Summary

Jim Moriarty is fourteen years old when he kills his mother.

Q is sixteen when he blackmails his brother's drug-dealing rapist into giving him somewhere to live.

Between them, they will construct the greatest crime syndicate the world will ever know.

(Theirs is almost, just almost, a love story.)

Notes

Welcome. Beware all ye who enter here.

Jim and Q's entwined lives. It is canon compliant, across Sherlock and both Bond films in which Q exists. It is very dark. They are not healthy. Other tagged relationships will develop
throughout. I hope you enjoy - this has been in the pipeline for a long while, and I'm very excited to finally be posting it!

Jen.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“You’re a memory, darlin’. You’re a dream, a little quirk of fancy on a Sunday afternoon in June, a thought of a lonely boy and a big scary man, a little big scary man, not scary enough though, hmm? Not scary enough.”

“I’m not scared of you”

The scream cleaves stone, and blood flicks outwards on a throttled breath like paint spatters, delicate. A small tsk; a fragment on hurt on the sleeve of his suit, and he shakes his head as though this boy is a child. Is a child.

His voice is a ragged screech: “Scared now?”

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Ireland is damp, and Ireland is green, and Ireland is drunk and Ireland is dirty and Ireland is breaking and Ireland is home.

This is not his home.

“Jimmy…”


His mother tuts and allows it, doesn’t question why her son is standing too still and too upright, and why he is dressed in his nicest coat, and has a bag in his hands. His mother questions nothing. His mother knows better. “Dinner’s almost ready. Set the table for me?”

“Mam, I’m leaving.”

His mother does not say a single word. His mother is not uninterested; merely, there is no point in commenting.

“Mam, did y’hear me?”

His mother washes and washes and dries and washes, soap suds and water washing over her elegant hands, over the gap where a wedding ring had been once upon a dream, the shadowy places he can thrive in and rot from the inside until nothing and everything is shadows.

“Mam.”

There are tears that he sees and does not understand; why mourn, when there is nothing to be mourned? His mother cries, and he does not understand, he cannot understand. He wants to be wanted, and knows he is not (because he never gave her a reason to) but that’s not the point, she’s his mam and he is leaving.

His mother ignores him, and he is now crying too.

This does not make sense. Ireland is not home, and she does not mourn for him because he never was. His mother cries and cries and cries, and when the soap suds turns perfectly pink and the water swirls with dissipating red spirals, and when there is crimson on her pink-red lips and her skin is tinged cold, cold blue and the water spills across the floor, clear and lying, he remembers the red and the heat, the unbearable heat.
He holds liquid fire, the beat of a heart in cold, cold hands, and his nailbeds are the same icy blue that her lips have become.

James Moriarty smiles and stands, feet soaked, not permeating the leather to his socked feet, not stained. A single dash across his shirt, easily covered, and his tears are transparent but the water around his feet is dark, now.

Ireland is not his home. He never liked green.

- Kent, England

There is a certain rigid familiarity to living at home, one Q is quite fond of and detests in equal measure.

His mother and father are not speaking, because they never speak, and it’s probably better that way in the long run. His brothers are a) absent and b) in jail, although the parents don’t know about b) yet because Q doesn’t want to tell them. His brother will probably thrive for a while in adult-jail, because he is now an adult, after all.

Q says nothing. Nothing at all. He is eleven years old and hasn’t had a real name since he was six, since eldest brother and middle brother found baby brother cross-legged with their father’s handgun and was predominantly concerned with making the sights better.

Eldest brother mockingly nicknamed him after a figure he knew in government, a figure who ran guns and munitions and made ‘toys’ and machinery and equipment, and Q would do his research and discover – two years later – that ‘Q’ was hardly an insult.

No. Q is an identity like any other. Nobody calls him by his birth name any longer.

(Q wonders if anybody remembers).

- London

“Ain’tcha pretty?”

His body arches slightly, and within a year, the pout of a child is the bitten lower lip of a not-quite-child; he knows where to look, where to touch, where to press when bodies slide towards him and he asks the questions and they underestimate him, so many of them do, but he knows how to find the crinkle of paper that makes this worth his while.

Being fucked is glorious. Being paid is even better.

“Would you like to know how pretty?”

Sometimes, he will be taken somewhere and fucked. Sometimes, he will do the fucking. Sometimes, he will be fucked and slip ice into heat and feel that liquid fire again, spurring hotly over his chest, throwing him into an orgasm punctuated by the fading heartbeat of a naïve man who should have known better.

After all: James is not big. He is not tall. He is not intimidating. He does not have muscle or bulk or anything more, really, than pretty words.
Words can get you everywhere.

The man saunters and devours every inch of James’s body, carnal; Jim recognises the tell-tale signs of paedophilia and sadism – James is that, fragile and desperately young, he always gets those sorts – and he decides he will (probably) not kill this one.

Time will tell, but not if James asks her to keep it secret.

- Kent, England

The boredom is consuming him. Inch by sterile dull boring inch.

Q lives in the garden of England, in a respectable home with a respectable life and a respectable family and respectable grades and he turns sixteen with his middle brother in rehab and his eldest away on business, his mother gently losing her brilliance and his father his memory, and Q realises he simply doesn’t care.

There is nothing to stop the tedium, the unbelievable crippling nothingness of it. He tried carving patterns into his skin, went too deep when he found nothing worked, stitched it up while his head spun from blood loss and that was exciting. That was fun.

Pain didn’t do it. Death didn’t do it. The midpoint, however, did.

He understands, now, why middle-sibling fucked up so badly. Middle-sibling understands the boredom, and refuses to let it happen. He found substances, which is fair enough, but not enough, never close to enough.

(Q knows. He stole a little of Sherlock’s cocaine at one stage. Sherlock knows. Never told. Q was unimpressed by the whole experience, and didn’t bother again.)

There is nothing even close to enough for him, and so Q makes the obvious and necessary decision, strides out of the front door with his bags in tow at two o’clock in the afternoon on a warm but overcast summer’s day in June.

Nobody notices for four days.

- London, England

The hospital dispatches him back into the Real World with slightly scared glances and a lot of warnings and a lot of little business cards from well-meaning people who thought a Boy Like You Shouldn’t Be Out There On His Own and Get In Touch If You Need Help and I Am Here If You Need Anything et cetera and so on.

Jim giggles a bit, stores the cards away on the basis of Just In Case.

‘James’ died with the man who fucked him into hospital, and Jim doesn’t miss him very much. His mother’s voice trills Jimmy! and he cries when he hears it, but the tears hold no weight and are completely divorced to thought or conscious feeling.

Having said that, Jim isn’t sure when he last felt Conscious Feeling, and smirks again to himself, because everything seems to be ascribing itself with importance today and his mind sparkles with
In any case, he needs somewhere to stay until there’s a hope in hell of him being able to take a cock up the arse again. The man who killed James stole all his money. A little unreasonable, Jim thinks.

Jim decides he’ll crash in a tube station, because he quite likes them, and the staff at the quieter ones usually don’t ask too many questions which suits him just fine. Jim is dressed in loose trackies a nurse gave him (his actual ones were a write-off, shredded and soaked) and has the hospital gown over the top, and is not oblivious to but just doesn’t care about the glances that flick his way.

The boy opposite isn’t even pretending not to stare.

Jim grins, obnoxiously.

- Q sees the grin, all teeth, clearly intended to be disturbing; he supposes it is, musing in a detached sort of way, and realises that the humming clawing nothingness is changing form to glance at the boy opposite.

It is when he sees his reflection in the tube window that he realises his expression mimics the boy’s. All teeth.

The boy laughs, truly laughs, and Q rather likes it; he has a pretty laugh, a melodic and creepy sort of thing that darts along octaves and trembles like Sherlock’s vibrato when he plays the violin.

“I’m Q.”

“And I’m Jim,” the boy replies.

The tube stops, and half the carriage pile out. At least five of them aren’t at their stop, and all of them want to escape the strange dark-haired boys in the carriage behind them, inexpressibly relieved when the train pulls out and they are both lost from view.

Jim scoots to Q’s side, quick, dextrous (injured, Q muses, cataloguing the hurts that span the boy’s body and knowing what each of them mean). “You’re a prostitute,” Q tells Jim – Jim, he likes the name ‘Jim’ – and is unsurprised at the shrug.

“You’re a runaway,” Jim parries, and doesn’t wait for an answer. “You have somewhere you’re stayin’?”

Q’s smile is a different breed to Jim. “I know somebody,” he says carefully, words picked ever-so-deftly. “I’m assuming you’d like to come with me?”

“With a voice like that, sweetheart, I’d go with you anywhere,” Jim drawls, and has never been quite so aware of his accent until faced with the epitome of English primness.

This boy thinks he knows what it is to have chasms, black holes, living in your brain. This boy thinks he understands. Jim can read him reading, grins as his gaze lingers on Jim’s crotch and puts together the limp and the bitten lip and the fingerprint bruising on his throat and the learned lean of his body, and simply knows.

Q is clever.

Jim decides to keep him.
“So where we headed?” he asks brightly, looking over Q himself; a million things to see, of course, but not especially interesting or important. Nothing of him is, bless his heart, but he’ll try and Jim’ll let him.

Jim wonders if Q fancies a fuck. He actually rather hopes so. It would definitely do Q good. All-English runaway boy thinking he knows, thinking he understands; would do him a world of good to take it hard and fast, Jim muses, and closes his eyes with a smile nobody sees as he imagines making the other boy sob.

Q does not chatter. He was never inclined to. No, his mind is busy elsewhere, which makes a decent change; he prods Jim with a foot when it is time to leave, and Jim follows like the obedient puppy he’s pretending to be.

It is a fairly long walk, and Jim is cold. Q hands over his gloves wordlessly, and thrusts his hands into the pockets of a rather lovely coat. Jim misses his coat. He sold it about a month after hitting London, a little while before he realised work and play were the same thing.

Q raps on the door, and waits patiently. It is forty-eight seconds before a breathtakingly thin man opens the door. “You,” he grunts, and steps back. He takes a moment looking over Jim. “Who the fuck’s this?”

“A friend,” Q returns, with a simplicity that resonates as a challenge; the man notices, and the slight paleness indicates fear. Q scares him.

How intriguing.

The man passes back, and both boys step through. Q strides in as though he’s entirely at home in the place, shrugging off the coat to hang on a doorframe; there is a sofa with a blanket cast over it, a miniature bedroom without a bed but with a pile of blankets and a surprising amount of what looks like electronic or computing equipment.

Q ignores it, immediately moving into the bite-sized kitchen to put the kettle on. “Tea?” he asks, and Jim blinks slightly. Q’s eyebrow shivers upwards. “Or coffee, although I won’t vouch for the quality.”

“How’s Jittery back there?” Jim drawls, sloping against the closed door; on the other side, he can hear the skittering, the man darting in and around his own habitat with the vague awareness of having been invaded.

Q’s expression is merciless and impenetrable. “The man who raped my brother while selling him drugs,” he replies calmly. It is the truth. “As I said: he owes me.”

Jim’s eyes narrow. “Why didn’t you wreck him already?”

Oddly, Q’s expression is more surprised than anything else. “Why on earth would I?” he replied lightly. “I gather information, and use it when I need to. No point in getting somebody locked up, when they can be useful. I have a place to live because of it.”

“I get that,” Jim drawled. “I mean, why don’t you kill him? Not somebody anybody’ll miss. You have the place. Just do it.”

Q lets out a quiet breath, apparently considering. Jim decides that he definitely underestimated the boy. “I never liked the idea,” he said softly.

“He fucked your brother.”
The kettle boils. Q is livid, but in a honed manner; he wears control with ease, breathes it through him. He has every little bit of the control Jim, James, never quite managed. “I noticed,” he says, and it doesn’t grind, it isn’t forced. His control is organic and completely compelling.

Tea is something Jim does not know very well. Honestly, it’s been a while since he drank the stuff; no point, not when a hot liquid could be soup or food. Jim doesn’t waste money on tea. That isn’t to say he has no money; rather, he uses his resources wisely.

Q, however, drinks with the poise and precision of somebody who had tea in lieu of mother’s milk. “I’ll kill him for you,” Jim suggests, unsure of why he’s extending his benevolence to this wisp of a man.

“If you like,” Q replies, with the weight of memory and anger and hate lingering on his tongue. For all his interesting facets, he is not a killer, nor somebody who likes killing. It is written over every inch of him.

Jim places his cup on the side, and ambles the few feet to Q, somehow making a few steps seem eternal. Q does not loosen his grip on the tea; Jim leans in, gently prises it out of his fingers, the mug’s heat leaving scalding suggestions on icy flesh as Jim takes those hands, glances them over, front and back.

“Looking for something?”

Jim doesn’t look up for a moment. When he does, it is a heartbeat before his lips meet Q’s, kissing him gently, a suggestion and a promise and a want. “Found it,” he breathes against Q’s lips, and Q actually groans, audibly groans at the crassness of the line.

All the same, they both know he likes it anyway.

Jim introduces Q to the subtle art of murder on the latter’s seventeenth birthday, seventeen days after they meet. The poetic part of Q finds it rather lovely, and is touched at the oddness and sweetness of such a birthday present; Jim repays the debt of living with him by tearing the man who raped his brother to pieces.

It is beautiful.

If it were not for Q’s collated knowledge, hiding the death would have been harder. Jim’s usual little murders are simple and easy; a man sought a prostitute and was killed for his troubles, a woman’s body is found in a river, a child disappears. Easy peasy.

Jim has skated past trouble for years by being a child; he had the clothes (all in one big Ikea bag, which he’d kept for nearly two years. Apparently, Ikea bags will survive literally anything) to dress himself up to look like the poor battered boy who would never hurt a fly.

(He rather misses the bag, all his clothes, all his everything. The man who killed James took it all, along with a rather important pair of shoes).

After all, Jim Moriarty does not exist on any records. An illegal immigrant, a whore, a vanishing act. Nothing touches him, nobody sees him, and he saunters stage left whenever required, leaving a body or two in his wake.

The man is screaming, and Q watches with utter impassivity. “Would you like the honours?” Jim asks, extending the hilt of the man’s kitchen knife out to Q. He nicks his palm in the gesture, tuts in
annoyance. Blood trailing up his forearms (like spirals in water) but his clothing remains as pristine as his smile.

“All yours,” Q tells him, although his eyes are sharp and toxic as they scan and slice this man apart until there is nothing left, as Jim smiles with true joy – he is beautiful when he smiles – and dances the blade across the man’s artery, stepping back, allowing it to arc into life without a drop on his shirt.

They fuck that night.

It transpires that Q is not a wilting flower. (Many things about Q have been a learning curve, and boy oh boy does Jim like to learn new things). In fact, while he freely admits to being a virgin, he knows what he likes and has no compunctions about telling Jim in perfect tones quite what those things are.

Jim hollows out his cheeks, and pulls Q’s cock deep, letting himself choke, letting oxygen stop. He tries to pull back, and finds Q’s fist holding him in place, refusing him air. His throat convulses, his body panics on instinct.

Fuck, Jim thinks, for the first time in a while. Oh fuck.

Oddly, he does not try to do anything, per se. There are a million options, there are always a million options, but he knows people and he knows Q and he knows that Q is not the type to choke a friend to death on his cock the first time he has sex with anyone.

At least, Jim is fairly optimistic.

Black is trickling into the edges of his vision, and Q’s breathing is all he can hear given that his own was stopped a long while ago now. Black, and everything is spinning, crazed and wild and colourful and black, and there is a kick of liquid and salt and Jim falls back with a whoop, drawing in frantic breaths and, as the colour becomes exponentially brighter, realises he cannot stop laughing.

It takes the slightest of touches from Q to have him coming harder than he knew he was able, screaming, the coagulating blood of a drug dealing rapist seeping into his bare skin and refusing to stain.

“Do you ever feel like you’re dead?”

Q does not look up. He has a computer – some parts from home that he’d lugged to London, the rest stolen or acquired or borrowed or cannibalised or homemade – and his world is in there, in a place Jim doesn’t even begin to understand.

Jim isn’t sure he’s ever used a computer. He knows of them, of course, has seen them and been around them, but never used them. There was never any point. Information lives in him, not in a hard drive.

“Yes, but my notes are things that time and mortality will never affect,” Q told him drily, when Jim tried to explain, and that was that. Jim immediately decided that he should keep some form of computer genius on side. Q would do.

And so, Q is typing, and Jim is being ignored which he really doesn’t like.
“I said…”

“I heard what you said,” Q cuts over. “No. I don’t. I’m assuming you do?”

Jim hums, a soft and contemplative sound. Q has been off with him for a few days, since Jim went out for the night and came back with pupils shot from the simple adrenaline of a perfect murder.

Q thinks Jim hasn’t noticed the correlation. He has.

(It won’t change anything, anyway)

Since not-dying at Q’s hands, Jim tried actual-killing by the same method, wondering exactly how long it would take, exactly everything. It meant some variables had to be explored, and some ideas had to be drawn out, but Jim has friends now. Murder is a pathetically simple art to conceal when nobody wants to look.

“I do,” Jim confirms lightly, and sighs.

They remain in utter silence for a while.

Q’s voice is level: “Why do you kill people?”

“Because I like it,” Jim replies, without hesitation. He has been expecting the question, actually. He has been trying to word the answer for days, prompted the question, and lovely Q took the bait and finally asked.

Jim thinks Q hadn’t noticed he was angling to be asked. He had.

(He asks anyway)

Q looks at him, waiting. “You feel dead?” he prompts, with a touch of vague sarcasm, deft and almost ignorable. Jim scowls at it. “Don’t look at me like that, you started it.”

“I exist,” Jim replies, so very softly. “I know that I do, but I don’t feel it. Nothing to feel, in my head. I respond to stimuli, so I find it. I get myself fucked ten times a night cos I like it, I like feeling, and I love the heat. They die, and they’re so hot, it burns.”

Q watches him. Jim’s eyes are bright, and he craves that feeling again, suddenly and viciously. He craves the possibility of somebody shattering him, he wants to be shattered.

Jim crows when Q slams him against the doorframe, and laughs until he can’t breathe, until the world is white and black, Q’s eyes sharper than even his blade, and he can feel the fire of himself slide along his thighs, his back, slicking the floor beneath their feet.

-“It never quiets.”

Jim glances up; the tone of Q’s voice is odd, unfocused. Uncontrolled. “What doesn’t, honey?”

Q doesn’t respond to the endearment, which makes Jim’s worry ramp up a notch. Q hates terms of endearment.

“You said you know what it feels like to be dead,” Q told him, voice too measured, and Jim stills entirely. “I don’t. I don’t know how to be anything other than loud, my head screams. Everything screams at me. I am so tired, all of the time, because everything is too loud and it hurts. I don’t ever
feel dead. I only ever feel alive.”

There is an agonising pain in the last words, one that slices at Jim more effectively than any of his perfectly arranged knives.

“I love watching things dying, that moment when it quiets, in between life and death. I like that control.”

Jim looks pointedly to the scars that dig trenches in Q’s wrists. Q doesn’t react. The bandages that they’d put on Jim’s lower back, on his upper thighs, itch slightly as he shifts. His throat is sore and scabs prickle.

Each action has an equal and opposite reaction.

The pair are silent for a while. Q sighs, closes his eyes, fingers drumming though the keyboard is a room’s span away. Jim can almost taste the motion in the other man’s head.

“Q?”

“Yes?”

“Wanna run the world with me?”
Q taps, taps away at a computer.

It is beginning to irk Jim, just a little bit, that he still has no idea what Q’s actual name is. A silly and unimportant little thing, almost, but Jim likes names and likes knowing and likes having somebody’s biography bound up in his pale white fingers.

Seven months, four days, and Jim still knows nothing about the boy tapping away at his computer.

“What’s your name?”

Q ignores him.

“What’s your name?”

Q ignores him.

“What’s your name,” Jim screams, and Q looks up placidly, his expression utterly unreadable as he watches Jim for a moment, examines the flush and the bead of sweat and the twitching eye of abrupt and incomprehensible anger.

“Q.”

Jim hisses, serpentine, eyes fathomlessly black. Breath stuttering in his throat, cancerous, throttling him from the inside out as he tries to come to terms with the fact that he knows nothing and he never knows nothing, Jim knows everything. It collates in his mind and it makes sense, is organised and simple and accessible. It isn’t an effort. Absorbing information is like breathing; it enters, allows him to function, innate and impossible to stop without dying entirely.

“My name is Q,” he repeats dangerously, and returns attention to his computer.

Jim throws a knife at the screen.

It fractures, the point sinking in and shattering the screen from the inside out, pointless sparks fizzling angrily before petering out. Shards try to escape. Q moves backwards quickly, a perfunctory movement. He appears unperturbed.

Never in his life has Jim wanted so badly to provoke a reaction. Q is implacable. Q threw him against a doorway and fucked him literally senseless, drew scores of lines across his body without finesse or care, left him unable to walk and bandaged up and for the time Q was fucking and hurting and bandaging Jim, he had seemed awake.

Q told him his brain screams. Jim knows it is true, and wants, needs to see it. Q could be beautiful, if he let himself scream at the stars as Jim does on occasion, scream to make somebody hear.

They are opposite, the pair of them, but they have the precise same ending. Or would, if Q just let it happen, as Jim always has. Jim doesn’t know how else to be. It’s impossible to make himself feel normal, ‘normal’ isn’t an option.
Q, he supposes, has the option of pretending if he just tries hard enough, swallows it back.

He would be beautiful. Jim can make him beautiful. He knows. He knows.

“You said it’s loud,” Jim asks softly, in the dark of a midnight Q can see straight into and past; he hasn’t been sleeping, Jim knows he hasn’t been sleeping. “How loud?”

Q doesn’t answer for a moment. The thoughts simply will not stop running, out of control, frenzied and perfect and awful. “Deafening,” he replies, almost inaudibly.

Jim props himself up on his elbow, hand reaching for Q’s cheek; the other man bats him away too-sharply, tension renting their shared air. “Show me.”

“What?”

A small giggle, a trace of fingers along Q’s cheek, his lips, his throat, and Q is just so delicate in the half-light. “Show me how loud it is. Let me see. Let me feel.”

Unsurprising, when Q rolls his eyes – Jim can just, just see his sclera glint with caught light – but annoying all the same. “No.”

“I want to see.”

“You want my name, too. No.”

Jim moves with speed and efficiency, straddling Q’s naked body, pinning his throat and scooping his wrists into one hand. “Show me. Now,” he spits, and squeezes. Q’s breathing becomes instantly laboured, a hissing thing that is not quite working, entire body trying to break away.

Q’s eyes are wide and frightened. Truly, honestly frightened, somewhere in the chasms of pupils that dilate impossibly wide now.

At least, Jim figures, it’s something. A flicker.

Q is not a masochist. Q is not a murderer. Q is a scared little boy who got in too deep, too fast, and found a bad bad influence who stopped him being bored and alone, who could let the side of him that cannot be have oxygen for one single night.

“Set me on fire,” Jim tells him, and it sounds like a plea. It sounds pathetic. He throttles a boy who can give him everything, and he is the pathetic one.

Jim staggers back, his voice falling into a strange and hysterical keen while Q gasps in breath and coughs painfully, body trembling slightly.

This is not alive. This is not dead. This is not fire. This is hell. This is a black hole and a cyclone and unmitigated chaos. Chaos is Jim’s, he has agency over chaos.

He screams when Q touches him, and is dimly aware of being terrified beyond all measure, terrified enough to make him retch over the edge of the bed. He is dead but there is screaming, and the screaming takes the shape of his name Jimmy, please, no please, no and her hair fills his mouth and his shoes fill with water.

When Jim has coherence, he is saying the name he always detested again and again and again and again under his breath, sobbing like a very small child.
Q’s expression does not change.

The man in the chair killed James. Thus, Jim and Q have acquired him. To Jim’s absolute delight he kept the bag he’d stolen from James – (Jim reclaims his very important shoes) – and it seems that Jim is not the first whore he’d killed or left for dead or fucked or robbed.

Q was the one to find him. Q collects information, stores it, uses it. Q has databases and documents. Q understands the Internet, which is a fairly new entity Jim entrusts to Q’s understanding for now.

In the Great Grand Database, Q has addresses and contacts, webbing outwards. He rarely leaves the house; Jim finds information and relays it, Q takes the documents Jim steals and the newspapers he reads and inputs everything, relevant or not, every single name and place and detail.

Finding the man took a while – nine months – but was immensely satisfying.

Now, Q and Jim are in a warehouse they own under a false name. Q is merely watching; he is still not a killer, and Jim still doesn’t know his name.

Jim is having fun with electricity, in Q’s honour. This is Q’s glory, after all; Q made all of this happen, and so Jim celebrates by watching the man convulse and vomit bloody strings, whimper pathetically, beg for mercy. It is rather compelling.

“You killed Carl Powers, didn’t you?” Q asks conversationally, as Jim snips off the man’s fingers with a pair of secateurs.

Jim stops a moment, twisting around curiously. Blood coats his arms stickily. There is not a drop on his clothes. “Yes. Why?”

Q merely smiles, and Jim restrains the urge to slam the secateurs through the other boy’s hand. Instead, he slams it through the man in the chair’s hand, and the scream he lets out is enough to make fire pump through every vein, a caramel taste on his tongue.

Twenty-four months. Jim starts to have what can honestly be called an empire. Already. His name opens doors and terrifies everybody with half an ounce of intelligence.

Jim is seventeen. Q is eighteen.

Between them, they have money, power, influence. It is all in Jim’s name which Q doesn’t care much about; Moriarty is a name with gravitas and heaviness that can crush almost instantaneously, and Jim himself is unseen and untouched. Nobody knows him. Nobody knows what he looks like. Moriarty is a shadow pulling strings.

Jim coins the phrase ‘consulting criminal’, and giggles a good amount about it, and soon has employees and a fully operational business.

He likes having People. Most of them are very, very afraid of him, which makes them intelligent, or at the very least not-stupid. Jim also likes that his computing skills are now good enough to keep the documentation running, all of his files and files and files that Q naturally is in charge of, but Jim is learning to survive alone. Just in case.

Jim needs a passport, they realise after a little while. His Irish one is destroyed somewhere, and he
has never needed one. Now, business booming, it is a problem.

