to play a role before Mum dared introduce Dominic and Adelaide Boothroyd to angel society.

His first kill was in self defense when a mission went wrong and he was separated from Uncle Richard- they held a gun to his head, threatened to kill him if 002 didn't cooperate.

002 didn't cooperate.

Q made the bullets swerve up and around, just like in the cartoons.

There were no survivors save him and Uncle Richard.

“You’ve known about this since before we arrived here.”

“Yes,” Bond agrees.

“And you’ve been awaiting your moment.”

“Yes.”
“Why now?”

Bond closes the distance between them, resting his chin on Q’s shoulder, hands sliding around Q’s sides to rest on either side of his knees. Closer, if only by an inch and yet much closer, but still leaving Q an escape route that doesn’t require even the slightest thread of his magic.

Vivi will mock him eternally for it, but Q doesn’t move.

“Captive audience.”
The current classification system for angels is predicated on one simple idea: Class One angels have one magical ability, Class Two angels have two. Recent studies done at Brown University, in conjunction with the United States Department of Magic and the United Nations Council for the Protection of Magic Users, indicate that this might be too simplistic of an understanding.

For as long as researchers have understood the mechanics of flight, they have questioned the logistics of angelic flight. Angel wings, though much larger than the rest of a full grown angel’s body, are not of sufficient size to carry the weight of an angel. It has been often linked to an angel’s regenerative abilities, theorizing that when an angel’s wings are out, the rest of their body would be in a more fragile state. These recent studies, however, indicate that it may be a completely separate magical ability to manifest wings and fly with them, one that is common to all angels.

This calls into mind the difference between ‘angels’ and ‘magic users’, as defined by the UN in 1974. All angels are capable of manifesting wings and flying, regardless of other magical abilities, as seen in the case of Irma Gold. Gold was able to manifest wings and fly, but did not have any other magical abilities sufficient to link her to either Class One or Class Two status. During the tax reforms in her area, she fought to be recognized as an angel despite her lack of classifiable abilities and won rights for the ‘Nonclassified’ angels, colloquially referred to as ‘the Untalented’.

Gold’s case, among others, led to the official distinction put forward by the UN. Magic users are all individuals capable of harnessing abilities defined as magic. Angels are the subset of magic users capable of flight and the associated manifestation of wings. This definition encompasses Nonclassified angels like Gold as well as the similarly small numbers of people incapable of manifesting wings who have proven magical abilities.

With this in mind, is it time to change our terminology? Some lawmakers say we should be classifying abilities based on magic users, not the traditional angelic classification. Others say non-angel magic users and Nonclassified angels are rare enough as to make large-scale changes to policy as well as the legal documentation of millions of individuals a poor trade.

Inclusion versus tradition.

The upcoming elections will see who gets to redefine the line between ‘angel’ and ‘human’. Make sure to vote, dear readers, because when lawmakers want to redefine what it means to be human, we should all be paying close attention.

***
What’s deadly about James Bond isn’t the marksmanship or the martial arts or the fact that his resume reads exactly like a hit list. It isn’t that Q Branch had to devise a new method for getting brain matter out of kevlar or the ability to find poisons in any given kitchen or even the fact that his magic has been honed to a point at which it is easier to spark an explosion than to light a candle.

No, Q decides, the deadliest part of Agent 00-fucking-7 is his irritating habit of making a point that nobody asked him to bring up, then sitting perfectly still and waiting for the other person to offer up information on their own.

That… Well, Q doesn’t have a good insult on hand, but it’d be a particularly nasty one. He’s sure of that. Some sort of extended simile about his attitude with an unflattering comparison to… something.

Q’s a little distracted.

Admittedly, he has a fairly good excuse. James Bond is a heavy weight across his back, flushed almost too warm with the spark of his magic, and sure, he’s been close to agents before, but this is different. This isn’t tossing himself across Alec’s lap to disrupt his concentration on Rainbow Road or falling asleep collapsed on Malaika’s shoulder when she escorts him home after a long mission. This is skin pressed against skin, Bond’s breath hot against his neck, the soft bristle of feathers wrapped around him.

“So what now?”

Bond hums under his breath, a low querying rumble, and slides his arms around to encircle Q’s waist. He squeezes once, then relaxes. They’ve been playing at easy affection for what feels like ages, now, but in private Bond has been alternately fond or distantly protective.

In that way, it’s almost like home at the flat, except with much more mafia connections and much less Halo. So, not like home at all.

This is unusual.

“You know about Azrael, and I know you know all about Azrael. You don’t do things without purpose, James. Where do we go from here?”

Bond shrugs. Q feels the motion in the press of Bond’s chest against his back and the rustle of his wings moving in tandem. “You tell me, Sebastian.”

“I don’t even know what you’re doing right now,” Q mumbles. Stillness seems to be his best option, at the moment, waiting for Bond to make the next move. It’s also something he’s absolutely terrible at. Vivi’s better at it, able to sit perfectly still and work on a project for hours, while he’s always a flurry of tapping fingers and rustling feathers and the hum of his magic trying to break his control and do something.

“I thought my reputation was clear enough.”

“You have a lot of reputations, and half of them I’ve manufactured for you.”

Bond mutters something that might be blind fool but just as well might be I’m cool. Knowing Bond, one is far more likely than the other. The weight of his wings disappears from around Q’s shoulders and his arms tighten around Q’s waist, giving him enough warning not to lash out magically when Bond’s wings beat once, twice, and toss them backwards. Bond thumps back against the headboard, grunting out a pained oof as his wings slide out of tangibility. Q lands heavily against him, sprawled across Bond’s lap with a sharp elbow digging into his perfect abs, sort of half-turned into his side now. It isn’t comfortable for him, and it certainly can’t be comfortable for Bond, not by the grimace
he’s trying rather poorly to hide.

“That couldn’t have worked out how you planned.”

“You have very sharp elbows.” Bond rearranges them, moving Q’s elbow gently and tucking it up against his body. “Say the word, Sebastian, and I’ll let you go. You know I can’t hold you if you don’t want to be held.”

“You can’t do anything unless I let you.” That’s sort of the point of the world warping to his will. He can be untouchable, if he doesn’t count Vivian. It’s one part standoffish nature, one part magically-induced near misses when he doesn’t feel like being touched. Hot coffee cups that slosh over the edge when people try to hand them to him, stumbling before they clap him on the shoulder, things like that.

“Exactly,” Bond agrees, and kisses him.

Q startles in that first moment of Bond’s lips pressed against his, jerking back against the cage of Bond’s arms and tumbling against the bed when Bond releases him immediately. He isn’t about to apologize- James Bond doesn’t do that- but the easy affection, the almost openness, starts to disappear almost immediately.

No.

Q catches his balance fast, magically augmented fast, and drags himself back in by a hand tight on Bond’s bicep. If Bond’s kiss was a question, a cautious query for permission to touch, Q’s is a demand.

You started this, now finish it.

He must say it aloud because Bond- no, James, he can call him that if they’re going to do this- mumbles yes, Quartermaster against his lips and deepens the kiss. James digs the fingers of one hand into Q’s hair, half combing through it and half holding him still, tightening his other arm back around the small of Q’s back. Q twines his arms around James’s neck and takes.

“Dominic, James,” comes the knock at the door, “we’re supposed to meet Serafina out on the patio in five minutes.”

James turns his head away, huffing out a sigh. “We’ll be ready in a moment, Adelaide,” he answers, somehow not sounding breathless at all. The jerk. He’s not allowed to sound in control and calm when Q wants to kiss him again.

Q buries his face in James’ shoulder, biting his collarbone to the left of where Eve shot him off the bridge just to feel him shiver. James doesn’t quite move- he’s been taught too well not to give anything away- but he loses the end of his sentence into a quiet hiss of breath.

“Sebastian,” James begins. Q kisses the spot he just bit, shifting just a hair up to bite the cord of James’ neck. He wants, and Q isn’t used to denying himself anything he wants.

James groans.

“Sebastian,” he tries again, roughly. “Sebastian, can you stop walling off the door?”

Q stops.

“What?”
“Look for yourself.” James extricates himself from their tangle of limbs, turning Q in his arms to see the door. Q keeps his forehead tipped against James’ throat, letting James do most of the work.

“Oh.”

The wall extends outwards in fits and starts, jagged pieces reaching for their mates on the other side, attempting to close off not only the door, but the windows and the balcony doors as well, with the frame around the bathroom door warping under the pressure of that wall fighting to move, too. Q hasn’t done accidental magic like that for… god, for ages. Vivi would mock him endlessly if he didn’t know that pregnancy had sent her own magic wonky lately.

Blackmail. He doesn’t know how any twins could function without it- he and Vivi have simply spent too much time together for them not to have piles and piles of blackmail material.

Keeps them honest.

“Whoops?” Q flicks one hand dismissively at the door, willing the wall back into its original shape. “Would you believe me if I said I didn’t like distractions?”

James smiles, stealing a quick kiss before sliding out from behind Q. His towel stays trapped under Q’s hip, giving Q a fantastic view of rippling muscle as he walks across the room.

“Put a shirt on, Sebastian,” he calls. “We have to be presentable.”

Q tries- with try being the optimal word, there- to comb his fingers through his hair. For not having kissed for very long, James managed to make a right mess of his hair. Q isn’t entirely sure that it was accidental.

“Presentable. You’ve ensured that I won’t make my standards for presentable, nevermind your own.” Q doesn’t bother trying to fix it- if it’s that bad, Vivi will take care of it with a flick of her fingers and a judgmental look. “I don’t know how you ever get away with seducing so many married targets, James, if it’s always this obvious.”

James is already almost fully dressed by the time Q finishes buttoning his shirt, which probably explains a lot of it. He doesn’t even look rumpled at all.

“Well, that’s rather the point, isn’t it? We’re together, Sebastian, and they’re not blind.” He waves around them to indicate the house and all its occupants. “It’d be odd if we weren’t disheveled from time to time.”

Oh.

Oh.

So that’s how it is.

*This is James Bond, who flirts with everyone. You know that.*

Q’s smile is barely even brittle.

“Of course.”
Forgive me, my love, for I have wronged you.

The twins, our twins, are the center of my world, as they should have been in yours. They are an utter terror most days, but I adore them all the same. It isn’t the same way I love you, the bright sparks of fireworks that make everything else seem dim, but rather the steady warmth of a campfire ever growing stronger in my heart.

They say we can only love once, Alessandro, and they are as right as they are wrong. I will never love another as I love you. Even now, I love you, though I doubt you would still love me if you knew what I have kept from you. But for them—oh, for our children, our beautiful children, I would do anything. Love isn’t a strong enough word for what I feel for them. I could never walk away from them like I walked away from you, my love.

I wish you could know they exist. I wish you could know they are loved. I wish someday, when they start asking who their father is, I could tell them about you without putting us all in danger from your obsessions.

I wish you were here beside me, that we had shared every diaper and every tantrum, that when one wakes from a nightmare you could hold them close while I bring the other one to sleep with us, too. I wish they could know their father as we always dreamed.

You would be a good father, Alessandro, but not to these children. With every passing day they grow stronger, and with every passing day I am more and more certain of what I feared when I ran. They do the impossible six times before breakfast, on a good day, and Geoffrey agrees that their magic is nothing like anything we’ve ever studied.

Archangels, born to the man who obsesses over them to the point of murder and torture and the woman who would even leave her mate on the fear of such children being born.

The world is cruel.

The twins turn three tomorrow. It’s their real birthday, the one we celebrate with an early evening home from work and their favorite food for dinner. Tonight, that means green eggs and ham for everyone. I’m thinking that means shelving the cabernet sauvignon in favor of chocolate milk over dinner.

My agents in Italy tell me you’ve essentially stopped looking.

I don’t know how to feel about that.

The children just woke, my love, and I have to feed them all on the rest of my lunch break before taking them to destroy my office while I’m in meetings. Before I lock this letter in my safe, here’s our toddlers’ handprints for you. Dominic is on the left and Adelaide is on the right. They’re very fond of leaving painted handprints on everything from my briefcase to Geoffrey’s leg to practically anywhere they can reach. I saw one in bright pink on the head of one of the Double-0s the other day.
The evening’s party, attended by all sorts of prominent angelic families and families of all standings from the local area, was supposed to be the highlight of their visit. Vivian’s been making plans for days, shopping with Annamaria and Elisabetta for the perfect dress and working out a plan for optimum schmoozing with Charles.

Somebody will know something.

It’s the rule of espionage. Somewhere, somehow, the truth always slips out. Somebody will make a mistake, say something they shouldn’t, and both Charles and Ja- and Bond- will be ready to capitalize on it. At this point, Vivi and Q’s job is to keep their cover intact and to get the agents in contact with the more fanatical of the old bloods, the ones who won’t speak to anyone without an equally impeccable bloodline.

Q managed the first four hours of standing by Bond’s side in a perfectly tailored tuxedo, poised and calm, finding excuses to avoid touching him. Bond reaches for his hand and he fetches a new drink, a plate of food, even finds a new person to introduce himself to. Bond smiles at him, Q smiles at whoever they’re talking to.

Bond stopped trying after the first three hours.

After that, Q couldn’t take much more. He made some sort of poor excuse, the type that everyone here knows is a lie but that they all know better than to point out as such, and he left. It’s been an hour and a half since then, the guests are starting to leave, and for the most part he’s been left alone. Vivi can handle things on her own.

No, no, no. That’s not right. Vivi shouldn’t have to handle things. He knows better than to let his emotions interfere with his work, Mum taught him better than that, and he can’t slip. People rely on him to be logical, to work his magic and kill who needs to be killed and to be exactly what everyone else needs him to be.

*Mistakes get people killed, Sebastian.*

*You’re an archangel, Sebastian. You can’t make mistakes.*

*You have to be better, Sebastian, better than anyone.*

Q drains his glass.

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Of course not,” Q answers, lifting his glass idly to the approaching shadow. He didn’t hear Carolina approaching- slipping, slipping- but he can sham with the best of them.

He likes her the best, of his cousins. Carolina has a quiet warmth to her that he much prefers to Elisabetta’s high-strung theatrics and Riccardo’s sonnets to his newest lost love. They’re young, the
two of them. They will learn. Annamaria, he could like all too easily, caught up into the easy love of a young family, but Carolina fits into his life as if she’s always been there.

“Of course not,” she repeats softly. “Like you would tell me if there was. Zio Alessandro and Mamma do not know what to think of you, we all keep our distance, and Zio Marco has given you all the reasons in the world not to like us. But I am not blind, signore. You hide from your lover, tonight.”

“James is busy.”

“Of course,” Carolina repeats, mimicking his exact tone from earlier. “But I’ll get you a fresh drink, anyways.”

He’s not really avoiding him, no matter what Vivi and her pointed remarks might say. He’s heading to the gardens, allowing for the Corvis to approach him for a private one on one. It’s strategic, that’s what it is. They’ll never get any information out of them as a group and time, unfortunately, is running out.

It’s a plan, at least, and one that’s solid enough to stand up to Vivi’s scrutiny.

His life would be a lot easier without the MI6 Informant Protection Protocols. Their sole informant inside Ali Aperte elected, under the IPP, to remain completely anonymous. No records of their identity: paper, electronic, or otherwise. Dead drops for information only, with a scheduled bi-weekly check. They aren’t even allowed to have the local office make guesses as to their informant’s identity based on what they know. No overrides, no exceptions, not even for the Quartermaster in the field.

He could really use an ally here, someone who isn’t a stranger to the whole issue.

Maybe- just maybe- they rushed in a little fast.

“Champagne.” Carolina sets the glass on the edge of the balcony next to him. She’s good, he’ll give her that. He didn’t hear her that time, either. Even with the handicap of being caught up in his own head, that speaks of practice. Could be practice avoiding her uncle- Marco can’t be the easiest of people to live with, especially when he’s not on his best behavior for guests.

“I’m not feeling terribly celebratory.”

“Why waste good champagne?”

Q accepts the glass. She has a point, there. He had a glass earlier- this isn’t the cheap stuff MI6 throws out at the company ‘congratulations on surviving- oh look it happens to be December, let’s hang snowflakes and give presents’ party. The Corvi family is almost as old a bloodline as the Boothroyds. They can afford the good stuff.

“Salute, Carolina.” He raises his glass in tandem with her, draining it.

“Salute, mio cugino.”

“Shall we take a turn about the gardens?”

Carolina leaves her glass next to his on the wide rail, tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow. She leads him back towards the open doors where light spills from the ballroom, tugging just slightly on his arm to steer him to the left or the right.
“Of course.”

She takes them down the back stairs, avoiding the thinning crowd and, more importantly, avoiding both Bond and Vivi. Charles would only give him disapproving looks- he takes liberties with the whole almost-family thing that he wouldn’t take with his Quartermaster otherwise.

“Cugino,” he starts, watching Carolina light the garden around them with a few flickering flames. “I’m terrible with languages, I really am. What does it mean?”

Carolina hums to herself, walking them over to the closest bench. It’s a pretty spot, one that always seems to be busy during the day, with the bench set back into the nearest flowerbed in a half-circle thingy in the wall. There is a shade tree over them here and flowers all around, almost like some of the more distant parts of the gardens, except still with the rock beneath their feet and a some pillows left here from the last person.

“Cugino?” Carolina smiles, releasing Q, and he wobbles a little bit before sitting down heavily on the bench. “It means cousin.”

That doesn’t make sense. Well, it does, but only because he knows what they don’t and has been doing a good job of keeping it a secret because if they know that he knows or even just what he knows but not that he knows it…

“Thadn’t ma seense,” he mumbles, dragging out the last syllables endlessly. He doesn’t feel so good, all… fuzzy. It’s different than his magic, always humming under his skin. It isn’t even like when he’s been stabbed with anti-magic stuff. That’s all empty inside. He’s just… tired. That’s the word.

Carolina smiles.

“Did you think you could keep it from us forever?”
In ancient times, the dynasties of angels were not worshipped as gods, as many a history student likes to claim, but instead were revered as the children of the gods. This is currently believed to be predicated on three factors: 1) the physical manifestation of both their wings and their magical abilities, 2) the seeming agelessness granted by their regenerative abilities relative to the health of the average human, and 3) the stark difference of even early angelic cultures from their human counterparts.

As for the first, this is the easiest one to understand. Even now, humans are fascinated with the abilities demonstrated by angels. We have angels performing at air shows, angels weaving fire ladders on street corners, angel artisans who work in an open workshop, allowing all and sundry to watch them craft elegant pieces with the metals flowing fluid between their hands. Their abilities, which to them are an extension of their senses, seem far-fetched to anyone on the outside and their attempts to explain it come off more confusing than before. Angels look like humans when their wings are hidden, so ancient cultures believed them to be humans touched by their gods.

This leads into the second point. One of the abilities that manifests itself in almost all angels is their remarkable healing ability. Physical wounds like cuts, broken bones, and so forth have been proven to be less likely to be lethal and faster healing in angels, even without an outright attempt to heal the wound. They do not get sick as often, though geneticists argue as to whether that has to do with their magic bolstering their immune system or the same genetic quirk that causes angels also serving to confuse viruses. This resilience is less prominent with the effects of modern medicine: angels visit doctors less often, but only have the advantage of a few years on lifespan. In ancient times, when medicine was much less successful, angels had double the lifespan of their human counterparts.

As for cultural differences, early humans were driven by survival of the individual, the group, and in a more biological sense, the species. Early angels, with better health and longer lifespans, had more time to be focused on laying the foundations for the mate-centric culture still seen in modern angelic culture. This mate-centric culture also led to a form of cultural isolation between the two groups, in which most surviving angel legends from the time revolve around the excitement of human lives and most human legends tell of the quests undertaken by angels.

**Excerpt from Entwined Cultures: The History of Human and Angelic Relations**

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Q wakes tied to a chair.

It’s a nice chair, he’ll give the Corvis that. It’s more a modified armchair than the standard wooden-slat chairs preferred by almost everyone in the business of drugging and kidnapping people, though he’s not sure how much it can be considered kidnapping when he’s still in the same building. The house resonates around him in a now-familiar hum of magic, a centering piece of familiarity that gives him something to work from.
He can’t touch his magic. The Corvis don’t know he’s an archangel- his continued existence is proof of that- but they’re smart enough to keep him drugged up on enough anti-magic toxin to take down a horse. A flying horse. A magical flying horse. Okay, so like a cross-breed between a Pegasus and a unicorn, and yes, he’s aware that it isn’t the best of analogies.

Q doesn’t bother testing his bonds. Without his magic, he’s not going to break free.

“Drugged champagne,” he drawls, “is so utterly cliche, you ought to be embarrassed of yourselves.”

“Ah, you’re awake. My apologies, Domenico.”