“You’ll have to have one under your actual name,” Q tells him, typing, eyebrows furrowed adorably. “I’ll have a think about how to do this, it could be fairly difficult from this piece of shit…”

“Aww, be nice,” Jim coos to the computer, pouting at Q, all lips and big eyes. Q raises an eyebrow. “Alright, clever boy, what d’you reckon?”

“I’ll work something out,” Q says with a smirk. “With a pretty photograph and everything.”

“Every photo of me is pretty.”

Q’s smile is genuine. It makes his entire face light. “I never said otherwise,” he grins, with a quirk of sarcasm which earns him Jim chucking a pair of scissors playfully; Q leans out of the way, and it sails past without incident. “I need a camera, speaking of which.”

Jim has a nasty habit of trashing everything Q creates. The screen had only been the start, all those months ago; Jim knows that the computer is Q’s first (and only) love, and so whenever he’s angry, Jim merrily destroys it.

“We’ll find you a camera, sweetie,” Jim coos, and Q smiles slightly, returns the kiss with bored vigour.

Something is wrong. Jim can tell. Jim can tell from the tension and the paleness and the slight itch of Q’s fingers that aren’t tap tap tapping. They’re tap tap tap tap tap tapping, and it’s very wrong. There is something wrong.

“Oh what a beautiful morning!” Jim sings, perfect Southern American accent that makes Q smile on occasion. He doesn’t respond. Jim stops, waits, watches. Rolls his eyes. “Oh what a beautiful day…”

“Not in the mood,” Q tells him shortly.

Tappety tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap. Jim’s fingers try to mimic. Never before has he realised quite how rhythmic Q usually is, how perfectly in time and predictable. Everything of him is currently short-circuiting and painfully irregular.

Jim saunters to his side, leans in, sings straight into the pale shell of his ear: “I’ve got a beautiful feeling…”

Q’s eyes blaze.

Pain explodes over Jim’s face, and it takes him a surprisingly long time to realise that Q has just punched him in the face. One hundred percent, indisputable, perfectly-aimed punch to the face that has just caused a spurt of boiling red to scald Jim’s hands and trickle into his mouth, his throat.

Jim can only laugh. There are no other possible responses.

Q is cradling his apparently sore hand, knuckles stained, his breathing as irregular as his typing had been a moment ago. “My brother is in rehab again,” he says, and Jim spits blood in gobbets onto the floor as Q cries.

It has been a very long time since Jim last saw Q cry. In fact, Jim literally cannot remember the last time Q cried, not sincerely, and certainly not like this. Q looks like parts of his world have come
unlaced.

Sentimentality suits neither of them. Jim could not give a flying fuck about Q’s brother and rehab. Q whining will do nothing useful. It makes sense to kiss Q rather than spew meaningless platitudes; this time, Jim is brutal, forceful.

Jim is punishing Q for being frankly pathetic. Q palpably welcomes it, screams out as Jim loops his wrists together, thrashes violently and begs under his breath and screams and begs, and Jim has never seen Q like this, never ever. Q is beautiful. Naked, Q’s body a canvas of white and pink and darker pink and cream and black; Jim’s fingers dance over the sparse hair, draws patterns in cold cold skin.

Q is biting and kicking with his hands now bound firmly above his head, metal biting into his wrists, little vampire teeth drawing lurid red blood that loops and arcs down his forearms in perfect rivulets, finds the familiar tracks of ageing pink scars, settles contentedly into the trenches of long-gone hurts.

Self-indulgence; Q manages a foot to his stomach, and the force is enough to knock air from Jim’s lungs, leave him to claw in air desperately.

Q laces his feet around Jim’s spine and wrenches him forward so he almost topples over, eyes a poisonous green, and Jim can see the just-visible rims of contact lenses around his irises. Q is utterly still. No tears, no hysteria, no fighting.

Jim’s Q is back.

“You do not fuck me,” Q reminds Jim quietly, so calm it sends a run of shivers through Jim’s body. “Let my wrists free.”

No threats. Nothing. Jim smiles, eyes shutting slightly with quiet bliss as he lets Q’s wrists free of the handcuffs – in retrospect, Jim has no idea where he spirited them out of, was clearly working on autopilot – and waits. Waits.

Q looks at him. “Wait here.”

Jim has never done as he was told in his entire life. He tries to follow Q wherever he goes.

The measured gravity of Q’s tone is awe inspiring: “Wait here, or this ends. You want to hear, so listen. Strip, if you’re bored; it will save time.”

It is tempting to be contrary in every way possible. Jim usually is. However, Q simply does not play games; he will not bait Jim or threaten him or do anything more than know that he will be obeyed, because Q is giving Jim what he wants. Jim has something to lose. Q knows it.

Jim does precisely as he is told.

Q returns with a series of devices. He is silent. Jim grins and giggles and hums under his breath; Q glances at him neutrally, and something about it makes Jim fall silent. The silence begins to throttle him almost immediately. Jim cannot handle silence, it makes him feel unwell. Nauseous.

It is one of the reasons Q stays so silent; this is not a game, this is not fun. This is Jim learning the parts of Q that do not exist (should not exist) and not even Jim Moriarty enjoys being the focus of every damaging part of a half-broken psyche.

After two hours, Jim begins to understand the gravity of what he has done, what he has asked. Q is absent by that stage; some recess of him has taken command, not his controlled Q or young Q or slightly-fucked-up Q. This is an unnamed entity that cries expressionlessly as Jim screams, not the
exhilarated and adrenaline-induced kind, but a terrified and inexpressibly pained kind.

Jim is not sure whether or not he’ll wake up again. Everything, everything, *everything* hurts. Q does not react to his increasingly urgent pleas to stop; Jim has never, and will never, beg in his life, not aloud. He pleads in the arch of his spine and the notable flinch, and Q has no response, *nothing*.

- 

Jim is not surprised when he is alive.

He is completely fucking *shocked*.

Q cries next to him, no longer expressionless, but riddled with the weight of what he has done. Jim’s body is wrecked to within an inch of its capabilities. To his surprise, Jim can hear a heart rate monitor blip comfortingly, feels the itchy tug of an IV line.

“I’m sorry,” he tells Q, and means it. He never meant for this, not for either of them.

One day, Jim will learn to not underestimate Q.

*Somebody* will learn not to underestimate Q.

Q doesn’t respond. He cries silently with the twisted pain of somebody who has lost too much and doesn’t know what. Jim pushed too far. He finally understands what it is to go too far.

“Is your brother ok?”

Jim’s voice is a barely-audible rasp, and is surprisingly painful to try and use. Q glances at him – he is wearing his glasses for once, and the tears and breath have steamed them very slightly – and he lets out a derisive snort; both of them know Jim still couldn’t give a flying fuck about Q’s brother.

They remain for a while. Jim slips in and out of consciousness. He wonders, vaguely, where Q procured the medical equipment from. He wonders what day it is. He had a meeting on Tuesday.

“Why did you kill Carl Powers?”

It is the second time Q has referenced a kill that only Jim knows was a kill, and Jim’s unresponsive body rolls at the mention. “How do you know about him?”

“My question first.”

Jim stares at the ceiling – mould in the corner, they should probably take a look at it – and thinks back to the face of the young boy, the floppy hair, the stupid trainers and the rich daddy who liked to play around with underage street walkers. Jim included. Jim especially.

Carl had done nothing more than notice where his father’s gaze had lingered, on a surprisingly bright day, when Jim had been cocooned in coats and blankets and mostly asleep. Carl had noticed. His father had said something, Jim hadn’t heard.

Carl Powers had *laughed*. Looked at Jim, laughed.

There was probably context, probably an explanation. Probably an innocuous comment. Possibly nothing to do with Jim at all. Possibly any number of things.

Jim hadn’t cared. Instead, he had watched them walk away, noted Carl’s swimming bag slung on his back, and the school crest. He already knew the father’s name; from that it is simple, tracking the boy
to a private school in the south, to a swimming pool where he trains three times weekly, the sessions at the weekends run by an Olympian.

Carl Powers was the first murder that took weeks of planning, and perfect execution. Jim had too many clumsy or impulsive deaths to his name; this was subtle and untraceable, the one that would prove Jim more than a common or garden serial killer. He wasn’t even a killer, because Carl Powers had not been murdered.

Quite how Q knows about it frightens Jim. He will not admit it, but it does. There is only one other person who ever realised that Carl Powers was murdered.

Q is party to sections of explanation, and makes the leap of logic easily when it comes to the mode of murder: clostridium botulinum was one of Jim’s more inspired ideas, and Q – while not a born chemist – is more than conversant in poisons.

“Eczema,” Jim explains, and remembers why he adores Q from the simple way he breathes in, mouth in a perfect pink oh of understanding. “The toxin…”

“… distilled and placed within his medication, absorbed through the damaged skin,” Q completed, looking not merely satisfied but post-orgasmically sated. “Perfect. Why keep the shoes?”

“Sentiment,” Jim replies on a half-breath, and sees Q’s spine roll with quiet but notable tension, creeping through him, parasitic. Jim is close to unconscious again, utterly exhausted, body seeping out into the sheets.

Q had been terrifying, and Jim has never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

“What’s your name?”

Jim is not surprised to be met with silence. He passes out again shortly afterwards.

Q apologises with a passport.

Jim looks over it with unashamed reverence. The photograph is him, and he does look pretty - I told you, I always look pretty - and the name reads James Moriarty, with his date of birth (ish) and all the details and it is a work of art, an absolute work of art.

This was not externally manufactured, either. Q made it from scratch. Q pickpocketed several dozen different people around London to acquire a cross-section of passports, broke them down, studied them. Stole various pieces of tech, with Jim’s help, assembled the printers and acquired the specialised paper as required.

It has been a labour of love for many months, and once Jim can walk on his own, Q presents him with the passport.

Jim Moriarty exists.

Jim finds this very, very exciting.
Thank you for the extraordinary support this fic has already received - it means the world! Jen.
Q vanishes twenty-six months, fourteen days and two hours after Jim met him. Ish.

Jim avoids vanishing himself by a hair’s breadth, and sighs with annoyance at the necessity of finding a new place to live. He likes their current flat. Convenient. Central. Well decorated. Sleeping in tube stations is simply below him these days.

And so, Jim wears a new name for a day, finds the smart clothes and non-prescription glasses he has in one of his bags (no longer Ikea, he has bags and bags, secured and black and locked and hidden in several dozen places, waiting for their owner just in case), and he saunters into a hotel with everything from top to toe fake, and asks for their best room.

The card reads J Matthews. Jim remembers: he is a twenty-one year old businessman in Goldman Sachs, he has a dog but no girlfriend, likes terrible TV and does not kill anybody ever even if he really wants to and I mean it Jim, this is one of the aliases you're not allowed to fuck up and Jim wears his new name with pride.

Q always had such a way with words.

- 

Q is vanished by his fucker of an eldest brother, who places him squarely in a chair opposite him in a very cold cell and stares at him with authoritative condescension.

“What can I do for you, Mycroft?”

The man says nothing. Q says nothing. This has the potential to last for a very long time, and apparently Mycroft works that much out because he finally deigns to ask: “Where is your compatriot?”

“M?” Q asks innocently.

‘M’ is the name they decided to give Jim (actual-Jim-with-a-physical-form, not ‘Moriarty’ the image), for situations precisely like this. Jim Moriarty doesn’t exist, and it is for the best that he remains non-existent for as long as feasibly possible. It is a jab on Q’s part, and Jim just likes the irony.

Mycroft is angry. He doesn’t look it, but even after nearly three years apart, Mycroft is still desperately readable to those who know how. Like most things on this earth, it is merely a case of
technique.

“Give me a name.”

Q raises an eyebrow. “I just did,” he points out obnoxiously.

“We have reason to believe he is a rather dangerous criminal figure.”

The sheer, indescribable *stupidity* makes Q very literally fall off his chair laughing.

- 

Jim is not a rather dangerous criminal figure, not in the slightest. It is insulting to say so.

Jim is the most lethal criminal mastermind the world will ever see, and the best part is, the world doesn’t especially want to open its eyes because that would mean *acknowledging* that Jim Moriarty exists. A boy who doesn’t have excuses or reasons or explanations, a man without a past or a future but *is*. Awful and omnipresent.

While life is harder without Q, Jim still has his People and his Identities, both of which he switches around like clothes, all of them transient; Q constructed several dozen bank accounts from thin air (so Jim has money), left Jim able to manage the databases (so Jim has information), and had a failsafe on the sensitive information in their flat (so Q, Jim, and everything tangibly dangerous is gone).

Jim Moriarty, passport and identities and money coming out of his nostrils, reinvents himself with ease, and saunters into his adulthood with a criminal empire (if not quite as extensive as he would like) established.

Competition springs up, names and places and voices and faces appear from nowhere. Spectre is Jim’s favourite, and an organisation he looks forward to unravelling. It is a very large world, Jim muses, as he sips champagne and eats seared blue steak on the balcony of an apartment in central London that he apparently owns. (Q misses him).

It occurs to him that he should probably invest in another right-hand man. Or, at the very least, a passable bodyguard.

- 

Q knows Jim misses him. He can see it in the bodies that pop up; choked to death, with parallel lines scored up the inner arms (Jim has improved with age; they are officially passed off as suicides, and with each one, Jim’s work is neater). A love letter, written in Q’s scars and Q’s kinks.

“Our idiot brother informs me that you are completely insane.”

“Our idiot brother does his level best to ensure he has no competition insofar as intelligence,” Q replies. “Of course he informs you that I’m insane. It’s a far simpler explanation than to consider that I may be more brilliant, more inspired, than even he is.”

Sherlock smiles, honest-to-god smiles. Q can’t remember the last time he saw Sherlock smile. Long before he left, certainly, somewhere in his prepubescent years, before rehab but during the drugs but not in prison but somewhere in between; Q can’t remember, but he smiles now.

“You’re clever.”

“Yes,” Q says, and it comes out oddly tired. “I’m clever.”
It never occurs to Jim that Q will come back. They need time apart. It is probably better for both of them.

Having said that, Jim really, really misses the sex. Every once in a while, he dresses up in his old garb – impossibly tight trousers, see-through vest, a touch of eyeliner and lips bitten red raw – and earns some cash. It makes more sense to sell than to buy, when it comes to sex; he has the money to spare, of course, but this way is far more fun and even a little bit nostalgic.

It is on one of these nights that Jim encounters the delightful Sebastian Moran.

The man is not very bright, it has to be said. Not stupid, and holy hell but the way the man works with a gun is enough to make Jim practically orgasm on the spot, but not intelligent.

They meet when Moran tries to rape him.

Jim is minding his own business – terrifyingly tight trousers notwithstanding – when he is slammed into the wall with a man built like the proverbial brick shithouse. Said man instantly has Jim’s hands bruised together, groping him harshly, kisses him hard enough to break the skin and rust floods Jim’s mouth and sticks to his teeth.

Jim realises that the man is trying to rape him, and responds by bucking his hips into the hand trying to molest him. He moans theatrically against the man’s lips, whines out want, and doesn’t actually need to fake the erection that springs to merry attention without hesitation.

Moran is deeply confused, which is how Jim knows he isn’t very bright.

He doesn’t argue or question, however, which is how Jim knows he is the right choice.

Instead, Moran continues with what he had wanted: a good hard fuck. Jim is more than content to confuse and fulfill him in equal measure, a confusion that permeates throughout (Jim imagines the entire situation would have been disappointing if Jim weren’t such a good fuck; it is clear that this is not Moran’s first time raping a prostitute) but all the same, he enjoys himself well enough.

Spent, still endearingly confused, Moran makes no real protest when he finds a knife against his testicles. Jim giggles. “Are you listening, Mr Big Man?”

Moran, silent, nods.

“Good, then we’ll get along just…” Jim hisses out the ‘s’, drawing the blade half a millimetre away from Moran’s now flaccid cock, a breathtakingly sharp flick-knife he keeps in his shoes. The man is a sharpshooter, a fighter. He is a man Jim wouldn’t stand a hope in hell of beating in unarmed – or even armed – combat. If he tried to fight now, Jim would have his neck snapped before he realised the man had moved. “… fine.”

However, there exists a human truism that Jim is rather fond of: men will always protect their genitals.

If Jim had the knife to Moran’s throat, the fight would already be over; those are angles and movements Moran is accustomed to. However, attacking Jim now risks the knife just catching, just gliding, and in a post-orgasmic haze with no actual damage caused yet, only threat, Moran plays his cards wisely and decides to give the prostitute holding a knife to his balls the benefit of the doubt.

“Now, I’m not going to hurt you, Big Man,” Jim purrs, and his eyes are sharp and fathomless. “But
if you’d like to fuck other little whores like me, you’re going to want to listen closely, hmm? What’s your name, darlin’?”

A single grunt: “Moran.”

Jim grins. “I love the silent types,” he enthuses. “Now – I need somebody big and scary to protect me from the monsters. You’re freelance. Dishonourable discharge?”

“How could you possibly…”

“No no, no moving now, I didn’t say move,” Jim reminds him, as the man tries to shift upwards, looking tangibly alarmed – it translates to angry in this man, very sexy, Jim approves – and Jim waits, patient, as he leans back again. “Better. Good boy. I didn’t catch your first name, sweetheart. Mine’s Jim.”

“I don’t use my first name.”

There is no need for words; Jim simply makes a sharper half-inch move with the flick-knife that makes Moran’s breath catch and body tense; the man is all muscle, scarred and ripped apart in all senses. Jim can only see his groin, his legs – the man’s shirt is still around him, casing whatever remains of his torso – but this is a man who knows what it is to fight and to scream and to live.

“Bad luck, honey. I do.”

Moran glances over him, not bothering to hide his open assessment. They both know Jim is outmatched physically, but it means the boy is either a) overconfident or b) knows more than Moran knows.

Sensibly, Moran decides it is the latter. Jim can see the moment he resolves to be compliant, at least for now. At least until further notice.

“Sebastian.”

Jim’s grin is bottled sunlight. “Alright then, Sebby,” he says obnoxiously, flicking away the knife and standing in one fluid movement. He looks surprisingly tall, surprisingly solid, standing over Moran. A force of nature. “Shall we?”

- 

Q looks down at the packs of pills. Little white ones, little yellow ones. Looks and looks and looks and looks.

- 

It takes a frustrating and commendably long time for Jim to finally, finally find out Q’s name.

Jim gapes. Literally gapes. Jaw hangs loosely, blinking languidly, reading and re-reading and re-re-reading. And re-re-re-reading.

Q cannot be a Holmes. Q cannot be a Holmes, and yet he must be, because Jim finally understands how he knew about Carl Powers. Jim understands why he disappeared, and why he will not reappear. Q never lied to him, but this is information that Jim should have known, and he swears violently and goes out that night in a beautifully pressed suit and this time kills a prostitute rather than client because hey, it’s nice to mix these things up.
He imagines it is Q, choking under his hands. The girl’s eyes are bottle green, bright bottle green, a little like Q’s had been on summer days when he left the building and ambled through parks, when they had been something like friends and something like lovers. The stranger times.

Those eyes turn glassy, and the memories die with her.

It is nice to know that Q isn’t dead or in a high-security prison, Jim muses briefly, before lifting his phone to his ear. “Hello darlin’, I have a cleanup for you,” he trills, sings an address, and leans back against the stone wall, staring at the stars he cannot see through the smoke of London skies.

“Who was he?” Sherlock asks, laid back in a puddle of limbs on the sofa, lighting a cigarette.

Q glances over. “Put it out. No smoking in here, or so help me, I’ll cut off every supplier for a ten-mile radius,” he says flatly, and returns to his work, neatly circumnavigating the question.

“Q. Who was he?”

Tap tap tappety tap. Tappety tap tap tap.

“A friend.”

A pause in the tap, tap, tapping. Q glances skywards, wonders briefly why he is cursed to be surrounded by people who stubbornly repeat the same bloody question again and again when they know full well they will not get answers. “He was… a colleague, I suppose.”

“A friend.”

Sherlock’s tone is contemptuous, and Q’s expression is mildly patronising. The Holmes boys do not have friends. Jim was not a friend. In a sense he was, Q supposes, but ‘friends’ connotes affection which Q just didn’t have. The Holmes boy can never have friends.

“You were in love with him.”

A small smile and a full eye roll. “Not in love. I don’t think he knew how. I don’t either.”

“Yes, clinically,” Sherlock returns, with palpable contempt. Q breathes carefully. It will not help to get angry. Sherlock is an irritant, but ultimately a benign one, and he does not understand.

Truly, Q does not either.

Sometimes, he misses Jim with every fibre of his being. Sometimes, he does not.

Q definitely misses the silence. Once in a while, Jim had been able to make blissful and impossible and perfect silence, and Q’s mind is screaming again now with the raw agony that calls out for the freedom of a life that is his. Not Mycroft’s. Not Sherlock’s. His, and he had made a life for himself.

In essence: he never had to try, with Jim. The power lingered under both of their skins. Jim was the open flame and raw wound, and Q was just there, his power the same as Mycroft’s unerring consistency and Sherlock’s drive. Q is the perfect Holmes. Jim is just perfect.

No, Q does not love him, and never did – but Jim is something extraordinary. Q could never deny him that.

Sherlock watches him with a form of almost dangerous interest, as he flicks through newspapers,
circles pieces of information. He has been working with Scotland Yard, apparently, after befriending (ha) a detective that arrested him at one stage or another.

As long as he isn’t blowing up the flat, Q is quite happy. If he touches Q’s equipment, Sherlock knows full well he will have his fingers chopped off.

(Q remembers watching Jim do it. Line up against the joint, and with a single gorgeous motion, snap his beloved secateurs shut with a wet sharp noise that Q sometimes half-imagines when he’s falling asleep).

Instead, Sherlock acquires body parts that litter their flat, and Q must admit he doesn’t care much. They have a mutual understanding that they do not use the fridge if Sherlock’s experimenting, and only the kettle and Q’s tea is sacrosanct. Q takes it black with a dash of lemon, so there is no need to concern themselves about milk.

They live well together, sort of.

Sherlock never stops asking. Mycroft gave up, after a point, but Sherlock has not and will not give up asking about the years that Q disappeared for. Asking why he left, why he hasn’t run again, why he lets Mycroft be a twat, who the other person was, what he did, what he saw, why.

Not a syllable passes Q’s lips, and it will not. It is not Sherlock’s. Jim is Q’s, and Q is surprised at how ferociously that sits inside him and snarls out. He will not let Sherlock steal even the memory of Jim.

It has vaguely occurred to Q that he should think about finding a job at some stage. Currently, he works freelance as a hacker, but Mycroft is getting antsy about it all again so he really should think of doing things above board for a while.

Sherlock’s words only haunt a little.

*Why haven’t you run again?* -

Jim is bored. Indescribably bored. The criminal world is festering and there’s nothing of interest in the normal world, and so Jim is bored. Very, very bored.

‘Moriarty’ is a whisper, a name carried on the wind. ‘Moriarty’ opens doors and closes windows. ‘Moriarty’ is an unspoken everything. ‘Moriarty’ is a world of its own, now, and the returns are colossal.

Jim, however, is known only to two people: Moran, and Q. Everything else is now through proxies or computers or both, and it can never be traced back to him; he is the consummate puppeteer, and they dance a red-hot tango on coals for him, begging for attention, for favours.

Boredom means it is time to invest in long-term projects. Boredom means ‘Moriarty’ going global, which is *unbelievably* fun, and the tap dance keeps him going for days and days on end. Jim does not sleep. Jim does not eat. Moran gets worried. Jim eats a doughnut. Jim does not sleep. Jim indirectly kills forty-seven people.

It is wisest to not get his hands dirty, these days. As technology improves, it becomes substantially harder to get away with random acts of malice; instead, Jim carefully selects those worthy enough to die under his tender ministrations, and truly, it is an honour. Even if they are moronic enough to not appreciate it.
Jim does not sleep.

Two weeks pass. Jim has started to hallucinate, and screams out the raw terror of a child, curls in the blistering heat of a bathtub and considers not emerging, letting himself boil to death.

Moran the moron is fucking useless when Jim is in this state.

The phone rings, while Jim’s head is submerged, crowned with frothy bubbles. He pokes his head out, cocks his head to one side with interest, reaches out and tugs it towards his foamy ear. “’Ello?” he says, a distinct Cockney twang – this is Jack’s phone, Jack being a supposed intermediary to Jim, one of his endless identities – and listens.

His grin turns nasty.

Jim steps out of the bath, stark naked, skin red and shrivelled. He hangs up the phone, lobbs it at the far wall; it shatters into a puddle of plastic sharps and electricity sparks. Q would have tutted. Jim laughs at the thought.

“Boss?”

“Out,” Jim screams at him; Moran retreats. Jim saunters to the wardrobe, humming lightly, leaving damp footprints on the plush carpet and seeping bubbles into the fibres, pink and gold spatters. “Cos you are gold…”


“Always believe in your so-oul…”

This is will be important. This meeting will be very important, and Jim is rather excited. It is nice to be going to a fun meeting, and not be dead. Something he should probably remember next time he tries to boil himself to death.

“You’ve got the power to know,” Jim sings brightly, “You’re indestructibuu-le.”

Next door, Moran chuckles. Jim pokes his head around the door and throws a shoe at him, which hits his head and bounces off satisfyingly with a musical clunk.

“Always believe i-it…”
Chapter 4

Q loves his job.

Q-branch is a wonderful little place. Q had thought they wouldn’t take him; Mycroft has been punishing him for his missing years, for never telling, by dangling opportunities under his nose and hoping Q will bite. Ultimately, Mycroft was not involved at all; Q was headhunted as a freelance computer technician and inventor, and no power on earth would stop Boothroyd from employing him.

And so Mycroft fumes quietly in the background while Q smirks, and inch by inch, takes over his little corner of the world.

Jim is doing the same somewhere, but Q doesn’t think about Jim all that much any longer. They have their own lives, their own spheres. Jim no longer needs Q to give him money; Jim has more than enough of his own these days, Q has seen his accounts, still monitors when he’s bored.

Fuck, but he is bored so much, so much, even with the fun of his job. Boredom still seeps in and poisons him.

Q and Sherlock no longer live together. They were both chucked out when the landlady finally gave up on optimistically hoping her tenants would stop wantonly trashing things. It was difficult to determine who blew up more, actually; Sherlock had his chemistry experiments, but Q was busy fiddling with devices that spewed everything from ink to acid to fire, at one particularly delightful stage.

“… and I’ve found a flatmate…”

“Really?” Q asked, voice heavy with scepticism. Sherlock is a nightmare to live with, not as good as Q once thought. Q refused to live with him again; they are somewhat lethal in conjunction, and Q is now at a stage where he recognises that.

Therapy has been an interesting experience, overall. Q has discovered a lot. Q is no longer crazy, sort of. Mostly. If he tries – and sometimes he doesn’t try – Q is something approaching normal these days.

Q realised quickly that normal is a relative term.

Little white and little yellow pills temper the literal madness that itches under his skin, and the screaming has dulled into something halfway manageable. The boredom still doesn’t leave. Sherlock treats him with utter contempt, which is ironic, given that Sherlock is a living breathing example of how the tilt of a brain may require pharmaceutical solutions. Q opted for legal ones. Again, it is a matter of perspective.
Sherlock sniffs, affronted. “Yes,” he replies primly. “I spoke to a colleague of mine at Barts…”

“Molly?” Q suggests drily. Sherlock blinks. Q finds it rather amusing, just how oblivious Sherlock is to the meandering sexual/romantic interests of others. Sherlock’s own sexual drive is a question in itself: either he truly has none (unlikely) or he willingly suppresses (probable) or he is simply too busy or too arrogant to pay attention (most likely).

Sherlock is intrinsically selfish. That, at least, was never something Q suffered with: he always knew that he was not normal, and that lack of normality needed to be guarded and hidden for the sake of others.

“… and she can’t afford anything better…”

“Out of interest, how are you affording this?”

Q is living in a shoebox sized little flat, with just about enough space for him to have a room for his gadgets, a room to spew wires across every accessible inch of floor space, a sofa he sleeps on when he sleeps, and a kitchen with a functioning kettle and microwave. It suits him, living alone.

“Mycroft.”

“Oh, that bastard,” Q hisses, on principle; even if Mycroft offered, Q wouldn’t accept, but all the same it rankles. “I’m guessing you’re paying sod all for it, then?”

A grin, all teeth. “Camden, too.”

Q gapes a little. “That’s just not fair.”

“Right on the tube line.”

Sherlock is gloating unapologetically, trying to get a rise. Sherlock reminds Q so much of Jim, sometimes. The baiting, the prodding, the insistent questions that Q resolutely refuses to answer, the vicious intensity and violent wants that are never quite sated.

“Lucky you,” Q manages, with an almost-polite smile, and fervently prays that Sherlock will drop the subject for the sake of both their health. “So – flatmate. Poor Molly Hooper.”

“Yes, Molly Hooper,” Sherlock says, rolling the name about on his tongue languidly, oblivious. “I think it will be an excellent experience for her.”

Q smiles faintly. “Your modesty is astounding, as ever,” he comments drily, “although I will concede that she will certainly be subjected to a lot in a short space time, knowing you…”

“Meet her?”

Instantly, Q shakes his head. Q does not exist. Q is an MI6 operative, these days, and has earned his place; the last thing he needs is more connections, when technically, he should have severed ties with Sherlock a long while ago. Mycroft has been severed for a long while already.

It is only Sherlock, for some reason. Sherlock is the exception to every rule in Q’s life. Sherlock is the being that Q cannot quite fathom losing, the one he cares about. Truly cares about.

Sherlock looks disappointed. Q doesn’t care. “Tell her I exist, and I’ll destroy you,” Q says brightly. Sherlock probably believes him. Sherlock has no reason to suspect that Q is anything other than the psychopath Mycroft dismissively labelled him, and certainly has no reason to hope or suspect that he
may have tapped into whatever sense of need and care Q possesses.

“I won’t say a word,” Sherlock says, aloof, pretending it does not bother him.

Q dips his head in gratitude, and returns his attention to his computer.

-

Moriarty is spreading.

The name is a whisper, a word nobody says, nobody dares breathe. Moriarty is known but untouchable. Criminal gangs, individuals, all seeming random, have tenuous connections to Moriarty somewhere.

Recently, Jim himself has branched out. He is a connoisseur; he hears gossip, follows the lines, joins the dots.

Spectre. The name on the tip of everybody’s tongue, the one that outstrips even him. Spectre, with strands crisscrossing every country in the world, with hundreds of operatives and thousands of operations, who Jim keeps bumping up against and skimming close to the edges of; Jim knows names, knows places, knows that there are surveillance systems and games being played on an absurdly large scale.

One day – one day soon – Jim will have to deal with them.

Currently however, Jim is working a dead-end job in St Bart’s hospital. It is for a longer game, of course: he is edging his way closer to Sherlock Holmes, because Sherlock Holmes is fascinating.

Carl Powers died, and Jim heard tell of a boy who knew it was murder. Jim has kept tabs ever since. Sherlock has been an amusement until now.

He has now started intruding.

Admittedly, Jim is rather excited about what Q will do when Jim kills his brother. Probably not be delighted. Jim isn’t sure he’ll kill Sherlock, actually, in the imminent future. Jim changes his mind approximately once every twenty minutes on this subject.

A knock on the door knocks Jim from his little reverie on how, precisely, he will kill Sherlock Holmes. He would like something elegant, he muses, as he saunters towards the door to admit Moran.

“Tiago’s back,” he says, with a shadow of pride. Tiago Rodriguez has been Moran’s project for a little while; the man has the potential to bring down a good amount of MI6, which suits Jim perfectly. Moran has been doing some groundwork to reel him in. “I was thinking…”

Jim cackles. “Honey, don’t bother. Thinking’s not your area.”

Moran has the audacity to look offended. Jim looks at him. Moran looks rather frightened.

“Better,” Jim nods appreciatively. “Now – Tiago has his own plans.” (Spectre, Jim’s head whispers) “Leave him to his own devices, hmm? I think we have other things to concern ourselves with.”

There are many aspects of the Moriarty business plan. Jim is very excited about a new possibility: there is a man who works as a cabbie, and Jim is meeting him (under an alias) to talk about a business proposition.
The man is a murderer with several to his name, but is rather unrefined. Jim reckons there is some fun to be had, a little bit of chaos and a neat distraction for the Met Police.

“… and I just… talk to them.”

Jim grins. He likes where this is going. “And what would you say?”

At this stage, the cabbie smiles. “I reckon you’ll like this. Your employer will like it.”

“My employer will be discussed at a later stage,” Jim answers, and picks at his nails; he is still in Jim-from-the-hospital mode, and it’s a decent enough alias to use in various places. Jim-from-the-hospital has manicures and impeccable personal grooming, and a gentle nondescript English accent which cannot be pinned down to any single location. “Now – what do you say?”

The old man – and he is an old man, he is dying so imminently Jim can taste it – places two identical pill bottles on the table. Jim’s grin is infectious, his heart beating with harsh regularity against his sternum, the inevitable excitement of something new. “Pick a bottle.”

The man’s accent is half impenetrable. The way he pronounces ‘bottle’ makes even Jim’s Irish-tinged sensibilities flinch. All the same, Jim is fascinated; the accent implies idiocy, but the dart of his eyes and the sparking of thought, the disillusioned anger of somebody who has been perpetually overlooked. He is palpably very, very clever.

“It’s a fifty-fifty chance,” Jim parries, still not quite seeing where this is rambling towards.

Still smiling, the cabbie pushes forward the left bottle.

Jim understands. There is the slightest of flutters in Jim’s throat. “One has poison, the other does not?”

“Yes. The best part?” the man continues, smiling with a slight suggestion of the deranged, that captivating hyper-intelligent pain. “I take the other. Whichever you pick, I don’t mind, but I’ll take the other. ‘ow bout that?”

It is a beautiful little scheme, and it’s interesting. “You’re so certain you’ll win?”

The man does not blanch. “Pick a bottle, Mr Manning.”

“Call me Jim.”

“Well – go on, Jim,” the man amends cockily, watching Jim ever so carefully. “You see – I know how people think.”

Jim holds up a hand. “Make the pitch to my employer. I’m playing the game. Shh.”

For several long minutes, Jim thinks, examines the man opposite him. This is what he is good at. The man is absolutely certain he will win, absolutely and completely, and does not hesitate in the slightest at dicing with his life. He is dying already, and has nothing to lose. He wants his children to have a better life than his own.

Jim does not care about the why. He cares about the game, this microcosmic game that will lead to a cooling corpse and a serene smile. Jim’s eloquent fingers accept the bottle furthest from him, unscrews, tips the single pill into the palm of his hand.

In this moment, Jim is not bored. He is electrically alive. The man opposite is smiling slightly as he
tips his own pill into his hand. “Shall we?” he suggests, and Jim couldn’t do anything else if he tried. This is what he lives for.

The pill is smooth and sticks slightly as he places it in his mouth. The man watches, seemingly fascinated by the enthusiasm with which Jim does so; he hesitates, and Jim grins obnoxiously.

“Did I get it right?”

The man watches him. “Bit late now, isn’t it?”

Jim raises an eyebrow. “Answer the question, now.”

“Guess we’ll see in a minute, won’t we?”

Now, Jim knows how these games work, and he knows that he doesn’t know enough. This man has thought through the statistics and how minds work. The game will work on lower intelligences, because they think in a predictably mundane manner. Jim does not think like anybody else. There is every possibility that he has bounced back through layers beyond which the man has thought of, or – also possible – this man is a dash more intelligent than he is.

(It is stupidity or arrogance, to assume that one is the most intelligent in a given collection of people. There are always the unexpected ones. They are usually the ones that will destroy you.)

Jim is not certain he is right, and he does not want to die. It would be annoying to die in such a manner. A little undignified and without any of the melodrama or fanfare he will demand when he finally extricates himself from this mortal coil.

He spits the pill out from under his tongue. “Fun,” he agrees happily. “Nice concept. I’ll have a chat, shall I?”

“Much obliged to you sir,” the man nods, looking at Jim with curious amusement. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure,” Jim says, with unusual sincerity, adrenaline still pumping through his veins in a psychedelic rush, “is all mine.”

… and if there are any problems, direct them to me, and I’ll have words,” Q finishes saying to R, who nods and disappears. Boothroyd is busy doing something or other at the mainframe computer, looking extremely pissed off at whatever is going wrong with it. Q will have a glance over in a minute; while Boothroyd is a better inventor, Q does have a way with computers.

Q-branch are still trying to track down a hard drive and a thief, with neither endeavour going nearly as well as planned. They are all still reeling a little from James Bond’s death; he was one of the seemingly immortal double-ohs, and was always friendly with Q-branch despite his pathological inability to look after equipment.

It is a fairly normal day, all in all.

The explosion rips through Q-branch.

Briefly, Q is airborne. He is not confused about this fact; understanding is immediate, even as he flies across the already half-devastated remains of the branch, sees fires spring up in his peripheral vision, the sharp buzz of electricity and the screams of those who are afraid.
Briefly, Q wonders if he is about to die.

Sod that for a game of soldiers, he decides a moment later, and remembers it is always best to protect the important things. Thus he clenches his hands into fists, tucks his arms towards his body, and curls up as much as he can before impact.

Impact is surprisingly kind. Q had expected to feel a phenomenal degree of pain – broken ribs, broken arms, broken legs, broken something - but instead, he rolls a bit, stops, and assesses the damage.

Lots and lots of bruises. Cuts. Imminent danger of burns if he doesn’t get the hell out of the branch in the imminent future. Lots of others in similar or worse states. Q leaves them to their own devices and, coughing, scouts out an exit. The doors are collapsed, half the ceiling is gone. Q works out which way is (literally) up, and starts to pick his way in that direction.

When it hits him, the light is blinding.

“Q.”

Q can’t hear properly, he realises with annoyance. The voice should not be muffled. Hands reach for him, and he bats them off, stands of his own volition and feels dizzy, nauseous, the sunlight burning his eyes. “We’re medical professionals, we...”

Vaguely, Q gestures to his ears, expression studiously unimpressed. “Can’t hear you properly.”

The medical staff exchange unsubtle panicked looks. Q rolls his eyes, and lets them take him into a quieter room – ironic – to test what in the hell has happened. 

Jim becomes the cabbie’s sponsor, as it were: each murder earns him money. It is not an isolated case. Jim has several serial killers who were delighted to make contact with the Moriarty network so their hobbies could become lucrative; the only rule is that they never speak of Moriarty.

They are also made aware that if they disappoint him – if they get caught, police get involved, any fuck-ups – they will be dead within hours.

The thing Jim doesn’t tell them is that if he gets bored, he’ll kill them. Any murders need a touch of style. They need frequency, and effort. If Jim is funding their day jobs, they had better damn well make sure they’re earning the money.

Around the same time, Jim gets in touch with two new sponsorship subjects: one is a trafficker of things both human and crystalline, while the other is just a rather sweet lady who’s been employed freelance as a cover-up artist. No blood on her hands, but she hides the evidence for whoever pays her enough.

All trickles along perfectly.

“Darling, how are you?”

His voice drips with unapologetic insincerity. Tiago – no, Raoul, tsk tsk – is just as insincere; he smirks slightly, bleached blond hair falling around his face, and dips his head in greeting as he slides sideways into the chair opposite. “And you must be Jim.”

“Delighted.”
Both grin, all teeth.

Jim *hates* him, but it is quite alright; he has the distinct impression that Raoul-Tiago-whatever has no intention of surviving long-term. The man is not a strategist, not somebody with true malice: he has vengeance, and is going to be very good at it.

Spectre has been funding Raoul Silva. Jim knows this. Jim knows that Spectre have honed his vengeance into something slick and deft, have tilted his focus onto M (an extraordinary woman; Jim has nothing but respect) and James Bond (less extraordinary, but an amusing person to watch from time to time).

Jim wonders why Spectre are so keen on dispatching James Bond. He can understand why one would eliminate M – indeed, Jim has considered doing so himself, but never quite got around to it – but James Bond is theoretically irrelevant.

Without preamble: “Show me,” Jim tells him, and it is very much an order.

The noise is somewhere between a pop and a snap. Skin sags, falls, splits, eye socket collapsing in on itself. Jim’s expression does not change; he simply wants with vague interest, extends a hand for the prosthesis itself

Small, clever, compact. Very nice workmanship. Raoul is very lucky; Spectre did a good job looking after him.

“I had your little note,” he purrs. “I like the boy, we… interact. His programmes are, *oof*, gorgeous.”

This is why Jim got in touch. Silva’s name has been whipping around various circuits; his programming and hacking work is exemplary, second to more or less none, and Jim wants to play a little bit of a game and Q just refuses to pick up the phone, so this will be Jim’s little quirk of petty malice.

Silva had not actually planned to get caught, initially. The plan, from Spectre’s perspective, was just to get M and James Bond dispatched.

The new plan involves wreaking a little bit of Q-branch havoc, just for Q, now he has finally become Quartermaster.

“You interact?” Jim replies neutrally. “Go on?”

“Naughty little hackers, all friends,” Raoul muses. “Such a clever boy. We all know each other, screen names and styles. He has a lovely flair, inventive, but very distinctive. He taught me a great deal. I taught him more.”

Jim’s smile is almost, almost not creepy. “Excellent,” he says, without intonation. “So you’ll do as you’re told?”

“To the letter,” Raoul tells him confidently. Jim wants to kill him. He wishes he were able to. Raoul is clever – genuinely clever – but Jim finds him irksome in the extreme. Jim can see the perfect line he would draw along the mark of a half-disintegrated jawline, watch it drip, extract the prosthesis and study the hollow maw of a man who should be dead. Trace the scars with a scalpel. Peel him away.

Jim kicks himself, and returns attention to business. “No connection to me.”

“None at all. Why would I give you the credit if you don’t want it?” Raoul says, with a calm laugh. “Never fear, Jim, may I call you Jim?”
He may not, but Jim grins. “Of course, Tiago.”

The smile slides from the man’s face, and Jim relishes the naked anger that sits there and festers. A lovely bit of anger. Useful and amusing. Almost a pity he will be dead shortly.

(almost)

“Lovely work on the Headquarters,” Jim acknowledges, foot rotating, the only sign of any irritation. “You should always be careful with my things, though. If you’d not been careful…”

“I’m always careful.” Raoul purrs.

Jim raises an eyebrow, smile gone, eyes fathomlessly black. “Good.”

Q is Quartermaster. James Bond is not dead.

Altogether, events move rather quickly in a very short space of time. Q has been working as de facto Quartermaster for a while – he was Boothroyd’s second in command, with Boothroyd no longer really able to handle active missions or more complex weaponry and thus acting as mere stage manager – and now, with Boothroyd dead, Q is in charge.

It is not a stressful venture. It is a natural development.

Some of the older agents are less than delighted, of course. Q is very young, especially compared to the prehistoric figure of Boothroyd.

Given the circumstances, there had been few options.

Q’s hearing was blown. Now, he wears little earbuds, lovely things that slide into the shell of his ear, unnoticed. His balance will be sketchy for a little while. Very irritating.

“Q?”

Gratifyingly, Sherlock sounds worried. “I’m alive,” Q replies calmly, fingers dancing over a keyboard. “I assume you finally heard? It was three days ago, you realise.”

“I was busy. Molly threw me out.”

Q kicks back from the keyboard and laughs, sharp and horrid. “Of course she did. You lasted, what, a week?”

“… five days.”

Another laugh; R looks at him with open amusement from across his workshop, and he shrugs, grinning at her mimed offering of tea and miming his own gesture of prayer and thanks while Sherlock bleats in his ear.

It feels very human, very normal. Q has friends and colleagues, goes out for drinks sometimes and plays at normality with increasing degrees of dexterity.

“… and I have a new flatmate…”

“… who now?!” Q asks, genuinely alarmed at who Sherlock has plucked off the streets this time. “And how? You’re…”
“Mike Stanforth, Stanford, that one,” Sherlock muses. “I conducted an intriguing experiment on the bruise formation created post-mortem, a man’s alibi depe-”

“The Camden case?” Q asks, with a pique of interest. “Yes, I was looking at that one. Did the alibi check out?”

Sherlock affirms it smugly, and Q feels a prickle of uncertainty in the base of his stomach. It was one of Jim’s, or at least, one of his employees or associates or proxies or whatever he calls them. Those he sponsors, those who seek him out.

Jim is getting sloppy. Sherlock is clever. He needs to be careful.

“So. Flatmate,” Q continues; he hears a small explosion from behind him, and turns around to give a condescending glare to the minion in question (she looks vaguely chastened, before grinning wildly, hands up in a sooty surrender that Q can’t help but snort at), and abruptly Q realises the obvious: “You don’t even have a flat to share, Sherlock, even Mycroft…”

“… Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock cuts in, and Q understands: Mrs Hudson, a lovely old dear with an odd past, whose abusive husband was executed in Florida with Sherlock’s assistance on one of the few times Sherlock has bothered to leave the UK. Q dreads to think how much carnage he would unleash if he ever was let loose on the world at large.

“That means Baker Street, then,” Q notes wearily, hating Sherlock a little. “You’re a lucky fuck, you realise?”

“Yes, I do.”

An anonymous little message flashes up and vanishes again on Q’s screen. Plug the laptop into the MI6 mainframe. Xxx

It is Jim. Q knows that, and it sends a spasm of want through him: it has been so long since that life, and Q is a different person.

“I have to go,” Q tells Sherlock abruptly, and hangs up.

R delivers the cup of tea. Q thinks.

At least for now. Q has no clue what it is in relation to; in lieu of anything else, and with work to do, he sighs slightly, shrugs on a mac against the weather, and ambles to the National Gallery.

It has been a very long time since Q indulged in art. It was always Jim’s area; Jim knew music and art and theatre like nobody Q knew before or since. Sherlock is a beautiful violinist, and he knows music, but Jim felt it.

Q reminisces about an evening Jim dragged him (reluctantly) to an orchestral concert, Q forgets the composer or orchestra or pieces.

Instead, he remembers the fear of recognition: Big Brother is watching, and Q had ever been wary of being found again. Q must remain a ghost, and concerts are not a part of the brief.

Jim had looked truly, utterly beautiful. Jim infected his brain with so many thoughts, finding anything to stop the boredom, and it is funny to realise that this stops the boredom. If Jim had the patience or resources as a child, he may have been the most extraordinary musician. Another life, perhaps.

Now, the thoughts dissipate, and Jim looks like he has found freedom in something a million miles
away. His body moves with the swell and fall of waves Q cannot ride, his spirit sings with a clarinet and flute, a cello, heart beating in time with drumming.

It was the closest Q had come to falling in love with Jim Moriarty. The memory is bittersweet.

Q closes it off, and continues to meander through the gallery. Double-oh seven has arrived – Q briefly spotted him – but Q is busy dissecting the brushstrokes of paintings that make him feel nothing but think in new colours. Jim taught him that.

It makes Q utterly livid that a single message from a long-forgotten age can pollute him like this.

In any case, James Bond. The man survives everything. Q is rather enamoured of immortality.

Bond is handsome, and quick, and sceptical. That will fade soon enough. He hears Bond’s muttered brave new world as he leaves, and smiles.

The man has no idea.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading - more soon! Jen.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Plug the laptop into the mainframe.*

Jim’s words finally make sense, and there are options. Q can be ridded of the man again, leave the spectre to do what it will, and forget. Q booked a session with the therapist who helped him calm the screaming, the invasive thoughts, *Jim*, and knows he can expunge the demon if he tries hard enough.

The laptop sits. If Q does what Jim wants, Jim will never go.

He shouldn’t.

He does, all the same.

*not such a clever boy*, and Q curses the world and everything in it because this is *his territory*, somebody has come into *his* domain and shat all over it, and Jim cackles in Q’s ear.

Q hopes to high heaven that he won’t get fired over this.

- “M and Silva are dead.”

Jim doesn’t look up. “Yes, the news came through two hours ago,” he drawls, bored. “You’re late. Tut tut.”

Moran intelligently deigns not to answer. Instead, he moves silently to Jim’s side, reading the screen over his shoulder; Jim doesn’t mind. Moran will be involved in this particular venture shortly.

The Chinese business is lucrative, but dispensable; he has another, more efficient, operation being constructed. The Black Lotus silliness was vaguely diverting, but no longer novel enough. Onto bigger and better things, and Moran will be needed to dispatch the self-appointed ‘General’ when it all goes under. They’re taking a whole circus to the UK, for the love of god, they don’t have much life left in them.

“Van Coon? What’s the problem?”

Jim rolls his eyes. This. *This* is why he doesn’t like Moran talking. “Don’t talk.”

Moran dutifully shuts up. The silence rushes to greet Jim, a wave that he knows how to ride now, filling the vastness of his brain with little riddles and little games, a honeytrap for the great Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock makes him less bored, and even Q couldn’t do that. Q didn’t understand or value the art of deduction. He didn’t *see*.

Sherlock Holmes sees a world like Jim’s, and never in his *life* has Jim wanted so badly to play.

Indeed: a blog update. Recognising different forms of tobacco ash. Jim is delighted to see things he didn’t know before. Sherlock teaches him, without realising, Jim closing his nets tighter and tighter with the man waltzing straight inside.
“Why is he of importance?”

Moran is finally asking the right questions, Jim muses, as he glances at the papers Moran had been looking over. Doctor John Watson’s face sits in a neat thumbnail, his CV, his history, his papers. Jim learnt from Q too, after all, and this had forever been Q’s speciality. Sometimes, Jim wonders if there is a single thing documented that Q does not know, or could not find within a half-hour.

Jim knows Q is still his, at least a little. Q risked his job and destroyed his integrity because Jim sent him a message. There is still something there that belongs to Jim Moriarty, just as parts of Jim belong to Q.

For now, it does not matter.

“Good,” Jim nods at Moran, fingers stroking Doctor Watson’s face. A very straightforward face. Trustworthy, even. Flat and predictable. Wrinkles from frowns and laughs, caring little for physical appearance beyond cleanliness and accustomed military strictures, the crease of an eye staring too-long through gun sights – Moran has the same, more pronounced – and a smile that is coaxed but genuine.

Jim hasn’t the faintest idea what Sherlock is doing with a man like John Watson, but he intends to find out. “They’re living together.”

“Holmes?” Moran confirms, and Jim nods lazily. “He’s of interest, then. Noted.”

“Massage.”

Moran blinks. “Sorry?”

“Massage,” Jim drawls, in an intentionally obnoxious mockery of an English accent. “Yes?”

Apparently, the concept is so bizarre Moran doesn’t actually bother to question it. Either that, or he has learnt to do as he’s told, and not question. Jim suspects the former, if only because the latter would imply that Moran has broken a bit. If he had, Jim would have dispatched him by now.

Broken people are very, very boring.

Instead, Jim purrs filthily as Moran starts to knead out the knots of hours of work, of research, contacting and writing and speaking and organising, all of which remains predominantly in the caverns of Jim’s intellect. Moran focuses on the body, and Jim keeps his brain from atrophying.

“Come with me tomorrow,” Jim tells Moran, and it is not a question. Moran does not acknowledge it. “Bring the pretty Glock.”

Moran smiles, unseen; Jim has very certain opinions about the aesthetic value of his various pieces of weaponry, resulting in a temper tantrum over the ‘ungainly’ Glock versus the ‘pretty’ one. Moran lets him do what he likes, and does not use the ‘ungainly’ (but better weighted) Glock in Jim’s company.

Numbers and letters flicker over the screen. Jim filters the useless and logs the useful.

There is ever so much to do.

- 

Q has an utterly horrible few days. He guides James Bond through the Tube, half the Underground gets trashed and is promptly shut down, the traffic through London becomes impossible, and the
economy gets a bit buggered because nobody can get into work and/or are terrified of another terrorist attack.

Personally, Q just finds it fairly amusing how many terrorist cells across the world desperately try to take the credit in the aftermath. The cleanup on the Underground is not Q’s problem, Silva is, and so he lets the world tick on and moves into Q-branch given that he cannot be arsed to try and negotiate with the world outside.

M dies.

Q feels nothing, and hadn’t expected to.

James Bond does not die.

Q feels a surge of relief.

The fact of feeling something, anything, causes such shock that he doesn’t move, not a finger twitch, for three silent minutes while his head computes the rush of something that has affected his brain.