Q lifts his head, not bothering to take a glance around the room. Alessandro Corvi’s chair is set up directly across from his, just barely out of what would be his reach, were he not tied to a chair. He can hear someone pacing behind him, back and forth, back and forth, but the click of high heels on wood doesn’t really narrow it down. One of the other Corvis, he would guess, and probably one of the younger ones. They would have had to divide and conquer to take out two trained Double-0 agents, Q, and Vivi and unless Alessandro Corvi is especially horrible, he’d have extra care taken with Vivi as not to risk her children.

He really, really, hopes Alessandro Corvi isn’t quite that bad.

“My sister,” he begins, because it isn’t any kind of stretch for them to realize that Vivi is his weak point.

“Is safe. I would not harm a pregnant woman, Domenico, and especially not my own child. She has been confined with all the comforts of home and told that any disturbance would result first in the death of her mate, then in yours.” Alessandro shrugs. “So far, she’s been quite amenable.”

Q thanks him and falls silent. If he wants answers, he’ll have to ask questions. Q can give away some things- personal things, not MI6 things- if it’ll give him enough time to clear whatever anti-magic toxin they’ve got him dosed with.

Alessandro Corvi leans back in his chair, accepts a glass of water from Carolina, and smiles.

And they wait.

Q settles in his bonds, finding a position where the ropes don’t wear against his skin, and lets his senses drift. It’s pleasantly warm in the room, not cold enough to be unpleasant and not warm enough to make him sleepy, with a chair that would be comfortable without the ropes and nobody talking to him. He listens to the easy in… out of Alessandro’s breathing, the nearly silent inhale and the louder huff of air on his exhale, unimpeded by the ill rattle Bond noticed in Marco’s breathing. Alessandro is perfectly comfortable here and now, waiting to interrogate his own child.

Now, that could be a strategy. It’s a risky one. If he plays up their relationship, plays up all the years Alessandro missed, he might make him slip up. Mum always said that some of the best interrogators MI6 has do their work when their target thinks they’re the interrogator. People are more cautious with what they say when they are in a position of weakness, and they tell more when in a position of power.

Q believes it. He’s been on the other end of Bond’s comms long enough to see the ‘and now, Mr. Bond, let me tell you my entire evil plan’ monologue multiple times. Uncle Ananth’s good at that trick, too.

Breathe.
Q opens his eyes- he hadn’t noticed them slipping shut, but he’ll blame the drugs and not his own
distraction- and makes eye contact with Alessandro Corvi.

He can feel the rush of his magic, just barely beyond his reach.

“So much for my promising career in espionage,” Q recites, pausing with a self-deprecating half-
smile. “That was the last she heard from either of her children. An offhanded quip, one not even
directed at her, over a comm channel. The last I actually spoke to her? Oh, something formal, I
imagine. Yes, ma’am, immediately ma’am, something like that.”

Alessandro’s hands tighten on the arms of his chair.

“Bullet to the stomach… that’s a long, painful way to die. They say you should have been able to
feel it, Father dear. That when your mate, the one and only love of your life, was shot and dying in
the moors of Scotland, you probably missed dinner.” Q leans as far forward as he can in his bonds,
tipping his head and widening his eyes. Provoking Alessandro Corvi isn’t his best idea in the world,
but hey. Maybe he’s spent too much time with Alec, living on the wild side like this. “Did you feel
her die, Father, and know that you’d truly lost her forever? Because you seem like the kind to keep
up hope that even though she abandoned you before your wedding day, even though it had been
decades and you couldn’t find her… you never gave up, did you? And now she’s dead.”

The slap rings out in the silent room, the crack of Alessandro’s ring against Q’s cheekbone and
Carolina’s muffled gasp. Q’s head snaps to the side with it, shock and the warm wetness of blood
preceding the hot burst of pain.

“Don’t,” Alessandro hisses, “talk about her that way.”

Q’s magic floods back through his veins, self-preservation instincts burning off the last of the toxin.
They only practiced that once or twice- even Mum didn’t like the idea of letting them take damage in
order to intentionally force-restart their magic. It’s not much- a trickle of magic, at best- but with his
specific abilities, it’s enough. He won’t be tearing Villa Corvi down around their ears anytime soon,
but he can make a show of it.

He reaches up to touch his face, vanishing the ropes from his chair without bothering to disguise it as
a regular ability, and swipes two fingers through the blood on his cheek. The pain recedes, his
healing factor quick enough to seal over the split skin, leaving only the trail of drying blood.

Q wills the rest of the ropes to vanish and slams the door when Carolina makes a break for it.

“So.”

“How did you do that?” Carolina asks, voice shaking. Q doesn’t blame her. His very existence- his
and Vivian’s, he wouldn’t dare forget her- shakes the foundations of how many angels view the
world.

He’s revealed his abilities to more people in the last five months than in the entire rest of his life.

Q thinks he likes showing off, likes the power of letting his magic loose and not pretending to be
anything other than what he is.

“You assumed Mum left because of you, then found out about us later,” Q says, taking a guess. So
far, he’s been rather successful in taking control of the conversation by throwing Mum back at
Alessandro, though he’ll be the first to admit that his little display is helping. “You would be wrong.”

“Arcangelo,” Alessandro murmurs. “It was just a theory, one of those things we talked about late at
night. The Corvis are one of the families tracing back to the Angel Lords, the old blood, but the Boothroyds are of the Blood of Azrael. Margherita is-was a powerful angel and I am a Janus angel. I told her I thought someday, we might be raising little arcangeli of our own.”

“Well, you were half right.” Q reaches out into the empty air and, with a little extra flourish for Alessandro’s benefit, pulls a tumbler of apple juice out of midair. Carolina shivers, disconcerted, while Alessandro stares at Q covetously. “How did you know? All our records are forged. Mum was very careful to hide our age.”

Alessandro reaches out to touch Q’s face, stopping at the last moment. “In Adelaide, all I see is Margherita’s features with barely a touch of myself. You may be identical, or close enough, but you look like me. Like what I used to.”

Q leans back, crossing his legs. He mimics Alessandro’s posture from earlier, down to the arrogant tilt of his chin. If the man already sees himself in Q, then emphasizing it a little won’t hurt. *Build a rapport*, he can almost hear Mum’s lessons. *They will be much less likely to kill you if they see themselves in you.*

“Your turn to ask a question.”

“Some MI6 agent you are.”

Q shrugs. “Unusual circumstances and all that. I’d much rather we come to an accord rather than you try to test my healing factor.”

Not that testing him would go well for Alessandro. He’s a Janus angel, which means he heals no better than a human of his age, give or take a little magical augmentation. If he tries to hurt Q or, god forbid, Vivi, then Q will wreck this place. All he has to do is separate Alessandro from his niece and he’ll die like a human.

“Are you happy?”

The trick to the question game will be answering his questions truthfully enough to inspire truth on Alessandro’s part without giving away any secrets. According to MI6’s information, *Ali Aperte* is set to become a worldwide power in the criminal underbelly. He can’t give them any extra information to work from. And… wait. What?

“Am I happy?”

“That is what I asked, was it not?”

Well. That’s remarkably easy.

“I don’t know. I just lost both my mother and my uncle to a terrorist and I’ve been drugged with anti-magic toxin twice more than usual in the last six months. Other than that? If I survive you, then I’m poised to become an uncle very soon. That’s a good thing.”

“And your James, your agent. Is he good to you?”

“Ah ah ah. My question, now. Why did you invite us here?”

Alessandro toys with a sliver of ice, passing it between his hands and shaping it like a potter with his clay. Electricity sparks at the click of his fingers, melting the ice only where he desires. In the light of his own magic, he looks older than Q’s seen him, old and weary and sad.
“Valentina suspected, when Margherita left, that she might have been pregnant. She and Serafina argued about it for nearly three years before telling me. After that… After that, I started looking for other things. Birth records. School records. Nothing. And then… MI6 exploded, and for the first time in years, I combed every paper, looking for her name. Lists of the dead, of the injured. *Margaret Boothroyd. Margaret Boothroyd. Margaret Boothroyd.*” Alessandro lets his hands drop into his lap, his ice sculpture shattering into a thousand pieces. Q throws his arm up to protect himself, his body reacting half a second faster than the magical command that follows. He sublimes the ice before it touches anyone, a warm mist that dissipates harmlessly.

“Mi dispiace, Carolina,” Alessandro apologizes. “Thank you, Domenico.”

The explosion, the papers, everything he hasn’t thought about since they boxed up the last of Operation Skyfall and had the trainees lug it to the filing room.

*Major Geoffrey Matthew Boothroyd is survived by his twin sister Margaret Katherine, his daughter Charlotte Eve, his niece Adelaide Vivian, and his nephew Dominic Sebastian.*

“Uncle Geoffrey’s obituary.”

“I knew Margherita wouldn’t let me near you two, not if you’d spent so long in hiding. The day she died, no, the day her obituary came out, I sent the invitation. With Margherita gone…” Alessandro shudders. “You were all I had left of her, whether you were mine or not.”

Q wants to believe it. The story’s too perfect. The bereaved angel who just lost his mate, reaching out to the one thing left of her- her children, who he hopes might be his but are just as likely those of another man. It’s perfectly played off just the right emotional notes, nostalgic and hurt and breathtakingly lonely. Q would love to believe it, to see some chance of reconciliation with his unknown father.

Except.

Except Alessandro ordered him drugged and confined, and drugged heavily enough to overcome his magic, instead of talking to him. He doesn’t know what they’ve done with Bond and Charles, and he only has Alessandro’s word that Vivian’s been confined, not drugged, with respect for her pregnancy.

*Because who wouldn’t like a pregnant archangel,* his thoughts nag at him. He and Vivian’s existence proves it’s genetic and, without Q and Charles as leverage, she wouldn’t play nicely.

Which means they played right into his hands.

*It was only a theory,* he said. It might be the truest thing he’s said tonight.

Q laughs, doubling over in his chair until he’s almost in Alessandro’s lap, and he laughs and laughs and laughs. It’s perhaps the most unfunny thing he’s dealt with- at least when they’re usually outsmarted, when MI6’s intel is three steps behind the game, the agents involved have usually gone dark and he doesn’t hear about it until later. They’ve been played, played like fools, and he’s about to do something drastic.

Malaika and Alec are going to kill him for this.

He fights for breath between the last dying giggles, gasping for air.

Alessandro Corvi tried to play MI6, and they accidentally sent him the weapons he wanted. That’s
not the funny part. The funny part is that, in getting exactly what he wanted, Alessandro Corvi brought MI6’s most dangerous right down on top of his head, and then he tried to drug him, and he didn’t do it well.

That’s the funny part.

Q lifts his head, cold resignation in his eyes as the hysterical laughter subsides into a fraught silence.

“There’s a reason, Father, that they call me Azrael.”
Hey, look who's managing to find writing time!!!

The most compelling figures of history and myth are those with wasted potential, those for whom we can look back and imagine what they might have done had something been different, those for whom we don’t know enough to criticize them. King Arthur, who died young. Pharoah Hatshepsut, whose history was erased by her successor. Azrael, who was half a myth during his lifetime, for whom there are scant facts about his life.

With these figures, is the reality of their life more important than the impact of their legend? We ask the same thing of such figures as William Shakespeare- does it matter to our valuation of Shakespeare if Shakespeare wrote it or not? Where do we draw the line between history and mythology?

With Azrael, the line seems to have been drawn at the baseline facts of his legacy. The Blood of Azrael- the name given to the old blood families with direct descent from Azrael via his sole child, Inias- are a fact. Much of the rest of the old blood claims descent from the Angel Lords. These families have their genealogy going back centuries without a single break, and most of them consistent where the family trees overlap. These are treated as facts, as history. His actions during his life, however, are widely regarded as myth.

The Blood of Azrael reached a maximum in the early 1600s as far as numbers go. The Great Plague of Milan reduced six bloodlines to a few sole survivors. The American Plagues throughout the century destroyed twelve bloodlines in South and North America. The Great Plague of London took the lives of all but one member of the Blood of Azrael in England. For centuries, the Blood of Azrael survived mostly in Asia and Africa, until the Third Pandemic in China and India and military unrest in Africa decimated those bloodlines as well. Angels, though not as susceptible to disease as humans are, tend to be the ideal choice for doctors in epidemics. In times of war, their potential for strength makes the Blood of Azrael immediate targets for assassination.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Blood of Azrael was reduced to six bloodlines. The Boothroyd family of England, the Amirmoez family of Iran, the Bhattacharya family of India, the Lin family of China, the Silveira family of Brazil, and the Afolayan family of Nigeria. By the end, all but the Silveira bloodline were reduced to numbers in the single digits.

Excerpt from In the Blood: The Descendants of Legends
The house hums with magic.
The house protects its own.
The house resists.

Q’s stronger.

He breaks every single piece of furniture in the room, shattering the tile floor and scorching the paint off the walls. He sits in his chair, the back ripped off it to make room for his wings to spread behind him, and he destroys.

The whites show all the way around Carolina’s eyes.

Q breaks the legs on two sides of Alessandro’s chair, toppling him to the floor in an ungracious sprawl, shredding the side of Carolina’s nice party dress in a measure of vindictiveness. She gasps in horror, snapping her wings out to cover the side he destroyed, and Q smiles politely at them both.

“Where are you keeping my sister?”

He keeps his voice even, perfectly polite and casually chatty.

Alessandro pushes himself up to a seated position, cutting his hands on the tile shards. There’s cuts sluggishly bleeding across his left side where he landed hard, staining his neat white shirt. He glares at Q, dropping the facade of interest.

“I don’t break that easily, brat.”

Q waves his hand carelessly, pushing out with his magic and snapping one of Alessandro’s fingers. He cradles his hand to his chest, flinching back from Q, but doesn’t say a word. Q rolls his eyes and breaks a second one.

“I’ll rephrase the question. Where is my sister?”

He keeps his voice even, almost politely bored, while his magic seethes and roils inside of him. Alessandro’s smile this time is a pained grimace with too many teeth.

“You’ll have to do better.”

“Very well,” Q agrees. He turns to Carolina, smile fixed firmly in place, and reaches out with his magic. “Nothing personal, Carolina.”

She screams when he breaks her wrist. Alessandro flinches.

“Now that we understand each other,” he says, turning back to Alessandro, “it’ll be my sister or her ribs.”

Alessandro crosses his arms and raises an eyebrow.

Q breaks both their ribs for good measure.

“Second floor, east wing,” Alessandro hisses, trying not to breathe deeply.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Q stands, clearing a path to the hole in the wall where the door used to be. When he passes Carolina, he exhales, rearranging his will to fix the damage he did to her. She’s not innocent in this whole tableau, but she is less so and he might not be terribly good at this
whole revenge thing.

The bricks scrape and rumble as he passes, and where he walks destruction follows. He slams Ricardo into a wall, snapping one of his wings in three places. Elisabetta crashes through a window, managing to get her wings under her and soar away before she hits the ground. *Ali Aperte* is more careful, after that, sending minions to attack him instead of his cousins.

He’s not entirely sure when he gets a shadow, when minions he hadn’t seen yet started dropping from the rafters in bursts of spontaneous human combustion. Bond slips in and out of the pristine bubble around Q, alternately battling the whorl of chaos and slipping close enough to brush against Q’s feathers. They don’t speak, just watch as Q strips the house to its skeleton and destroys the rest.

They find Vivian in the last room in the wing, guarded by four members of *Ali Aperte*. Q breaks their necks without a second thought.

“ Took you long enough, Sebastian,” Vivi greets him, handcuffed to a chair.

“Anti-magic toxin?”

“I’m pregnant, not lazy. If I had my magic, I wouldn’t be wearing this lovely silver bracelet.” Vivi shakes her cuffed hand for emphasis, making the cuffs rattle against the chair.

Q snaps them away from her wrist, offering Vivi a hand up out of the chair. She dodges his embrace, reaching up to smear her thumb across the arch of his cheekbone.

“You’re covered in mercenary, Sebby, and I happen to like this dress.”

Q glances down at himself. His suit is relatively undamaged, which is more than can be said for Bond’s, but there’s scarcely a square inch of it that isn’t stained. There’s a grey gloop that might be brain on his shoulder and Q doesn’t remember exploding someone, but he must have. How childish of him. He has far more control than liquifying someone, these days.

“I may or may not have burned our bridges with Daddy dearest,” he apologizes, banishing the goo.

His suit will never be the same- there’s a reason he and Vivian haven’t made a fortune with magical dry cleaning- but at least he isn’t covered in it any longer.

“I assumed as much when you started ripping down the house.”

Q shrugs, checking her over for injuries. She seems fine and one of the babies kicks at his hand, but he reaches out with his magic anyways, willing her to health. The scrapes around her wrist from the too-tight handcuff vanish, erased like they were never there.

“Let me go, Sebastian. Where’s my fiance?”

“Stealing a car,” Bond says, stepping over the body of one of Vivi’s guards and into the room. “We should leave. Somebody will have called the police.”

“Give us a moment,” Q complains. “I’m not used to rescue missions. Azrael doesn’t leave survivors.”

“For that matter, should you be leaving any survivors? I can blow the place up while you get Vivian out.” Bond grins, letting a flame dance across the tips of his fingers.

“They can’t tell anyone. Nobody would believe them. What would they say?” Q grins back, releasing his sister. He closes his eyes, feeling for the faint magical resonance of the house with any
other Corvis, and he rearranges the hallways.

The house groans and complains, fighting Q’s command, before it rearranges, shoving corpses into closets and giving him a straight hallway to the stairs. He wants to stay inside as long as possible, where he can force the house to protect them. He seals off doorways, giving himself an isolated hall through the house, offering his hand to Vivian.

“Shall we?”

“What happened to Azrael, the consummate professional?” Vivi’s voice is unreadable, caught somewhere between amusement and chagrin. It’s her own thoughts warring against their lessons, Vivian’s distaste for Azrael’s cold nature against Israfil’s understanding of their rules. Azrael and Israfil are cold, they’re a frozen facsimile of the twins, a version of themselves that lets them do absolutely anything that’s required of them.

“This is no place for Azrael. This? This is personal.”

He’s not entirely certain that he could summon up Azrael’s composure, even if he wanted to. Azrael is the emptiness that’s left when he takes Q away, the silence in his thoughts when he doesn’t care. This is entirely too personal for Azrael’s brand of efficient destruction. They deserve to suffer, not because they went after him, but because they went after Vivian. Vivian and the fledglings, his soon to be nieces or nephews.

They went after his family, and then Alessandro Corvi dared to look him in the eyes and pretend this was about searching for his own family.

“We need to go,” Bond murmurs, low and urgent.

So they do.

Q watches through the back window as Villa Corvi shrinks into the distance, the elegant lines disturbed by his alterations to the second floor, and he pushes his displeasure out one last time. The villa shudders and groans, resisting him, and finally collapses into a pile of rubble.

Don’t touch my family.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

It's a short one, sorry.

BREAKING NEWS: SIXTEEN DEAD IN VILLA COLLAPSE, AUTHORITIES IN TIVOLI SUSPECT FOUL PLAY

Authorities in Tivoli, Italy were called to the scene today when a villa on the outskirts of town collapsed suddenly. No members of the Corvi family, prominent angels in the region, were killed, with all the deceased coming from either guests at their party or their staff. The Corvi family declined to comment on the disaster.

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Q Branch is cold glass and polished steel, sharp and impersonal. It’s new enough not to carry magical imprints from the angelic staff or the agents, not even in the sparring rooms. It hasn’t even managed to accumulate the piles of not-yet-filed paperwork, half-constructed prototypes, and the other detritus of their fast-paced lifestyle. It’s gloriously new, beautifully blank against his senses.

“Sooo…. about Italy.”

It’s also full of people who make a living off of poking their nose into absolutely everything.

“No, Eve,” he sighs for what must be the fourth time but feels like the hundredth. He keeps hoping that if he keeps his eyes on his screen, working on the latest iteration of the triangulation algorithm for the subcutaneous trackers in the agents, she’ll go away.

So far, he’s had no such luck.

Eve hops up onto the edge of his desk, letting her high heels drop to the floor. She sighs quietly in relief, tipping her face to the ceiling and leaning her weight back on her hands.

“You’re the only one who hasn’t filed your report yet. Which you knew, Quartermaster, since you had to sign off on the other three.”

Q frowns at his screen, deleting the last few lines and tapping his fingers lightly on the keyboard while he thinks. The trick to the triangulation problem is that they want to cast a wide net in order to always be in range of the signal, yet they want to cast a narrow enough net to be able to actually find the thing. A twenty mile radius is good for a start in the middle of Siberia, but it doesn’t mean a whole lot in Cairo.
“Azrael’s never been anything but on top of his paperwork, which leads me to suspect that you’re hiding something from us. From me. And, as your eldest cousin, I feel the need to remind you how outrageous it is that you think you get to have secrets. Spill.”

Q rolls his eyes. “You’re my only cousin. That makes you both my eldest cousin and my youngest cousin and my middle cousin, if you want to go that far.”

“Oh?” Eve pulls his laptop away, ignoring his offended squawk and the unreadable keyboard smash in the middle of his lovely program. “I believe I remember a certain four Italian cousins. You ought to remember them- they just tried to kill you.”