Bond is definitely attractive, Q knows that much, and there is an aesthetic interest. Probably sexual; Q has never felt a romantic attraction to another human being in his life, and he tremendously doubts that he will for a man with the emotional repertoire of a broken bassoon.

In any case, it is far too early to tell. The kneejerk emotional response is probably nothing, just an obvious case of not needing to replace a double-oh since one of their best is not, in fact, dead.

He calls Bond’s mobile phone. No answer. Not surprising.

Bond returns to MI6 two days later, and nobody has the faintest idea where he’s been bar Q, who kept an eye – he has no interest in interfering, merely monitoring for damage control – and immediately reports to Mallory (M, Q tells himself. It’s M now).

There will be an investigation. Neither Bond nor Q nor anybody involved will be fired; Silva was outside anybody’s control, would have taken down M regardless of intervention or stalling of his plans. Silva had never intended to survive.

On Q’s part, he simply regrets plugging in the laptop. It was a damned stupid thing to have done, but he was under strain. The psych team will evaluate and deem him fit for work, which is what matters. If they suspect that Q is ‘relapsing’, they will not allow him close.

Nobody actually knows what Q is, however, which rather prohibits anybody realising that he is no longer sane(ish). Q is a sociopath. Q is autistic. Q is dissociative. Q is frightening. Q is narcissistic.

Q is something, but nobody can work out what. Jury’s out, everybody has a different opinion and diagnosis and theory, but Q doesn’t honestly care as long as he has the pills and the coping strategies and safeguards put in place.

(One of those safeguards involves a protocol of what Q will do if Jim ever comes back. Q is conveniently planning to ignore said safeguard).

Options concerning Jim:

One – Ignore. Not very possible, given that Q cannot seem to get the man out of his head.

Two – Locate and monitor. Possible, but risks Jim realising and retaliating. Jim evidently has links
that spread further than Q knows, unsurprisingly. One attack on MI6 was quite enough.

Three – Locate and confront. Possible, but suicidal. Jim is unstable, as is Q, at least for now. No point in causing undue harm to self or others. Not to mention risk of being shot on sight.

Four – Speak to higher powers. Which means Mycroft. Not a hope in hell.

“Q?”

Bond’s voice cuts into Q’s considerations, slices through his brain painfully. “Yes, double-oh seven?” he returns drily. “Can I help you with something?”

“Why did you help, when you knew you would be destroying your career?”

Q’s smile is a small, wry thing. “I could ask the same of you,” he points out. “Many are postulating that it is your fault M died.”

There is not even a flicker that crosses Bond’s face, and Q adores him for that: it is not merely stoicism. James Bond is not stoic; he understands the situation entirely, understands that his actions were valid and decisions sound – although reckless and impulsive – and he would do the same again.

M is dead. No amount of investigation will change that. The rest is simply red tape.

“I assume it is too much to hope for that any equipment has wended its way home?” Q asks, already knowing the answer; Bond just smiles almost imperceptibly. “At least you are consistent. I am not going to be as merciful as my predecessor, however; wanton destruction will cause direct repercussions to your salary, living conditions, and internet speed.”

Bond’s smile breaks out. “The latter isn’t really a threat.”

Q raises an eyebrow. “You are a dinosaur concerning technology, but do not lie to me; given the nature of content you attempt to access on a frequent basis, you will quite definitely be affected by internet speeds.”

“My, my, Quartermaster, what are you suggesting?”

“I was not merely suggesting, Bond, I was explicitly referencing,” Q replied, and there is no noise. His head is quiet, and all is James Bond, and a smile he could very contentedly look at indefinitely.

Bond looks at him without reverence. Bond looks at him without fear. Bond looks at him without condescension. For all his jokes, Bond does not care a whit about Q’s age, as long as he gets the job done. Their conversation comes easily.

In short: Bond knows he is clever, and Q has nothing whatsoever to prove. Everybody in the world has an opinion, when it comes to clever people; there is a judgement made, positive or otherwise, and it then becomes a game to meet expectations or contradict assumptions, and that particular game never ends.

The last person who knew Q was clever – without provisos or questions or disbelief or condescension or fear or anger or reverence or anything, just took it at face value and didn’t care - was Jim.

Never in his life did Q imagine that somebody like James Bond could ever share anything, even in passing, with Jim Moriarty.
“Until next time, Quartermaster,” Bond smirks, and saunters away from the branch, not looking back.

- 

“We lost the cabbie.”

In an instant, Jim’s contented musing evaporates. “What?” he hisses, and slams Moran against the wall, kicks the door shut with his foot, the bang echoing through the flat. Jim’s hands are tight around Moran’s throat. “How?”

“Holmes,” Moran rasps.

Jim lets him go. Moran takes a second, wheezing very slightly but otherwise unperturbed. Jim has done worse; there is a still-pink scar in his stomach, a missing toe, a bruised rib. He cannot leave. He simply weather whatever storms Jim screams.

Moran watches Jim as he smiles, hoists up his jeans – the hospital job is getting to him, the ‘Jim-from-the-hospital’ persona taking over a little. It is a perfect illusion. Jim has spotted Sherlock from the other side of the cafeteria, outside the building, kept eyes. He knows that Molly Hooper is hopelessly in love with the man (although could not abide living with him; unsurprising). He knows that Sherlock will be deeply uncomfortable if, when this all implodes, he realises that Jim can and will find everybody around him to destroy, if he must.

Jim falls dramatically into his armchair, pouting a little. “Wire the money out to his kiddies,” he sighs. “We have a problem, Sebby.”

“What’s the plan?”

Jim looks at him, the void of his pupils swallowing Moran whole. “We will have to see,” he murmurs, the sensuality of a snake. “Leave him for now, let him have his fun. Doctor Watson?”

“Pulled the trigger.”

Comically, Jim’s jaw drops, caricature. “Well,” he enthuses, tipping his head to one side, seeing images and words and ideas that Moran will never come even close to accessing. Jim’s chaos. “Isn’t that interesting.”

Moran stands, watching.

“What are you still doing here?” Jim asks lightly.

Moran looks rather lost for a moment, confused, and the stupidity in comparison to the excitement of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson (and Q Holmes, shh) is mind-numbing. Not for the first time, Jim wonders if he should kill Moran now, or whether that would be considered bad form.

“GET OUT,” he shrieks instead, before he does something he’ll regret.

Not that he’ll regret killing Moran, per se, but it will be a bugger trying to find somebody else who’s on top of the paperwork. Jim hates paperwork, always did, which is why he had Q, only Q was so much better than Moran.

Jim sighs elaborately. “I’m coming to get you,” he sings under his breath, as his vision swims with images of Sherlock Holmes, and he starts to think about how to play, how would be the best way to play this game.
“Molly?” he says into the phone, listens to the insistent squeak of the girl and rolls his eyes, restraining the urge to commit immediate homicide. Sherlock might even thank him. “Yeah, I just wanted to ask – d’you want to get a drink sometime?”

The timing is perfect: in the aftermath of Sherlock, a replacement – somebody to take her mind off things, make her feel wanted, all the rest of it – presents himself and fulfils the brief she does not consciously realise she has.

She bleats. Jim grimaces, and smiles and agrees and books a time and pencils it in mentally with a reminder that he is not to miss this appointment, regardless of the tedium. He also ensures that Moran won’t be busy afterwards, because god knows Jim’ll need something to help him recover.

“Sebby, where the fuck are you?” he asks, his Irish accent more pronounced than usual when he swears.

Moran bleats. Jim vaguely remembers that he chucked Moran out of the apartment about an hour or so ago.

Oops.

A knock on the door slides Jim away from his little reverie.

(Moran leaves with bites peppering his inner thighs, the sharp glide of a knife tracing a slim line across his inner forearm, post-orgasmic and wondering if there is anywhere left in the world that is far enough away to run from Moriarty).

- 

“Does this constitute a date?” Bond asks, as he pours Q another glass of wine.

Q laughs, drinks, shrugs, smiles. “I suppose so, yes,” he returns playfully. “Good god, Bond, you’re a terrible influence.”

“Never claimed otherwise,” Bond smirks, looking frustratingly smug; he had been flirting ceaselessly before Q finally acceded to a date, and now here he was, a bottle and a half of wine down having had a genuinely, unapologetically wonderful evening with the last person he would have once anticipated. “I’ll pay.”

“My salary’s better, I’m paying.”

“Ah, but my chivalry complex is more established than yours, so I’m paying,” Bond returns, eliciting a surprised laugh from Q. “You look beautiful when you laugh.”

Q winces. “Eww. No. Don’t be sentimental, it’s weird.”

Bond raises an eyebrow, sips more wine. 2001 St Emillion; Mycroft’s favourite wine, and Q hates to admit it but the man has very good taste.

Thinking about his eldest brother probably isn’t good on a date, so Q knocks the age-old Mycroft adage of sentiment is a chemical defect out of his head, and tries very hard to replace Mycroft’s dysfunctional teachings with that of his therapist.

“Am I not allowed to be sentimental at all?”

A smaller smile. Probably reads as shy. It isn’t. Q simply doesn’t know how to respond. You cannot
try to control the nuances of everybody in the world – if they want to do something you consider pointless, that is their prerogative.

“If you like.”

Bond’s grin is genuine and sparkling, and Q can’t help but reciprocate, vaguely wondering just how much of a bad influence Bond is – or will be – on his life.

It is really, really nice to have something so deliciously normal. With Jim, Q never left their flat. Therapy, Q never left his flat. Quartermaster, Q never left Q-branch.

“… so where did you learn everything you do?” Bond is asking. Q’s attention meandering away and back again with the gentle coaxing of fine wine. “I’m guessing university isn’t the place to learn to programme guns and weaponry…”

“Not as such,” Q agrees easily, and briefly flirts with telling Bond the truth. Then decides he shall. “I was brought up in a rich family with a lot of resources – my father taught me to shoot, and I taught myself how to make the gun more efficient. Computing has always been something that makes instinctive sense to me; that was hardly a stretch.”

Bond watches with a slight smile. “Rumour has it you’re the best shot in MI6.”

“I am,” Q replies, without defence or hyperbole. Q knows he is. Perhaps not the very best, true, but in a world of assassins and perfect marksmen it is vital to be one of the impeccable few. Q knows how to shoot, he makes and improves weaponry for a living. He is an excellent archer, too.

(Q also knows how to vivisect a human being. The decibels of scream and the requisite soundproofing. Injections that leave needle-point holes that will never be found. The parts of body armour easily overlooked and under-protected. The frailties and strengths have been witnessed in person, and it makes everything he does effective).

“Show me.”

It is fair to say Q has developed something of a hatred for that imperative. “No.”

“I…”

“If you ever see it, it’ll be for a reason,” Q replies calmly. “Now get back to flirting, you were doing well before you started asking uncomfortable questions.”

Bond laughs, does as he’s told, and Q feels the tension drain from his body in minute fractions, heartbeat by heartbeat.

Jim is humming, and is playing with a bright pink smartphone. Very bright pink. It is slightly nauseating. On screen, Moran can read the names of Korean businessmen and politicians; Jim has been insinuating that there’s likely to be an election in three months’ time or so, and thus he is keeping a careful eye.

“Go plant it,” Jim drawls, sealing the phone into an envelope with perfect calligraphy – he’s copying their art friend Mrs Wenceslas, her eloquently curled lettering – and handing it into Moran’s gloved hand. “Set the explosives up while you’re there, I don’t want them going off until the Vermeer’s installed, though, yes?”
“Yes,” Moran answers. Simple answers are usually best.

Jim sighs.

They are so very close, it is \textit{so close} to beginning; soon, he will have a dance partner, and they will waltz, and the Holmes brother that deserves it will know exactly who he is and why he is there.

For a little while, at least, Jim will not be bored.

The computer pings merrily. Jim glances at the message; eyes closed, he lets the letters print against his retinas, and smiles so faintly it is almost transcendent.

Moran doesn’t ask. He values his spleen.

“I’m being watched,” Jim murmurs, his voice a light hum, rendering questions unnecessary. Soft and melodic, an eerie sing-song: “Tick tock, start the clock, catch me if you can.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading - I’m honoured at the reception this fic is getting!
Update will occur soon. Jen.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

At last, a reunion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Fucking sodding hell Jim, you unmitigated little wanker.”

Bond looks up with bleary confusion, blinking exhaustion away; the Penang mission had only been a short in-and-out trip, but Bond hadn’t slept for the duration and the jetlag was unpleasant, to say the least.

Not to mention that Bond and Q had slept together for the first time the previous night, in what was probably one of their least well-advised but most enjoyable extracurricular activities in a long while.

“… v’rythin okay?”

It has to be said: Bond is rather endearing when mostly asleep.

Q doesn’t care for endearing at the best of times, and certainly not when Jim has blown up half of Baker Street, kidnapped a Q-branch minion and is sending various bits of her back to HQ in small beribboned boxes, installed the Golem on UK soil again, and is partially if not entirely responsible for the cockup with Agent Severn two days previously.

This goes beyond the realms of a cheeky message on a computer screen, and right slap bang into I’m going to destroy everything you love level of Jim-related sadism; if Q didn’t know better, he would safely assume that Jim is trying to get his attention.

The only thing is, if Jim wants attention, he can send a bloody email.

“What’s happened?”

“Shut up,” Q snaps. “Busy. Go make me tea.”

Bond’s raised eyebrow can be sensed from the next room. “Good morning to you too.”

Q glances up, expression riddled with acerbity. “I enjoyed last night tremendously, and would like the situation to repeat itself. I like you, and we appear to get on well both mentally and physically. Do not act like a kicked puppy because I didn’t cuddle you in the morning, I’m not the type, and while you’ve been attempting to turtle-shell me for the last eight hours, various forms of chaos have presented themselves and I am now busy. Tea. Please.”

Bond laughs. “You are an absolute little shit.”

“So I’ve been told,” Q retorts, returning Bond’s smile, the cruelty in his voice just about tempered. “Pretty please?”
Bond stands, his body sculpted perfectly in the half-light; all Q can see is scars, bruises, marks, colours. The print of a mouth across his shoulder, the gunshot, the torture, the beatings, the bruises, the fall from a two-storey window three days ago and the caress of false nails from the woman he lied to.

Last night, Bond had asked whether Q minded that he slept with other people. Whether it would be a problem.

“You sleep with people because I tell you to; can we agree that whatever this relationship is probably isn’t normal?”

“You’re incapable of normal, aren’t you, Quartermaster?”

“Clinically.”

So Q doesn’t mind that the bruises are not from him, the kisses that stain Bond’s lips are not, nor will ever be Q’s; Q doesn’t stain.

“Earl Grey?”

“English Breakfast,” Q corrects, shooing Bond out of the door to return attention to his work, eyebrows crumpling together to examine the screens and work why in the name of all things unholy Jim fucking Moriarty is back.

-  

Jim is devastatingly disappointed by what has become of Q.

Once upon a time, Q was exciting. No surname, no past, very little present (barring a traumatised drug dealer) and no interest in the future. It suited Jim to a T; Jim himself had (and has) no interest in a future. Jim dices and plays and fiddles with death on a daily basis. It’s fun.

Q, though. He is not fun any more. Q is ordinary. Good little boy with a good little job and a good little future and a good little life.

Jim can’t imagine how Q can stand it. Q hated the mundane, and truly loathed knowing what he would be doing every single day. Perhaps now Q consoles himself that it is erratic in some regards and dangerous in some regards and that is enough, but it isn’t. Jim knows it isn’t.

Maybe Q would benefit from some re-education.

“Kidnap James Bond for me, darlin’,” Jim tells Moran, as the other man empties himself into Jim’s arse. “Don’t do too much damage. All appendages attached. I just want him available.”

Moran doesn’t respond. Jim kicks him. “Fuck off, Jim, I’ve just fucked you and I’m buzzed – need a moment,” he says, with a surprising amount of attitude; Moran’s been getting more verbal lately, more interesting, perhaps aware that if he’s going to die a painful death he may as well enjoy himself on the way.

Really, Jim had rather hoped he would reach this stage.

“Alright – run that by me again?”

“Kidnap James Bond.”

Moran looks at Jim for a long moment, and blinks. “You’re fucking kidding me.”
“Language,” Jim chastises, tsiking. “By the end of next week. The game will be over by then.”

“No. I get until the end of the month. Bond may be old for this game, but he’s extremely good at what he does. It can’t be that urgent.”

Jim wrinkles his nose slightly, petulant. “Fine,” he whines. “But make it a *stylish* kidnapping, and remember that MI6 will be sent off to find him. Clean, efficient, no traces.”

“Obviously,” Moran replies flippantly, and stands fluidly, reaching for his underwear. “I’m assuming you still want the Baker Street detonation this evening?”

Jim shivers luxuriously, still sprawled naked in the bedsheets. “Mmn. Remember: no deaths this time.”

Moran smiles, very slightly, and nods crisply before exiting.

- 

Q cannot get in touch with Sherlock for the life of him. Presumably screening his calls. He has not even deigned to respond to a text message from Q, attempting to establish whether he died in the Baker Street explosion.

He is sincerely unimpressed with Sherlock’s escapades. Jim is playing games, palpably, and Q cannot help but be nervous. So much so, in fact, that he does the one thing he detests doing most on earth: calling Mycroft.

“Brother dear, what a delightful surprise.”

“Is Sherlock dead?”

Mycroft pauses for a heartbeat, and Q can almost see the melodramatic eye roll. “Your talent for niceties has yet to improve, I see,” he comments lightly, “but in any case: no. Sherlock is alive and quite the same as he ever is. In fact, the abominable screeching you may hear behind me is his doing.”

Q smirks despite himself. Sherlock has ever been an obnoxious bastard, especially where the damned violin is concerned. “Excellent. Tell him to answer his phone, in future. Goodbye.”

Before Mycroft is able to get another word in, Q hangs up with no small degree of satisfaction. There are few people Q hates more in this world than his eldest brother.

Jim is up to something, and knowing Jim, it will be fairly monumental. Q will protect Sherlock, always, and Sherlock is not going to beat Jim Moriarty on his own. The pair are intellectually perfectly, beautifully balanced; Q knows that, of course he knows that, in the same way he knows that both of them outweigh him in base intelligence.

Base intelligence, however, does not make a tremendous amount of difference. Q’s world is unlike any other, when the screaming creeps back and the noise is impossible and the boredom eats him alive, his world is the screaming, drowned out by the gentle pop of an eye being coaxed out of its socket, the squelch of body and flesh, the slight creaking of bone against bone; he misses that quiet, he always has and always will.

Q does not take his medication any more. It makes no difference that the screaming is coming back, because Jim *is* the screaming – raw chaos, naked, cruel, exquisite – and Jim cannot be fought by somebody normal. He can be sparred with, as Jim and Sherlock do, but that is playful, the dance of
two lovers; Q is going to war, and the screaming is deafening.

This was a perfect inevitability. It is so nice to finally have the excuse.

Bond will worry, and Q will miss some aspects of being ‘sane’. A job and a life and it was enough, it was enough to make him perfectly content.

Now, the screaming makes every nerve sing, every heartbeat pump acid, colours so bright too bright so beautiful, light and sound and touch, cotton fibres and synthetic additives, the scratch of a label the caress of a button the bite of a shoe on the edge of the middle toe, Q can see again.

There is no contentment, no safety. It is loud and it hurts.

Q is not happy. It will only get worse, spiral, crash. The carvings on his arms will blossom, people will die, Q will watch and control that edge of life and death and possibility; Q never killed back then, but he was always possibility and potential, the finality of it all was Jim’s speciality.

Jim was, and is, so very beautiful.

It will not be long before the screaming drowns out everything. Control is imperative. There are many strands to this problem, and the importance is in the ending; Jim is a director, not a stage manager. It was forever thus. He has exquisite ideas and makes his puppets dance to unheard tunes.

Q manipulates, organises, and disappears.

Finally, finally, Q is alive.

“Could you run the CCTV around Baker Street?” Sherlock asks.

Q can only smile. Sherlock is ignoring Mycroft’s latest edict and working on something new of his own – which is nice, Q is getting exceptionally bored of having to call off the police every time Sherlock has no cases – and even needs Q’s help. He feels loved. Which is a little nauseating, but he’ll go with it.

“How far?”

“Until you see somebody break into 221, presumably with a bag,” Sherlock replies, his voice a low drawl. “And before you pull the ‘I don’t monitor your front door’, I am aware and even intermittently grateful for the surveillance you insistently place. Far less conspicuous than Mycroft.”

Sibling rivalry. The best way to any siblinged-person’s heart. “On it as we speak. Dare I ask what for?”

Sherlock sighs, but it is the sigh of excitement, of anticipation and want. It is the sound Sherlock would probably make if he was ever to wind up in bed with some unfortunate soul; but he will not. Sherlock will always make this noise for his work and his excitement.

Q wonders what that makes him in this equation, and dismisses the thought abruptly.

“...broke into 221C and has planted a pair of trainers for my analysis,” Sherlock is explaining, as Q abandons his previous project to focus on the CCTV in and around Sherlock’s portion of Baker Street. “I am on my way to St Barts, naturally. Do not worry yourself seeking out the hostage, it is probably a pointless venture…”

“I can look through the phone logs if you…”
“It will spoil the game.”

A moment of pause. Sherlock does so love to play his games, and far be it for Q to interrupt; he deserves his time to have fun, to play, and Q does not doubt that Sherlock will restrict the number of human lives lost. Lives end perpetually; if this one ends, the least it will do is bring Sherlock back a little more. Balance the scales.

(His therapist would have a field day with this train of thought. Q smiles without humour).

“Duly noted. So the game is…?”

“Solve the puzzle,” Sherlock replies shortly. “That’s it. Solve it, the hostage is released, the next stage begins. The show has begun, Q, and it is just as intoxicating as I had hoped. This movement, this act, has been waiting for me, ticking on the edges on my encounters…”

Q tunes him out. Sherlock monologues. He monologues delectably well, but Q is not a poet and has no time for his nonsense. Jim was the same; beautiful words in beautiful patterns, eloquent and effusive.

Jim.

Trainners.

Sherlock babbles, and Q understands, as he finds the relevant CCTV footage: a car pulls up to Baker Street, and Jim slides out. The datestamp reads three weeks previously. He looks a little podgier than Q remembers, but the nonexistence of his smile and the utter blackness in his eyes is everything.

As Q watches, Jim smiles at the sky. He does not find the correct CCTV camera. He smiles at the sky, and the light in his eyes is all Q’s.

“… found anything?” Sherlock asks, as Jim slips a Yale key into the lock and twists himself inside.

“No,” Q says, without inflexion, reaching for his phone.

-  

“Hello?”

“Jim, you are an absolute wanker.”

“… I missed you too.”

-  

Jim’s shit-eating grin is well and truly placed and intact as Q ambles in his direction.

They are in a Starbucks. Q hates Starbucks. The tea is not up to scratch. Jim loves it, because the strawberries and cream Frappucino with an extra shot of strawberry makes him see stars and hallucinate in sugar spirals, and for a business meeting of this ilk he needs minor hallucinations.

“You…”

“Yep,” Jim says brightly, extending the frap in Q’s direction; he makes a small face, ignores it. “How’ve you been?”

Q walks straight past him to the bar, orders a double espresso – one of those sorts of days, and if
nothing else, Starbucks do relatively good coffee – and returns a few minutes later with Jim slurping noisily on his now-empty cup.

“You look like shit.”

“I’m undercover,” Jim says laboriously, licking his lips obscenely; he darts a glance to the nearest barista, his eyes turn fathomless, and he clicks at her. She looks dutifully terrified, and scuttles to make him another. Jim’s eyes trace her all the way.

He looks back to Q once the second hit of strawberry has been administered. “And I just saw your big brother, wouldn’t you know it? I’m working in Barts these days. Nine to five. Three days a week. I have a job. Boring. So boring. But: I met him. Sherlock Holmes. The great Sherlock Holmes.”

Q rolls his eyes. “Enough histrionics. Why are you going after Sherlock?”

Jim ignores him steadfastly. “And you’ve gone domestic, sweetheart. I’m disappointed,” he murmurs, the softness deeply unnerving.

“Thought you might be,” Q conceded, downing the espresso in one smooth motion.

Jim watches. Q cannot contain the slight grimace at the bitterness of it.

Both laugh at his face, and it is a strangely lovely thing, a familiar and almost warm thing. Q watches him watch him; so many years have passed, so many endlessly tired years.

Jim shuffles around the table, and leans in, kissing him with a perfect tenderness. Soft lips, the cataleptic sweetness and sting of acrid espresso, the suggestion of a smile without any touch of malice; Jim’s fingers trail over his face, Q’s knuckles split white as he pulls Jim tensely close, Jim’s careful rake across his skull with the warmth of pain as the nails scrape, just slightly.

They are still surgically attached to one another when the barista comes over with the drink, still looking terrified out of her wits and rightly so. “Thank you, sweetie,” Jim smiles, and fuck, but he is gorgeous when intimidating. It is so rare to find somebody so frightening it makes the whole body and soul revolt through sheer terror.

“So tell me. MI6?”

“You broke into my brother’s flat,” Q stated mercilessly. “Why, pray tell?”

Jim’s smile is disconnected. Sherlock is a very long way from his mind, in this moment. “Did you know I was planning to kidnap your new man?”

Q’s eyebrows furrow, relax. One quirks upwards. “What for?”

“Fun. You’ve gotten boring, my love. I wanted to shake you up a bit, you understand,” Jim purred, reaching out to place a hand over Q’s. “What happened to you?”

“Not here. Come.”

Jim, as he always has and always will, follows without hesitation.

- They sit in Q’s living room. The Quartermaster of MI6 and a known criminal mastermind.
“I don’t have long,” Jim tells him brightly. “Met your big brother, and he isn’t far now, he’s working it out.”

Q sighs. “You’re expecting him to work out that you killed Carl Powers, based on the shoes, correct?”

“He noticed. He noticed the shoes. I noticed him.” Jim says, and looks deliriously excited; abruptly, his expression snaps into something not even faintly benign. “You lied to me.”

A small snort. “Never lied. Avoided the truth, certainly, but I’ll thank you not to accuse me of lying. I never told you my name, because I do not want to be associated with them. Sherlock is my brother by blood, and I take care of his interests, but I will not willingly ally myself with the Holmes clan.”