“They didn’t try to kill me,” he retorts, hands snapping to his mouth as Eve grins and looms into his space.

Shit.

Eve’s always been able to make him talk. She knew all their secrets as kids and always managed to make him and Vivi perjure themselves in front of Mum and Uncle Geoffrey when they tried to hide something. Eve’s the living, breathing proof that the truth always comes out in the end, though he admits he might be a little biased in thinking that.

“They wanted to recruit you.”

“They wanted her.”

Eve’s smile drops and her hands close into fists. Q turns his hand, closing the door idly. Eve values her mask even more so than he does. Vivian doesn’t understand that- Israfil is separate from her, but R and Adelaide Boothroyd and Vivian are all the same person. She doesn’t understand the dichotomy of his existence: Azrael is not Dominic Boothroyd is not Q is not Sebastian. Not even to the people who know that he is all four.

Charlotte Boothroyd hasn’t been seen in years, not since Eve Moneypenny, a nobody from nowhere, took her place. Not in public, at the very least, and he intends to keep it that way.

“They wanted the little ones,” Eve says coldly, sounding for a moment just like Mum used to when some petty criminal managed to earn her wrath. Mum’s anger was always the cold kind, for all that she shammed at rage and hot fury to distract others from her true emotions.

“There’s every reason to assume they’ll be born archangels, and if not, that they’d be powerful Class Two angels in their own right.”

“We’re going to have to bury your secret deeper if we want to protect them.” Eve taps her fingers against the desk, keeping a steady one-two-three time. Q stills her hand with one of his own, typing one-handed until Eve reclaims her hand. It isn’t a real nervous tic, not in the sense that it actually gives anything away about her. Eve trained herself out of those by the time Q could spell ‘nervous tic’. Any she has now are a conscious thing she affects, the trappings expected of her.

“Azrael and Israfil are have to stop running missions.”

Eve nods in agreement.

It’ll mean late nights developing the kind of tech the Double-0s will need to survive Azrael and Israfil’s missions and even longer ones overseeing those missions. It’ll be hours poring over field specs and agent specialties, days spent dragging the Double-0s out to the sparring floors to work on getting them closer to his level, and weeks of wishing food into existence at his lunch break so he
can keep working. Eve and Vivi will threaten him into taking breaks, M and Tanner will revoke his official computer access and force him to hack his way in, and Alec and Malaika will toss him over their shoulders and drag him back home. It’ll be hellish for all of them and if it does anything to protect Vivi’s fledglings, then it will be worth it.

“MI6 has never officially confirmed nor denied the presence of an archangel on staff. I’ll let some rumors about MI6 faking archangelic feats slip to some marginally reputable newspaper, get the rumor mill churning. M will sign off on a minor information leak if it’ll keep 005 from taking R into hiding.” Eve taps a finger against her lips while she thinks, light enough not to smudge her lipstick.

“This is a personal matter, Evie. We can’t muddle that with MI6 business.”

Eve tsks at him, more the disappointed elder sister than the truth of his cousin. She might as well be his elder sister, for the way they were raised. “Business, pleasure, what’s the difference? There isn’t one, for us. We were raised in the life, Sebby.”

“You think I don’t know that? I was there, Charlotte, in case you forgot.”

“Oh, you were there? I hadn’t noticed.”

“You hadn’t noticed,” he mocks. Eve frowns at him like he’s five years old again and Q spends an awful lot of energy focusing on his laptop screen instead of looking at her. “Sorry.”

“You better be,” she grumbles, ruffling his hair. He bats her away with a smile. It’s the kind of light and easy companionship born of years together, the kind people in their line of work don’t get all that often.

“I’ll meet you for lunch,” he shoos her away while the mood’s still light. He’s spent too many days in the past year on rocky terms with Eve, he’s not going to take the chance of this being one of them.

He has a nursery to design, after all, even though he’ll have to bribe Alec and Malaika and possibly Eve into helping him sneak it all into Vivi and Charles’ home. Well, to sneak it past Vivi. Charles is all for a separate security system for the fledglings and CCTV and subcutaneous trackers. He has the other Double-0s lining up for a babysitting rota already, to keep the fledglings out of Q and Vivi’s hair as much as possible.

“No, you won’t.” Eve ruffles his hair one last time before slipping back into her high heels and composing herself. “But I’ll be back in a few hours with lunch and you can apologize to me for forgetting then.”

Q sticks his tongue out at her when she leaves.
CONFIDENTIAL

MISSION REPORT 2013RI-DSB019: Operation Ravenswood

ALTERNATIVELY KNOWN AS:

Mission Report 2013-005-009: Operation Ravenswood
Mission Report 2013-007-010: Operation Ravenswood
Mission Report 2013RI-AVB016: Operation Ravenswood

LEAD AGENT: Quartermaster Dominic Boothroyd, codename Q

SUPPORT AGENTS:

Relief Quartermaster Adelaide Boothroyd, codename R
Agent James Bond, codename 007
Agent Charles Blake, codename 005

Final Report

Operation Ravenswood had two primary objectives: determining the motivations behind Ali Aperte’s recent movements and obtaining any and all information the Corvi family has about the Boothroyd family and their role in MI6. Q and R were deployed as the bait, with Agents 007 and 005 defending MI6 assets.

Ali Aperte and, more specifically, Alessandro Corvi are on record as always having been obsessed with the possibility of an archangel. Operation Ravenswood confirms that creating or obtaining an archangel is still Ali Aperte’s primary motivation. The Quartermaster believes that Ali Aperte went dormant due to a lack of leads and, when they had more information, began gathering their power base again.

The Corvi family does not seem to have any information about the extent of Boothroyd involvement in MI6. They are aware of Margaret and Geoffrey Boothroyd’s roles to the extent in which the information was released after their deaths. They are also aware of Dominic and Adelaide Boothroyd’s status as archangels, though not their status as Q and R.

Ali Aperte intends to obtain an archangel of their own. The Quartermaster suggests that, for the
duration of her pregnancy, R ought to have a designated bodyguard. The immediate threat from the Corvis has been neutralized. Have the Rome office keep an eye on their informant and inform Headquarters if anything changes.

File closed 3/21/2013 by order of Quartermaster Dominic Boothroyd, sealed For His Eyes Only on the same date.

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Q falls asleep at his desk and wakes to a blanket draped over his back, a folded-up jacket as a pillow, and a cup of hot chocolate that’s just shy of too hot steaming on a coaster.

Q falls asleep at Eve’s desk and wakes on the couch in his own office, lights dimmed and the door closing behind someone with classical playing quietly over his office speakers.

Q works until he collapses somewhere- usually when someone makes him pause long enough to eat or at the most inconvenient time over a pile of circuitboards- and he wakes significantly more comfortable than he should be. He hacks into Medical’s records to make sure they’re not drugging him long enough to feed him intravenously, but if they are, nobody’s put anything to record. Somehow, he’s simply eating enough without ever getting up to go find food.

Huh.

He would think Vivi has some new tricks, but she’s never been strong enough to carry him from Eve’s office to his own and certainly isn’t with the fledglings turning her the size of a house. Not that he’s fool enough to say it like that. She’s glowing and radiant and stunningly beautiful and she always laughs when his reply to how do I look, Sebby? is rather like me, actually. This is the least identical they’ve ever been except, perhaps, for when they were thirteen and Vivi’s fondness for pastel dresses and high heels was only overshadowed by his own for ripped jeans, black shirts, and eyeliner.

Which leaves the Double-0s, in his estimation, because nobody else would either dare to bother him or be able to move him without waking him. Uncle Richard, Uncle Ananth, and Aunt Mel would- and have, in the past- leave him where he is and come back to fetch him later. Uncle Ananth hasn’t let him live down the time he got caught disassembling all of 004’s weaponry to prevent him from missing Q’s birthday party because he fell asleep in the armory. Besides, Aunt Mel’s out on a mission- he needs to remember to check on that later, 001’s mission got passed off to a younger member of Q Branch in training because it isn’t high priority- and Uncle Richard’s tied up in Medical to requalify for field work after 002’s last injury.

Not literally tied up. Medical saves that for the Double-0s who haven’t learned to just accept their checkups and stop sewing themselves up with dirty pieces of string.

Charles would wake him up, 008 and 009 are in the field, and Bond’s been outright avoiding him since they got back from Italy. Which leaves Malaika and Alec as the culprits, no matter how they both exchange looks and deny it when he tried to thank them.

So he doesn’t, but if he leaves a prototype exploding pen in his empty mug one morning with the instructions folded underneath it, nobody comments when it disappears. Mostly because he didn’t
mention to Vivi that he only tested four of the prototypes he built, so she thinks they’re all in pieces. For the limited amount of explosive he could fit in the pen, it’s surprisingly effective.

Anyways.

The short version is he works too hard and forgets to eat and passes out in a lot of places lacking a mattress, so he isn’t too surprised when he wakes up to muffled cursing and an upside-down view of a fine ass. And it is a fine ass, clad in worn denim that’s just a hair on the side of too tight. Q appreciates that much in the hazy place between waking and sleeping. Alec, then. Malaika’s strong, but she’s too petite to throw Q over her shoulder this easily.

Q would almost develop a complex, being around all these incredibly fit agents, except he’s seen how much they work out to maintain it. He used to sit on Aunt Mel’s back while 001 did pushups, asking questions whenever he needed help on his homework.

“Fucking shit,” the owner of the nice ass rumbles, his voice deeper and more gravelly than Alec’s. “Shoot me, stab me, even burn me, but never make me stub my fucking toe.”

“Bond?”

Bond freezes, still as a statue for a long moment before he shifts Q in his arms, switching from a fireman’s carry to an arm around his ribs while Q stands on shaky legs.

He only came home to pick up clothes, but Malaika ‘just happened’ to finish dinner- her falafel and fattoush sandwiches are amazing, but she only makes them when sufficiently bribed- so he agreed to stay for that. Then it was playing referee between Alec and Bond so neither of them could put the controller through the television. Again.

Q needs to stop making a habit of letting himself get played. In retrospect, their ploys to get him to stay home were painfully obvious.

“Nooo, carry me,” Q complains, leaning heavily into Bond’s side. Childish? Perhaps. He’s tired enough that he doesn’t really care, not if Bond’ll carry him the remaining fifteen feet to his bed.

“You’re too light,” Bond scolds, scooping him up and turning them both sideways to slide through the doorway. “I thought it was just caution in Italy, watching you pick over your meals. Alec’s cooking needs work, Q, but that’s no reason to behave as if he might poison you.”

Q blows a raspberry at Bond and tucks his face into Bond’s shoulder. It’s to keep from banging his head on the door frame, of course. Because he doesn’t like Bond, so he certainly can’t like him, no matter how good he smells. Which he doesn’t. Not really.

Hell, he needs to go to sleep. Get back to sleep. Something like that.

He mumbles as much into Bond’s collarbone.

“Stop squirming. I don’t want to drop you.”

“Warm,” Q mumbles.

“I know. I’m everyone’s favorite during winter months, but nobody’s fond of fire angels in the summer.” Bond heaves him up onto his mattress, not bothering with any covers. “Now stay here. Moneypenny isn’t letting you back into MI6 until at least noon, so get a proper rest.”

Q waves him away and is asleep before he hears the door shut.
In the morning, Alec is making blueberry pancakes with bacon and sausage on the side. Q stops in his tracks, hand on his doorknob, and blinks slowly a few times. He kind of sort of lost track of his days, but there’s a six-sevenths chance that it’s not Tuesday. Which begs the question of why Alec’s cooking and why he’s cooking. He only does one on Tuesdays and, as for the other, his version of cooking is usually toast, cereal, and sandwiches.

It’s… suspicious.

“Malaika got called in for an early briefing, so it’s you and me for breakfast.” Alec flips a pancake a little too early, splattering batter across the counter. He drags a finger through one splash, popping it in his mouth, and shrugs. “I get shot at on a regular basis, Q. I’m not afraid of salmonella.”

Q retreats to his room for an oversized blanket, wearing it like a hooded cape and perching on his favorite dining room chair. For an awful moment, he waits for Mum to chastise him, to call for him to sit like a normal person from the other side of her assortment of newspapers in six different languages, and Alec’s slightly off-key rendition of *Hips Don’t Lie* is off-putting instead of familiar.

“Aaand I’m on tonight,” Alec belts out, “you know my hips don’t lie and I’m starting to feel it’s right.” He shimmies over to the coffee pot, snagging Q’s favorite mug from the cabinet, and Q almost falls off his chair laughing. He’s still wheezing for breath when Alec slides his mug in front of him and hustles back to his faintly smoking pan of sausage.

“Where’s Bond, then?” he asks once he’s collected himself. Alec glances over, an automatic response to someone speaking to him, except it isn’t. His eyes are too sharp, too… knowing? Q takes another sip of his coffee. He’s clearly misreading things without a good dose of caffeine in him. Alec’s affable smile is back in place the next time he looks over, anyways.

“Sleeping,” Alec tells him, munching on a piece of bacon that looks too crispy for anybody but Alec’s tastes. “He was up all night, after all.”

Q frowns. “Why?”

Alec chokes on his bacon.

“See, that’s why nobody burns bacon like you,” Q chastises, not waiting for an answer. “Give me that spatula, you’ve still got most of your pancake batter left and I won’t let you burn all of them.”

He wills the spatula to his hand anyways, flying out of Alec’s hand into his own, and adjusts the temperature of the stove while he’s at it. He inspects Alec’s efforts, tasting the batter, and frowns.

“How much salt did you put in this?”

“Enough?”

Q shakes his head. He really doesn’t know how Alec manages to be so utterly terrible at following simple directions on a recipe when he’s marvelous at complicated mission plans. He banishes all the pancakes and the remaining batter to the trash can, wishing the pan clean and reaching for ingredients.

“For your terrible cooking, I condemn you to waking Bond up for breakfast.” Alec scowls at Bond’s closed door. “For your much better coffee, I’ll even burn some of the remaining bacon for you.”

“You’re so sweet.”

“I try.”
My sole summer class is over, so I actually have time to write that isn't all about Romeo and Juliet making VERY BAD LIFE CHOICES. Big, electronic hugs to everyone who's been patient with me this whole time- in six days, I'll have been actively writing Espionage for six months. One of these days I'll learn to finish writing before I start publishing. Anyways, you've all been lovely and the comments you've been leaving absolutely make my day!!!
Chapter 29

What might we have been, in a world without angels?

Think of it. A world of technology, one in which magic is best left to the fairy tales. A world where the most devastating weapons of war are the ones built by men to kill men, not the ones born to wield the elements. A world where healing takes weeks or months, not minutes, and disease swept unchecked across the world.

In a world without angels, epidemiologists predict that every major plague in history would have had triple the casualties. The reclusive angels were, through most parts of history, the only ones able to save an infected person from almost certain death while their magic provided them a magical immunity. Their interference stopped the spread of plagues before they could decimate parts of the world’s population. There’s a reason that, even with the advances of modern medicine, infectious disease wards at all major hospitals are staffed primarily by Class One angels.

Disaster relief would be similarly more costly in terms of lives lost. Angels can reach unreachable areas, they can fight through conditions that would kill humans, and they can heal any survivors they recover. Most angels are stronger, faster, and the magic of certain angels can be beneficial in the right situation. A fire angel is beyond useful after an avalanche or a water angel after a flood, for instance.

Without angels, wars would have had lower instantaneous casualties, but dragged on longer and cost more lives on both sides. Particularly in the past, many more soldiers would have been lost if it weren’t for the first battlefield medics, angels who healed as they pulled soldiers off the battlefield.

So who would we be without our angelic brethren? Some say we’d be better, some say we’d be worse, but one thing is for certain. Without them, we’d most likely be dead.

Excerpt from In The Time of Humans: A Glimpse at a World Without Angels

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There’s a classified envelope on his desk.

That’s not the unusual part. There are actually nine classified envelopes in his overflowing inbox and another eleven in various states of completion piled on top of a box of prototypes awaiting his approval. His three filing cabinets are full to the bursting with zebra stripes of classified and regular files. Anything pertaining to the Double-0 program is highly classified, from equipment loss reports to the paper trail on memos about Double-0s who shall not be named- Alec bloody Trevelyan, that’s who- playing pranks on members of Q Branch who didn’t immediately supply him with the exact prototypes he wanted to destroy in the field. He hasn’t bothered to organize his files at all- all it takes is a closed door and a whisper of his magic to have the correct one in front of him.

This one, though, is sealed.
That’s the unusual part.

Q’s time is, in a word, valuable. Every moment he’s wading through reams of paperwork is a moment he’s not hacking his way into CCTV to keep an agent unseen or murmuring the necessary information in their ear or designing the next wave of cutting edge tech to keep them all alive and ahead of the terrorists. He has minions with high enough security clearance to do his routine paperwork and summarize the salient points of files, so even his classified files normally come to him unsealed with a bullet point summary tucked under the cover.

He examines it like he would an IED someone forgot to dismantle in the labs, poking it with a pencil and giving it a brief magical push of *don’t blow me up*. It ignores him, as much as an inanimate object is capable of ignoring anyone. It’s just paper, and a rather thin file at that, with no magical signature but what it picked up from time in his office.

“Why is this here?”

“It’s marked *For the Quartermaster’s Eyes Only*. As none of us are you or M, that means a sealed file and lunch from the cafe down the street.” Ian steals the prototype boxes from his desk and replaces them with a boxed lunch that no doubt contains half a sub, a bag of crisps, and should include a soda that one of the minions already made off with. Must be a Wednesday.

“Yes, but you don’t *normally* pay any attention to that.”

Ian shrugs. “There are seven Double-0s in the field on missions that are low enough priority to get bumped down to us. There’s a cluster of trainees around a monitor out there seeing who can irritate 004 into breaking something first. You’re on your own today, Quartermaster, sir.” Ian snaps him a sloppy salute, backing out of the office. Q shakes his head, stretching from fingertips to wingtips.

They’re young, even the ones who are older than him. They’re fresh out of university, out of their masters’ and their doctorates with capstone projects that caught the eyes of the Recruiting Department. They haven’t listened to an agent fail to defuse a bomb, they haven’t had agents go dark for weeks, they haven’t seen their coworkers hiding in the remaining structurally stable corners after a bomb. By Q’s estimation? *Young*.

Uncle Ananth will eat those trainees alive. He learned to be utterly unflappable in the face of twin archangels with grabby hands who would replace Uncle Geoffrey’s careful instructions with happy babbling. If they’re too irritating, all the Double-0s have Q’s emergency line.

For the Quartermaster’s Eyes Only.

It’s rare that something comes in from the field offices already sealed for his eyes only. That tends to happen only with the most volatile prototypes designed here in Q Branch and the reports when one of the Double-0s stumbles into a field office bleeding profusely. Last he checked, none of his seven in the field had so much as shot or been shot at yet. Bond and Sarah Adair are working with trainees, which bodes poorly for the trainees. Nobody’s turned in a ‘this might kill me, I promise my family won’t sue’ waiver for any tests lately, so… he’s confused.

And there’s only one thing to do about that confusion. He slits the seal and takes out the thin sheaf of papers, shuffling through them to get the gist. Birth certificates, old-style diary pages, the summary of someone’s life as an agent would gather it. He shuffles back to the front and begins to read properly.
CONFIDENTIAL

INFORMANT REPORT 2013RI-CVI-011: Ali Aperte

LEAD AGENT: Fieldmaster Vincent Douglas, Rome Office

SUPPORT AGENT: Corvi Informant, moniker ‘Sparrow’

Final Report

Sparrow, the informant on Ali Aperte who has long been the source of our most valuable information, arranged an information drop with their handler three weeks after the end of Operation Ravenswood. At the information drop, Sparrow’s handler Julietta Grigio, was accosted by Mrs. Serafina Corvi and her grandson. Mrs. Corvi tapped the location of Sparrow’s information drop and listed off the next three verification codes Sparrow was to use. Agent Grigio took Mrs. Corvi and the child to her home and called the Rome Office’s emergency number. Mrs. Corvi claims to have been the informant Sparrow all along and is aware of enough confidential information to back it up. She wishes to claim sanctuary from MI6 for her assistance and requests a private meeting with the Quartermaster.

Under the authority of the Fieldmaster, Mrs. Corvi and her grandson have been granted sanctuary under the auspices of MI6. For their own safety, they have been transferred to the care of the Warsaw Office as protected assets. Mrs. Corvi’s second request is pending the approval of the Quartermaster and the Director himself.

File closed 4/15/2013 by order of Fieldmaster Vincent Douglas, sealed For the Quartermaster’s Eyes Only on the same date.

Q snaps the file shut, shoving it across his desk and re-sealing it with a burst of magic strong enough to slam his door shut and shake the glass walls in their frames. He reigns his surprise in before he shatters the walls of his sanctuary, twisting the hem of his cardigan between his clenched fists.

Serafina Corvi. He doesn’t know if he trusts her, MI6 informant or not. She could be a plant, Ali Aperte feeding MI6 only what they want them to know. She could very well be the reason why Q and Vivi let themselves be led into a trap. She certainly didn’t warn them of Alessandro’s intentions or prevent the attempt at subduing them.

Her intentions are a puzzle and, as for him, Q isn’t one to let a puzzle go unsolved.

“Shit.”

He’s going to have to talk to her.
In both human and angelic lines, there are bloodlines that tend towards multiple births. This occurs most rarely in the commingled bloodlines, the half-human angels and the half-angel humans. The angelic and human bloodlines aren’t entirely compatible, though they are capable of procreation, limiting those families to single births.

The power of humanity lies in its numbers. Angels hold the balance of strength and the near-immortality of their strongest members. Humans hold dominance over the world by matter of their numbers, and the most human of the human bloodlines are those who breed in twins and triplets and quadruplets to maintain the status quo. Those who are limited to single births tend towards larger families overall, beginning their families much younger and having far more children.

As for angels, those prone to multiple births are, in almost all cases, the strongest of magical bloodlines. They are limited to twins, born not to increase the number of angels but to balance one another’s magic. They are magically co-dependent and in many cases, psychologically so as well. The most famous example is the legendary Romulus and Remus, founders of ancient Rome and ancestors of most modern Italian angels.

Romulus was an earth angel, strong enough to create the heart of ancient Rome and hold her walls against invaders. His magic imbues the oldest parts of the city even today, the parts rebuilt from original stone that carries the force of Romulus’ indomitable will that are less likely to be damaged in natural disasters and have a far lower incidence of crime. His twin Remus, beloved of the people, was as flighty and changeable as the wind he controlled. His influence is still felt in the fair weather that graces Rome most days. Where Remus was unreliable, Romulus was always present. Where Romulus was staid and inflexible, Remus was willing to listen and compromise. The success of Rome was built on the backs of their incredible combined strength as well as the balance of power and personality between them. Without one, the other would undoubtedly have failed.

Excerpt from Dark and Light: A Dichotomy of Opposites

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“You’re an idiot.” Bond storms across the dining room, leaving scorch marks on the dining room chairs when he shoves them out of the way. Q ignores him. He’ll fix the damage later- unless, of course, Bond breaks something Q dislikes, in which case he’ll throw a fit and make Bond replace it with something nicer. “I thought you understood how dangerous they were, Q. You brought the mansion down on top of their heads and now you want to talk?”

“Villa,” he corrects absently, tapping at his keyboard to shift to the next CCTV camera. The trainees who are in charge of Malaika’s reconnaissance mission are doing a decent job, given that 003 knows exactly what she’s doing and has no need of their assistance. She hasn’t had to ignore their instructions yet, at the very least. The camera swivels to follow Malaika around the room to squawks of outrage from Q Branch and she shakes her head, a near-imperceptible smile on the grainy CCTV
They’ll learn that there’s no such thing as the Quartermaster being hands off on a Double-0 mission, particularly not when it’s 003, 006, or 007 in the field. The fact that the three of them moved in with Q is the worst-kept secret in MI6, but all that means is that it’s kept secret only from outsiders to their little world.

“It’s too convenient. You bring the villa down on their heads, rip your way through their private army, and now she wants to talk to you in private. Admit it, Q. Sparrow the informant’s dead. They just tortured the details out of them first, picked Serafina Corvi as the least threatening and sent the kid to keep you from doing anything to her.”

“Order dinner,” he tells Malaika, hacking into the comms and isolating his voice from the official MI6 channel. “You’ll be there for ages, if what I’m seeing is right.”

The refrigerator door slams, rattling the cupboard doors. Bond rages around the kitchen, warping the griddle as he heats it too fast with his flames and burns his first sandwich. He’s normally a bit more gourmet in tastes- the result of years upon years of wining and dining his targets and insisting on only the best for himself- but he’s been making a never-ending series of grilled cheese sandwiches and stacking them in front of Q like it’s entirely his fault that Bond’s made too many of them.

“You’re a blind idiot!”

“Yes, you’ve said that already.” Q makes a shooing motion at the last stack of sandwiches, banishing them to… wherever banished things go when he’s not focusing on them. He probably ought to be returning them to their component parts, wishing them back to bread and butter and slices of cheese.

Oh, well. Today of all days, that’s too much effort. To the banishing place they go.

He bids Malaika a good evening and works on tracking Uncle Richard instead, checking the MI6 feeds first. He and 001 are notorious for lulling trainee Q Branch handlers into a sense of security, then slipping their watch and going dark for the fun of it. They don’t make as much a habit of going dark as 007 does, and not quite as bad as 003 and 006, but maybe Q indulges them a little much.

Right on time, Bond stacks another pair of grilled cheese sandwiches in front of him. “Eat. You’re skin and bones.”

Q sticks out his tongue and tracks 002’s locator chips- the two he ordered Medical to hide and the one Mum had, not the two Uncle Richard actually knows about, he’s not an idiot- and narrows him down to somewhere in Russia. Which is interesting, given that he was supposed to be gathering intel in Cuba. He hacks into 002’s communicator, listening in on him humming something tuneless to himself, and smiles.

“Hide and seek protocols, 72 hours,” he instructs. 002’s breathing doesn’t even hitch at the interruption.

“Understood, Quartermaster,” he agrees. “And get some sleep before Ananth starts threatening to put you under 24/7 watch again.”

“What, like Bond isn’t doing that already?”

002 laughs and crushes his earpiece. Hide and seek protocols mean he’ll destroy any way Q Branch has to track him and find somewhere to hunker down for the assigned time limit, somewhere he thinks they can’t track him to. It’s the easiest game to start the new trainees on. Marco Polo includes globetrotting as only the Double-0s can, cutting out their official MI6 trackers, and depending on the
time frame they’ll take down a minor terrorist cell or two as a way of calling home.

He sends an untraceable message to the main Q Branch server- *Hide and Seek, 72 hours*- and listens to all the techs swear.

“‘You’re cruel to them,’” Bond states, taking one of the sandwiches for himself and watching over Q’s shoulder. “‘Hide and seek on what, their third day?’”

“Fourth,” Q corrects. “And cruel would be setting Malaika on hide and seek protocols. She still gives me a hard time finding her on the rare occasion that she goes dark.” He sets his laptop aside and pulls the bread apart to see what Bond actually put in this sandwich. He stopped trusting them blindly after Bond started getting experimental with illegally imported peppers.

They sit silently for a long time, eating their sandwiches and pointedly not looking at each other. Q flicks on the Xbox when he gets bored, stabbing his way out of some restricted area he wasn’t supposed to invade quite yet, but he’s never been one for rules. He slides into Bond’s space, draping himself over the agent’s lap to get the best view of the television and stealing his pillow. Bond just sighs and adjusts to make himself more comfortable.

“Can you get me a glass of scotch?” Bond twirls his finger in their universal symbol for Q’s magic. Q sighs, too comfortable now to make a fuss about using his gifts for laziness, and wills a glass and the bottle from the liquor cabinet over. “Thank you, Sebastian.”

Q stills at the use of his name and gets killed by a Templar, the world fizzling out of existence as it resets to the latest checkpoint. After all that angry cooking and shouting, Bond’s being remarkably calm about the whole thing. Q was half expecting to get tossed off Bond’s lap for taking up the entire couch and not respecting personal space. Instead, Bond’s idly attempting to untangle Q’s hair and strategizing over some minor slash-and-dash mission with him and calling him by name.

He wants something. That’s the only conclusion Q’s got for his change of mind.

“I think you should let one of the Double-0s go talk to her first,” Bond finally says, almost as an offhand comment. Q ignores him. Bond’ll have to do better than that to get his attention. Sending a Double-0 was Eve’s first suggestion, anyways, but they came to the agreement that Serafina Corvi would see that as an act of aggression no matter who they sent.

And seriously, why is Bond being so incredibly fussy about this? It isn’t like him. Alec does the fussing in this flat, and sometimes Q if they’re being reckless with their lives, but never Bond. He’s more likely to shrug, get a glass of something, and remind them all that when it goes bad, he’ll be there to point and laugh. He doesn’t do worrying and he certainly shouldn’t worry about Q. He’s seen Azrael’s service record, he’s seen the archangel in action, and he’s gotten familiar enough with Q to duck when things snap across the room and ignore how the dirty dishes just end up clean in the cupboard whenever it’s Q’s turn to do them.

“At the very least, take one of us with you,” Bond concedes. “A bodyguard. That way you can focus on getting the story straight and one of us can watch for a trap.”

Q continues playing. Eve argued this one, too. Bond’ll get the official mission briefing first thing tomorrow morning. Having a Double-0 watching his back isn’t a bad idea and Serafina’s already been exposed to Bond.

“They’ve already seen what I can do,” he begins evenly.

“So you’ve lost the element of surprise,” Bond interrupts.
“Excuse me, I was talking here. They’ve already see what I can do,” he reiterates, louder and more forcefully than the first time, and this time Bond doesn’t interrupt. That’s why I’ll be sending Azrael in my stead.”

Bond’s quiet agreement is a surge of warmth against his back and a wing draped over him like a blanket. Q curls into Bond’s feathers, very pointedly not thinking about how incredibly intimate it is, and dives into a pile of hay just in time to avoid the people chasing him.

“Good.”
My dear,

Nature versus nurture is quite an interesting question, is it not? How much of who we are is in our genetics, how much is in the people who raised us and the places they lived?

I find myself wondering that more and more these days.

Adelaide and Dominic are terribly active children. They run amok at work and torment my agents horribly. I’ve half a mind to sic them on the council, send them to keep MI5 out of my hair, and on their most precocious days I’m tempted to send them alongside my best agents. They would terrorize my agents, my enemies, anyone who so much as crossed their path.

They’re very much your children in that respect.

Adelaide is quick and clever and even quicker to defend her brother. She’s warm, more like me than Geoffrey in that she wears her emotions on her sleeve. She’s easy to anger and easier to forgive, which isn’t always a safe thing to be in our world and certainly not when her anger shatters things and her forgiveness repairs them as if they’d never been broken. She likes to draw, a talent which her uncle is already putting to use in forging papers and handwriting and such. She does a very good forgery of Dominic’s handwriting, scribbling ‘confessions’ to things he may or may not have done to get herself out of trouble. Her only mistake is a fondness for scribbling them in the particular shade of blue-green crayon that I know she’s stolen all of because Dominic fusses over it when he’s trying to draw the sea.

Dominic is, in some ways, incredibly not like me. Sometimes I look at them, at close to perfectly identical as any fraternal twins I’ve ever seen, and I see myself in Adelaide and you in Dominic. He was my calm baby, unruffled by life, and he’s turned into a child who doesn’t like new people but his affection, once won or lost, is unshakeable. He’s more bookish than Adelaide, now that we’re reading, and he’s often curled up on the couch with some dusty tome he must have magicked down to himself asking his uncle to define things. He doesn’t like the building blocks, but keeps trying to get Geoffrey to teach him the basics of mechanical engineering. Walls, I’ve learned, are boring as compared to robots, but I daren’t say that in front of Adelaide.

Stay under MI6’s radar, Alessandro. I dread the day that I have to take force against you. I know myself too well, know I would authorize excessive force too easily against even you if it meant protecting my children. Stay quiet, and stay safe. It’s better for both of us that way, even if you don’t know it.

Yours,

Maggie
“How about this one?”

“Nooo,” Vivi drawls, readjusting the pillows behind her back. “Come on, Sebby. I haven’t been able to see my feet for ages and I still wouldn’t be caught dead in those shoes.”

Q scowls at her and throws his arms wide, willing his clothes to shift. They’ve gone through absolutely everything he owns, trying to find something appropriate for Azrael to wear to dinner that doesn’t scream ‘Lord Boothroyd’. He needs to be the archangel, not the angel lord, and there is no way he’ll let James Bond upstage him.

The key to Azrael, Q decides, is just the right combination of aggressively fashionable, aggressively disdainful, and being a little freer with his magic than would be socially acceptable. Aggressively, of course. If he’s learned anything from the Double-0s, it’s that when subtlety isn’t an option, it’s better to go over the top dramatic instead.

Case in point: James Bond’s entire career.

Unfortunately, they’ve also gone through everything Q can imagine Azrael wearing. They never figured this part out because, honestly, it never came up. Azrael and Israfil are never seen outside of their head-to-toe body armor and rarely even at that. Vivi’s been hunting for inspiration in fashion magazines, trying to find something to make him look chic, but in a mildly terrifying way.

“This?”

“You’re a disaster.” She reels him in, pressing a kiss to his cheek to take the sting out of it. “Not that I didn’t know that already, but it deserves repeating.”

“How very kind of you, Vivi.”

“I try.” She guides his hand to her stomach, letting one of the fledglings kick him and cooing to them. “Don’t be a disaster like you Uncle Sebastian, promise? Mommy won’t let you.”

Q rolls his eyes. “You talk big, but we’ll see who’s a disaster when you need a babysitter.”

Vivi squeezes his hand tight. They haven’t had much time together… since Uncle Geoffrey’s death, really. They were inseparable as kids, lived in each others’ back pockets, and even as adults they spent more than a few nights squished into one armchair talking about anything and everything. They were both busy after the explosion at MI6, then she moved out after Skyfall, and talking to her at work and Thursday night family dinners just isn’t the same.

“You ready to be an uncle, Sebby?”

“You ready to be a mom, Vivi?”

“Yeah,” she says, smiling softly down at her belly, “I think I just might be.”

*I promise*, he swears silently, leaning into Vivi while she moves his hand to follow the fledglings’ kicks, *I promise we won’t be Uncle Geoffrey and Mum. I promise we’ll do better.*

And they will. Uncle Geoffrey was a widower, his mate murdered, distant and sad whenever he
thought they weren’t looking. Mum was willingly separated from her mate, constantly in hiding, because of Q and Vivian’s gifts. She never said so much out loud, but finding out about that afterwards, a lot of things make a little more sense. Vivi’s got Charles, Q’s not found his mate, and they might not have much in the way of blood kin but they’re not lacking in family. They’ll all love the fledglings as much as they can bear and then a little more, just for good measure.

“Alright,” Vivi finally shoos him, keeping his hand so that he can’t step too far away. “You’re an utter trainwreck and your plane leaves in two hours, you sop. Stand back and let me dress you.”

Vivi wraps the both of her hands around one of his, her magic a warm rush over the surface of his skin. She overpowers his defenses by a combination of sheer magical strength and their blood tie, putting him in a dark suit almost identical to the one pulled up on his laptop screen. She tilts her head, fixing the fit through his shoulders before she releases him.

“Thank you.”

“Always.” Vivi swings her feet over the edge of Q’s bed, using her wings for that extra push to get to her feet. “I’ll send you pictures in case you need multiple outfits. Get James to critique the fit for you.” He follows her out into the main part of the flat, where Charles and Bond are playing Modern Warfare on the couch, Charles in jeans and a tee and Bond in a crisp suit.

It’s not unusual- Q lives with three Double-0s and sees Charles almost as much as he sees Vivi- but there’s always something a little funny about watching MI6’s top assassins getting just as angry at the game as people who don’t shoot other people for a living. Bond’s got his suit coat draped over the arm of the couch so they can all see the pale leather straps of his holster around his shoulders, the Walther hidden in the shadow of his body. He’s also got garrote wire coiled in the back of his watch, a Taser in his fully functional cell phone, and an emergency phone home signal activated by using a particular credit card in his wallet.

Well, that’s what Q issued him from the Prototypes Bank, at least. Anything else comes from the occasional piece of equipment that Q knows damn well wasn’t ‘broken’ or ‘lost’ like it was reported to be. He’s got no doubt that Bond’s armed to the teeth today.

“Ready?” Bond asks him, tossing his controller aside and slipping his jacket back on.

“As I’ll ever be.”

Chapter End Notes

What can I say, I needed sibling bonding time.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

So it turns out marathoning ANTM is great for my writing speed. Surprise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sometimes, all it takes is a single powerful angel to change the course of a battle.

Historically, the old blood families were the de facto center of their communities, the leaders in times when governments were few and far between. They were the guardians of their people and, when their people stood up in rebellion, their angel was rarely far from the battlefield.

The Battle of Watling Street, 60 or 61 BC. Boudicca, the human Queen, led her larger force against the well-trained Romans. It was looking to be an overwhelming defeat of the Britons until the Roman soldiers killed a country doctor for refusing to treat their wounded. Andraste, the local Angel Lady, destroyed half the Roman army in retribution and singlehandedly prolonged the British rebellion for another seventeen years.

The Battle of al-Qādisiyyah, 636. Kaveh Amirmoez refused to fight except to defend himself, but he walked the battlefield the entire time, healing the members of the Arabic Muslim army but not the Sassanid Persian army. His involvement is said to be the reason why the smaller army decisively defeated the Persians, resulting in the Islamic conquest of the region.

The Battle of Bannockburn, Agincourt, the Tumu Crisis, the naval battle of Lepanto. Throughout history, military disasters are often marked by the presence of angels, but the ones in which a much smaller force takes minimal casualties of their own and comes out victorious almost always are. These battles have become less prevalent with the advent of modern technology capable of equalling or overpowering angels, but that doesn’t mean they’re uncommon.

The Battle of the Salween River.

The Battle of Trenton.

The Battle of Boedrivier.

That pattern, for the most part, ends in 1854 with the Charge of the Light Brigade, where the British angels believed their abilities outmatched the Russian guns and encouraged the officers to charge. The angels, earthbound by the first anti-angelflight guns, rode alongside their brigade and were immediately targeted by the Russians. By the time the tattered remains of the brigade reached the Russian line, the last angel fell, leaving the soldiers to retreat under massive casualties and the loss of their ability to wreak equal damage on their foes. In the immortal words of Lord Tennyson:

Boldly they rode and well,

Into the jaws of Death,

Into the mouth of Hell
“007.”

“Azrael.”

Q takes a long, slow breath in and out, settling into Azrael’s skin on his exhale. He nods, letting Bond lead on the way into the restaurant where they’re meeting Serafina. It’s one of the ones the Double-0s frequent, securing them a relatively private table that Bond thinks is easily defensible with a promise of discretion from the waitstaff. He winks at the closest camera, watching in the edge of his vision as Vivi turns it to follow him.

He can do this. He can be Azrael, he can be coldly professional and find out what he needs to know without giving them anything in return. Q watches the Double-0s do it every day- it can’t be that hard, not really.

“She’s here.”

Under the table, Bond squeezes Q’s knee, surprising him enough that he actually relaxes. Q’s hand falls to cover Bond’s, keeping the one point of skin-on-skin between them as Serafina and Giancarlo join them. The waitstaff leaves them alone once they order, giving them a modicum of privacy in the bustling restaurant.

“So. What inspires a woman to turn traitor against her family?”

Bond squeezes his knee harder, disapproving. Q taps a finger against all of their water glasses, refilling them and refreshing the ice. He gives himself a new slice of lemon, too, staring at Serafina as if to dare her to say anything about it.

“Let me tell you a story, Domenico, about a young girl from a family with a good bloodline and no money. This young girl was pretty and she caught the eye of the second son of an old, rich family who offered to save her family in return for her hand in marriage. And so she married a man who wasn’t her mate, a man she’d never met, because she didn’t love him but she did love her family and her little siblings.”

Serafina falls silent as the waitstaff delivers their food, fussing quietly over Giancarlo to compose herself. Bond is perpetually on guard, holding his steak knife like he’s ready to throw it at the slightest provocation. Q rolls his eyes and sends a touch of his magic to soothe Bond until he doesn’t look quite so murderous. Azrael and 007 are here to be intimidating, not to be noticed.

“Continue,” he prods Serafina. She straightens, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear, and holds out her glass to him.

“Any way I can get a glass of wine?”
“Red or white?”

“Is that supposed to be a question?”

Q shifts the glass in her hand without touching it, turning it to a wine glass while the red seeps across the clear liquid. Serafina toasts him once the entire glass is a deep red, taking a tasting sip and then another, fuller one.

“A lifetime ago, I married Marco Corvi to save my family. Any betrayal on my part was entirely due to the way he kept that promise.”

“Do go on, Mrs. Corvi.”

Serafina runs a hand through Giancarlo’s curls. “Sweetheart, no matter what I say about your grandfather, you know your nonna loves you, right?”

“Sí, Nonna.”

“Good. Eat your dinner, darling.” Serafina takes a few bites of her salad, considering her next words carefully.

Bond steals bites from Q’s plate before he has a chance to try anything, offering him bites in return. Q’s pretty sure it’s so Serafina doesn’t notice that he’s paranoid and checking for poison, completely ignoring the fact that Q’s healing factor makes him damnably hard to kill. Bond, used to the best, ordered the filet mignon, which is admittedly better than Q’s shrimp pasta thing. He swaps their plates with barely a blink after Q steals yet another bite of steak, switching out Q’s butter knife for his steak knife.