“Sherlock was always going to be mine,” Jim muses. “I was always going to find him in the end, the game had to begin. I met him.”

Q’s spine rolls with instinctive distrust. “Go on?”

“Don’t look spooked. I flirted.”

A sharp, genuine laugh. “How did he take it?” Q asks, grinning. “Sherlock doesn’t do flirting, he has no idea how to do…”

“… people?” Jim asks, in perfect unison with Q. “But he’s fascinating, my Sherlock Holmes, all mine…”

The note of true insanity is half-familiar, but perhaps a little bit more so than Q remembers. The repetition, the manic desperation that lives behind Jim’s expression, in the chasms somewhere in his brain that Q had no interest in reaching, for fear of what he would find; Jim has gone downhill where Q has recovered.

Only, the more he looks at Jim, the less Q feels like a success story. Jim has a world, a construct he is the king of, and he is never ever bored, because the next game will begin, the next curtain will rise.

Is rising, in fact.

“I need your help.”

Q is so shocked at the admission that he genuinely gapes. “… go on?” he asks, very warily, trying not to think about the fact that he really shouldn’t be assisting a known terrorist but can’t bring himself to mind unduly.

“I need to infiltrate the British Secret Service so I can infiltrate the largest criminal organisation in the world and infiltrate their systems so I can hijack communications and transmissions from every major intelligence agency in the developed world.”

“… run that by me again?”

A beautiful, perfect showman.

Jim smiles. “Play a game with me?”

Q, as he always has been and always will be, is powerless to resist.
Thank you, as ever - I love reading any comments and thoughts!! Jen.
My apologies for how long I've taken to update - real life intervened somewhat, and I've finally managed to return attention to the things I enjoy (IE: I AM WRITING AGAIN WOOP!).

Thank you all for your patience, and I hope you enjoy it. Jen.

There is the question why. Q loves his job.

There is a difference between a domestic love and a passionate love affair. The former is how one lives. The latter is why.

Q will never stop being Quartermaster of MI6. It supplies him with an excellent job, a salary, a flat, a boyfriend. Jim or not, sane or not, Q values it very highly and has no desire to compromise any aspect.

But. But.

Q no longer has the option to truly breathe, and sometimes, he misses all of it. It is only a side project. Jim needs him. Q does not need Jim, but he will feel so much more alive when he has something new. Even the act of keeping a secret of this magnitude from MI6 will be diverting enough to keep him more than amply occupied.

At least for now, Q can have everything. It is too good an opportunity to pass up.

Jim has been planning all of this for ages, that much is painfully apparent, and Q has to admit it is gorgeous. All the work around Carl Powers is immensely clever.

The reason: Jim cannot get Sherlock out of his head. Jim had introduced himself to Sherlock, flirted, finally able to meet. Sherlock had done a gorgeous once-over, taken all the visual clues (even the subtle) and known in an instant, or so he thought. Jim presented, Sherlock applauded without realising.

Q watches the first few puzzles from a distance. Carl Powers is the introduction, just to show how long Jim has been watching. Janis Cars is to illustrate the international scope of Jim’s work – and the clue, of course, was to show how much fun Jim is finding it. Rattle him a little.

Puzzle number three: Connie Prince, and a blind little old lady. Connie Prince, simply because she’s famous and even fame does not escape Jim’s touch. Little blind old lady, because Jim cares not a whit for class or creed or disability. They are all just people. None are more or less sacrosanct than the next.

Jim could sob with delight when he realises what Sherlock did: solved the puzzle quickly, gave
himself time to work out the connecting factors. He will not find anything. The only thing connecting all three is Jim himself, and he is intending to remain out of sight for a little while yet.

Then: “His voice…”


He only ever calls Sebby ‘Moran’ when they’re working. It keeps things cleaner, professional. Jim is nothing if not professional.

“No, don’t tell me about him, don’t…”

“He sounded so… soft.”

Moran pulls the trigger. The resulting explosion is almost audible from Jim’s flat; he smiles a bit, and his phone rings. “Was that you?” Q asks, from within the hallowed halls of MI6.

“Yep. Not your dear brother’s fault, don’t you worry. My little proxy got talkative. Apparently my voice is ‘soft’.”

“She had a point,” Q agrees. “Can’t stay, work to do. I’ll be around this afternoon – you’ll be glad to hear that the Bruce-Partington plans have been duly copied and distributed to the relevant parties. I believe Sherlock should pick up the memory stick within the next two days, maximum.”

Jim smiles audibly. “See you later,” he trills, and hangs up.

- Q ambles over to Jim, who has a small child handcuffed to a wall, with a man Q knows to be Sebastian Moran holding a gun to his head. The child is, unsurprisingly, sobbing hysterically. Q watches dispassionately as Jim bounces over him.

“Sebby, heel.”

Moran steps back, gun moving from child. Child continues to cry; the sound is grating, irritating. If he dies, Q will not be all that upset.

As it stands, Jim is more than prepared to let the kid go if Sherlock plays by the rules. “Stop crying, or you will die,” he tells the child simply, with the kind of terrifying intensity that paralyses most people Jim talks to. It is the tone that signifies a knifepoint danger.

The child quiets, sniffs a bit, whimpers about his mummy and daddy.

“Shh,” Jim coaxes, stroking the child’s face. Jim remembers being that age. Q remembers being that age. Neither can recall ever being so entirely pathetic, but then, they are not like others and never have been. Never were.

The child whimpers a little more. Q’s spine rolls with palpable aggravation; Jim senses rather than sees it, glances to Q with faint amusement. “I can kill him now, get a new one?” he suggests. “Sherlock won’t call for a little while…”

“He’s seen your face,” Moran points out, his voice a low gravel.

Jim – in a perfect, fluid motion – stands and backhands the man. If Jim had wanted Moran’s input, he would have asked for it. Moran knows, and does not respond, just dips his head in a quiet acknowledgement that Q watches with fascination.
Moran loves Jim, in whatever way the man is capable of doing. Perhaps Stockholm Syndrome, or a variation thereupon, but Moran quite definitely loves Jim.

It is awful and entrancing.

“He’s actually seen all three of us,” Q points out lightly, glancing down at the still-snvelling child. “I don’t intend for this to reach higher powers. You’re already irritated, Jim, and that doesn’t bode well – get a new one.”

Jim pouts. “But I set all this up, it’s all been made pretty and child-size…”

“… which I still find mildly alarming. I might add,” Q continues, voice dust-dry. “Really? Child-size wall-mounted cuffs? You must have a very understanding supplier.”

Of course, Jim’s grin is all teeth and absolutely terrifying to boot. “Adores me, don’t you know. Don’t’ch’all?”

The pseudo-Southern drawl makes Q wince. Jim returns attention to the now almost-silent child. Seb watches with vaguely wary attention; to most observers he is nonchalant to the point of insult, but Q is not ‘most’.

“Problem?” he asks, with a vague taunt.

Seb smiles, teeth and claws; danger rolls from his body in sweet waves, tingling on the tongue, and Q knows he underestimates the man. In fact, he is very difficult to read, and that is so unusual that Q feels himself shiver with interest.

Jim sighs at the boy, completely oblivious to Q’s background musings. “It’s a pity you’re irritating,” he says, and shoots the child through the head.

Seb looks a dash unhappy. Q’s expression doesn’t change, but he is also not particularly happy. Jim has swallowed the soul of a dead child and uses the energy to grin like the fucked-up maniac he is before ambling Q-wards. “I need another now,” he purrs, intimately close, not quite a lover. “Find me one?”

“If I must, but I do also have to get into work – unlike some, I have a sustainable job, et cetera,” Q chastises, thinking of none other than James Bond. Bond, whom he is dating, who suggested – from wherever in the world he has holed himself up – that they move in together when they see each other again (because MI6 relationships are quick and ferocious affairs), a man who doesn’t love him and whom Q is very fond of. “Try not to kill the next one. I’ll deal with the clean-up, if you like?”

Jim trills delightedly. “You spoil me.”

“Yes, I do,” Q replies primly. “Goodnight both, and I will doubtless speak to you imminently as you continue to wreak varying forms of destruction. I’d appreciate you not murdering my brother, because I will kill you.”

There is not a shadow of a doubt that Q is telling the truth. Jim – for once in his life – takes something seriously; his nod is grave, a truth that Q has so rarely seen from him flickering lightly in his eyes.

Q turns to leave. Jim snags his sleeve, whips him around, kisses him with a biting ferocity that is Jim’s form of adoration. Q reciprocates, Moran shifts weight, and Jim hisses into Q’s mouth before releasing him.
A moment of speculation, and Q leaves.

“You seem distracted,” Bond comments, looking a little tired. Recent events have been less than ideal, but Q is more concerned with the events on home turf rather than the machinations of countries infinities away from him.

Q does not reply. “…Q?”

A glance up, cursory. “I do have a fairly high intensity job,” he reminds Bond, with perhaps a shadow more sting than is necessary. “Forgive me.”

Bond does not smile, does nothing but look with a disconcerting and rather disgusting tenderness. “I’m concerned about you.”

A small snort. “There is little need,” Q tells him. “I am overworked and underfed, which is why you’ve taken me to dinner, presumably?”

The quick response, sharp and witty and less cruel, is enough to calm Bond’s evident tension. “In part,” he replies, with a slight shrug. “I also wanted to see you after the mission. Before Mexico.”

Q’s smile is small and mildly apologetic.

Bond is going to Mexico City. Q is not supposed to know, but has been quietly organising it; it has taken considerably longer than Bond wanted – he was all gung ho to head off the moment he watched the tape, a tape from a dead woman who has sent him on a mission – but Bond has to be outfitted, tickets to be bought to Mexico and back, and in addition Bond has been on active missions because – believe it or not – he is still employed by MI6 and has a job to do.

It means that Q has needed to do quite a few things that cannot and will not ever reach official ears. They have an understanding.

They eat. Steak and peas and thick-cut chips with a type of barbecue relish that explodes sweetness and acid over Q’s tongue, and he had forgotten how it felt to be like this, to anticipate the sharper motions of the world and the taste, touch, sense of everything is so much more profound.

“Any dates yet?”

“As soon as your current mission is officially behind you,” Q nods; Bond’s expression is pure gratitude, and rightly so. “I’ll outfit you as soon as I know what’s going on.”

Q reaches for the phone in tandem with it ringing.

“A little rude, at the dinner table.”

“I repeat: job,” Q tells him shortly, and answers it. “Yes?”

“I’m in,” Jim trills at him, the laugh brighter and more extraordinary than the sugar and acid that coats Q’s tongue and shatters his teeth. “Come celebrate?”

A moment of contemplation where Bond fills everything in Q’s mind, blue eyes and a razor-blade smile when he deigns to do so; when he doesn’t, he looks like a hunk of very beautifully tailored rock.

He is watching Q with pointed disinterest, although Q senses the stillness of curiosity. “I’ll be there
in the morning, don’t you have other people to be pestering?”

Jim is dangerously silent.

Q cannot quite believe the choice he has just made.

Neither of them can. Jim’s lips stain Q’s, hot and ferocious. “Is it him?” Jim whispers, barely audible, and in the tinny fracture of a phone he sounds like a child, he sounds broken. As though Q has done him the greatest wrong, has finally broken an unspeakable rule and destroyed him utterly.

It is this that convinces Q that Jim will be fine. He has to be fine. This is so profoundly out of character that it has to be a manipulation, Jim doesn’t do this. Jim never, ever does anything even close to this.

“I’ll see you soon,” Q tells him, and the fact of him telling it is tender, even if the tone of voice is still curt. “Try not to kill anyone before I get there.”

Q can see Jim’s smile. A crawling, cancerous thing.

“Enjoy your evening,” he murmurs, hisses, somehow making the sentence sibilant. “Night night.”

Dial tone. Q pops the phone back in his pocket, and returns his attention to James Bond, utterly bemused by the fact that he is.

“All alright?” Bond asks lightly, without pressure.

Q’s smile is worryingly genuine. “Perfect.”

-

Jim screams.

Moran doesn’t know what to do with him. It is like the screaming when he was young, when Q would watch and wait for him to calm down while stars burst in cataclysmic showers somewhere deep in his brain and speared through every synapse, and it hurts, it hurts it hurts, and there is nothing to stem the impossible rage.

(water seeps into his shoes, and it is tinged pink, and he chokes on her hair while she cries out a name that will never be his own again)

When he is calm, there is echoing silence. Moran is horrified, and is bleeding profusely from the nose. Jim has no memory of anything but Q’s betrayal.

“I’m going to destroy him,” Jim breathes. “Both of them.”

Only he cannot, because Bond will start the ball rolling in Mexico City soon enough, and Jim suspects (knows) that Bond’s momentum will scoop up Spectre and spit it out into his lap, along with the surveillance from nine global superpowers. Bond is somehow brushing the edges of Spectre in a way Jim doesn’t fully understand yet, but until he knows, he cannot dispatch Bond.

Jim hates being dependent.

For now, Q and Bond have to be left alone.

In the meantime, Jim dresses himself up while Moran watches in silence, and goes out on the hunt.
The streets are dark black with sickly yellow street lights, casting impossible shadows just where nobody would expect. Jim knows where to go.

It feels like forever since he did this, waits for somebody to pick him up and fuck in the back of a car and slit his throat open, drive the car through streets he knows will not pick him up – that, or he can wipe the tapes later – and find somewhere quiet, hum to himself as he sets fire to the dead man’s clothes, lets the fire spread, a long way away by the time the fire reaches the seats, the temperature rising, exploding the engine in convulsions of smoke.

Jim saunters home feeling far happier about the world. He taps into the CCTV just to confirm his own safety, hums a bit more, sings snatches to himself while Moran watches with a commendably neutral expression.

“Come here,” Jim commands; Moran does as bidden, and Jim kisses him, all teeth. His shirt is soaked with blood, neatly hidden under the coat he found in the back seat of the dead man’s car; it squishes against Moran’s front, smearing blood across them both.

Moran smirks against Jim’s lips. “Welcome back, boss.”

“I never left,” Jim breathes back, and the calm is back. The nice calm, the prelude; he pulls Moran towards the bed, intending to collapse him in and sleep for a few strangled hours before returning to one or the other of his many jobs and faces. Max Denbigh has just sprung into existence, Jim-from-the-hospital is about to vanish off the edge of the map.

Right now, Sherlock is busy solving his puzzles. Jim needs to be ready.

Jim doesn’t notice Moran deflecting him off into the bathroom. He notices when he is standing under the stream of water, and the blood stains the tiles pink-red, and Moran’s body is crowding with him with nothing sexual, just washing him off and then drying him off with perfunctory motions, guiding him back to the bed.

By the time Moran has pulled the covers over, Jim is soundly asleep.

- 

To make Jim’s dreams about Spectre come true, a number of things have had to happen: a background, a present day, a new name and place to live, a whole bloody life construction, enough that there are no hiccups and a new man can spring from nowhere but still be accepted wholesale.

This is a very complicated game. It is a lot of fun, and a lot of a challenge, but it’s perfectly manageable; Jim still isn’t known as Moriarty. His face has been carefully and thoroughly concealed throughout his entire career.

(except to a select few, but Sherlock Holmes does not work in the same spheres as, say, his brother. Sherlock Holmes will soon know Jim’s face, remember Jim’s face – but their paths will not cross again until Jim wishes it).

The game is this: Max Denbigh will appear on Spectre’s radar, as a visionary, criminally minded but with ambitions tending towards the ‘Nine Eyes’ concept that is starting to rattle around secret service organisations.

Q is overjoyed, but not surprised in the slightest, that Jim has been constructing this for an extremely long time. Max Denbigh already has a paper trail, an extensive one. Max Denbigh is not springing out of nowhere, not quite; it takes delightfully little to take him from an almost-present shadow to a manifested entity.
Jim has been so thorough that Spectre is already registering interest. It will not be long before they get formally in touch.

In the meantime, Q works. Q-branch is moved underground, somewhere he can concentrate and work outside of the constant prying gaze of MI5 and MI6 officials, places he can play with his toys and construct his very own versions of carnage from a safe space with lots of money and resources. A home.

This is going to be extraordinary.

- 

Jim’s anger at Q does not dissipate.

The Golem stalks, the game goes on, the game has to go on.

“The painting is a fake.”

A second child survives, counting down numbers with a surprisingly steady voice while Jim holds a knife to his throat out of sheer interest. The child is interesting. He is brave. Jim will keep tabs as he grows up, because why not.

Now, it is time to wait, all of it is waiting.

Q rings and is ignored, rings and is ignored, again and again.

Jim cries, screams and cries. Moran is lost and Jim is more so and he has not the faintest clue why, but this makes him want to rip his skin off his chalk-white bones and stretch into a false grin like he is so capable of doing.

Q is ignored and ignored and ignored.

Then: the swimming pool.

Jim is there, has been there for hours – he knows full well that Sherlock will choose here, someplace suitably dramatic. He fucked Moran in one of the changing rooms just because, leant over the bench and let the man drive into him, a twisting corkscrew motion that makes Jim want more, harder, crueler like Q used to do when they were children.

He misses Q. He hates himself and Q and the entire fucking world for that fact.

John Watson’s abduction was a very fun part of the entire affair, and embarrassingly easy to do: a van, a confused Watson, handcuffs, a gun, a knife, a bomb jacket and bob’s your uncle, John Watson is putty in Jim Moriarty’s hands.

Naturally, he does exactly as told. The fucking happens while John et al are waiting for Sherlock to turn up. John is handcuffed to a bench, and they have the decency to go next door because really, voyeurism is only fun when there’s somebody worthwhile watching.

Then, Sherlock is on the way, and Jim starts to bounce with excitement and forgets Q for a little while. Today, Sherlock Holmes dies, or more accurately they both die and Jim doesn’t actually mind. Five deaths, minimum, including Jim and fellow snipers.

Gorgeous.

This will be lovely, perfect, poetic.
Q keeps calling. Abruptly, lividly, Jim picks up; there are mere moments before Sherlock will turn up, and that is so much more interesting than anything Q can or will concoct.

“You’re a memory, darlin’,” Jim breathes. “You’re a dream, a little quirk of fancy on a Sunday afternoon in June, a thought of a lonely boy and a big scary man, a little bit scary man, not scary enough though, hmm? Not scary enough.”

Moran cannot breathe properly for a moment, face paling very slightly – but only very slightly – as he tries to negotiate with the wound in his thigh. Jim has just stabbed him. Not for the first time.

Jim’s voice is a ragged screech: “Scared now?”

Q’s tone is still utterly blank. “No, but I’d imagine Sebastian is by now; I’d advice not killing or damaging your favourite toys, as a life rule.”

“I don’t like rules,” Jim hisses.

A small, cruel laugh. “I ascertained as much. Now stop acting like a petulant child towards me. Continue your machinations with Watson as much as you like – I quite enjoy watching – but let me reiterate that if damage comes to Sherlock, you will die.”

“Yes,” Jim says happily, and hangs up.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Ohh and now we're moving into some fun things, boys and girls. Thank you as ever for reading, your comments make my soul sing. Jen.

Q doesn’t always know why he does the things he does, but usually there is an ineffable combination of possibility and curiosity that conspire to lead him to very strange places and even stranger things. In this case, a very scenic swimming pool in the middle of the night.

Jim is going to do something new, and Q doesn’t want to miss it.

While Jim and Moran were fucking gracelessly in the background, Q was merrily killing one of the snipers that Jim had set up; an embarrassingly easy thing, and Q then just dressed himself up in the dead man’s clothes, hid the body, and set everything up precisely as the dead sniper had left it. There are colleagues lingering around, but they are too busy in their own machinations to notice a corpse in the background covered with a black tarpaulin. Said body will be disposed of later.

Then there is Sherlock. He enters against the backdrop of blue and red curtains, a lovely flair that Jim no doubt enjoys. Sherlock is a beautiful man, all angles, and the memory stick twirls in his violin fingers as he glances, body dancing to find the source of a man, and he has no clue there are eight separate snipers trained on him, one of which is his younger brother.

Q briefly sees Moran across the far side, before Sherlock arrives. He looks remarkably well for a man with a stab wound and mild blood loss, but then, he always does. Moran – and a handful of others – wait with sniper rifles that hold little red sightlines; none of them need it, but Jim’s flair for melodrama wins out as ever.

Moran does not see Q, which is what matters.

“Brought you a little getting-to-know-you present,” Sherlock says into the half-light; Q smiles at the dramatics, at the shadow sibling of his Jim. “Come on, that’s what it’s all been for, isn’t it? All your little puzzles…”

A shadow, because he isn’t right. Jim isn’t always right either, true, but he would not have got this quite so catastrophically wrong; Sherlock’s arrogance outstrips his intellect, and given the sheer force of the man’s intellect, that is something of a compliment to the man’s ego.

Sherlock twists with remarkable speed when he hears noise from a curtain, and it takes everything in Q not to snort with laughter: he doesn’t understand. Sherlock Holmes does not understand.

Sentiment, that little rooted thing that he tries to deny wriggles its way through and beneath his skin, and he is utterly at its power when it presents him with a friend and a betrayal.

Q wonders what Sherlock would be like if he ever, god forbid, fell in love.

(After all, Q knows what Jim is like).

John’s voice is steady, which makes Sherlock’s hand – the memory stick, his form of weapon (although not quite as good as the Browning) – fall slower, slower still, caught in stop-frame
animation.

"John."

The horror in that single word is all Jim needs. Tut tut, Sherlock: should have done better on that front, never give an enemy that much power. Sherlock is so weak; Q almost cannot understand why Jim puts up with him. Mycroft would surely be a better playmate.

But then, Jim just needs somebody to dance with, and Mycroft would not. He does not play games. Jim is lonely, and Sherlock makes him less alone.

The joke snaps off fairly quickly; there’s only so much to be gained by fooling, although ‘gottle of geer’ was a lovely touch in Q’s eyes. Sherlock is palpably repulsed, and Q was right to turn up to this: it is beautifully elegant. There is a single sniper light trained on John – Moran – and Q awaits further instructions. Jim will only need a gesture to Moran, and the lights will find Sherlock, find them both.

“I gave you my number… thought you might call…”

The whining Irish drawl of a very excitable Jim; the door slides open, and for a half-second his gaze flicks to Q and there is an honest-to-god wink.

Jim knows.

Q’s cock hardens on instinct, and he watches Jim saunter around the edge of the pool, taunting, completely ignoring John Watson who is holding things together remarkably well, good little soldier boy that he is.

Sherlock slides out the gun, and ignores the jibe around sex – he always does – to point the weapon at Moriarty. In ignoring it, he does seem to imply that he too is aroused, which honestly wouldn’t be surprising: a Holmes trait, perhaps. Immediately springing to attention at the point that anybody else in the world can see not only a) a gun, b) the make, c) the model and d) all through somebody’s trousers from several metres away.

Jesus, Q has never been so hard in his life, and Jim in a suit only makes it worse. Wanker. He loves making a good impression, though, so Q oughtn’t be all that surprised.

Sherlock is delectably confused and Jim is delectably in charge.

(Q will fuck that out of him fairly shortly after this is all done and dusted).

“… don’t like getting my hands dirty…”

Liar. Absolute liar.

If only Sherlock had understood properly that Q was the reason Jim existed. Nobody can exist in a vacuum, and with all his brilliance, Jim would not be Jim without Q at the beginning and end of it, and yes, Q will be there at the end.

Oh, he is a taunting little shit. One of these days, Q will call John ‘Johnny-boy’ to Sherlock’s face and see if he flinches, see if Doctor Watson himself flinches, remembering the Irish voice who had done the precise same thing. It’ll be interesting to see.

Nothing Jim does is new to Q, and it is all as compelling as he remembers. He saunters out with a look of vitriol and does not look at Q – he’s probably forgotten – and then, of course, Sherlock goes
for John Watson and starts to predictably save his life and then *faff about rather than running the hell away*.

Q’s brother is sometimes a complete moron. Q forgets this from time to time. Not to mention that his gun etiquette is *appalling*.

Jim punishes them by re-entering, and Q finally gets the excitement of training a gun on Doctor Watson with the sure knowledge that he will die unless something very different happens imminently.

(Jim meant for this to happen. He knows he can die; Q can recognise explosives from a fairly long distance, the weight, the shape. This is not bluffing. Q is scared: Jim is never suicidal, never ever, and arrogance or not Q cannot help but wonder if it is his fault. Jim would never have taken this risk if he had been with Q).

The phone rings.

Q lets out a breath he hadn’t known he had been holding. It sounds like Jim is about to have a new business venture, as long as he doesn’t elect to reappear from yet another door.

Q’s phone rings.

This ought to be good

- 

The sex is mindblowing. Almost literally: Q holds a gun to Jim’s head and slams into him while Jim cries and screams and hisses, knowing Q is really dicing with death, that for all the Holmesian control Q exhibits he is still human, still fallible, and could still shoot Jim through the head by accident if he lets any part of himself slip.

Q prides himself on being infallible, and Jim lives.

“You were going to die.”

“Yes,” Jim replies, utterly calm, close to sincere. “I didn’t.”

“You were going to.”

“Yes.”

Q’s eyes flicker with something like emotion, and it makes Jim’s entire body shiver. “Why the fuck would you do something that stupid?” Q hisses. “Why would you *let* yourself die? Too *bored*?”

“Yes,” Jim screams, literally screams, his voice *everywhere*.

Silence. Q is still. Jim is panting, eyes glittering tears that are horrifying to witness. Jim fakes tears, he fakes laughs; the only thing he doesn’t fake is orgasm, and that is only because he is so easily aroused. Jim could orgasm over practically anything; it is about power, and the ability to physically and mentally peak over absolutely anything is power incarnate.

Jim can never be forced into anything. All things are precisely as he wants; it just requires a slight tilt of angle, of perspective.

A slap would be ideal right now, for Jim. He hopes for one. He hopes to have provoked Q’s so rarely employed anger; he wants to scream, he wants to feel how he did so many years ago when he
had pushed Q too far and his eyes had turned black. He wants to feel like he could, he *will*, die.

“Kill me.”

Q rolls his eyes. “No.”

“Well then,” Jim hisses. “Get out. You’re no use to me.”

“Ah ah,” Q interjects; Jim’s body is coiled and ready to strike, and Q is patiently wary. “Max Denbigh is ready and waiting, insertion within the next day or two. Everything is set up. You never existed here – every trace of you as your hospital persona is gone, as is anything else that may trace you to here. Your face is officially invisible.”