“How do I describe Marco Corvi, circa 1977? He was the handsomest man in the angelic elite, at least to one of the poorest girls there. Marco was the second son, so while Alessandro and Geoffrey Boothroyd and Esmail Amirmoez were equally as handsome, girls like me knew there was no chance of marrying any of them. Marco was an incorrigible flirt and we all thought we had a chance with him, but his eye settled on me. My parents disliked him from the beginning, my younger sister felt uncomfortable around him, but I was enthralled by his attention. I knew he wasn’t my mate, but the attention was flattering nonetheless, and then he promised he’d bring my family in to Ali Aperte, save us from utter bankruptcy, if only I’d pledge myself to him. That made it a simple decision. I wed Marco within a fortnight.”

Serafina pauses, swirling the wine in her glass and composing herself. Q and Bond remain silent. Q’s grateful for the… ease with which Serafina offers her life story. He was expecting to have to coax the answers out of her, which is half the reason he let Bond come along. Q’s a master at getting information out of computers, out of trails of receipts and Facebook profiles, but Bond’s a master at getting information out of people.

“Eighteen months after our wedding, my entire family was murdered in the middle of the night. Marco swore he’d get revenge, but he never did anything more than repeat Alessandro’s allegations that such a travesty against angelkind could only be perpetrated by Nazi sympathizers. Their deaths, I learned later, brought the suspicions of MI6 down on Ali Aperte. Margherita- your mother- arrived two and a half months later.”

Serafina sighs, caught up in her reminiscences.

“Margherita was glorious. She was beautiful, almost as beautiful as your sister, but she was so utterly confident that everyone’s eyes followed her. Alessandro was besotted, giving Marco more power
within the family so he could spend more time with Margherita, and Valentina and I were betting on
when they’d be wed. That they were mates was obvious, that they were utterly obsessed with one
another equally so. Valentina was pregnant with Carolina at this point. It was she who first suggested
that Margherita might be pregnant, just another bet to keep between us, three months after she joined
us. A week after we made our bet…”

“She disappeared.”

Serafina gives him a look, one that reads clearly as do not interrupt your elders. Q fights the urge to
raise his hands in surrender. Serafina isn’t as intimidating as Mum, not be a long shot, and he learned
not to quail under her fiercest glares. He shouldn’t quail under Serafina’s annoyance, especially not
as Azrael.

“Margherita raised some suspicions in the villa, got me thinking about my family’s murder. When
Marco uncovered that she’d been MI6 all along, he crowed about it for nearly a week before
bringing it to Alessandro’s attention. I used his contacts to track down MI6 and offer my services
within the month, staying anonymous for my protection. I became Sparrow. Within a few years, MI6
had tracked down enough information to prove that Ali Aperte had murdered my family the moment
they became a liability. I was preparing to fake my death and abscond to MI6 when I found out I was
pregnant with Annamaria.”

Serafina falls silent while the waitstaff clears the table, ordering dessert for herself and for Giancarlo
with a sort of crisp confidence. Bond orders something equally quickly and Q orders the same due to
a lack of a menu. If he doesn’t like it, he’ll magic it to a banana split or a piece of triple chocolate
cake or something good like that.

She doesn’t continue her story until after their desserts have been delivered.

“So you stayed.”

“So I stayed. I had no promises of a good life, of any life at all, if I left. I could tolerate that for
myself, but not for my daughter. I stayed, and I told MI6 everything I could manage, and I muddled
information in Alessandro’s search for Margherita. I swear,” she hisses vehemently, “I swear that I
didn’t know what Alessandro wanted of you. I made sure my daughter and her husband were safe
after you collapsed the building, then took Giancarlo and ran.”

That’s… that’s quite a story, for sure. He glances over to Bond, using his experience as a sort of
human lie detector. When he notices Q’s attention, he reaches over for Q’s hand, giving it a quick
squeeze before tapping Morse code against his palm: T-R-U-E.

“Why did you come to find me? Not just MI6, but me in particular?”

Bond tightens his hand on Q’s, warning him that it isn’t perhaps a good path to be following.
Serafina smiles softly, looking from Q to Bond and back, reaching across the table to brush Q’s
cheekbone affectionately. Q frowns. He’s going to have to work on this whole intimidating thing
when he’s not in full body armor.

“I’m on the run from one of the largest criminal organizations in Europe who also happens to be one
of the most respected angel families in the world. Who better to go to than an archangel whose
mate’s name is synonymous with explosions?”

Silence.
In case it's still unclear, I REALLY like backstories.
The Azrael Project, or Hunting Archangels in our Genome

The Human Genome Project (HGP), completed on April 14, 2003, continues to spur cutting-edge research in fields from molecular medicine and human evolution to angelic physiology and forensic sciences. Sequencing the genome is allowing human scientists to design medicines to treat chronic illnesses more effectively than angelic healers while the viability of biofuel technology creeps ever upwards. The progress of the last ten years since the HGP finished their work has been incredible, and one of the projects that’s been more or less overlooked is the Azrael Project.

The Azrael Project, named for the legendary archangel, focuses on the angelic genome. They’ve made progress in identifying the specific genes that control the presentation of magical talents, particularly in differentiating between fire gifts and other elemental gifts. Theoretically, this could lead to a true merging of science and magic, unlocking the secrets to angelic healing, longevity, and their ever-deadly gifts.

The current discoveries out of the Azrael Project note that the disparate gifts are genetic fragments. This is often not a matter of what genetic pieces a particular angel has, but rather what they don’t. Most Class One or Class Two angels have the genetic possibilities for at least one gift they themselves do not present. The ‘old blood’ angels, for the most part, have in their genetics the possibilities for almost any combination of gifts.

Note: The Azrael Project needs samples! Any angels interested in helping the project should write to The Azrael Project at the following address in order to determine if they are qualified for participation.

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Bond recovers his composure first.

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken, Mrs. Corvi,” he says in his most unruffled professional tone, one Q knows he uses with arms dealers who are a little too good for the usual smash and grab missions. “I don’t have the honor of being your nephew’s mate, unfortunately, just his bodyguard.”

Q shoots a glare at Bond. He’s not Q’s bodyguard, no matter what Eve might have threatened Bond with. Q outranks him and Azrael outranks him, on the technicality that Azrael isn’t in any of the official hierarchies but is unofficially the lead agent. Mum left a hierarchy by power in the official
regulations and, last he checked, M hasn’t changed it. That puts Azrael in the top spot, Israfil below him, and 003 in third. Off the top of his head, 007 barely makes the top five.

In any means, he is not Q’s bodyguard. He’s just managed to out-stubborn Q enough to stay by his side, which has absolutely nothing to do with Q enjoying his presence. Bond releases his hand long enough to tap out more Morse code against his palm, dragging his nail lightly across Q’s lifeline for the dashes.


Q squeezes his hand tight enough to hurt, but he keeps his mouth shut.

“Of course, my mistake,” Serafina murmurs in a tone of voice that says exactly the opposite. She smiles sweetly at them, almost cloyingly so, and folds her hands on the table in front of her. “I would hate to… imply anything. You’ll have to forgive an old woman. My eyes must be going bad.”

Yeah. Q’s sure that’s it.

Bond and Giancarlo look equally convinced.

Q is very, very glad that Vivi’s not here- or worse, Eve. They’d never let him live it down. Hell, he’s glad that he insisted on not wiring them up with a connection to Q Branch. James Bond has a reputation in the intelligence world and an even larger one among the people in MI6 who have actually seen his service record. James Bond may flirt with everyone, yes, but everyone knows better than to think it means anything.

It’s that simple. Serafina doesn’t know about Bond’s reputation. She assumes there’s something between the two of them just because Bond’s a flirt and Q can’t be bothered to do anything more than ignore him. Everyone knows that telling a Double-0 they can’t do something only eggs them on. He ignores Bond and, eventually, he’ll get bored. Q’s just a novelty, an archangel he can flirt with without incurring the wrath of 005, but even he’ll grow bored.

That’s all.

“Mrs. Corvi, MI6 will be happy to offer you sanctuary in repayment for your work all these years. I will personally arrange for new identities for both you and Giancarlo, or, actually, it’d be better for all of us if I passed that task on to R.”

Vivi’s got an uncanny touch with forgery. She’ll give them a new, false identity that holds up long enough to get genuine emigration papers for wherever Serafina decides to live. Vivi can whip something good enough to get agents past security in all sorts of places with a click of her fingers, but for something more permanent like this she’ll do it by hand. Q’s never had the patience for that kind of detail work, where a single penstroke means it’s all useless. At least when he builds complicated things, they tend to explode if he makes a mistake.

“Do we have to stay in Warsaw?” Giancarlo asks. For a kid who hasn’t done much more than mumur to his grandmother in Italian and keep his eyes on his plate, he’s suddenly very bold about it, staring Q down. The candle on the table flickers, flaring up and then almost snuffing out with someone’s emotions. Q spares a glance to Bond, who shakes his head. Must be Giancarlo, then. Serafina’s record says she’s got a talent for plants, not fire.

“MI6 can move you to almost any location in the world. We’d like to keep you close to an outpost so, should Marco Corvi come looking, we can protect you,” Bond explains. “Personally, I’d prefer keeping you away from the Mediterranean basin. \textit{Ali Aperte} has too many contacts in that area and
you’re well-known to the region’s angel community.”

He’s probably more familiar with the asset sanctuary programs than Q is- Q Branch deals with creating their identities to get them on their feet, but then it’s outsourced to the branch offices. Bond’s been put in asset sanctuary three times when they needed him to disappear and rescued his fair share of exposed assets who then disappeared into the program. Q doesn’t even deal with it directly- Vivi’s in charge of new identities.

The best part about being Quartermaster is making Vivi do all the stuff he doesn’t like.

“Giancarlo, love, where would you like to go? India’s lovely, I hear, and I must admit that I’ve always been curious about the Caribbean.”

“Virginia’s lovely this time of year,” Q offers. He’s never actually been- MI6 stays out of the CIA’s affairs that close to home in return for London being off-limits to them- but they have a branch office in New York and Q’s got contacts who would help keep the CIA’s eyes on a high-priority asset. “Or New York.”

“London,” Giancarlo decides, never breaking eye contact. “I’m about to have cousins, aren’t I? I want London.”

“London’s rather grey and boring for someone who’s grown up in a lovely villa in Italy, I’m afraid.”

“Looondoooon,” Giancarlo drags it out.

“Nobody would think to look for us there,” Serafina considers. “Even if they figure out that I’ve been supplying information to MI6 for decades. It would be the smart move to run to the far corners of the world, so that’s where Marco will look first.” She stands, offering her hand to Giancarlo and smiling that shark’s smile again. “We’ll have to have lunch after Giancarlo and I settle in, sweetheart. You should bring your James, but perhaps not when he’s prepared to shoot me.”

“He’s always prepared to shoot people,” Q argues, and then when his brain catches up with him, “and he’s not mine!”

“Have Adelaide send us the rest of the details,” Serafina says, slipping her coat back on. “Fly safely, don’t forget to floss, and don’t forget to use a condom, dears.” Blowing a kiss over her shoulder, she and Giancarlo breeze out of the restaurant and vanish into the crowds, headed in a completely different direction from the one they arrived in. Q stares after them, utterly at a loss for words.

“That would’ve been awkward to have on comms,” Bond comments, accepting his sleek MI6-issue credit card back from the server and signing the receipt in an illegible scribble. He guides Q through the crowds with a hand on the small of his back, keeping Q just slightly in front of him. It’d be a fantastic defensive strategy on Bond’s part, were he thinking that far ahead. It’s damnably difficult to damage Q in any way he can’t heal in a few moments, so in their lack of body armor Q becomes the perfect human shield.

But perhaps Bond doesn’t understand Q’s abilities to quite that extent.

God, he’s grateful that they aren’t on comms. He can imagine that now- Q Branch is a gossipmonger’s paradise, which means absolutely everyone would know. Vivi would never let him forget it and that’s not even considering Eve, who lives for the next piece of gossip to hold over Q’s head.

“What has my life become?” he complains, twisting into a sidestep to address Bond directly.
Bond corrals him back in, one arm tight around his side and the flicker-spark of his magic dancing across Q’s skin. The impression of his wings ghosts through the air for a moment before folding completely around them, a protective cocoon of warm brown-and-gold feathers blocking out the bustle of the world around them. He has a split second to think- *Bond’s fingers on the line of his jaw and a question in those blue, blue eyes*- before Bond leans in and kisses him.

It’s a brief kiss, over almost as quickly as it began. Q’d like to think that’s because they are, regardless of the protection of Bond’s wings, in a rather public place. For all that Bond’s rather blasé about seducing beautiful, dangerous people in full knowledge that his video feed is probably up on the big screens in Q Branch from half a dozen angles, they’re still angels born to the privacy of the elite. Some things aren’t meant for public consumption. Either way, Bond pulls away from him after a long moment with a tiny smile, folding his wings away.

“If complicated.” Bond starts to walk away, leisurely enough that it takes only a couple quick steps for Q to catch up with him.

“What?”

“If your life.” Bond doesn’t look back, striding through the crowd with the same self-assured strut Q’s seen a thousand times on video feeds in casinos and slums alike, always watching from a distance. This time, Bond casts a hand back to tangle his fingers with Q’s.

“It’s complicated,” Q echoes, tightening his grip. “Yes, I suppose it might be.”

Chapter End Notes

I swear I’ve spent the last two days trying to write the last paragraph.
Chapter 34

Society is composed of invisible lines.

Men and women. Muslim and Jewish and Christian and Buddhist. Black and white and all the shades in between, divided by skin color as much as the arbitrary lines on the globe, the swinging symphony of a Gospel choir in the deep South and the layers of voices reciting ‘Our Father, who art in heaven…’

Angels and humans.

Humans who love angels are flighty. They dream of clouds beyond their reach and the flash of sunlight off bright wings, of the momentary attention of someone who can never love them back. Angels who love humans are grounded, wings clipped by the lack of such in their human partner. They deny the sky and stop using their gifts, pretending to live as much like a human as they can. Occasionally, they stake their claim to an angel, to a human, to have them for a day or a year or a decade while promises of forever fade under the cold reality that whatever inconceivable magic links angel mates, it doesn’t touch human lovers.

Society objects, sometimes quietly and sometimes loud and vehemently, to unions that cross invisible lines. As far as angels and humans go, society tends to have one thing to say about the inevitable failure of such unions:

They got what they deserved.

Excerpt from A Society for Humans: The Angel Problem

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Q Branch

“DOMINIC SEBASTIAN BOOTHROYD!”

Sebastian winces, dropping his acetylene torch at the Major’s roar. He scrapes for it, the flame flickering out of existence conveniently before it hits the floor, cracking his head on the edge of his workbench. For a long moment, he considers staying exactly where he is, hiding under the workbench like a fledgling, but that’s not an option with every single pair of eyes in Q Branch on him.

Shit.

Biting back a pained curse, he slides out from under the table, running through a mental list of what
he’s done recently that could merit that tone of voice and his full name. It’s not like he’s got a common one, a John Smith or George White or something like the names Vivian puts on the agents’ false papers.

And there’s that tone of voice. Major Boothroyd’s got a bit of a temper- his spats with M are legendary- but he rarely gets upset at either Sebastian or Vivian at work. Forgetting to do the dishes, sure, but the last time Sebastian got shouted at here was for sending an agent out on a cruise ship with a prototype in full knowledge that it might have failed in prolonged exposure to water. Might. Like, a 30% chance, and the agent wasn’t supposed to end up taking a nice swim in the Pacific.

Still.

He hasn’t played any nasty pranks on agents who fail to return their equipment lately, nor has he slipped and forgotten that food has to be made or bought and a cup of tea doesn’t last for hours. He’s been a good little Q Branch worker bee since 007’s death. M was about as emotional as a stone at the agent’s funeral, but Mum was broken up about it. Marise St Pierre was one of Mum’s closest friends back when she was Agent Boothroyd and her death was entirely preventable, were it not for the pernicious Double-0 habit of underestimating their injuries. The gunshot wound was negligible, by 007’s standards, but it went septic in the middle of the Amazon, where she continued to ignore it.

“VIVIAN, FIND YOUR BROTHER,” the Major bellows.

Across the Branch, Vivi’s eyes snap up, meeting his and shrugging. She’s got no idea what this is about, then. Shit. Sebastian winds his way through the maze of tables as quickly as he can, willing nothing to fall off or shatter as he bumps into them. There’d usually be an outraged chorus of complaints, but Q Branch is deadly silent right now.

“Whatever it is, I swear I didn’t do it.”

Major Boothroyd stops without saying anything, fixing his nephew with a glare. He flops back into his desk chair, pinching the bridge of his nose to stave off a stress headache.

“I don’t want to know what you’ve done, Sebastian, and if your mother finds out whatever you’ve done, then we never had this conversation.” Major Boothroyd sighs, tapping the table next to him. “Sit down. Channel 007.”

Sebastian tunes into the audio feed and pulls Major Boothroyd’s keyboard over, turning his screen to a slightly more comfortable angle. Agent 007 must have just come back online, else Q Branch would be buzzing with the news. M shouted and threw things at the wall when he up and decided to resign without so much as a by-your-leave. Vivian swears she repaired M’s porcelain bulldog six times, which would be impressive since Sebastian repaired it another four.

“Boothroyd of Q Branch on comms. 007, what is your status?”

“Like I told you twenty minutes ago,” Bond snaps, “unless you have a response team in fucking Venice, you aren’t much bloody use. Report me to M later, Quartermaster, but in the meantime I have quite a bit of Her Majesty’s money to retrieve and a traitorous bitch to deal with.”

“Good luck.” Major Boothroyd claps Sebastian on the shoulder and walks away. He stops in the doorway, one hand on the doorknob, and turns back around. “Oh, and Sebastian? The comm logs are on the fritz and haven’t been recording any of 007’s mission since he came back online. Do give that a look once you’ve gotten him on a plane, will you?”

The door slams behind him and Sebastian grins. That’s as good as permission, coming from Major
Boothroyd. He’s a proponent of positive communication strategies, which means a lot less shouting at the agents when they do something particularly stupid. Sebastian, like anybody else in Q Branch who’s had to deal with Killian Grey, the current 009, on the other end of their comms, thinks that’s a crock of shit. He finds 007 by his tracker and has a CCTV feed up moments later, watching 007 stalk irritably through a building.

“Now, now, 007. If you’d stop being rude for the sake of being rude, you might notice the gunman turning the corner ahead. Yes, that’s the one, I’d really rather you shoot them first instead of looking menacingly at them long enough for them to fumble out a weapon.”

“You’re not the Quartermaster,” 007 accuses him, rounding the next corner and out of Sebastian’s cameras. He hunts for his next ones, running facial recognition in the background of locally uploaded photos in an attempt to find Miss Vesper Lynd, soon to be fired from Her Majesty’s Treasury.

“Clever, aren’t you? I introduced myself and everything. If you must, call me Boothroyd. I don’t answer to hey you or techie or any of those other things you field agents like to call us. The door on the left looks flimsy, kick it down, if you would.”

“I can do my job,” 007 snarls, picking up the pace as he closes in on Lynd and the miscellaneous henchmen she’s with.

“Prove it.”

And he does.

***

Two weeks later, Mum’s working on a pile of paperwork in the dining room while Uncle Geoffrey cooks. She slides a document across to him with a frown, red pen tapping arrhythmically against the table.

“What’s wrong with this after action report?”

Sebastian skims the last page of the official Q Branch report on 007’s high stakes poker game, etcetera, where his commentary on what’s been unofficially dubbed ‘the Venice debacle’ has been circled numerous times in red. Eve leans against the back of his chair, reading over his shoulder, and Mum swats her hand.

“That’s confidential, Charlotte, and last I checked, you didn’t have clearance for it.”

“Sorry, Aunt Margaret,” Eve apologizes, continuing to read over his shoulder anyways. Mum swats her a second time. She almost looks proud.

“Read it again.”

Venice, Italy.

DSB2103 on comms. Transcript not available.

Results: Money retrieved, target retrieval failed
Analysis: Vesper Lynd was entirely human, and she loved with a ferocity that was nigh on angelic. Unfortunately for Agent 007, she did not, in fact, love him.

“Tell me, Dominic,” Mum continues, “in what world did you think that was an appropriate note for Agent 007’s personnel file?”

“One in which Agent 007 took up with a human treasury official after going essentially rogue on his first mission, after which she promptly betrayed him and her country?”

Mum’s pen stills. She reaches out slowly, taking back what will become the soonest addition to the file for Agent 007 (Bond, James). She closes it without any corrections, setting it atop her stack of completed file reviews.

“Fair point.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Angelic society is at once remarkably unified and remarkably not. They are not bound by divisions of nationality and rarely divided by religion, though many angels are loyal to both. Their interactions with other angels are predicated first and foremost upon their experiences as angels and then, secondarily, upon their experiences as everything else they might be.

A group of angels, forbidden from knowing names or any personal information about each other, will automatically sort into a hierarchy based on relative strength. There is an intrinsic ranking based on the rarity of their gifts as well as their strength: an angel wielding fire ranks lower than an equally strong one wielding ice, simply by the rarity of the talent.

Take these same angels and allow them to introduce themselves, and suddenly they rearrange into a different hierarchy. They divide into groups based on who the closest old blood family is, the one who in a different age they might have sworn fealty to. Inside those groups, they once again create a power-based hierarchy with the exceptions of angels closely related to the old blood family. Theoretically, the old blood family would take their place at the top of the hierarchy, regardless of power.

These groups were not openly hostile to one another. In fact, they were perhaps more pleasant to each other, knowing how they all related to their society as a whole. Historically, this has not always been the case. Centuries ago, there was a blood feud between the Boothroyds of England and the MacKenzies of Scotland, leading to the escalation of minor border skirmishes between the humans. In that particular case, the stronger Boothroyds wiped out the angelic line of the MacKenzies in their entirety. Similar feuds within the Blood of Azrael led to the eradication of many other old blood families.

Excerpt from In the Blood: The Descendants of Legends

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“What part of no don’t you understand, 006?”

Onscreen, Trevelyan sticks his tongue out at the closest CCTV camera and sways through the crowd. There’s an appreciative sigh through Q Branch and one of the minions zooms in, filling the screen with the sway of Trevelyan’s too-tight trousers. Another intrepid minion zooms in on Bond on the other screen, starting murmurs of comparison between the two. Bond stalks like a predator searching for prey, coldly efficient with sharp edges his prey are only too willing to throw themselves on. Trevelyan is molasses-slow smiles and seductive glances, slinking through crowds and drawing every eye to himself.

“Why, I didn’t know you cared,” Trevelyan purrs, faking a conversation with the woman at the bar.
He winks into the camera in El-Hashem’s necklace because Trevelyan’s the worst kind of secret agent.

“I don’t know, Q, should I throw my drink in his face?” 003 comments, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She’s without her headscarf for once- their target tonight is an Islamophobe with a fetish for Middle Eastern women and El-Hashem insisted that she was fine leaving it at home for a mission.

“Absolutely,” he confirms on the open line. Out in the gardens, Bond smirks into his drink. “That kind never learns until they’re wearing your drink, after all, and a little bird told me that 006 managed to find explosives somewhere despite being told no.”

“As you wish, Quartermaster,” El-Hashem murmurs, suddenly raising her voice to shout abuse at Trevelyan, reaching behind her for the next man over’s new drink instead of throwing the last few sips of hers. Trevelyan retreats to the restroom, where he’ll change and seduce his way into some heiress’ skirt, while El-Hashem apologizes profusely to the man whose drink she stole and gets an invitation up to meet their host. Bond’s waiting to catch a security guard alone and steal their uniform, staying close enough to El-Hashem for when it all goes to hell.

It’s a bit of overkill, Q’ll admit to that, but they’ve been working to find one Mr. Edric Gold ever since the fall of Quantum. This was supposed to be a mission for Azrael and Israfil. Once Vivi got pregnant, they started planning to send 003 instead of Israfil with Azrael on backup. Now… this is a mission halfway across the world and Vivi’s due date was three days ago.

Translation: no way in hell could they get Azrael.

They’re taking a bit of a chance here. El-Hashem’s good. Electricity’s a powerful gift- and a rare one- and she can be utterly devastating in urban areas. She’s one of the best, for all that her talents are too often overlooked in her infiltration work. In a good mission, she’ll be in and out before they ever realize anything’s gone, with no call for exploding transformers and burnt out circuit breakers. She’s perhaps the best Double-0 in the business and the only one with nearly the right skills to replace Israfil.

Replacing Azrael’s a different matter. Israfil’s forte is manipulating people and the type of defensive magic that can go unnoticed. If Mum ever trusted sending them out into infiltration missions, Vivian would have been even more dangerous than Malaika is. On the short-term missions of sheer destruction that Azrael and Israfil are used on, Q’s the better choice. He doesn’t have her healing abilities- or her sense for people- but he’s objectively stronger.

Hence, 006 and 007. Between the two of them, they do more in the way of property damage than the other five combined and have a body count that nearly rivals Azrael’s… if he doesn’t count the Quartermaster’s body count. With a little luck and Q’s voice in their ears, they might even get the job done without Trevelyan resorting to explosives.

Q’s headset clicks over to a different channel, untouched. He glances over his shoulder at Vivi, who is pointedly ignoring him.

“You might want to hurry things up,” Vivi murmurs, barely loud enough for their microphones to catch, and then he’s back on the mission channel again. Q glances over at Charles, busy critiquing Bond’s impression of a member of Gold’s security team, and back at Vivi.

Yeah, he’s not playing this game. The last time he played the ‘I’m fine’ game with someone, Akane almost bled out before admitting she did, in fact, need to go to Medical.
“Danielle, you’re the lead,” he orders, leaving his post to go check on Vivi. Someone pokes Charles, sending him to join them. Q perches on the table at her side, flicking both their earpieces to a private channel.

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“How long until you hurt enough that the lights start flickering?”

Vivi sighs, flattening her hands over her keyboard and then pushing it away. All of the Branch finds reasons to have their backs turned and the few who work directly next to Vivi all take a sudden trip to the break room, calling for coffee or tea orders the entire way.

“That’s irrelevant, Q. You’re the Quartermaster and I’m the Reserve Quartermaster. We don’t just get to leave during the biggest mission of our year.”

“Danielle has the rest of the Branch behind her. If she can run missions while we’re in the field, if she ran the entire branch while we were in Italy, then she can run it long enough for you to have a baby or two.” Q looks over Vivi’s head at Charles, who, for his part, looks utterly terrified of the prospect of babies. Charles stares down at Vivi’s hands linked over her belly with more trepidation than the last time 005 faced down a firing squad or jumped off a building with a broken wing or any of the extreme bullshit the Double-0s pull on a regular basis.

“I’m fine.”

“Alright,” he concedes. “Your body, your rules, but don’t put off leaving for the sake of the mission. Malaika and Alec are good agents and James is damnably hard to kill. They’ll be fine, with or without us.”

Vivi takes his hand, squeezing it tight. She releases him to link their pinkies, holding their hands up between them and smiling.

“Pinky promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Q releases her, striding back to his workstation. Danielle slides back to her own workstation with a motherly pat on his shoulder. She’s been third in command of Q Branch for as long as he can remember, as powerful as anyone can be in the Branch without taking a title. She much prefers to be the spider in the shadows, yanking threads to make everything run smoothly while Q and R do the inventing and the politics and all that nonsense. The HR department’s been after her for years, but Danielle’s too happy keeping the minions in line to transfer now.

“006,” he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, “I told you to make a scene, not to get caught with your hand up Gold’s niece’s skirt in the coat closet, of all places. Are you trying to get yourself shot?”

Trevelyan, the bastard, blows a kiss to the closest CCTV camera and runs for his life.

Chapter End Notes
Bit of a short one, but I don't argue when I'm actually writing at a good clip. Hope you enjoyed!
Angelkind’s Most Eligible: The Bachelors and Bachelorettes of the Blood of Azrael

As of the most recent census, there are forty-three surviving members of the Blood of Azrael. Their status as angelic royalty puts them firmly atop our list of the most eligible bachelors and bachelorettes in winged circles. Without further ado, here’s the most eligible son and daughter of each of the six remaining families- in alphabetical order, of course.

Ayodele Afolayan: The eldest son of noted fashion designer Monifa Afolayan, Ayodele’s photographs have been featured everywhere from Vogue Italia to National Geographic. Ayodele’s shoots have earned him notoriety as one of the most creative minds of the age.

Enitan Afolayan: The youngest of the Afolayan angels, Enitan chose to use her portion of the Afolayan fortune to start her own engineering firm. Enitan’s sustainable designs are inspired by traditional solutions updated for modern problems.

Zhaleh and Rahman Amirmoez: The twins, eldest of Yasmin and Baraz Amirmoez’s children, have made a name for themselves as the lead scientists working on the Azrael Project. Zhaleh is an expert on genetics and her brother Rahman is the world’s foremost expert on the blurry line between science and magic.

Kamala Bhattacharya: Kamala recently took over the clinic her grandmother Abhilasha started. Talk is that she’ll be a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in establishing similar angel-run clinics around the world for the poor.

Raj Bhattacharya: What more can we say about Raj Bhattacharya? He’s on the front of every gossip magazine, it seems, and not always for his technical brilliance.

Charlotte Boothroyd: Not much is known about Charlotte Boothroyd. She was last spotted in public in a casino in Macau.

Dominic Boothroyd: Much like his cousin, Dominic Boothroyd is an enigma. He was last seen visiting the Corvi family of Tivoli, Italy with his newly-mated twin sister before the disastrous collapse of Villa Corvi.

Lin Mei: With her new, iconic line of shoes, Mei is on track to be the next Christian Louboutin- and the richest angel in the world, even without her family fortune.

Lin Zhi: With great power comes great responsibility. Zhi’s access to the inner circles of angelkind have made him one of the most respected journalists in the world- even before he admitted to being the force behind the pseudonym.

Tereza Silveira: This political dynamo recently became one of the youngest members of the United Nations, representing Brazil. Unlike her cousins, Tereza’s kept her personal life, well, personal- ‘save the world first, then settle down’ is her motto.

Antônio Silveira: Last but certainly not least, Antônio recently succeeded his father Altair as the
head of the Silveira Corporation, a multi-national business venture with their fingers in a lot of pies across the Americas. In his spare time, he’s often seen skydiving the angel way: only opening his wings moments before he would hit the ground.

That’s it for this year! Catch us in next year’s issue, when we see how many of these angels are still looking for that special someone. In the meantime, check out our list of Meeting Your Mate: The Top 6 Dos And Don’ts.

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The archangel bit… is a problem.

The doctors have rules and even more than that, they have protocols, none of which are flexible to an angel who attempts to shatter everything near her during a contraction. They fuss over the blank space in her patently false medical files where it acknowledges that she’s an angel, but redacts any other information, they fuss over her twin brother who sits in the corner with his knuckles white around the arm of his chair and a crackle of magic around him that gets the nurses murmuring something about ‘off the charts strong’, and they fuss over her mate standing by her side in a clear panic with no less than three more-or-less visible guns on him. In short, they fuss over a lot of things before Charles has the presence of mind to pull out his and Vivi’s MI6 identification cards, after which point they just stare and whisper.

In short, it’s about as terrible as Q and Vivi were expecting and far worse than Charles was expecting because, for all his skills, he didn’t quite connect the dots.

Fact #1: Angels in pain lose control of their magic and lash out at whatever’s closest. Q knows Charles is aware of that—every single Double-0 is trained to make that lashing out as deadly as possible for the occasions in which they are, unfortunately, outnumbered and overpowered. Charles, in fact, currently holds the record for taking out nineteen terrorists in a massive earthquake the last time he was captured. Malaika’s been hoping to beat it, but she’s too good to get captured that often and when she is, it’s by people who know better than to let her anywhere near a power station or copious amounts of metal.

Fact #2: Childbirth hurts. Q has no practical experience with this, nor did he really think that needed to be spelled out for Charles, but then again he retreated to his corner after Vivi managed to crack three bones in his hand. It healed within half an hour, but Q was less than appreciative and decided he’d be more use when not wasting his energy healing himself.

Fact #3: Vivian is an archangel.

One plus two plus three equals Vivian doing her best to absolutely shatter her hospital room with every contraction, which would include breaking her mate’s bones, probably not her brother’s because he can defend against her magic, and definitely the completely innocent staff of doctors and nurses who really ought to be counting themselves lucky that the other Double-0s aren’t here to glare at them. At least Charles is distracted from checking qualifications and inspecting every single nook in the room by his impending fatherhood.

Not that Q would permit there to be anything wrong. The only thing holding the room in its current
form is the full force of his will pitted against Vivi’s. It’s giving him a headache, working at his full
power for this bloody long, especially the bit where he’s fighting against his magic’s natural
tendencies. Vivi’s the one whose magic is predicated on stability, on order and putting things back to
rights, all that stuff that lends itself well to defensive and healing applications. Q’s magic is chaos
incarnate, well-suited to destruction and the simple act of changing things. Vivi’s coffee cup never
gets any lower during a critical mission, his fills every time he’s just about out. He’d be far more
amused by the reversal of their skills if his head didn’t hurt quite so badly.

Still.

It’s all worth it to see Vivi’s face light up when they present her with Baby Number One, printing
out a tiny wristband with Alexander Michael Boothroyd on it and fastening it around the fledgling’s
wrist. Nathaniel Logan Boothroyd, slightly smaller but more or less identical to his older brother, is
handed straight to Charles. Q wonders if they’re actually identical or if it’s just a newborn thing, and
then he wonders if the hospital cafeteria makes anything worth eating.

“I want something horrific for my waistline,” Vivi says the minute Q stands up and stretches, “and
preferably something that tastes good at the same time. Charles, put Nathaniel down in the crib they
left for him and get yourself something to eat while they’re both asleep.”

Charles coos over Nathaniel for a moment longer before setting him down, looping the cushioned
elastic strap around one of the fledgling’s ankles. Fledglings can’t really fly, not this early, but they
can occasionally get just enough airborne to hurt themselves. The strap’s a smart precaution.

Q may or may not have done a lot of research on how to keep the fledglings safe.

“Where’d you get the names from?”

Charles beams, half turning to face Q as they wander through the damn near endless halls with their
tiny little signs directing them this way and that. Q’s got the blueprints of this place on his tablet, but
Vivi stole that to play Candy Crush when Alexander fell asleep and the nurses put him in his crib.
Her phone was not two feet away with her tablet, but no, she insisted on his and who’s he to argue
with her right now?

“We’ve had Nathaniel Logan picked out for ages- Nathaniel Logan for a boy, Margaret Rose for a
girl, back before the doctor told us it was twins. We wanted to do a little bit of old and a little bit of
new, you see, and my brother was Nathaniel.” Charles doesn’t bother to elaborate, guessing correctly
that Q’s read his file. Orphans make the best recruits, Mum always said, as hypocritical as that made
her, and orphans with tragic backgrounds all the better. Charles’ parents died in his university years-
leukemia and a boating accident- but the tragedy in his past is the death of his little brother when they
were out tromping around in the woods.

As for Margaret, well, he knows where that one came from, too. Probably for the best that they’re
both boys- Mum always hated her name, was perfectly happy to give it up for a single letter.

“And after you knew you were getting double trouble?”

“We wanted it to be a surprise, so that meant two more names. Two boy names and two girl names.
For my mother, we had Maria Elizabeth, and after you and Viv found all those papers…”

“Alexander Michael.”

Charles shrugs. “Slightly awkward after you brought a mansion down on top of his head, but by that
time we liked the name.”
“It’s a good name.”

“Glad you agree.”

Their conversation devolves into a debate about the relative merits of the cafeteria’s various offerings and what Vivi meant when she said horrendous for her waistline but still good. Charles has a particular distaste for anything lime that Q understands so far as lime-flavored yogurt and key lime pie but not quite so far as the hint of lime in a Moscow Mule or Malaika’s cooking. He’ll have to make sure to feed the fledglings plenty of good things with lime in them when they spend time with their Uncle Sebastian, he decides, to counteract their father’s awful tastes.

In the end, they pick the three things that look the least boring on the menu and figure that Vivi will pick whatever she wants and leave them to eat the rest. Q’s got an hour or so before he has to return to MI6, check his Double-0s back in and retrieve what equipment Malaika will bring back, and let Eve come be Auntie Eve.

“Vivi, do you want a burger or one of Charles’s ridiculous chicken sandwiches,” Q demands as he pushes through the privacy curtain. They’ve got a private room, but they’re all too paranoid to allow anyone to see in, even when the door’s open. “Personally, I’d question his idea of ‘horrendous for your waistline and yet not utter shit’, but then again, you seem to like him any-“

Q cuts off in the middle of his sentence, stopping fast enough for Charles to run into him.

Vivi’s pale and shaken, clinging to one of her fledglings with her wings curled around herself. Marco Corvi sits nearby, gun trained on Vivi’s head. Carolina and Riccardo, similarly armed, direct their weapons at Charles and chivvy him further into the not-so-spacious room, taking all his visible weapons. Their sister Elisabetta slips outside and shuts the door, dragging a chair with her.

“Lovely to see you again, passerotto,” Alessandro addresses him, adjusting his hold on the swaddled infant in his arms, the weight of his gun lying heavy on the fledgling’s stomach. It’s not in firing position, Q can see that, so it’s more of a threat than anything else. The sheen of ice across the windows behind him and the flicker of the lights, that’s the more viable threat.

“Alessandro.”

“Papà will do, Domenico.”
Angelic classifications have one major flaw.

The classic spectrum of angelic abilities focuses on the number and type of abilities presented. As far as identifying what an angel can do, this classification scheme is a good one. A Class Two: Earth classification marks the angel as one who can heal and manipulate inorganic materials that are generally rock or metal based. In the case of an arrest, the police force needs to know not to put this type of angel in metal handcuffs.

However, this classification scheme neglects to account for one major factor: not all angels are created equal.

Some angels are able to heal anything short of death. Some can barely heal a papercut unless they’re healing themselves- others can barely heal that much on themselves, but their magic acts as preventative medicine against the common cold and other ailments. Fire angels range from lighting a cigarette to controlling explosions and maintaining flames in damp conditions. Some electric angels require a current to manipulate, others can generate the energy out of seemingly nothing. For this, the Hargreaves Strength Scale was created.

The Hargreaves Strength Scale ranks angels from 1 to 10 on the basis of the relative strength of their ability. Class Two angels tend to have either middling strength in both abilities or a strong gift and a weak gift, though this is by no means a comprehensive assessment.

1: An ability that is manifested but generally non-functional: a healing ability that only works as mild preventative medicine or an elemental ability that’s limited to slight disturbance in an existing source.

5: In healing gifts, a HSS score of 5 corresponds to the shift from accelerating the healing of injuries to immediate healing of minor injuries. In elemental gifts, it corresponds to the shift from the manipulation of extant sources to the ability to manifest small quantities of the element.

10: Healing abilities on this scale can heal anything short of death and, while touching a patient, can halt the spread of chronic conditions, though no angel has been able to fix them entirely. Elemental abilities can manifest their element and control it within an approximate thirty foot radius given the appropriate sight distance.

Angels with abilities beyond the HSS scale have been reported on occasion, but these reports are few and never have been verified to any degree of authenticity.

Excerpt from Categorizing the Inexplicable: Cryptozoology, Angels, and Area 51

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“Sit down.”

Q summons a chair instead of conjuring one, yanking it across the room and almost taking Riccardo out at the knees. He tries not to sag into it. Until he gets a solid meal and a good night’s sleep behind him, his magic’ll be iffy at best, and even that much takes more out of him than he’d care to admit. Alessandro graces him with a patronizing smile.

“Good boy.”

“Last time I sat across from you, Alessandro, I seem to remember bringing the ceiling down on your head. Interesting, isn’t it, that you insist on repeating the scenario.” Q lounges back in his best impression of nonchalance, keeping his eyes fixed on Alessandro’s. At the moment, he doesn’t seem like he’s actually going to hurt whichever of the twins he’s got, and Q would rather save his strength to try and do something if that changes.

On any other day, he could have them disarmed before they could do anything about it, hold them immobile to retrieve Vivi’s fledglings, and MI6 could make them disappear somewhere far, far away.

This is not an average day.

Alessandro smiles at him, adjusting the fledgling in his arms as he stands and paces around Q. His free hand comes down on Q’s shoulder, fingers digging in just under his collarbone, a sheen of ice spreading across Q’s skin in sharp tendrils that crackle their way up his neck. Q stares straight ahead, declining to react, and lets the ice creep up across his cheekbone.

“You’ll call me papà,” Alessandro orders.

“No.”

Electricity sparks along the ice, a warning tingle. Q grits his teeth.

“No?”

“No.”

Alessandro ups the charge, never loosening his fingers on Q’s shoulder. It feels like a punch in his chest and all his muscles lock up, holding him stiff and breathless for a long moment while the electricity sears across his skin. He gasps for breath when Alessandro releases him, padding back around to his seat and cooing to the fledgling in his arms.

“You’ve made your point, papà,” Vivian speaks up, her voice tight and hurt. Alessandro smiles, pleased, first at Vivian and then at Q, eyes flickering from Q’s eyes, down his face, and to the collar of his shirt. Q resists the urge to reach up and touch his face where it burns, either from the touch of the ice or the electricity. Probably both.

“Have I?”

Alessandro tickles under the fledgling’s chin, slipping into the picture-perfect image of a doting grandfather, and then presses two fingers to the fledgling’s collarbone, just where he gripped Q’s shoulder. He looks up from the fledgling to smile at Q, tipping his head to reiterate his question.