Jim’s soft smile makes Q tingle. “You. *You*.”

“You always underestimate me,” Q points out, buttoning his shirt. Jim is still naked, and doesn’t seem to care much about it. “Always, always did.”

A hum of agreement. “Another weakness of mine, my love,” he sings, tongue rolling in circles on the endearment, “you. You and your lovely brother, clever, clever brothers. Clever family.”

“Why Sherlock?”

The question is not entirely unexpected. Jim has the answer ready: “He’s *me*.”

It is nothing new. Jim and Sherlock have a separate dynamic; they orientate around one another, where Q and Jim work on a shared trajectory. Both of them love Sherlock far too much.

“Credit where due, it was beautifully scenic.”

“You killed one of my men,” Jim remembers petulantly. “That was mean.”

Q quirks a smile, reaches for his socks. “I don’t entirely care. I was on a schedule, you had abducted my brother’s flatmate, and I rather wanted to ensure there were no unanticipated deaths.”

“So you caused one.”

“That wasn’t unanticipated on my part,” Q points out, socks pulled on, Jim watching with a fascinated expression as Q’s toes slide their way forward, foot briefly caught in an elegant arch. “On yours, perhaps, but you were dicing with your own potential demise, so I think I can be forgiven.”

Jim sticks his tongue out. Retracts. Q ignores him, finds his shoes. His favourite cardigan covers the crumple of a shirt ripped off too quickly and carelessly, glasses returned to precariously balance on his nose.

He has all but turned to the door, when Jim’s voice – frightening, truly frightening – murmurs: “You put him before me.”

It is expected. Jim has yet to truly ride out the adrenaline of the ‘game’; no better channel than through Q, who cannot be touched by anger. Knives thrown to his head glide past unchallenged, drop limply and sigh into whatever surface lies behind him. He *consumes* emotion, breathes it in, nothing left of it by the time he releases a breath.

Q exhales. Jim almost moans aloud at the perfect lack of anything. “My life is not your business any more, you made that quite apparent,” Q tells him. “I had other priorities. An evening with Bond was
one of them."

“Bond. How delightfully impersonal.”

A smile for the pair of them alone. “I’m still surprised you haven’t already abducted him, quite frankly, threats notwithstanding,” Q muses. “I imagine you were a little preoccupied killing my brother, and indeed yourself.”

“It wasn’t a preoccupation,” Jim whined. “I was playing a game. You always loved our games, Q, and you disappointed me, you disappointed me.”

The last words are a slightly garbled shriek. Q sighs. Jim seems to have not changed in all the time Q has known him. “Disappointing you is often unavoidable; you have rather bizarre standards by most human reckoning.”

“Do you love him?”

“No,” Q replies easily, because he doesn’t. “I don’t see why you’re quite so unhappy. Once again: you nearly killed my brother, and I told you before that I will disembowel you and your entire operation, slowly, if you ever cause him harm.”

Half of Jim’s face contorts into an approximation of a smile. “Why d’you think I risked it?” he purrs. “Die with him, or let you kill me afterwards – tsk tsk, should have thought it through.”

“Why didn’t you kill him?”

Jim shrugs. “Got distracted.”

“You changed your mind.”

“No,” Jim repeats, as though Q is a moron. “I got distracted.”

Q realises: he is telling the truth. Jim truly did manage to avoid a murder-suicide through nothing more than a particularly succulent distraction. “Who by?”

Jim’s eyes glaze with intrigue. “The Woman.”

“Ah,” Q sighs out, while Jim continues to stare glassily into space. “I’m assuming she has upgraded her clientele?”

A thin giggle. “And then some. I keep my tabs, and she’s doing some very fun things. I like her. She knows what people like.”

“You’ve slept with her,” Q remarks, almost irritably.

Jim looks smug as can be. “She tried to get information. I had a very, very good evening.”

The Woman must be scared out of her mind, if Jim had such an enjoyable time. Q resolves quietly to make some enquiries; he has been keeping an eye on The Woman for a while, given quite how many fingers are in various pies that need keeping track of. It is extraordinary how much people will sacrifice just to feel special. Irene Adler has enough power to make Q interested.

Really, it is right that she and Jim are working together. They are of a certain type.

“Is this another Sherlock-related trap?”
Jim thinks of lying, but decides he cannot be bothered. Q already knows, or he would not have asked. “Just a little one, for now. Give me time. There are big plans, enormous plans. Exciting things are coming.”

Q has a nasty feeling Mycroft is going to get dragged into things. Mycroft often insinuates or flat-out inserts himself into various scenarios, but this time, Q wonders if he will find himself involved entirely by accident for one of the few times in his life.

Exciting things are coming, indeed.

Jim’s eyes burn into him as Q leaves.

It takes Jim a remarkably long time to realise: Q killed somebody. Q, who never finishes the job. Q, who was a spectator but never a player. Q, who showed no remorse and treated it with a flippancy of somebody accustomed to murder. Q, who has changed.

Riding out the delirious high of understanding, Jim laughs, loud and uncontrolled and echoing, ricocheting off the walls and hitting into him, again and again, punching him down and shooting into him, as Jim giggles, knows, his perpetual games and the knowledge that there is a new player. Q is finally playing.

For a blissful moment, the silence is gone, and all Jim can hear is Q’s smile and the click click click of his footsteps, not a single drop of blood staining his shirt.

- Moran, unsurprisingly, is fairly pissed off with Jim for a while. The stab wound will heal. Jim has good aim; not too much damage, but it naturally hurts and Moran is very unimpressed at being a vessel for Jim’s anger.

“Never do that again.”

Jim glances up at him. “Don’t tell me what to do. Not nice.”

“Jim, don’t fuck about. You will never do that again.”

The pair stare at one another, Jim’s eyes daring Moran to continue – and, delightfully, he does. Moran holds his gaze without wavering. Maybe Jim has finally started to push him too far, something clicking in the depths of Moran’s brain to provoke this unequivocal and brave statement.

Jim loves him ever so much when he’s brave. His smile shivers close to genuine. “Never what. Which part of it? You can’t stop me playing games, Sebby. You can’t stop me having fun.”

“Take out your anger on somebody else,” Moran tells him shortly. “You can have just as much fun with somebody off the streets, take a few days, enjoy yourself – but I’m fucking fed up of being stabbed or having things sliced off because you fancy it.”

“But I like…”

“I know,” Moran cuts in over him – daring, very daring – and continues with his commendably unflinching gaze. “You’ll have to get used to it.”

Jim is somewhat sideswiped. Nobody is ever so impertinent, but Moran is being so splendidly new that it is surprisingly easy to agree. “No stabbing,” he pouts, saunters to Moran; the man stiffens slightly in understandable wariness, but does not move away, nor indeed break the now utterly
unforgiving eye contact. Most people would have shat themselves from fear by this stage, in Jim’s experience.

Moran holds it, holds it, as Jim straddles him carefully, their foreheads almost pressed together but Moran knows this is part of the game. The dilated black of Jim’s eyes, eating into him, daring him to keep going: Moran keeps going, and in doing so, he has inadvertently started something.

“You’ll find me things to play with?” Jim whispers, pink tongue flickering out to taste Moran’s lips – acid, gunmetal and whiskey – and waits for the miniscule nod of agreement. “Good.”

Jim kisses him with teeth, and Moran, good old Sebastian Moran, he replies with unheard-of ferocity, shadows away from their first night together when Moran pressed an underage prostitute against a wall and his life unravelled from there.

And so, Jim absentmindedly lets Moran fuck him and considers his next move.

Spectre.

After all these years, Spectre.

Q has been making arrangements, and the ideal time has come upon them: ‘Nine Eyes’ is finally taking off. Both Q and Jim want in on it.

The next act begins.
Chapter 9

As far as Q can work out, Bond blew up half of Mexico City and then proceeded to commandeer a helicopter before Q managed to send out the private clean-up team he's organised.

Q is not delighted. To put it mildly.

Bond sweeps back into the UK. He is now on everybody’s radar, even if nobody can prove that he was responsible for the whole Mexico City debacle which is currently throttling every news channel across the world.

*I’m going to kill you*, Q thinks violently, and rather malevolently pitches the ‘Smart Blood’ to M; given Bond’s extracurricular activities, Q now has a perfect opportunity to have permanent eyes on Bond.

He traps Bond’s arm: “You’ll feel a small…”

“Ow”

“…prick.”

It’s only a little dig, and after his stunt in Mexico Q feels it is merited. For all of Bond’s sexual prowess – and yes, the man is legendary for a reason – he is not particularly well endowed. Q laughed for fourteen solid minutes when he found out. Bond then proved the old adage: it’s what you do with it that counts.

“…call it a post-Mexico insurance plan.”

Bond smiles thinly, stands, follows Q into the next room. He chooses not to comment on the fact that Q is pathologically incapable of wearing a suit that fits.

Further vengeance: he dangles the car under Bond’s nose, and takes it away again. To his credit, he does hand over the watch – made in Bond’s honour, in lieu of an exploding pen – and smirks at him.

Bond and Q are utter professionals. MI6 do not know they are in any form of a relationship, and neither of them intend to enlighten anybody. “…I told you to bring it back in one piece, not bring back one piece!”

Q genuinely does giggle and snort at his own joke. It is a trait he shares with Jim; both always laugh at their own jokes, often rather hysterically. Even if nobody else has taste, at least they are having a fun time.

“…make me disappear?”

The endearing thing is that Bond thinks he is being mysterious and elusive. Q combats that with quiet uncertainty on his part that Tanner overlooks while Bond pushes his luck, and Q smiles very slightly and palms him the keys to the DB10 while shooting Bond a look that vividly demonstrates what will happen to him if he damages the car.

In addition, Q ensures him a space on a ferry to France, so he can drive through to Italy uninterrupted.

If Bond is surprised by how helpful Q is being, he does not show it. In fact, he shows something of a
single-minded focus on his own fate that verges on being rather selfish.

Q has no idea what the old M is leading Bond into, but he trusts her. M knew Bond, and knew the world, better than anybody Q has known (but the exception, always the exception); whatever she wanted, it matters.

And so, Bond disappears on whatever chase she sets, and Q watches with mounting irritation.

“… and ‘Nine Eyes’ is being voted in, so I will be off-grid…”

M and Tanner (and Jim) are decamping to the other side of the world. Q wonders how Jim is doing; he has caused merry hell across the MI6 management team, ‘C’ is absolutely despised – Q himself has cursed him with happy vigour, despite having not technically met him in person – and ‘Nine Eyes’ is just a matter of time.

It certainly looks like everything is progressing exactly according to plan.

In practise, their absences give Q the run of MI6, more or less; everybody important is busy elsewhere, and Q has a grand old time running surveillance systems through the whole of the new MI6 building, and even goes on a field trip to the Centre for National Security to hook up some new bugs.

It certainly passes the time.

- ‘Nine Eyes’ is going to be invaluable, and that is where Jim comes in.

The promotion to ‘C’ involves equal parts manipulation and sheer force of will. Jim has worked himself to the bone, meeting everybody, making friends. The original mind behind “Nine Eyes” disappeared a fair while ago, and Max Denbigh has taken his place as a staunch supporter.

It is so easy to convince higher powers that Max Denbigh is worth backing. The only tricky bit is the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister, half of the cabinet; he needs a trail to pretend he has known them since university.

A few pressure points. Just a few, just enough. The Home Secretary will swear blind he has known Max since primary school if he has to. All of them are wrapped around Jim’s fingers, and the rest are irrelevant.

“You are the driving force behind ‘Nine Eyes’?”

Finally. Finally, they have cottoned on.

“Aren’t we going to meet in person?” he asks, smile playing around the corners of his mouth. “I’d like to discuss this formally…”

“Not an option.”

Jim falls obediently silent. It is a strange balancing act; Max Denbigh is not Jim Moriarty. Moriarty would cackle in this man’s face. Max stays quiet and awaits further instruction.

“Two million pounds sterling into your private account. We want access to ‘Nine Eyes’.”

A moment of contemplation, and Jim chooses Max’s words very carefully: “The money doesn’t matter. This is about changing the world, Mr…?”
“Black.”

“Mr Black,” Max supplements, his tone somewhere between reverential and self-assured. “The money would naturally be helpful, but you must appreciate that this is going to change the face of counterintelligence. I want to be involved.”

The voice at the other end of the phone sounds impressed, which is quite gratifying. To Jim’s frustration, the voice is evading tracking; his systems are failing to trace to a location, to a name. Spectre clearly has some very good people on side.

In this moment, Jim (rather desperately) wishes Q was here.

“You are a visionary, Mr Denbigh.”

“Call me Max.”

“Mr Denbigh,” the voice replies, just slightly pointedly. Jim rolls his eyes. There is no need for that. “We will work with you. We will be in touch with further instructions.”

“May I ask who you are working for?”

A moment of quiet contemplation. “Spectre,” the voice predictably replies, and the line goes dead.

Jim all but crows with delight, the noise bouncing off his ceiling and back around to him; the office is soundproof, although see-through, and so while some peon might see him cackling they will hear nothing.

This, this is extraordinary.

Spectre has eyes everywhere already, Jim knows that. Spectre probably know – or at least suspect – that Max Denbigh is not all he seems. In fact, Jim would be absolutely shocked if they didn’t know; the difference between them and MI6 is that Spectre just do not care, as long as they get what they want.

Jim cares, though. Jim Moriarty does not intend for the world’s largest criminal empire – bar his own – to continue running.

Later that day, and Denbigh taps on M’s door.

“James Bond.”

Jim looks him up and down. It is his first face-to-face encounter with Bond, and he likes what he sees; strong, confident, flippant, arrogant, efficient.

Of all the possibilities, James Bond is right for Q. Jim can see it. He doesn’t have to like it, but he can see it all the same.

“Max Denbigh,” he replies, and shakes Bond’s hand warmly.

Bond insists on calling him ‘C’, which he actually quite likes.

(Jim intends to gloat hysterically about being earlier in the alphabet than Q. Somehow, he doubts Q will care, but that isn’t the point).

‘C’ has a lovely long conversation with M, who obviously hates him, and brings up the subject of eliminating the double-oh programme.
In all honesty, the double-oh programme bit is just Jim having fun. It would be a bloody stupid idea for MI6 to remove the programme, but this is Jim’s continued revenge on Q for everything he has become: mess around with Q’s departments, his work, his life.

Jim has always been Q’s destructive force. Q needs a destructive force. He needs to be reminded of who and what he is: he is a force of a nature, and worth more than a lovely little job and a lovely little boyfriend and a lovely little life. Jim knows Q is worth so much more, and thus, Jim lays waste to parts of his world because he can.

Q will be less than delighted, but Jim is having fun. It makes it worthwhile. Q will not derail Jim now; Q stands to gain a ridiculous amount from ‘Nine Eyes’, when he inevitably piggybacks the system.

Now, Jim stands in Japan, presenting Nine Eyes to people who thoroughly believe him to be Max Denbigh. Never has an alias had such incredible power. Jim will never have this again, not in the same way; Moriarty has more than enough power, of course, but this is legitimate. He is standing up in front of people as a supposed ‘good guy’ pitching the thing that will undo them all.

M and Tanner are hilariously unsubtle at their respective relief, when the vote falls through; M mutters “democracy” as a completely pointless jab.

Jim is unfazed. This was expected.

It is less than twenty minutes later that he receives the next call: “South Africa will sign within the next week.”

“I’m assuming that is being covered by yourselves?” he asks politely, ambling away from the congregation of MI6 employees he has clubbed together with. The phone call does not surprise him, despite it being to a private mobile number and quite perfectly timed; Spectre are keeping very careful eyes on him indeed.

“You assume correctly, Mr Denbigh. We are delighted with your progress.”

Jim smirks to himself, knows they can see it. “Thank you. Once we have unanimity, I will transfer control over to yourselves; the launch is the most convenient moment, I should think.”

“Within the week.”

Perfect.

- Q is beyond livid.

Austria. The bloody sodding idiot has gone to Austria. Max Denbigh is spying on everybody, which means Q can’t make a phone call like he normally would, but has to go out the middle of fucking nowhere and truly, Q is inches away from a very nasty Jim-style homicide.

Which reminds him: Jim is trying, and succeeding, to get the double-oh department shut down, which is just fucking petty.

“M wants my balls as a Christmas decoration,” he hisses to Bond, and really does mean it; M is furious. Tanner is furious. Q is furious, but he is the one who let Bond trot along to Italy with the most beautiful car in the Western world only to watch it get fished out of the Tiber.
Franz Oberhauser is dead. There is no doubt of that. Q has combed every record from the beginning of time amen, and there is nothing to suggest that Franz Oberhauser could possibly be alive.

“I saw him. Not somebody I’d ever forget.”

Q knows Bond. He is quite serious. There is something in his voice that hitches around the edges, and it hurts more than Q could know, for whatever reason. This is something personal.

“So, you have a lead?” he asks, willing to give Bond the benefit of the doubt but seriously, he is watching his career go up in smoke because of Bond’s pissing about and he cannot support this any more, deceased M or not.

Bond is painfully flippant, and has nothing but a name. Q passionately wants to kill him.

Then, he hands Q a ring, and Q abruptly forgets to breathe; Bond asks him to analyse it, and Q remembers who he is.

“I really, really hate you right now,” he tells Bond, and it is no word of a lie.

Q loathes flying. It took a great deal of lorazepam and prayer to get him on a plane in the first place, and then the second and third circles of hell spewed up a fucking ski lift, which is essentially flying in a transparent bubble and Q honestly looked at it and wanted to vomit.

But, this is his job.

Not to mention that Q has an idea.

-

M hates him. Jim finds it very funny.

“Have you ever killed anybody, Max?” M asks; Max humours him, and M delivers a lovely little speech about killing or not killing, during which Jim daydreams about a quick stab under the ribs, puncture the lung. Angles and force.

M leaves in the end, suitably humiliated by the knowledge that his employees are completely out of his control: Max edges between enjoyment and condescension as he proves to M that ‘Nine Eyes’ is going to change everything in their worlds. Nobody will be immune.

The phone rings, and Jim crows with laughter: a massive explosion in Cape Town. A truly masterful piece of engineering.

And it gets even better, because he gets a missive from Q telling him (off all records and untraceable, and Jim trusts that Q knows what he’s doing) that Bond has, somehow, wound up right in the centre of Spectre’s current machinations.

‘Nine Eyes’ will pass. Jim has so much less work, now. Bond will lead them all right to the centre of everything, and Jim just has to follow on his coattails.

And Q has a lovely little idea.

-

The ring has DNA registered from everybody Bond has come in contact with in the recent past. It is more or less impossible for a single ring of that nature to have been passed around so freely; the DNA has been placed there intentionally, waiting to be found.
Obenhauser is alive.

There is absolutely no doubt whatsoever that this is a trap. A carefully woven, beautifully constructed, absolutely spectacular trap. Q is impressed, so impressed he lets out a vague inadvertent moan which attracts the attention of the man opposite.

Said man is staring a bit. Q doesn’t pay him any mind.

Stupid, stupid fucking mistake.

Q feels the blood drain from his face as men file in past the skiing girls, and Q thinks carefully and makes his play because this is own personal hell, being potentially abducted and/or killed while on a fucking ski lift.

He runs.

-

Jim will treasure M and Tanner’s expressions for the rest of his life. M made a delightful little speech, and Jim merrily informed him that he is redundant, and the double-oh programme is officially dead.

Double-oh seven has gone entirely rogue. Q has too, technically. M and Tanner will probably go off on their own fairly soon too, in their attempts to block ‘Nine Eyes’.

Bond is out doing his own thing, and wreaking havoc in a way that is rather pretty; Jim likes Bond more with every passing minute. If he survives, that would be splendid. If he does not, it is not the greatest tragedy in the world.

Mostly, he wants to know how Bond has fallen in with Spectre. Max received a phone call at an absurd hour to inform him of Bond’s movements and Bond’s surveillance, both of which Spectre want access to, and he does not have to feign surprise.

It’s ever so lovely when a plan comes together.

-

“I need you to do something for me.”

Bond looks at him, raises an eyebrow. Madeleine Swann is showering in the next room; they will be leaving shortly. All three of them made it to Q’s hotel room, and he has arranged transportation to get himself home, and Bond off to L’Americain.

“Oh?”

Q smiles thinly, his stare absolutely level.

Bond takes a step forward, cups Q’s face, kisses him.

It is foolish, ridiculous. It is unfair.

James Bond should not be able to unlace him like this. James Bond should not make him feel like parts of him have turned to water. James Bond should not look at him like Q means something, something indeterminate, but something all the same.

They echo.
“Disappear.”

- 

Matters escalate, as they are wont to do, and Jim is faced with how to make himself die effectively, potentially in front of a number of witnesses. It is a nice way to pass the time while he awaits the launch of ‘Nine Eyes’.

It has been working a desk job, for the most part. It is deeply, painfully boring – mercifully not as bad as Jim-from-the-hospital, but this is all pen pushing and the tedium is just extraordinary.

Q returns to HQ, and – finally – they formally meet.

“Q?”

Jim has never seen Q working, not like this. There was always a part of him that assumed Q would never be able to lie so effectively, act so effectively. Now, he looks at Q, and there is only a passing resemblance to the Q he knew (knows).

The creature in front of him is shy, and gangly, and awkward. Does not quite meet Jim’s eyes, shoots him a look of pure loathing in the one moment their eyes do meet: “And you must be C.”

“Max. Call me Max.”

Q’s smile is hard and unpleasant, but somehow still fits with the awkwardness he cultivates; Jim gets the impression Q trips over his own feet quite a bit. Jim smiles at him superciliously, and they are impeccable, absolutely impeccable. “Alright: Max. You’re the force behind the more moronic decisions of recent days, I understand?”

Max’s smile remains genially fixed. “Careful, Quartermaster. Your job is at stake.”

“Are you threatening me?”

A further flat smile, and Q hates him. Everything Max Denbigh, and also Jim a little bit too, because Jim has pushed him to the edges of ‘too far’ in taking away his work, the one thing, the one thing they’re not supposed to touch.

(Q will have some fun of his own when all this is done, and if Jim objects Q will make his life a living hell).

“Not threatening,” Denbigh replies, “not at all. Just a polite reminder. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Quartermaster.”

“The sentiment is not entirely shared, I must admit,” Q tells him drily. “Now, some of us have actual work to be getting along with, rather than sowing chaos across the western and parts of the eastern worlds.”

Jim’s grin is refined and predatory. Q ignores him, and stalks away; the Smart Blood indicates that Bond is quite literally in the middle of nowhere, and Q is naturally waiting with an extraction team for when he eventually pops up in a random location.

After all: plane tickets do not materialise out of thin air, perfectly timed to allow Bond back into the UK and intercept terrorists, to be James Bond agent extraordinaire at the drop of a hat, to fly a second person back out with him, to get to the airport in the first place which naturally requires money, to ensure they have the right paperwork, to defuse tensions from external government angles
who were champing at the bit for an excuse to kick off, to stop anybody flagging Bond the moment he gets into the country (which both UK forces and Spectre are valiantly attempting) and then getting them halfway across London into a specially designated safe house that M needs to disclose to Bond – even Q is not granted that particular piece of information – and a second party while not being monitored.

And Spectre are very, very good. Q did not realise just how good, not until now, when he is faced with their fine work and the fact that Q is not safe.

He is very much not safe, in fact.

Thus ensues a number of conversations. Spectre is watching everything, absolutely everything. Q is watching the same things, but he can’t quite piggyback the system, can’t quite get in and work out just how much they’re seeing. Spectre have bugs within bugs within bugs.

Q has massively misjudged the entire affair.

Understandably, Q gets rather panicked rather quickly, something he is not accustomed to. Q always has control, always has and always will, but it looks like that control is slipping with every passing second because Spectre are better.

Nine Eyes was not supposed to actually be given to Spectre. All of that was supposed to have been stopped from the outset; Q would jump on the back of it before it was released, and it was supposed to be so simple.

Instead, Q knows he genuinely is in a race against time. Spectre will get what they want, if Q doesn’t somehow outwit them; he is bloody good at his job, but they have power beyond anything Q had considered possible.

After all: Bond needs all the support he can get, and it takes more or less all of Q’s resources and a lot of effort to manage the bare minimum required to get Bond home. Spectre have truly dizzying resources; Cape Town was only the tip of the metaphorical iceberg, and simply the most recent action of a crime syndicate of impossible magnitude.

It is impossible to express how much is needed to run an organisation of that size. Thousands of people. A frankly disgusting quantity of money. Moles, allies, blackmail, extortion, connections by the hundreds.

Jim has a very large organisation, yes.

Jim’s empire is insignificant against Spectre’s reach.

The upside: Jim will slide neatly into the gaps Spectre will leave, when they are dismantled – which was, of course, the plan.

The downside: it is going to be extremely difficult to dismantle any of it in the first place, particularly when Q is beginning to wonder if he’s actually capable of interceding in the way he needs to for Jim’s plans to come to fruition.

Nine Eyes is a very short while from being launched. Bond pops up in the middle of Morocco, and Q – out of Spectre’s gaze – gets him on a plane home for the next morning, and procures a hotel room for the intervening hours.

It is only when Bond clears UK passport control without so much as a raised eyebrow that Q knows something is wrong: even with Q’s interventions, there should have been something. Spectre can see
everything, surely somebody was there with a camera, especially as Madeleine Swann is also being watched.

“I think we have a problem,” Q tells Eve, almost inaudibly. “We need to get into the safe house now. M knows where we’re going, yes?”

Eve nods, looking rather uncomfortable. “James also knows where to go, apparently,” she murmurs back, lips not moving. “M will take us there.”

“It has to be now,” Q emphasises. “We need to do something, or Nine Eyes will go live, and I think we’re out of our depths – I don’t even know yet how I’m going to fully thwart the system and I’m pretty worried. Everything I’ve tried has been rebuffed, and we’re running out of time – they’re monitoring what I’m doing, and there isn’t time, I have to get into the heart of it all before it’s too late.”

Eve looks at Q, and sees that he is very much telling the truth. Q never willingly concedes defeat. “I’ll get us moving,” she assures him, still without moving her lips – Q has to marvel at the woman’s apparent skills of ventriloquism – and abruptly is in motion, heading off to deal with things.