“Yes, papà,” Q agrees, ducking his head. He can make a show of obeisance, if that’s what it takes. His pride is not more important than his nephew’s safety.
“Good, good. Head up, Domenico. I’ve been denied decades of your life, I’ll not be denied looking at you both now.”

Q sneaks a glance at the clock as he looks up. Half an hour until he’s due back at MI6, which means twenty until Eve calls to remind him that it’s her turn to dote and his turn to protect Queen and country. Half an hour until someone realizes that Q, for all his flaws, is never, ever late.

“We weren’t expecting you, papà,” Q says. It’s stating the obvious, yes, but he needs time and Alessandro seems to like to talk. If he missteps, hopefully he’ll settle for hurting Q again. He doesn’t feel like he’s healing right, but he can take it. If not, well, he’s sitting in a hospital and he doesn’t actually think Alessandro wants him dead.

“Is it so wrong for a grandfather to want to see his grandchildren?” Alessandro strokes the fledgling’s cheek, leaving faint trails of frost that melt as soon as he moves on. “So sweet of you, Adelaide, to name him for me. It certainly makes picking between the two so very easy.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Q can see Vivian bristle, tightening her wings around the fledgling who must be Nathaniel. He tries to shoot her an angry look, warning her to stay silent. They expected this. It’s even in the report: Ali Aperte intends to obtain an archangel of their own. Alessandro can’t have Q or Vivian, so he’ll want to raise Alexander as his own, hoping that the archangel gene breeds true.

“Of course, if my children weren’t so selfish, I wouldn’t have to go to extremes to see you,” Alessandro coos to little Alexander. The fledgling squirms a little, his tiny wings shifting against Alessandro’s arm, and proceeds to kick up a fuss. As if tipped off by Alexander’s distress, Nathaniel starts to fuss too, his wailing slightly muffled by the cocoon of Vivian’s wings.

Q looks around, catching the eyes of Carolina and Riccardo doing the same thing. Marco remains impassive, his gun unwaveringly on Vivian. Alessandro and Vivian rock the fledglings and calm them down, slowly but surely, waiting them out until they’ve wailed themselves back into exhaustion.

Fifteen minutes.

His Double-0s should be back at MI6, going through their initial debrief and trying to evade Medical. Malaika will tolerate it patiently, knowing that it’s better to stay on Medical’s good side, letting them poke and prod at her until they agree that she’s entirely healthy. Alec will make a fuss but keep it all light and amusing enough that Medical won’t hold it against him and probably attempt to take one of the nurses home with him again. James will vanish somewhere in the short hallway between debrief and Medical’s waiting arms and that’s only if he bothers to debrief.

No, focus. He can fix their bad habits later, after he deals with his infant-thieving father.

“What are you still here?”

Alessandro’s head snaps up and Q winces. Bad question. The last thing he wants right now is for Alessandro to take Alexander and disappear. Maybe Vivian or Charles could pull something off if Alessandro tried to leave, but Q can’t even quite heal himself. His skin still feels too hot where Alessandro’s ice crept and it hurts to turn his head.

“My daughter just had children, Domenico. Where else would I be?”

“Of course.”

Alessandro toys with the grey-black feathers on the edge of Alexander’s wings, smoothing the downy mess as best he can. Carolina and Riccardo shift their position around Charles, moving in and
out of Q’s peripheral vision. He keeps his eyes trained on Alessandro. This should be about Vivian and Charles, about Alexander and Nathaniel, but Alessandro’s made this about himself and Q.

Somehow, this is about Q dropping the villa on Alessandro’s head all twisted up with his desire to obtain an archangel. It’s a challenge. If he looks away, if he admits weakness, if he defies him too much, he loses. Right now, the best he can do is arrogant silence, keeping his chin tilted up and his eyes cold on Alessandro while he coos over the fledgling in his arms.

Someone knocks at the door.

“Zio,” Elisabetta warns, opening the door. It clicks shut after just enough time for two people to enter. Alessandro’s face crunches up into a snarl and his hands tighten just enough to make Alexander squirm in his arms.

“How kind of you to join us, Mr. Bond.”

Chapter End Notes

My cat's incredibly grumpy that I'm still up and my laptop is disturbing her sleep, but them's the breaks.
Damage caused by angelic gifts is an interesting proposition.

Injuries caused indirectly by angelic gifts heal as if they occurred of natural causes. A rockslide is still a rockslide, no matter the origin. Certain gifts, like earth gifts, tend to cause indirect injuries.

Injuries caused directly by manipulated elements also heal like regular injuries. A fire angel who throws a campfire at someone is causing an extremely unnatural injury, but since the fire is not magical in origin, the burns can be either healed or left to heal on their own. This accounts for most magically-caused injuries. These types of injuries can also be caused by an angel under a Hargreaves Strength Score of 8 who manifests their element but does not cause the damage by physical touch. These semi-magical injuries take slightly longer to heal naturally and take more energy from an angel to heal magically.

The most difficult type of magically-inflicted injuries to heal are the ones inflicted by manifested elements either:

A) by an angel in direct physical contact with their target, or

B) by an angel using an element at a HSS of 8 or higher.

In practical applications, the first reason is the one that is more often encountered. The majority of Class Two or Non-Healing angels wield their gifts in a range of HSS from 3 to 7. It ought to be assumed that, when attempting to heal a magically-inflicted wound that resists magical healing, it is the result of direct contact while manifesting an element, either intentional or accidentally.

The rare fourth manifestation of magically-inflicted injuries is a combination of the conditions for the third. In the case of direct contact with a manifested element at HSS 8 or above, the wounds will resist magical healing. Leaving a wound like that to heal naturally is often the wisest choice. Magical healing, when layered on top of serious magical wounds, will often cause unexpected side effects.

Excerpt from Where Magic Fails: Pros and Cons of Magical Healing for the Medical Professional

***

Forget all his rules about facing Alessandro.

Forget it.
Q twists in his seat fast enough to make him hiss in pain. James’ attention flickers to Q for a moment, anger replacing cold impassivity for a split second before returning his attention to Elisabetta. Her hair is singed and James’ Walther is pressed into her spine, but she stands up straight and avoids either of her uncles’ eyes.

“My pleasure, Lord Corvi,” James agrees, his smile caught halfway between his meaningless society smile and his murderous one. “Now that we’ve both been reacquainted, what do you say we discuss this like rational people?”

Alessandro tucks Alexander into his chest, unfolding his wings to curl one protectively around him. Q returns his attention to Alessandro, settling in as if he hadn’t been so eager to look. He’s perfected the art of indolent nonchalance for the rare occasions in which they had to interact with angel society. That’s what he falls back on now, the lazy sprawl of limbs and the quirk of his brow, keeping his wings tucked away and his smile a careless smirk.

“The great James Bond.” Alessandro gestures with his free hand as if giving a soliloquy, scoffing. “MI6’s favorite son, a lost Abaddon in search of the grave and dragging as many poor souls down with him as he can. Go find your doom elsewhere, Mr. Bond. Your loyalty lies with Queen and country, everyone knows that, and this? This is a family affair.”

Elisabetta squeaks and steps further into the room. In the reflection of the window, James sidles closer to Q, keeping Elisabetta between him and Marco. It’s a good plan, one Q would’ve whispered in his ear were this a normal situation. Carolina and Riccardo won’t dare shoot lest they hit their sister, so he can expose more of his side to them. Between Alessandro and Marco, only one of them has his gun in firing position and in his hand. Well, Alessandro’s gun is neither, so putting Elisabetta between Marco and himself really is the best option for James.

“That would require us to be family,” Vivian spits, letting her temper get the better of her. Not that Q blames her for that, of course. He can’t even begin to imagine what she and Charles are going through in Alessandro’s passive-aggressive game, though with the number of weapons involved it’s an muddied distinction between passive-aggressive and plain old aggressive.

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“I thought, Adelaide,” Alessandro says in a dark whisper that carries across the silence, “that we had come to an understanding regarding that.”

“This,” Vivian bites out, a viciously satisfied smile spreading across her face, “is why your mate abandoned you.”

Alessandro’s face contorts into a vicious snarl before he gets himself back under control, going entirely blank. He returns to a neutral expression, or at least as neutral as angels of the elite get. It’s more of a ghost of a smirk, a self-assured knowledge that he’s the center of his universe. It’s the same one Q wears when a mission runs just right, all the way down to the finger tapping against his lower lip and the tilt of his head. Which is a slightly disturbing realization, to be honest. He doesn’t want to be anything like Alessandro.

“Rudeness, Adelaide, shall not be tolerated. Whatever did your mother teach you?”

Alessandro smiles sweetly and the temperature drops. Ice spiderwebs across the windows, shattering the scant sunlight it allows through, and their breath fogs in front of them. Alessandro sits at the eye of his chill, keeping both him and the fledgling perfectly warm, while a few feet away the ice crystallizes in Q’s wounds. He stays silent this time, fingers tightening into the arm of his chair until it strains and cracks under his limited magic.

“Stop it, stop it, fermalo!”
Alessandro’s smile drops off his face, attention snapping to Elisabetta’s cries. Q follows, turning slowly as not to hurt himself further. James has his free hand on Elisabetta’s bare shoulder, her coat destroyed in the silhouette of his fingers. Her skin looks badly sunburnt where his fingers shirt and move, starting to blister at the tips of James’ fingers.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Alessandro snaps. James smiles politely at him, removing his hand and wiggling his fingers like a child waving goodbye.

“Why, only keeping you polite, Lord Corvi.”

“By damaging my niece?”

“You hurt one of mine, I hurt one of yours.” James shrugs. “The way I see it, I seem to have some catching up to do.”

“Yours?” Alessandro laughs, or at least something that ought to be a hollow, bitter approximation of laughter. “How positively human of you, Mr. Bond, to think that just because you wish to protect someone, they’re yours.”

James’ smile falters.

He switches hands with barely a second’s hitch, drawing a knife to replace the gun he holsters. James holds it up, twirling it between his fingers for Q to see before setting it against Elisabetta’s throat. Q inhales sharply, too sharply, and doubles over into a hacking cough.

Everyone’s faces turn to him. Vivian’s eyes go wide and shocked as she recognizes it a moment later, curling around Nathaniel even tighter. Charles glances between the three of them, uncomprehending, because unlike some people, he hasn’t seen Azrael fully armed.

“That,” Q accuses, “is mine.”

There were five of those knives forged, though ‘forged’ isn’t entirely the right word. Forging implies the manufacturing process in which metal is shaped by localized compressive forces, to be specific, and that is not the genesis of these particular blades. Rather than the heat of fire and the rhythm of hammers, they were born of the cooling corpses of his fiercest enemies and the manifestation of his magic pushed too far. Bone handles carved with the impression of their owner’s abilities, the iron forged into carbon steel by their flesh and blood, they’re a macabre sort of tool. They are perhaps the most beautiful and the most deadly of Azrael’s armaments, a dichotomy which appeals to his aesthetics, and nobody touches them.

“Elisabetta’s one of the finest healers born outside of the Blood of Azrael in centuries,” Alessandro drawls, bored. “A knife to the throat is painful, yes, but you’d be better off with the gun. At least then you’d have a chance to shoot the rest of us before we spill my poor children’s blood upon the tile.”

“And mate,” Marco adds, nodding towards Charles.

“And mate,” Alessandro agrees.

“Sebastian,” James calls, “would you care to explain to my dear Lord Corvi here why this particular knife is a bit more complicated?”

Q glares at him. They’ll be having words over James’ theft from Q’s private armory, starting with how the hell he managed to get past the blood spell. Those are dangerous in any hands but his own and possibly Vivian’s, in which they’re still incredibly dangerous but not to their wielder.
“Azrael’s blades,” he recites monotonously. “Forged by the archangel himself, Azrael’s blades were touched by the essence of his powers and inflicted wounds that resist healing. They were either lost or destroyed upon the archangel’s death. Attempts to replicate them have always met in failure. That blade is perhaps the closest rendition in existence.”

Vivian shudders. She’s never liked them. Hell, Q doesn’t really like them, not when he thinks about it, but they feel right in his hand and get the job done.

“Not, I believe, something your lovely niece would like used against her.”

Alessandro shrugs.

“Go ahead. I have a spare.”

The ice that crystallizes around James’ arm takes barely a flash of his magic to evaporate, long enough for Alessandro to take a shot at his head. Vivian throws out her arm, forcing the bullet to miss by a foot and rolling to tuck Nathaniel on the far side of her body from Marco. His bullet goes through her wing and out the window. Charles launches himself at Riccardo, sweeping his wing out to catch Carolina by surprise, taking the three of them down into a pile of tangled limbs, punching and kicking the whole way.

“Surrender, Corvi,” James calls, pushing Elisabetta to the ground behind him and shifting the Azrael blade into a throwing hold. His other hand flames bright, trailing afterimages across Q’s vision as James moves.

“Never.”

Bond bares his teeth in a rictus of a smile as Alessandro adjusts his aim, throwing the blade. Alessandro fires again, this time without Vivian to obstruct his aim.

NO.

Q hears his voice shouting as if from a distance as his magic explodes out of him, whiting out his vision, and then he hears nothing else as unconsciousness closes over him.

Chapter End Notes

This scene is officially dubbed "The Scene That Wouldn't End".
Azrael, as the Angel of Death, is most often associated in poetic structures with the Grim Reaper. In general, it is a rather accurate comparison—indeed, some believe that the myth of the Grim Reaper began as a corrupted form of the Legend of Azrael. Detractors argue that, though the stories are indeed similar, the differences in weaponry even in the original tales overpower the similarities in description.

The Grim Reaper is described as a tall, skeletal figure swathed in dark robes who comes either to bring death or to carry away the dead, depending on the version of the tale. Versions in which the Reaper brings death are closer to the Legend of Azrael, in which Azrael is described as the Bringer of Death on several occasions. Azrael is often described as being a tall man, ethnicity unknown, gaunt of visage with enormous dark wings.

Interestingly enough, the specific description of the Grim Reaper as anything other than ‘the very spectre of Death itself’ occurs only after the Legend of Azrael reached widespread usage.

In terms of weaponry, the links between Azrael and the Grim Reaper break down. Both are associated with specific weaponry that ‘brings death to all who cross them’. For the Grim Reaper, this is his scythe, a mystical weapon of unknown origin that separates body and soul. Azrael’s blades, often illustrated as a pair of swords, inflicted damage that healed as poorly as if it were magically inflicted.

It is this discrepancy which leads scholars to believe that the associations between the archangel Azrael and the myth of the Grim Reaper are a later connection, most likely made due to similarities in artistic representations of the two.

*Excerpt from Myths and Legends: Common Associations Between Fictional and Historical Figures*

***

“You’re certain we shouldn’t take him to Medical.”

“I’m certain.”

“It’s just that it’s been days and he hasn’t shown the slightest sign of waking.”

“James, it’s been a day and a half. You haven’t eaten, you haven’t slept. Let one of us stand guard for a turn. If you won’t trust Alec’s abilities—your own best friend—trust mine.”

Silence.

“Have you forgotten that I’m an archangel, same as he is? There’s no better guardian.”
“Go back to the little ones, Adelaide. I’ll not be leaving him and they shouldn’t be denied their mother because of me.”

“I’ve told you to call me Vivian.”

“I didn’t want to overstep my bounds.”

“James Bond, worried about overstepping his bounds. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“Once in a blue moon, Vivian. Once in a blue moon.”

***

“How long until you’re going to admit he needs Medical’s help?”

“He overexerted himself, that’s all.”

“Overexertion? Overexertion? He’s damn near in a coma, Vivian, and you’re acting like he’s just taking a midafternoon nap!”

“Don’t you dare give me that nonsense, James! Who do you think sat by his bedside the last time this happened?”

“Then why can’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

“I have! Don’t blame me because you’re too wrapped up in your melodrama to listen!”

“Overexertion, overexertion. That’s nonsense, Vivian, and you know it!”

“It’s the truth! You remember what happened when you overdosed him on anti-magic toxin, right? People like you, they can survive without their magic, but it’s an integral part of how Sebby and I get out of bed every single day. He just overexerted himself, that’s all. Give him time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. I understand how hard it can be, the not knowing.”

“I don’t even really understand how it happened.”

“Desperation does funny things to us all.”

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Q wakes to oppressive warmth and feathers tickling under his nose.

It takes him a fuzzy eternity to put the pieces together. Flight feathers in his face and the weight-warmth draped over the rest of him equals wing. Wing plus the heavy weight draped over his legs means angel. Angel plus those feathers, deep chocolate brown intermingled with burnished gold, means…
“James?” Q shifts uncomfortably. “It’s too hot for wings, James.”

James mumbles something, his wing pulling back and folding away into nothing. He’s as disheveled as Q’s ever seen him in what looks like one of Alec’s tees and a pair of yoga pants that Q suspects are purloined from Malaika’s closet. They’re awfully tight across James’ admittedly fabulous arse. The neon pink waistband and the fact that it spells out ‘HOT STUFF’ in rhinestones isn’t much Malaika’s style, so on second thought, probably not Malaika’s.

“Go ‘way,” James mumbles, a little more clearly, cracking open one blue eye to glare at him. Q raises an eyebrow and waits for a count of one… two…

James sits bolt upright, wings flaring wide in surprise before he glares at them and tucks them away. His hair’s flattened awkwardly on the side he was sleeping on and the sleeve of Alec’s shirt rides up on the crisp white bandage wrapped around his bicep. Not Vivi’s work- she can manage an adhesive bandage or burn cream, but that’s about it.

“You’re awake.”

“And now, so are you.”

James doesn’t answer, just takes the two short steps to cross the distance between them and drags Q up into a too-tight embrace. He buries his face in Q’s shoulder, one arm tight around Q’s waist and the other crushing his ribs. Q wraps his wings around James in the only kind of hug he can manage with his arms trapped, ignoring the painful stretch on his left wing.

“You’re awake,” James… well, from anyone else, he’d call it a sob, but James Bond doesn’t do that. “Sebastian, Sebastian, you’re awake.”

“I’m okay,” he hears himself repeating over and over and over again, “I’m okay, James, I’m fine.” All around him, things in Q’s bedroom start levitating, his magic reaching out to do something and entirely unclear about what to do. One of them is shaking like a leaf and Q’s not sure if it’s him. James pulls back just enough to rest his forehead against Q’s, blindly smoothing the bandages wrapped from Q’s neck down to his left elbow, around his shoulder and up his wing. He seems satisfied by whatever he’s found, reaching up to run his thumb gently over the gauze taped to Q’s cheek, sighing in relief.

“You’re safe,” James breathes, pressing a kiss to Q’s forehead.

Q’s stomach growls.

They look down at Q’s abdomen in unison, cracking their heads together. Q winces out of habit, his healing factor clearing up the headache before it really has a chance to start, and reaches over to brush a fingertip across James’ shoulder to heal him, too. The awkward silence hangs heavy between them before James offers Q a hand up.

“It’s the middle of the night, but I can probably make you some blueberry pancakes,” James offers, sounding incredibly unsure of himself. Q takes his hand, letting James pull him to his feet and folding his wings neatly behind him.

“That sounds perfect.”

Q wanders the flat while James mixes up pancake batter from scratch and without using his magic- Q’s is a different matter, since they’re out of fresh blueberries and James refuses to use frozen ones. It’s something like three o’clock in the morning, London as dim as she ever gets outside the windows of their flat. Q presses his hands to the glass and closes his eyes, letting the familiar sounds of his life
James hums while he cooks, slipping from tune to tune without rhyme nor reason, a quiet clatter of dishes and silverware and the hiss of oil in the pan. Alec’s snores resonate through the flat, even with his door shut. Q’s never entirely sure how the hell he manages to snore like that and not have his healing factor decide something’s wrong and fix it. There’s all the little noises- the beep of the alarm system, reprogrammed to play the melody of Q’s favorite classical songs when he was overtired one night, the whirr of the ceiling fan Malaika prefers to the air conditioning and the slightly different hum of the refrigerator. His life all in place, his angels in their places, and…

“What happened at the hospital?” Q doesn’t bother turning around, watching James’ reflection in the glass. James stills at the question, going quiet for a moment before he starts humming again and flips a pancake.

“Well, your sister went into labor, which is what tends to happen when an angel is very, very pregnant, and you got a pair of nephews.”

Q scowls at James’ reflection. “Yes, I know that part.”

“They aren’t a problem,” James hedges. “As for the rest, your sister was admirably vague about exactly what it was that you did, but there’s a box on the table for you. She said you’d understand.”

Well.

James watches Q as he inspects the box. It’s one of Vivi’s creations, bio-locked to their magical signatures. Someone- anyone- could try for ages, but it’ll only open within a certain degree of magical similarity that only Q and Vivian have. Flameproof, iceproof, waterproof… generally speaking, entirely angelproofed. He swipes his finger across the latch, letting his magic seek out the locking mechanism and feeling it unlatch with a tick of clockwork. It’s not feasible most days, too delicate for their line of work, but Vivi integrates it where she can.