Q knows he will be picked up and carted to wheresoever the safe house is, and that is perfectly fine by him. Bond has dropped off radar, which is his MO, and M seems reasonably happy that Bond will find the right place, and that the three of them are not being followed.

This is really, really not good.

There are many, many aspects of this which are really, really not good.

But: even Jim won’t be gloating, not any more, because the end is very much in sight and it is not a good end, not for any of them.

Spectre is going to win. Q knows it.
Jim, meanwhile, is still concerning himself with how he is going to die.

After all: Max Denbigh cannot be allowed to continue. Max was only a stop-gap while Jim worked on the destruction of Spectre, and when Spectre goes, so will Max, and Jim can go back to being Jim Moriarty full time. He has missed it.

James Bond is what makes this all possible. If it hadn’t been for Bond, Jim would be struggling to truly insinuate himself within Spectre; Nine Eyes was obviously never intended to take off (thank you, Q) but in the empty aftermath, Max Denbigh would need to have found other ways to impress and infiltrate Spectre.

Through more luck than judgement, Jim’s job has been made infinitely easier, and now he just has the fun part left: his death needs to be something dramatic, and something categorical. Max Denbigh has to have properly, truly died.

This is going to take some very neat manœuvring, and ultimately, Jim borrows the idea from Spectre themselves, who are doing something remarkably similar just over the road: netting. Lots and lots of netting.

Except for this: the netting needs to be more or less invisible, and/or removed almost immediately. The body will also need to be laid out in such a way that it still looks like Jim has died.

All of this has led to the following moment:

Q, Eve Moneypenny and Bill Tanner are sat opposite him, all looking rather disarmed. “What is this about?” Tanner ventures, while Q’s eyes roam around the glass walls, considering the bizarre duplicity of transparency in a room where the conversation is entirely obscured.

Spectre watch everything – but there would be limited point wasting resources so closely watching a man they now know is an ally. Max Denbigh has thrown his lot in with Spectre entirely, and as such, they do not need to overhear every word he utters.

His office is one of the few places where they will not be overheard. Ironic.

“I understand you have a daughter, Bill. May I call you Bill?”

“By all means,” Tanner replies, quite politely, although with a slight edge in his voice. “What about her?”

Max smiles pleasantly; without warning, his eyes turn black, and the cold in them is all Jim. “It would be a great pity if anything were to happen to her,” he muses, with lethal quiet. “Such a pretty girl, too.”

Tanner catches on more or less instantly. “Explain,” he says sharply, as Jim’s smile broadens. “What do you want?”

“I require your help,” Jim tells him. “All three of you, in fact.”

Q looks at him levelly. “What makes you think we’ll give it?”

“In a world of surveillance, are you really so naïve as to think you’ve not been watched?” Max asks,
and Q pales slightly.

(Inside, Q is simmering, but is also rather enjoying it; he has never been on the receiving end of Jim’s incredible ability to intimidate and threaten, and if he was anything other than what he is, Q would be trembling from head to foot).

As it is, Q – Q-the-Quartermaster – is very pale and indeed trembling. It is all about the illusion.

“Max,” Eve says, and her power is all calm and dangerous. “You know we will never go against M, and work contrary to the safety of this country…”

“This is not about the country, Miss Moneypenny,” Jim cuts in; she seems to stall mid-motion, confused. “This is just about myself, and you three, and what you can do for me. Before we begin, I would like to briefly consider what you all have to lose. Family, friends, lovers,” on the last, Max’s eyes dart to Moneypenny, and Q can see the shift in her, “all of which matter an awful lot.”

“And me?” Q asks, a little belligerently. Tanner is deathly quiet, and Eve looks more or less ready to kill the man on the spot. “You’ll, what, publish my internet history?”

Jim grins, and Q just knows Jim is going to go too far. “No,” he murmurs, with wicked quiet, “I’ll publish who you are – and everybody has a family somewhere.”

Q almost hisses with anger, but restrains himself into the awkward and probably rather traumatised Quartermaster he is playing.

Jim is an utter, inconceivable wanker from time to time.

Max holds the power, and he speaks as somebody who knows their position and has no qualms about exploiting every avenue he can. “This evening, the three of you are going to assist me in faking my own death,” he explains calmly. “I have everything prepared, and you are all going to ensure matters run smoothly. If you would like your requisite loved ones and lives to remain in one piece rather than being fished out of the Thames, you will help.”


Max raises an eyebrow. “I know full well you’re going to try and stop me,” he explains, “which means I have a backup plan. It doesn’t risk Queen and Country, will not offend your sensibilities – but if you do succeed in destroying Nine Eyes, I would prefer to vanish. Feel free to do what you will to stop me – I will not intercede, although my employers might – but this is entirely for myself.”

“So you’re a selfish prick?” Eve asks lightly, but her voice shakes slightly, betraying her.

Jim’s eyes flash briefly, and the accent is just a dash more Irish: “Yes, Miss Moneypenny. I am.”

“What do you want, exactly?” Tanner asks, his voice laudably calm, interrupting the imminent escalation between Max and Eve.

Max settles back in his chair, and explains:

He will be on one of the upper floors, outside his office. A large section of the glass will shatter. Max will fall off the side and plunge dramatically earthwards.

It is beautiful. The netting is composed of an obscenely expensive transparent fibre, suspended on the first floor; it will be more or less invisible upon entry into the building, especially if one is not looking for it. Q is tasked with checking over the plans; Jim has already organised the set-up, but does have
the decency to admit that he is fallible, and that is where Q comes in to double-check.

(Jim is a twat: he slides the plans to Q there and then, expression expectant, Q trying very hard to not snap at Jim for the sheer fucking risk and stupidity of a plan like this).

Upon Max’s landing, there will be a handful of associates, who will slice the webbing; there is not to be much. It is to avoid death, not to avoid all injury, and Jim will be wearing discreet padding.

The risk is unbelievable, but then, that’s Jim. Tanner and Eve will report him dead, and while M wends his way down the stairs again, they will assist in removing evidence of padding and/or netting, and dress the body with blood and other necessaries.

“Everybody understand?” Max completes.

All three concede defeat. The threat hangs, pregnant, over their heads. Max – because Max is more desperate than Jim, and far less refined – reiterates the threats before they leave, just to make sure everybody understands.

He and Q do not exchange looks. They do not break character. Q leaves, Max watches him go.

Jim giggles to himself. He has missed this.

“Can you sabotage the netting?” Eve murmurs to Q, as they leave, as all three go and find coffee and tea and alcohol. “If you…”

Q looks at her with almost-honest shock. “You want to kill him?” he asks, tone forced. “I think murder is rather your area than mine. Isn’t that why you went off active duty? Killing people is not something to take lightly.”

“He’s right,” Tanner supplements. “And I won’t risk my daughter. Even if he’s bluffing, I’m not risking it.”

It is the most emotional Q has ever seen Tanner. He is usually the epitome of calm; Q has always liked him for that, the control and the knowledge that lives in him, unassuming and forgettable. Tanner exists to be forgettable. It seems apt that everybody forgot he has a life outside of MI6.

Eve is still incomprehensibly angry. “There has to be something…”

“Once he disappears, I’ll keep an eye,” Q says, after a moment. “The best option, I think. Maybe he could lead us to Spectre, I mean he all but confessed he was a part of it…”

“Be careful,” Tanner reminds them quietly. “We do not know who is listening. Later.”

‘Later’ is less than half an hour, in the form of M and a car and a series of directions, while Q starts to work out how to hack something that is already hacking him by virtue of being perpetually watching, and it involves some rather frightening convulsions of code and the quiet terror that they will not get there in time.

M is confident. Q wishes he could say the same.

Bond materialises, as he is wont to do, along with Swann. Bond looks a little the worse for wear, but there will be time for questions later; after all, they all know that Blofeld and Bond have a history, and Q has no doubt that Bond’s recent past has involved a lot of pain.
As has Madeleine’s. She is years older than when Q saw her in Austria.

She is also painfully, obviously in love with Bond. Bond is reciprocating, and it takes a little while for Q to figure it out: this is his get-out clause. This is how he will disappear, as Q has asked him to. All it takes is an obvious reason; he falls in love, he runs away. Bond has done it before. Bond knows MI6 will not chase him, not with something like this.

All the same, it sends a spike of livid jealousy and anger straight into Q’s body, lancing him open. Neither he nor Bond make any comment.

It is so fucking unfair that Bond can do this to him.

Eve, Tanner and Q exchange looks between them. They head out to waiting cars, Q keeping his head down and walking away from Bond and Madeleine without looking back; it is only when Madeleine walks in the opposite direction that Q looks, watches.

This was not a part of Bond’s plan. It is written into him.

It may make things more complex, but at least he no longer has her attached to his side, testing Q’s resolve by virtue of smiles and lingering touches that make Q very much want to chop her hands off.

(Q hears the wet snipping of secateurs as an after-echo, and knows precisely what he will do with Madeleine Swann when all of this is over).

For now, Q is primarily concerned with ensuring Nine Eyes does not take off. M is concentrating on C. Eve is backup. Tanner is the walking encyclopaedia of locations and names and allies and passwords – the man has an eidetic memory, after all – and between them, they start driving.

At which point, things go very wrong.

It is the moment a bullet shatters Q’s window that he realises there is a very good chance that he is going to die. That Spectre have already won, and they are fighting shadows that have shadows of their own, people with far more information and far more resources and Q only has a laptop and the knowledge that he is very, very, very good at his job.

Q has never known terror before this moment.

Jim waits in the wings, watching the building opposite; by now, Madeleine Swann will have been installed, and Bond abducted. Spectre were kind enough to warn him what would happen: they will try and destroy M and the assorted cavalry, but they cannot guarantee it.

Max Denbigh is dispensable to Spectre, and knows it – which is, ultimately, why Max Denbigh must die. Max Denbigh has only borrowed power; when Jim returns to his waiting glory, he will have enough power to destroy what is left of Spectre.

(Not all that much, it would seem, given that there is a smoking hole in the middle of a desert that had served as Spectre’s base of operations. Oops.)

Jim watches a car with shattered windows pull up in front of the glass doors.

Showtime.
Q is typing to save his life and his job and his future and Jim. Terrified, he glances up at the ostentatiously large clock with an ostentatiously obvious countdown and tries to remember how to breathe as he finally slips into the mainframe and is faced with a nightmare of coding that he half-recognises and mercifully knows what to do with.

The problem is time. The problem is that there is no time. The problem is that Q is swallowing back the fact that he may not make it in time.

Max Denbigh enters his office.

M is sitting placidly. Q is busy working, strings of code, but he glances up when Jim enters and would have given an insubordinate wave if he wasn’t a) playing a role and b) scared out of his wits about the non-existent remaining time.

Minutes. There are minutes left.

Next door, Max and M are facing off. M is winning, obviously. Max is less than delighted.

In Q’s head, there is a subtle click.

It returns him to the way he had always been, with Jim: nothing is frightening, when you are the one to fear. Q had never been even slightly concerned with time before, with being caught, with consequences; there were none. Q had skated above it all without effort and without fault.

This is Q, the Q before he had been medicated into being well-balanced and a hard worker and very MI6. This is the Q who watched and smiled thinly as he destroyed entire worlds that were sat at his fingertips.

Seconds left.

Click.

The calm swallows him, and Q rattles off a few more lines of code, and he can feel the control that he has in his body, that has lain dormant for a long time, that had been replaced with self-doubt and concern and emotions that have no place in his head.

A pause.

The countdown is stopped. Nine Eyes has been averted.

Now, Q moves onto the trickier bits: nudging Nine Eyes over to Jim’s private systems, linking them all into Q’s own systems, the Database and all the tendrils interconnecting without notice.

Q glances up, and sees M and Max in some form of tussle.

This is it. Q gets up quickly, ready and waiting.

The glass shatters. Jim falls.

Q does not feel fear. There is nothing to fear. Q knows his designs are stable – Jim will be very bruised, may have a broken bone or two, but will certainly live – and the cables that kept the netting up will be immediately released, so when M looks over the side (which he does after a long frozen second of disbelief; Q had been counting on that heartbeat of hesitation) the only sight to see is the body beneath.

If M had waited around to look closer, he would have known instantly – but he does not. After all,
he has no reason to think that Max Denbigh had plotted out his own demise and successfully feigned it by falling onto semi-transparent netting.

The tricky bit is happening beneath them. Q keeps M occupied, talking hysterically about code and Nine Eyes, and they walk down the circular stairs with Q insistently bleating to keep his attention while M asks questions to ensure everything has worked.

It has. Q will need to spend a little while longer organising all of the transfers, but he has basic access to every strand of Nine Eyes – and more importantly, Spectre does not.

Tanner confirms Max Denbigh is dead.

Q holds a half-second of mourning; Max Denbigh had, for all his faults, been a fairly fun diversion in the realms of MI6.

But this means Jim is back, and that is everything.

“Fucking hell.”

Q does not mean to swear. Q does not mean to jump about in the foot in the air and stare with utter disbelief as, across the river, everything explodes. Literally everything explodes. It makes Silva seem childish in comparison. It makes every explosion in the history of the world seem a touch irrelevant.

“Where’s Bond?” he asks M, asks Tanner, asks Eve.

The general consensus: he was in that building.

Q stands, stranded. “Is he dead?” he asks pointlessly, a question nobody can answer. “Also – is that a helicopter?”

Everything seems to happen at once, and yet slower than anybody could imagine. Behind them, Jim is being carted away by some of his associates, helpfully dressed as ambulance staff with fake ID cards, ready to emerge whenever he fancies.

“You have to admit he has style,” Tanner comments drolly, and indicates the speedboat with – of course – James Bond, firing at the helicopter with surprisingly good aim for somebody who, not all that long ago, had failed his tests with legendary aplomb. “We should probably intervene.”

Tanner seems to spark everybody into action; all of them bundle into a car, watch the helicopter crash into the bridge, and follow them up.

By the time they arrive, Bond – and the crumpled figure of Blofeld – are mere inches from one another. Bond is holding a gun. Blofeld is half-dead, by the look of him.

Madeleine Swann waits at the opposite end of the bridge to Q.

Disappear, Q had asked him. Bond had replied with a kiss that seared Q’s skin and lips, burnt him, consumed him.

Swann is an incidental, and a useful one, and this is exactly right. Nobody will question Bond’s decision. This is it, this is how to disappear, and Q watches while parts of himself burn as Bond turns away to Swann and leaves Q behind.

The night air is fucking freezing.

The rest is just clean-up. Q is allowed to go home relatively early; he is the unsung hero of the hour,
and they want him back in Q-branch first thing in the morning to deal with the aftermath.

Q considers ignoring them, and going straight back to MI6 – but then, if he goes home, he can take his laptop and continue working on the Nine Eyes integration without disturbance. It will be a lot of fun to see just how much he now has control over.

When Q reaches his flat, he can immediately tell that Jim has broken in. It is definitely Jim – firstly, nobody else is that audacious and secondly, nobody else would have survived it – and so Q heaves out something of a sigh and slips in. “Jim?”

“Honey, I’m home!”, crows a voice from the living room; Q walks along, kicking off his shoes en route and dispensing with the parka. Jim is sat with his feet up on the coffee table, bandages covering a good part of his left-hand side, extraordinarily large mug in hand, filled with what looks distinctly like not-tea or indeed coffee. In fact, Q would go so far as to say it is his very old and very lovely whiskey that he was saving for a special occasion.

Few situations are quite as special as the death of an alias, so Q lets it slide. “And for me?” he asks; Jim wordlessly slides him a champagne flute of whiskey – Q doesn’t own any champagne glasses, but elects to not comment – and the pair clink them together. “Cheers. Congratulations.”

“It’s been fun,” he says happily. Q notes that he still has blood in his hair. Full credit where due: it is real blood, blood which will be analysed and match the dataprints of Max Denbigh (deceased). The body has already been processed, and through a paperwork error will be cremated earlier than anticipated. In fact, it is probably burning as they speak.

“You are an arsehole.”

Jim grins. “Yep. But wasn’t it brilliant?”

Q dips his head in acknowledgement. “You owe me. I could have let you die, you realise.”

“You would never,” Jim purrs. “You don’t do that sort of thing. I know that. You know that. It’s why I like you, Q.”

Q smirks. “So you broke the arm?”

“Left arm, three ribs, another two cracked,” he says happily, indicating the bandaged arm and running a hand briefly across the planes of his bandaged chest. “Altogether could have been worse.”

“Indeed,” Q agrees, as he all but drains his glass and promptly refills it. “I need a favour, by the way “Ooh, do tell?”

“Madeleine Swann. Kill her for me.”

Jim’s smile is a live animal. “Jealous?”

Q nods once, simply. “It doesn’t have to be lingering,” he clarifies. “I just want her out of the way. In fact, she really doesn’t merit lingering. A quick and efficient one will do.”

“Consider it done,” Jim agrees. He stands, pads on bare feet into the kitchen; Q listens to him open and close every single cupboard, drawer, fridge, freezer. Jim works his way clockwise around it, judging by the order of sounds, before finally conceding defeat and returning to the living room. “You have no food.”
“I have *some* food,” Q retorts calmly, filling up a third champagne flute of whiskey, dimly aware of the blurriness coaxing its way into his vision. “I just haven’t stocked up on your favourites. I always forget what a whinging bastard you are.”

“Pizza?”

Q’s smile is small and absurd. “Yes, but you’re supposed to be dead, so I’ll have to make the calls,” he reminds; Jim blinks. He had, for a very brief moment, not considered that in the slightest.

It is to be the first of Jim’s many, many deaths.
It is the middle of a perfectly normal Wednesday afternoon when Jim is plucked off the streets by a team from Her Majesty’s Secret Service.

Really, Jim is surprised it took them this long.

“I will only speak to Mycroft Holmes.”

Q is MI6, not MI5, and so generally cares very little for domestic matters. In fact, he would not have heard of Jim’s incarceration had Mycroft not made the rather calculated move of putting Bond on the extraction team to bring him in.

“Mycroft, what are you playing at?” Q asks with irritation that borders on anger. “A home soil abduction of somebody who is operating internationally – I have needed to keep very careful eyes on Moriarty, and you’ve gone over my head.”

“Yes, I have,” Mycroft replies placidly. He is silent for a moment. Q waits, the line crackling brief static. “I know, Q.”

Unseen, Q’s body rolls on livid instinct. “Precisely what do you know?”

“I do not understand your reasoning, but I know that you and James Moriarty have a form of relationship – given his instalment in the alias Max Denbigh, and your lack of intercession…”

“… Mycroft, you’re being absurd…”

“Quiet,” Mycroft snaps, and Q bottles his sparkling anger for a moment because Mycroft is losing his legendary control, again. “Given that you were the sole reason for Nine Eyes not being launched, and were imperative in the destruction of the organisation known as Spectre, I am prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt. However, I do feel it necessary to step in. Not to mention Sherlock. He is fragile, under Moriarty’s influence.”

Q thinks to the pool. “He is fragile in any instance. Why Moriarty?”

“Do not patronise me,” Mycroft tells him, voice brittle with Mycroft’s form of anger. Mycroft is so rarely riled that Q cannot help but find it viciously fun; Mycroft hasn’t been this angry since when he abducted Q back home.

That makes two of them.

His eldest brother’s voice drones on: “I have allowed your fraternisation…”

“Fraternisation?” Q interrupts, his voice perfectly calm despite the unbelievable rage just under his skin. “Mycroft. You will remove yourself from my interests, both domestic and international. I will allow you to interview Moriarty. If you interfere with anything of mine again, you will seek permission through official channels.”

Mycroft does not attempt to argue. He has no need; he won this battle simply in that Q called to harangue him. Mycroft knows that there is an intangible dynamic between his brothers and James
Moriarty. He will doubtless take the opportunity, while Moriarty is interrogated, to try and understand quite what that dynamic is.

“… was that Mycroft Holmes?”

Bond’s voice breaks through unexpectedly.

Bond did precisely as Q had asked: disappeared for several months, using a relationship with Madeleine Swann as his reasoning. While off radar, Bond had performed several tasks and organised a number of things, met contacts, organised set-ups, all under Q’s orders, tidying things up from the remnants of Spectre and setting the groundwork for Jim when he heads off-continent (which he will do in the not-too-distant future).

For reasons known only to himself, Bond seems quite happy to have just done as Q asked, without question or pause. Bond must know it is not legal, or above board. Perhaps he even suspects criminality. Evidently, he doesn’t care. Perhaps he even enjoys it. Bond has always had a penchant for going off piste.

(Q receives a knot of blood soaked blonde hair in the post, in a pretty beribboned box, as is Jim’s custom. Swann is no longer a problem. Her disappearance prompts Bond’s return to MI6, and all is now well with the world).

“Yes,” Q replies, after a heartbeat. Bond’s eyebrow rises pointedly. “We go back.”

“And Moriarty?”

Q smiles very slightly. “We go back, too.”

Bond’s stare is very level, too level to be safe. “James Moriarty, who happened to be Max Denbigh? If you go back, how did you not…”

“… The man is an international criminal mastermind, of course I’ve been aware of his actions. The face was irrelevant, I was only interested in his work.” Q interjected, before the conversation turned dangerous. “Until recently, we had no face to attach to the name. Nobody had any idea Denbigh was anything other than legitimate. But that is hardly the point: I personally think it crassly stupid to extract him at this stage; he is the central link to dozens of criminal enterprises, which I would prefer to keep an eye on. My observations are more complicated when the common factor is eliminated.”

“That makes sense,” Bond muses.

Moriarty’s extraction had been a very simple thing, from Bond’s perspective. Moriarty had not objected, although Bond had been healthily aware of Sebastian Moran’s potential proximity. Bond knew of Moran from years previously; good British marksmen are hard to come by. Moran outclassed Bond as a sniper, although his close combat skills were markedly lower.

Thinking about it, Moriarty had seemed unfazed to the extent that he almost, almost seemed to have expected them. Bond simply had the long moment of palpable disbelief upon realising that Max Denbigh is quite definitely not dead, and is also not Max Denbigh.

In any case, the extraction occurred without incident, and Moriarty is now locked in the darkest bowels of the MI buildings awaiting further instruction.

Q hates Mycroft for the pettiness of sending Bond. It was a silly, childish way to illustrate that Mycroft had finally figured out what he should have deduced years previously: it was Jim, it was always Jim.
Mycroft cannot prove it. Q will not confirm it.

“You don’t want to know,” Q warns Bond, who is still palpably curious. “We both have our own histories. Do not probe mine, I will not probe yours. Moriarty is my business.”

Bond shrugs. “And mine, if I am sent to interrogate,” he points out quietly. Ultimately, Mycroft outranks Q, and if Mycroft decides to make Bond lead the interrogation then there is nothing Q will be able to do. “Mycroft…”

“Is also very much my business, and my sibling,” Q tells him; it seems pointless to conceal, given the conversation that has transpired and Q’s obvious weakness when it comes to Sherlock. “Do not ask me about him. Sherlock Holmes is, by extension, is also my brother. Hence the somewhat inflated interest in Moriarty.”

“I had no idea of your relationship with him.”

Something in Q bristles at ‘relationship’. It is a gross understatement, and overstatement, and he remembers telling Sherlock that they had never been in love. He thinks of Jim asking whether he is in love with Bond.

He remembers a lifetime of never being ‘in love’, and wonders what precisely love is supposed to feel like.

“Okay James, road trip,” Q says brightly, and the screaming is everywhere at once. “We’re going to interrogate James Moriarty before Mycroft has a chance. Ready?”

Bond blinks, and says something Q truly didn’t expect: “You never call me James.”

“Pity, seeing as it’s your name,” Q returns, reaching for his coat and stuffing keys into the pockets. Apparently, Bond has no problem with Q’s new plan for the evening. “I also need to calm down, so you and I are going to the shooting range to deal with your currently less than ideal scores. If you outshoot me, I will outfit you with a new car, personal full spec. If I win, you get the pleasure of two hours per day compulsory practise for the next fortnight. Then we repeat the exercise.”

“You want me to have another car?” Bond asks, with understandable incredulity.

Q shrugs vaguely. “Perhaps a little bit,” he admits. “It’s been something of a side project, given that the Aston you’re currently enjoying is a touch behind the times. I’m giving you something else pretty. Not as pretty as the DB10, but I’m never giving you anything that expensive ever again – so you’re getting this one as a reward for when you’re no longer inept.”

Bond stands to follow Q, shrugging on his own overcoat. “I think I’m insulted.”

“Don’t think too much, it doesn’t suit you,” Q jibes back, a perfect parallel to Jim and Moran, such a very long time ago. “Now – off we go. You will do as you are told, and this goes no further than us two and whichever poor bastards are on guard at present.”

Bond raises an eyebrow. “And them?”

Q fixes Bond with a cool stare. “They will not be a problem,” he says simply, and Bond accepts it as he must. “Do we have an understanding?”

There is a long moment where Bond is still assessing. Q can see it, the cogs churning in grey matter, the comparable quietness of somebody else’s mind. Bond knows that there is so much more to Q than anybody would like to believe, or anybody has seen.
“Yes.”

Bond does not underestimate him. For the first time, Q is not underestimated. Bond, unlike Jim or M or Boothroyd or Mycroft, the casts of thousands, even Sherlock – none of them but Bond.

The screaming in Q’s head abruptly stops. Q flies at Bond and kisses him with unforced passion, almost knocking him back into the sofa. The steady bulk of Bond’s frame just about keeps them upright, before Bond lifts Q half into the air and chucks him backwards, the sofa rocking in confusion for a moment before Bond is all over Q once again and the sofa returns to an uncertain standstill.

They fall off the sofa in the end.

When both are spent and Q’s hair is irretrievably destroyed after Bond’s fingers have ruffled through it a thousand times over, Q sits up, grabs his trousers, and gets dressed while Bond is still attempting to work out what on earth is happening.

“Where are you going?”

Q looks at Bond in frank confusion. “Where do you think? Work to do.”

Post-coital and equally confused, Bond cannot help but gape a bit. “But…”

“We had sex. It was a good use of time. The lower cells have a guard change at half past midnight, so we should arrive perfectly in time to intercept them. I am then spared two murders and clean-up, part of which you would have been responsible for.”