The lid lifts up, click-click-clicking into an upright position and revealing the satin-lined interior he uses for his knife boxes. One of his knives, his hated-and-beloved Azrael blades, lies underneath a folded scrap of paper. He sets the paper aside, choosing to inspect his blade instead. This has to be the one James stole- Vivi knows he won’t rest easy until he’s inspected it and seen it back in its safe.

The blade, like all the others, is marbled through with streaks of the deepest red, making it look blood-drenched when entirely clean. There’s not a single scratch on it. He flips it, catching it by the blade to get a good look at the handle and figure out which one James stole. This one… the bone handle’s almost crystalline in nature, shot through with some kind of a fractal pattern, which isn’t right. His blades are all organic swirls on the handles, roaring fires and branching trees, vines and clouds and the pattern waves make on the sand below them.

Q narrows his eyes at the blade and reaches for Vivi’s note.

Dearest brother,

Your nephews are safe, thanks to you. I’ll explain the specifics later, so don’t badger them about it. Yes, that is a genuine Azrael blade, and no, I didn’t make it. Now, Alexander’s making a fuss, so I presume you can piece the rest of it together.

And yes, you left enough for them to bury.
Vivian

The fractal patterns. They’re Lichtenberg figures, the marks left by an electric current. Q sets the knife back in its box, tearing at his bandages and rushing to the bathroom. The same marks spread out from his shoulder, trailing red and angry up to brush his cheekbone and down to his elbow. The same marks, he imagines, that must trace up his wing, healing slowly thanks to Alessandro’s strength.

James steps up behind him, easing the last of the bandages free from Q’s wing so he can see. His hands settle on Q’s waist, steadying him when he wobbles.

“Are you alright?”

Q chokes back a laugh, tucking his wings away into nothing and leaning back into James’ chest. He bears few scars, despite the life he’s lived, but he’ll bear these ones forever. It seems somehow appropriate. Alessandro’s absence marked Q’s life in a plethora of tiny and not-so-tiny ways and his involvement in their lives will leave him marked in the literal sense. It isn’t funny, which is exactly why it is.

“Lichtenberg figures,” he answers. “I’m covered in Lichtenberg figures.”

“That doesn’t really answer my questions.”

Q closes his eyes and tips his head back, letting James bear his weight. James takes them down to the tile floor, cradling Q back against him and tracing soothing circles down his uninjured forearm.

“I need to know, Sebastian. Are you alright?”

“I… I murdered my father.”

“If it helps, it was more like self-defense.”

“No,” Q replies, curling closer to James’ warmth. “No, that doesn’t help at all.”
Chapter 40

THE ANGELIC EVENT OF THE YEAR: IT’S A BOY!

How do you tell who is and isn’t a part of the upper echelon of the angelic elite? Why, by who gets invited to the biggest party of the year, of course! Keep an eye out, Londoners, because this year it’s your turn to catch a glimpse of the most famous names in angelkind!

Adelaide Boothroyd, England’s favorite daughter. She may have handed the lordship of the Boothroyd family off to her brother Dominic, but don’t underestimate the influence of this angel. Her sons are the newest members of angelkind’s most exclusive clique- the Blood of Azrael- and as such, their introduction to the angelic elite will place in a three day party, invitation only. We don’t know who all will be in attendance, not yet, but here at AngelWatch we’ve got a pretty good guess. Expect almost all of the Blood of Azrael with representatives from the other old blood families, particularly those of an age with the Boothroyd twins- and those looking to catch her unmated twin, the youngest Lord in the Blood of Azrael.

Check our guide in the next issue, telling you who’s who for the casual celebrity spotter. We’ll be covering the Blood of Azrael, with specific emphasis on those known to be childhood friends of Adelaide Boothroyd’s: Mahsa Amirmoez, Antônio and Matheus Silveira, Kamala Bhattacharya, and Dayo Afolayan.

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Q doesn’t mourn Alessandro Corvi, not in quite so many words.

James would probably debate that fact. He holds Q while he cries himself into exhaustion, the one spot of warmth against the cold tile of the bathroom floor, rubbing circles on his back and letting Q get snot all over Alec’s shirt. It’s James who carries Q off to bed when he’s run out of tears, bringing him a tray with his reheated pancakes and a glass of apple juice that Q changes into orange in a moment of fussiness.

Q sips at his orange juice delicately. It still tastes faintly of apple.

Alessandro Corvi was a broken man and a bad one and Q’ll never know how much of one was due to the other. He did horrible things in an attempt to reclaim a family that wasn’t his and let damages fester within the family that was. He was no father to Q and Vivian, no grandfather to Nathaniel and Alexander, no matter what the biology says. If an official termination order had come through MI6 for Alessandro Corvi, he would’ve equipped one of his Double-0s and walked them through it without a moment of guilt.

Still.
He mourns for the could’ve beens. For the way he soothed Alexander when he fussed, clearly used to helping his nieces and nephew when they were young, for the affection they saw at Villa Corvi for Giancarlo as he ran and played, for all the things he could’ve been except they weren’t. For the father they never had and the misery Mum and Alessandro inflicted on each other, for teaching Eve and Vivian and Q to be skeptical about the tales of angelic mates and true love because sometimes, just sometimes, soulmates can be more destructive than they are good.

James doesn’t understand that. Q loves him all the more because he doesn’t, because in all that he’s seen, he still believes in magic, and not just the kind humming at Q’s fingertips.

Wait.

No.

Q knocks his tray off his lap, scrambling to catch it in the last minute. He misses it with his hands and freezes it in midair with his magic, picking everything out of the air and clutching the tray to his chest. He stares wide-eyed at James, who continues his recitation of the current situation with *Ali Aperte* as if he hasn’t noticed.

Slip of the tongue.

Of the mind.

Whatever.

He banishes the tray to balance precariously on his desk. It’s more or less stable, with less preferred books flying into place to act as scaffolding holding the entire wobbly stack up. Everything in his room is more or less stable, verging towards less any time he’s not home. He’s come home from plenty of missions as Azrael to find his bookshelves collapsed and papers spread haphazardly over his bed.

“Are you alright, Sebastian?”

And that’s the other thing. Alec and Malaika call him Q, even at home. Uncle Ananth, Aunt Melissa, and Uncle Richard call him Q except when they’re angry enough to call him by his full name. Charles only started calling him Sebastian after Vivian realized Charles was going to be a permanent fixture in their little family. James just up and decided one day that he’d call him Sebastian at home and Q at work and he’s never gone back.

“Sebastian?”

“Just… Alessandro,” Q lies through his teeth. “The manifestation of an Azrael blade… it isn’t exactly the neatest of things and I feel like I ought to know if the hospital needs a new Boothroyd Obstetrics Wing in return for their silence.”

“Well, the new obstetrics wing will have to wait.” James sighs, scrubbing a hand through his hair while he considers his next words. “It was bad, I won’t deny that. At a best guess, you broke every bone in his body, including his wings, which I didn’t know was even possible.”

That’s more from Q losing control than creating an Azrael blade, but James doesn’t need to know that. He essentially threw his magic at Alessandro, every last bit of it, and without any kind of direction his magic just… breaks things. Everything. Shattered bones, perforated organs, if it can break, it will. The Azrael blades cause immense damage, but it’s the type of damage only a full autopsy would reveal: missing bone, incredibly anemic, some body mass missing for the carbon.
Q shivers. He’d rather not think about the details.

“I lost control,” he admits when James has been staring at him a little too long.

“Everyone has to eventually,” James says evenly. “Even you.”

“Except I can’t!” Q throws his pillow at the wall angrily, watching it vanish before it hits anything and reappear behind him. “It’s a clear distinction for all of you. You point at me in in body armor with my hair slicked back and say that one’s the Angel of Death, that’s definitely Azrael. Pajamas and an oversized cup of coffee is Sebastian, mustard yellow cardigan and grease smears across my cheekbone is the Quartermaster, a tailored suit makes me Lord Boothroyd. Haven’t you ever thought that they’re all me, that just because I’m handing you equipment on a tray doesn’t mean I’m not still capable of murdering every single person in the room?”

The quiet of the flat is almost a shock after Q’s outburst. James watches him cautiously, tucking his wings away without so much as a shake of his shoulders. Things in Q’s room lift up and fly around, neatly avoiding each other, Q, and James. As he calms down, items fall back in their places until only the books from his shelves remain in the air.

James reaches up, heedless of the way the books dodge his hand, catching a book out of the air and opening it.

“In the Blood: The Descendants of Legends? What’s next, A Comprehensive History of Archangels?”

Q holds his hand out flat, letting the encyclopedic volume land there and handing it to James for inspection.

“I have every single book that pertains to archangels in every language I read.” Q shrugs. “Most of the rest are coding manuals from my teenage years, books on angelic society Mum had us memorize before we were allowed out in public, that sort of thing.”

“But, books on archangels, really? I’d think that, between you and Vivian, you’re the authority on this sort of thing.”

“Best to know what everyone else would be looking for, right?”

“Clever,” James agrees, closing the books and shelving them. “And exactly my point. You don’t have to do this alone, Sebastian. You’ve got people to help you- Eve, Vivian, even Alec and Malaika and the rest of the Double-0s. You’ve got me, if you want me.” James looks away, catching other books as they soar by him and placing them on the shelves. Q watches him, catching the flush of red on James’ ears even with his face turned away.

“You mean it?”

“Always,” James murmurs, barely audibly. “So long as you’ll have me and then some.”

Q stares at his fingers, the books whirling slower and slower. James continues to pluck them from the air one by one, placing them on the shelf behind him until the air is clear and the shelf groans in protest. He thumbs over the last book in his hands, a genealogy of the Blood of Azrael that’s on the less side of more or less accurate, flipping it to the modern pages for House Boothroyd.

James smiles.

Q flushes red, curling his wings around himself to hide it. A wobbly line connects Margaret
Boothroyd to the childish blue scrawl reading Dominic and Adelaide Boothroyd with their real birthday. Q’s heavily slanted cursive added Alessandro Corvi above their names and Charles Blake next to Vivi’s. He’s also added Mum and Uncle Geoffrey’s date of deaths, the ink smeared where he cried over it.

“You keep it updated?”

“As much as I can.”

Q accepts the book from James, a pen flying out of the mess on his desk to his left hand. He adds Alessandro’s date of death next to his name before drawing a neat line down from Charles and Vivian, adding Alexander and Nathaniel Boothroyd to the family tree. He blows on the ink to dry it, passing it back to James to see.

“Perfect,” he agrees, leaving it open on top of a stack of books. “I’ll be in my room, Q, if you need me. Some of us didn’t just take a four day nap, you know.”

Q freezes at the use of his letter instead of his proper name. After a moment, James stands to leave, stiff and uncomfortable. Q’s hand shoots out, snagging the hem of his oversized shirt and holding fast.

“Q?”

“Stay with me,” he blurts out. “James, stay with me.”

James hooks his foot in the chair in the corner, pulling it close enough that Q doesn’t have to release his grip on his shirt. It’s the same chair that he’s spent many a night in, guarding Q while he slept. Alec and Malaika have both taken their turns in the chair, but they all pretend it wasn’t James more often than not, especially in the most recent months.

“Can’t promise I’ll stay awake, but I’ll stand guard if it makes you feel better.”

He looks… sad, or at least the guarded type of sad that Q’s used to reading over CCTV when agents are in the field, as not to be confused with Malaika bursting into tears over dogs in movies or Alec chopping onions.

Q takes a deep breath, one-two-three in, one-two-three out.

Be brave, Q.

“James,” he says, voice breaking. “James, I don’t know how to say it any other way. Stay with me. Not just tonight, not just tomorrow. Stay with me when there’s deadlines and I shout at you for coffee, stay with me when the twins learn to walk and we spend days childproofing MI6, and stay with me when there’s the next big threat to Queen and country and all you see if me is a voice in your ear. Just. Um. Stay?”

Q hides inside his wings because he has to be bright red. He read this completely wrong, he just knows he did, and he’s so incredibly unprepared for this. James Bond can have anyone. Hell, Q’s watched him seduce his way through the rich and the famous with a drink and a witty one-liner, never bothering with all the lineage nonsense that bogs down most of the angelic elite. Who is Q to think that, having seen all the blood that stains Q’s hands, that James Bond would ever want him.

“Sebastian?”

Q peeks out from behind his wings, parting his feathers just enough to see. James looms over him,
hand held out palm-up and the question framed in his eyes.

“You and me, now and forever.”

As if that was the question.

Q reaches out from under his wing, lacing his fingers through James’.

“Forever.”

Chapter End Notes

Just an epilogue left, guys. I can't believe it either.
Angels are creatures of emotion, and what emotion is stronger than love?

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“You’re late.”

James freezes in the door to Q’s office. Q’s stretched out on his couch, a game of solitaire superimposed over the CCTV feed of 006’s mission on the ceiling and a toddler covered in brightly colored paint on top of him. Alexander’s grey-black wings quiver with concentration while he traces the Lichtenberg scars up Q’s throat in hot pink finger paint. Nathaniel hops down from Q’s desk chair, trying to make a break for it between James’ legs.

“Uncah Jamie!”

“Hey there, little one,” he says, scooping Nathaniel up in his uninjured arm. Nathaniel tilts his cheek up for a kiss, grinning madly.

“Oh, good, you got him.” Q rolls his head to the side to look, earning him a smear of pink going almost up to his ear and an outraged squawk from Alexander. The toddler looks from side to side furtively and then vanishes the offending smear of paint, continuing as if Q hadn’t ruined his masterpiece. “Come on, shut the door. They’ve already terrorized the Branch once today, there’s no need to inflict them upon the unsuspecting minions yet again.”

If Q and Vivian were anything like Nathaniel and Alexander are as toddlers, it’s no wonder Mum recruited half the Double-0s to be their aunts and uncles.

Nathaniel has a talent with any kind of latch that makes Q suspect he’ll really like opening machines up to see what makes them tick. Maybe, with a little help, he might figure out one of Q’s favorite tricks, the ability to assemble delicate pieces of machinery without touching them. Not that Vivi would ever stand for forcing them into Q Branch if they don’t want to be a part of MI6- those talents would serve Nathaniel just as well in mechanical or even electrical engineering, among other things, though Q would be a terrible uncle if he didn’t teach Nathaniel to pick locks with it.

Alexander, on the other hand, doesn’t use his magic as much. He’s undoubtedly a tiny archangel- his infrequent tantrums show that much- but he’s much happier monopolizing the finger paints that never quite seem to run out and change colors as his needs dictate. Q keeps some window paints for Alexander and the glass walls of his office- or at least the glass walls up to the top of Alexander’s reach, since neither twin is the steadiest flier yet- have never looked better. If he wants to, Vivi will teach him the art of forgery, but for now it’s just a matter of supplying Alexander with the supplies to draw and paint to his heart’s desire.

“Kiss, kiss,” Nathaniel chimes when James is slow to press a kiss to his cheek. He’s moving
carefully, almost uncomfortably, which says that he hid how much his injuries hurt from Medical. He doesn’t like Medical, but he’s started going more regularly for the sake of the twins. James resigned himself to Medical’s poking and prodding after the first time the twins argued that if Uncle James didn’t go to the doctors, they didn’t have to.

Q gives James a once over anyways, confirming what the Medical report he probably shouldn’t have says. The cuts and bruises have already healed over, but the broken arm and sprained wing will take a little longer to deal with. The angel who inflicted them on him used plant magic. It’s not usually the most dangerous kind, but this one managed to hit him with a tree before 007 could torch it. It’s an unconventional weapon, but a rather effective one.

“So. How did we end up in Toddlerville?”

Q rolls his eyes, moving Alexander’s hand away from his face before he looks up at his solitaire game. Nathaniel babbles in James’ ear, lapsing between English and the Italian he’s picked up from Serafina’s occasional stints as emergency babysitter.

“005 beat you home. Vivi, the rotten traitor, dropped the twins on me and thanked me for making dinner reservations for them.” Q taps Alexander on the nose, catching his attention. “Don’t you ever betray Nathaniel like that, you hear me?”

“Betray,” Alexander agrees sagely, leaving a smudged handprint on Q’s forehead while he traces the pattern up across Q’s cheek. Alexander’s mostly paint-free, except for his hands. He’s not a neat toddler- Q’s been led to believe that there’s no such thing- but he tends to erase paint smudges as they get itchy.

“That’s what I thought.” Q ruffles the boy’s curls, earning himself an annoyed grumble from Alexander. “I think we’ll be here for a bit more, James, if you want to join us.”

James sets Nathaniel down and sits with his back against the arm of Q’s couch. Nathaniel dashes over to the scattered papers on the floor, grabbing a handful of markers and making himself comfortable on James’ lap. Q snickers, resolving not to heal James’ arm quite yet so MI6 can appreciate the dinosaurs Nathaniel will undoubtedly gift upon his cast.

“As date nights go, Toddlerville isn’t the worst place we’ve ended up.”

“No,” Q laughs, “there was that one time the restaurant was actually a front for a money laundering operation that somehow led to us hunting down a human trafficking ring in the middle of the night.”

“No better time to hunt down a human trafficking ring,” James comments, handing Nathaniel the right shade of orange for dinosaur eyes. “I was referring to the time our flight got delayed and we ended up eating fast food in an airport lounge.”

“Planes. They’re just not worth it.”

“You can’t fly everywhere on your own wings, love,” James laughs, stretching the little bit up to steal a kiss. Nathaniel leaps up, throwing his arm around James’ neck and planting a sloppy kiss on his cheek just not to be left out. Q smiles, watching his mate play with his nephew, helping him add vicious spikes to the dinosaurs and make sure they breathe fire, like all proper dinosaurs do. And they are dinosaurs and not wingless dragons- Q’s made that particular mistake before.

“What about Vienna?” Q offers. Vienna was a mess. They needed to infiltrate an old blood party on unquestionable credentials and that meant using the Boothroyd name for all it’s worth. Vivian refused to leave the twins, so that meant Q trying to work off his laptop in the field while James
schmoozed to the best of his abilities.

“Say what you will,” James argues, “but I liked Vienna. And it doesn’t count as a date night anyways, so the point is moot.”

“Does too!” Q blurts. Alexander shushes him, tilting Q’s face differently to inspect his work. Q takes a deep breath, moderating his tone before he continues. “It was a Thursday night, we were both in the same location, and neither of us was in the hospital or Medical’s tender clutches. Last I checked, that made it date night.”

“We were on a mission. There’s no room for date night on a mission.”

“That’s not what you said when I dropped equipment off during the Bangkok mission.”

“Have it your way.” James rolls his eyes and Nathaniel mirrors him. It’s… kind of adorable, to be honest. “Date night or not, any time I get to say ‘no, I’m the other Lord Boothroyd’ before shooting someone is a good day.”

“Speaking of,” Q says, shifting Alexander back a little bit to fish for the chain around his neck. He twists it around, wiping away the paint caught in the links with a thought, and unhooks his necklace. James’ ring is a simple gold band, too big for Q to wear on his finger when he doesn’t take it in the field. Q thumbs over the engraving on the inside, tracing the hollows of forever, before slipping it back on James’ finger.

“Hi, honey,” James breathes, putting up his uninjured wing as a toddler-proof privacy screen, “I’m home.”

It’s barely a kiss. They’re both twisted around at awkward angles with Vivi’s kids on their laps. Q is covered in hot pink paint, James is injured and smells faintly of gasoline and gunpowder even still. It’s the barest brush of lips and the tap of their wedding rings as they link hands, a promise and an affirmation all in one.

“I’m glad you’re home,” Q murmurs back, squeezing James’ hand a little tighter.

“I love you, Sebastian.”

“I love you too, James.”

Q snaps, whirling up all the twins’ toys and depositing them in the colorful bin in the corner of his office. Alexander leaps off his chest, wings flapping wildly as he tries- and fails- to get airborne. Nathaniel clings to James, getting picked up as he and Q get to their feet. Alexander takes Q’s hand when he picks up the duffle bag Vivi dropped off with the twins, neither of them bothering to erase the paint twisting up from his collar. Q smiles at his mate and his nephews, hefting the bag up onto his shoulder.

“Come on, sweethearts,” he addresses his family, “let’s go home.”

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The course of true love never did run smooth.
Chapter End Notes

And that's all she wrote.

(Literally.)

A big THANK YOU to everyone who's read this, whether you've been here since the beginning or just read Espionage for the first time. Your love made writing Espionage a true joy and kept me loving this story just as much today as I did ten months ago when I started writing it. Your comments have made me laugh, they've made me cry (in a good way), and they've made me pull late nights to write that little bit extra because I couldn't wait to see how you'd all take the newest chapter. I adore you all, you fantastic people. <3 <3 <3

I'd love to hear what you did like (or didn't, but mostly what you did because I'm a selfish creature). Tell me here, tell me on my Tumblr (nagapdragon, because I'm predictable), or just come talk to me just to talk. I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Most of all, though? I hope you enjoyed it.

Love,

Nagapdragon

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!