Bond doesn’t blanch in the slightest. (Q smiles, an internal little thing). Q has actually done him a favour; what limited conscience Bond still has recoils a just a very little from killing men who were doing their job – for Queen and Country, it must be added – so avoiding murder is a popular move.

“Are we still going to shoot tonight?” Bond asks, reaching for his trousers, “Only, I could really do with a drink.”

Q lets out a sigh between his teeth. “Alright, bring the whiskey – we’ll drink when I’m done with Moriarty, not before, and yes, we’re still going to be shooting. You drink on missions, so one would hope it’ll be fairly reflective.”

Bond picks up the whiskey, and – Q’s glare notwithstanding – takes a long swallow, Adam’s apple bobbing obscenely. Q does not partake, but notes Bond’s insubordination with another fluttering thrill of interest.

It is going to be a fun evening.

-  

“Hello,” Jim waves.

It is quarter to one in the morning. Q and Jim have not seen one another in several months. The ribs and arms have more or less healed, although being beaten about by irritable interrogators who have managed to get sweet fuck all out of him probably hasn’t helped.

Jim is bright and bubbly, sat bolt upright in the chair he has been chained to, without the slightest suggestion of tiredness and with an obnoxious grin plastered across his face. As far as anybody can tell, he has been expecting Q all along.
“You’re late,” Jim purrs, licking his lips eloquently.

“No, I’m not,” Q contradicts easily, sliding into the chair opposite. “Guard changes at half past, not at midnight. I’m perfectly on time, and no bodies – far cleaner than any of your attempts to break into this building previously, I might add.”

Jim’s eyebrows furrow. “How did I miss that?” he asks, with deep trenches of real concern, an uncommon crinkle of his forehead. He has failed at something. Something so obvious and so simple, and he missed it. “How?”

Q shrugs sideways, smiling in a way that makes Jim’s eyes dilate pure black. “You fucked up,” he says shortly, not inclined to be kind while Jim plays silly buggers. “Not your first time. You have been getting sloppier for years on things like this – I’m not surprised you’ve started to miss nuances. Now, onto the more immediate problem of your incarceration – I really could have done with a warning.”

“You didn’t deserve one,” Jim spits, abruptly sizzling with flat hatred. “You can manage without. You always manage without.”

“Yes, I do, but that doesn’t mean I’m not extremely irritated.”

Jim’s eyes had been wandering. They snap to Q. “Is James coming?” he asks, trilling. “Your Mr Bond. Has Big Brother pushed you? S’the only reason you’d be here so quickly, hmm?”

The drawl is what gives him away: Jim has been drugged. Q should have checked properly. The dilation is both anger and something more. “Sodium thiopental,” Q recognises, with only a shadow of a question; Q knows the habits of the agent leading Moriarty’s interrogations, and knows he likes testing out drugs, with particular emphasis on ‘truth serums’ or equivalent. A low dose, but enough to render Jim a little spaced out. It is probably in the last stages of wearing off by now.

Q has no idea how Jim is still conscious.

“Did it work?”

Jim smiles dully. “Nope.”

The ‘p’ pops out and bounces. “I was there for that one, wasn’t I?” Q muses, remembering the stretch of time – about six months into their makeshift acquaintance – when Jim had started trying out all sorts of drugs, measuring the effects. Sherlock had done the same thing.

Slightly less auspiciously, he had then become an addict, but his notes had provided Q with an excellent collection of first-hand accounts. Jim later completed the collection, either through testing himself, or testing on a wide variety of subjects.

All had been entered into the Grand Database, as they had once called it – Q and Jim smile in perfect unison – and filed for later usage. Sodium thiopental was one of the first things Jim had tried out in any serious way.

(As a point of reference: truth serums are absolute bollocks. Both Q and Jim knew from the outset, but it doesn’t change the popularity of ‘truth serums’ in a lot of interrogations).

Q remembers Jim using it on himself first; he had scaled up doses until he was fairly accustomed to the effects and was growing vaguely immune. He did the same with several poisons.

Jim now injects himself once in a while, just to keep topped up. He chalks off two or three days in
his calendar, and makes himself incredibly unwell – Moran watches, a strange and sweet vigil, ready with all manner of medical supplies if required – for the sake of moments like this.

All the same, being dosed up with large quantities of barbiturates is always likely to make anybody groggy.

Jim hums, sits back slightly. “All a bit unnecessary,” he continues; the more he talks, the more tired he seems. “It was Big Brother, hmm? Must’ve been. Must have been.”

Every blink is languid, every thought is tripping on itself with the hypnotic tick of an unseen clock. “You look terrible,” Q tells him frankly. “I do not intend to intervene in your treatment here.”

“I didn’t ask you to,” Jim replies impertinently. “I didn’t ask you to come, you just came.”

His eyes wander. Q watches him, considering what else could be in Jim’s system; there is something else off about him, but Jim is always a little bit off, so this could just be Jim being Jim.

There is perfect silence. It feels like home.

Jim drums his fingers against the table. It ruins things, but then, Jim never could handle silence. It is difficult to believe that so little has changed over the years; that they are both still so young, and so fragile.

They were so good with one another. The leaps they have managed over the years, while facilitating one another, have been really beyond imagining; Q still remembers the click in his head, the moment he remembered what it was to be with Jim, to take the screaming in his head and hone it into something useful. Q is humming in the sense of calm and sod just his job, he could take over the world in his pyjamas like this.

Jim knows he is better with Q. Jim has known since the moment Q entered his life, and never more so than in this moment: Q has already proved that his fostered amorality still exists in full force. Jim is quietly moving from extraordinary to stratospheric, and is safe. Q can keep him safe. If he wants.

It is curious to realise that Jim is oddly dependent on Q. Jim has made a point of never being dependent; and yet, Q has facilitated him from the beginning. Q has always existed somewhere in the background, ticking, tap tap tapping his silent protection.

“You never answered my question.”

Q hums back to attention. “Which one?”

“Is Mr Bond coming back?” Jim asks again, mocking, and at least they both agree that Mycroft had been remarkably childish in his behaviour. “I’d like to have a little chat with him, now we know who each other is. Didn’t count as Max. But then, I can wait.” A small glint. “He can wait.”

There is an edge to the singsong tone that bodes ill. “Jim, what have you done?” Q asks, low and lethal. Jim’s slightly glassy eyes fix on Q. “Jim.”

“Where is Mr Bond, these days?”

“Around,” Q replies evasively, tingling anticipation creeping up his spine. “Jim. Tell me.”

Jim grimaces, spine rolling with sheer repulsion. “You sound pathetic.”

Bond is important. Q can feel his pulse come sharper, quicker. Bond lingers in the mind like
Sherlock does; untouchable somehow, and an instinct in Q rises to protect them. Q knows Jim, knows his jealousy, and knows that Q is to Jim what Sherlock is to Q. But then, Jim to Sherlock is another dizzying layer that keeps Sherlock, unwittingly, safe.

Jim to Bond has no connection, and there is Q’s fear. Jim has no reason to keep Bond alive.

“Do you remember,” Jim muses, “when Sherlock went back to rehab again? And you cried.”

Q’s face turns hard. “Vividly.”

It is Q’s worst and best nightmare. The night blackens, and Q can still see him, Jim’s slim body curving into impossible shapes as he begged (his body begs, his pride will allow nothing more) for it to stop. Jim never begs. Q never cries. Both did, and Q wakes sometimes with a gasp in his mouth for the memory of slitting perfectly along a bone to see the white shine hypnotically out, for the strange gargling sound from Jim’s throat while a thin cord sliced into it, the stain of blood that trickled in the indents of rib from the sternum in an unforgettable pattern of trickles and dashes and starts.

Jim had never looked so beautiful. “Bet fucking him is nowhere near as good as that,” he whispers.

Nothing in Q’s life has ever come close to that. James Bond included.

Q feels his pulse flare, and his cock is twitching at the induced memory. Q knows how Jim’s lips taste. Q knows every plane of Jim’s body, the markings, and has left a good number himself from that single event and many more besides.

Looking at Jim now, Q wishes he still knew everything, but knows he does not. Jim’s body is patterned with new lines now, ones that age and opportunity have printed into him. Jim is no longer Q’s.

“It will never happen again,” Q tells Jim, with awful quiet, and he half-means it all, and knows he considering something with so much more gravity than Spectre or their childhood or anything. “It cannot happen again.”

Jim’s eyes are bright black. “But sweetheart, it can,” he murmurs back, the lulling softness of a lover; in these moments, Jim’s accent purrs with the home that was never a home, the one he left behind so very long ago. “You know it can. You’re not scared of endings any more.”

It is true: Q kills, now. Quick, necessary kills. Never for fun, never like Jim does.

But, he could.

A small giggle from Jim; he can see it in Q, the consideration, the knowledge that he really, truly could. The screaming in his head can be set free, without a conscience to trouble him. It is how Jim makes sense of his silence, and it can be how Q makes sense of the noise.

“Try it,” Jim coaxes. “With me. Come with me. We’ll find something worth your time, and go to town. You know you want to.”

Yes, Q does. On the fringes of his memory, there is the blissful and beautiful quiet that had settled through him while Jim had come perilously close to dying, watching a body tilt closer and closer and closer to death, kept him balancing on the edge and never letting him topple over.

Q is not a murderer. A killer, yes, but not a murderer.
“No,” he therefore replies, simple and blunt. Jim does not respond: his gaze is flat and mocking, because he knows that Q will be considering this for the rest of the foreseeable future, and he suspects (knows) that eventually, Q will concede defeat.

They have a suspended moment just watching one another, waiting.

“Why now?” Q asks eventually, breaking into their silence before their time runs out completely. “Why did Mycroft choose now?”

“They’re asking about the keycode.”

As he says it, Jim’s eyes flare, wide and dramatic.

Q smiles; their little secret now, their perfect and beautiful secret.

Because there is a keycode.

James Moriarty, however, does not possess it.

-

Jim smiles from the moment he hears the door open. The perfect picture of unhinged; eyes wide, darting around to stare at nothing, lips parting in a lulling smile that sings without voice.

“Mycroft,” he purrs, drifting through emotional inflexions. “How are you?”

“Mr Moriarty,” Mycroft intones, sitting in the chair opposite, schooling his features into polite impassivity while Jim’s eyes dance. “What do you have for me today?”

Jim grins with manic intensity. Mycroft remains predictably unperturbed, but then, Jim doesn’t expect anything less. “Depends on what you’ll give me,” he parries lightly, “and call me Jim, darling.”

Mycroft raises an eyebrow, and Jim lets out a flippant sigh, adopting a look of innocent naivety. Mycroft doesn’t play along. Unlike with Sherlock, there is no posturing. It is not quite a game. It is an information exchange, with laws rather than rules, ones that cannot and will not be broken or bent by either party without consequence.

There is a moment of silence, anticipation; Jim just waits, happily aware that he is dictating these little meetings.

“He detests family holidays,” Mycroft says simply.

The new smile is blinding, and it is easy enough to ignore the splits in his lip and the bruise snaking cancerously over his left eye and across his cheekbone. It has to hurt, but Jim cannot feel it: he is winning. Again.

“Splendid. JSB,” Jim returns, delighting in the mental acrobatics of being cryptic. “Why does he?”

“None of us were suited to family occasions. What is JSB?”

“An acronym,” Jim answers swiftly, obnoxiously. Mycroft looks extremely unimpressed, but does not press it. Jim is not feeling very cooperative today. “As a child, his favourite holiday?”

“Christmas,” Mycroft informs him easily, flippant information that is easy to divulge. “An acronym relating to what aspect?”
Jim considers the answer to that for a very brief moment. “The source,” he replies, a little disarmingly: Johann Sebastian Bach. It is obscure enough, but also very honest; at one stage soon, binary code will be tapped to one of Jim’s favourite pieces of classical music.

Abruptly, Jim remembers a concert. Q had finally agreed to go, after weeks of cajoling. They play Rossini. Q is impassively mesmerised, and Jim remembers falling utterly into the folds of music. At the time, Jim played no instruments; he was a good singer, but music required access to expensive instruments that Jim had no time for. He would later dabble with a variety, before settling on the piccolo. It is practically pocket-sized. Jim can have music wherever he goes.

Q has a beautiful voice, but his music is the tap tap tapping, perfectly rhythmic and perfectly timed. A metronome. Jim used to dance to the tune of Q’s tapping, a waltz, a gentle nocturne that beckoned him to sleep on nights where Q can see and hear nothing but his work.

Jim’s thoughts meander back to Mycroft’s question, the answer he has given, the next question he shall ask. Both Mycroft and Jim know that the other is being very evasive today. “His favourite Christmas gift?”

“The coat I gave him,” Mycroft tells him, almost fondly. Jim finds him very amusing to read; he has echoes of both his brothers, a strange amalgam. Unlike Sherlock, Mycroft has nothing to prove, and so the melodramatic flair is missing. Unlike Q, he feigns at having empathy; Q never truly bothered. Mycroft shows the cracks of emotion he feels are apt, nothing more or less, and it is calculated.

Mycroft is an extraordinary actor. A career path he presumably felt was beneath him, but Jim has never seen anybody feign with such eloquent precision.

“… have you abducted James Bond?”

Their laws: Jim does not ask about Q. Mycroft does not ask about Q. Neither asks why the other wants information. Mycroft asks questions, gives small degrees of information on Sherlock and Sherlock alone. Jim gives him fragments of information in return.

Mycroft has overstepped. Jim falls instantly, deathly silent.

The session is over.

“Good evening,” Mycroft nods, standing fluidly and retrieving his umbrella. “A pleasure as always, Mr Moriarty.”

Dull, but the unbelievable intelligence makes Jim’s mouth water slightly. Jim knows he is pathetically outclassed. Mycroft can doubtless read every facet of James Moriarty – including every façade he possesses – in the space of a glance.

“Afternoon,” Jim calls after him brightly.

Mycroft pauses incrementally. There are no clocks in the room. Nobody has been keeping office hours; they have been attempting to play with Moriarty’s sense of time from the outset, ever since an unusual cock-up in guard scheduling on his first night of captivity.

Jim is still smiling as the door closes. Mycroft’s watch had been reflected in the infinite shining surfaces of his cell. Jim knows it is half past four in the afternoon, and knows Mycroft lies.

It is nice to have a decent sparring partner. The morons they send to batter information out of him are very boring, very ordinary. Mycroft breaks up the monotony, even if it is exceptionally slow progress on both parts.
The door opens again. “Hello boys,” he murmurs sensually, and waits.

- 

Bond has disappeared.

Q knows. Obviously, he knows. Bond disappeared very shortly after Q and Jim’s little meeting, and his entire department are currently chasing shadows in the quietly certain knowledge (although technically unsubstantiated as yet) that Moriarty is responsible.

Moriarty, or more accurately, one of his denizens.

Thus, Q wearily seeks permission to see Jim.

Mycroft forbids it.

Q is incandescently angry. Mycroft promptly finds his life considerably more difficult – his phone, his laptop, his desktop, all start to pack up in the space of an afternoon – but naturally, Q does not accept responsibility. It can never be traced to him.

It is Mycroft’s fault. From the outset of this little episode with Jim, he has been petty and quietly vengeful. Mycroft holds grudges. Q once fell off his chair, laughing at Mycroft. Q had been all but kidnapped back into his big brother’s tender loving care, and spent the next few weeks and months and years mocking him for not realising.

Mycroft knows.

It should frighten Q more, but it somehow doesn’t. It makes Mycroft more annoying – the git is unendurably smug, and has far too much power – but Q isn’t frightened, because Mycroft has no way of proving anything.

There are whole years of a life that Mycroft can never touch.

“… hmm, are you planning to liberate me?” Jim asks, as Q walks in, looking vaguely harassed. Q slumps into the chair opposite, bag falling off his shoulder with an echoing clunk. “Not your day, poppet?”

Q looks up at Jim with weary irritation. “You’ve carved my brother’s name everywhere in here. It’s a bit… well, I’m not fond of your interior design tastes. I also feel a tiny bit abandoned.”

Jim blinks owlishly. “You what?”

Every once in a while, Q actually employs some of the techniques he learnt through a number of years with an exceptionally patient therapist. One of which is being open and honest about his feelings, or at the very least, open and honest about the feelings he thinks he ought to have in a given situation.

Q isn’t entirely sure any longer whether he is lying or making it up, when it comes to emotion. After a while, he figured that was the point: feign at enough emotions and eventually you’ll buy into it.

And thus he tells the greatest criminal mastermind in the Western (and parts of the Eastern) world that he feels somewhat abandoned by said mastermind carving his beloved elder brother’s name repeatedly into a wall.

(Nobody can work out what Moriarty has done it with, which is the most impressive. Sheet metal has
been gouged, clearly with something, but given that they have searched Moriarty quite extensively on more than one occasion they can only surmise the man is somehow performing magic.)

“I feel abandoned,” Q repeats, with a little more certainty.

Really, Q doesn’t feel very much at all. “… you don’t feel abandoned,” Jim tells him slowly, accurately, bemused. “Why are you saying that?”

When Q is on medication and attending therapy and working hard, he genuinely might have some fleeting sense of genuine offence or upset at Jim in general.

As it happens, he is doing none of the above, and it has managed to make him realise several things including – but not limited to – that he has somehow managed to fall in love with James Bond. Which makes his abduction a little problematic.

“Because you ought to know,” Q replies, a dash primly, and sighs again. “Sod it. I have been trying very hard to live a life without you, and I was managing it. Then you get me tied up in the Spectre debacle, and now, you make my life considerably harder and abduct my boyfriend who, by the way, was pretty instrumental in disbanding Spectre for you, if you recall?”

“He was distracting you,” Jim informs him unrepentantly. “You’re better than him.”

Jim has an amazing way of sounding hypnotic. The melody of his voice becomes a lullaby. Mocking, coaxing, seductive; he can speak across octaves, lifting in a scratching, cruel soprano before shattering to a bass purr.

Q ignores it to the best of his abilities. “I want him back, regardless.”

“No.”

“Jim.”

“I said no.”

Q hisses with frustration. “What, precisely, do you want from me?” he asks sharply. “I can’t break you out of here. Mycroft already knows far too much, and he will track both of us down if I try. I have given you everything you could possibly want, and then some. So what, exactly, do you want from me now?”

Jim looks at him for a very long time.

“I want,” he whispers, and Q – he knows he shouldn’t be drawn in, he shouldn’t listen, but god damn it Jim is unbelievably enticing – hangs on every word.

“Yes?”

Neither’s eyes deviate so much as an inch.

“… to disappear.”
Chapter 12

Bond is delivered back with minimal fuss.

Naturally, he is less than impressed at having been kidnapped in the first place, but the point is somewhat moot. Bond has actually never been a hostage before, not in the classic sense, so this is just something else he can chalk up to experience on the bizarre CV of his life thus far.

“Sebastian Moran.”

“I know,” Q replies, without looking up. “But you’re back, which is delightful. I want a full breakdown and write-up by the end of tomorrow, full detailing of precisely what happened.”

“It’s good to see you too.”

Q finally looks at him, and smiles something genuine. “I’m glad you’re back safely,” he tells Bond, shockingly honest. Bond is so surprised by the simple normality of Q’s words and demeanour that he doesn’t question it.

Instead, he moves to Q’s side, and lifts his chin up with a hand. Q lets himself be moved, although his expression is hostile. Bond kisses him, and Q responds, all teeth and terror; Bond knows that Q is not himself, does not question it.

In fact, he rather likes this shade of Q. Bleaker, but there is a sharp adrenaline hiss that appeals to Bond. It is different. Bond suits ‘different’.

Days pass, and Q finds himself sinking deeper. He doesn’t mind. Nobody seems to. Work and life tick onwards, and extracurricular projects (as it were) become a little more prioritised.

Jim has slunk back to where he always belonged, somewhere in the back of Q’s mind. (Elsewhere, Jim smiles at the inaudible tapping of a keyboard, and all is once again in order).

Years have sprawled, and so has the Database. The Database piggybacks MI6, MI5 and Spectre’s individual databases, which doubles Jim’s resources and puts a great deal of people in fairly immediate jeopardy. The sheer, extraordinary scope of the information at Q’s fingertips is intoxicating.

It is now a case of Q preparing for Jim’s release from custody, organising information and even taking over a few things here and there; it is easy enough to be Jim – at least for a little while – given that a good proportion of his work happens remotely, to protect his identity. Spectre will continue to take months to fully unravel – it has been months now, and they are still only beginning – but Q can do the groundwork for Jim to assume control the moment he is released.

And so Q becomes a parody of Jim, and Jim remains incarcerated with Sherlock’s name carved into every part of him, while Sherlock saunters through his strange little life without the slightest idea what is happening just outside his door.

Bond suspects, but does not ask. Q is inexpressibly grateful for it.

Mycroft, however, has opted to become very much involved in the complex workings of Q’s life and motives. It is not surprising. Mycroft knows, and he is attempting to ‘rescue’ Q, to ‘save’ him from his past mistakes.
“… and you have stopped seeing your therapist…”

“Mycroft, is it physically possible for you to stop interfering?” Q asks, drumming fingers against Bond’s bare arm as he clutches the phone to his ear. “I do not have to answer to you.”

“No, but you do have to answer to M,” Mycroft reminds him, and there is the slightest dash of smugness in his tone. “Who would, I’m sure, be fascinated to hear the full extent of your medical history and your current level of noncompliance. As I understand it, a condition of your appointment as Quartermaster is a clean bill of both physical and psychiatric health…”

Q’s entire body ripples. His fingers dig in harshly. “I’m certain you have looked, and will have seen that I have been entirely signed off,” he informs his eldest brother, his tone betraying nothing of his simmering anger. “Is that all?”

Mycroft pauses. “Q, I would like to see you.”

“No,” Q replies simply. “Anything else?”

“You are my brother. I am concerned about your safety.”

Q relaxes his grip. Bond shoots him a grateful glance which Q doesn’t acknowledge. “I am not your concern. Quite frankly, I never was. You have taken it upon yourself to interfere with my life without my consent, and assume you are in any sense relevant.”

“I am also keeping a careful eye on a man who disappeared for over two years, has had extensive criminal dealings, and appears to be working for James Moriarty.”

The concept is absurd. Q has never been subservient to Jim. If anything – and this is something Jim himself has insinuated in the past – Jim follows Q. Q has a great deal more ostensible power, or at the very least, resources. Jim has intelligence and an imagination that would make most people pass out from instant horror.

Q’s laugh is born of genuine amusement. His brother is wrong, again, and all because he still has absolutely no idea what Q is capable of.

Bond looks mildly alarmed, and it occurs to Q – a little belatedly – that the laugh sounds very much like Jim’s.

A moment of quiet. “I would appreciate a face-to-face meeting,” Mycroft is continuing; Q doesn’t bother with niceties, and simply hangs up while Mycroft is still speaking.

Q knows what is coming. He cannot wait to see Mycroft’s reaction. It promises to be very diverting.

“He keeps calling,” Bond notes, nodding at the phone as Q places it back on the bedside table. “Moriarty?”

Bond asks without judgement or expectation. “Yes,” Q therefore replies, knowing that Bond understands. “Mycroft wants to meet me, presumably to discuss the matter and deduce as much as he is able. I naturally have no interest.”

Bond is not naïve. Mycroft knows that Q has been a fairly prolific criminal in the past. Bond knows (or strongly suspects) the full extent: not merely a criminal, but a criminal force of nature, changing the entire landscape of criminality with James Moriarty at his side. Bond has long-since realised that Q knew full well that Max Denbigh was Moriarty.
Q has precious little in the way of a moral compass. Bond has no idea why Q ever withdrew from the criminal world; he seems to find it a great deal more fun.

“Why are you in MI6?”

It is not an unfair question, and Bond has earned an honest answer. “I was bored,” Q tells him, without inflexion. “It gives me something to do with my time. I am hardly a patriot. It is a complex job, quite frankly helped by amorality. Sacrifice is simple, the mission aims are met, the functions are streamlined – it would serve no purposes to waste good agents, but if it is demanded, I am perfectly happy to allow personnel deaths. Boothroyd was abysmal at it. He cared far too much.”

Bond nods. His eyebrows contract very slightly. Both of them know what he is thinking: Bond is anomalous insofar as Q’s capacity for care, and as a direct result, Bond is dangerous. Regardless of whether he will exploit it or not, Bond has stumbled into a position of unprecedented power. It is why he was abducted – albeit briefly – by Moriarty.

“You will not interfere,” Q notices. It is not a demand. It is a statement of curious fact. Bond never has, nor ever will, have the slightest intention of interfering with Q’s work or projects. “Will you help?”

Queen and Country. Bond has nowhere else to go, and never did; even after more than one vanishing act, spanning several months, he still eventually crawled and crawled back to MI6.

Everybody wonders why Bond keeps coming back. He has had the chance to leave MI6 forever. Disappear, leave no trace. Stay dead, stay with a lover. Everybody wonders why, but they have never quite found the answer.

Simple:

He was bored.

-

Torture is not condoned, officially, by the British Government.

Unofficially, Mycroft finds it an excellent way to extort information.

Jim Moriarty finds it excellent fun, but rather pointless insofar as information extortion, given that people in pain have a delightful (if irritating) habit of lying. Not to mention that regardless of how careful you are, subjects can and do die by accident.

It has taken Jim over a decade to perfect his techniques. He can keep people alive, conscious, coherent. It has taken time and dedication and a hefty dry cleaning bill. It has taken experimentation and risk. It has been the study of a lifetime, and no other alive knows the intimacy of a human body like he does.

Having said that, even the best of torturers lose their temper from time to time. Q always found it very frustrating, especially when they were younger, when Jim had less control and less finesse than he does now.

Mycroft is frankly childish in comparison. The last ‘interrogation’ Jim staged took three weeks. It was slow and careful. The girl knew she would die the moment she told the truth, and not a microsecond earlier. Jim told her this in a voice like treacle.

Jim had to admire her resilience. As promised, the moment she told the truth, she was permitted to
die.

It is awfully enjoyable to play god, to play death. To have perfect control. It is Q’s fascination, but Q never quite managed the practical application. Far too afraid of going too far.

Except that beautiful once, Jim considers, fingers skating over the raised nubs of scars.

Anyway, it matters very little. Mycroft is not a very good interrogator. Jim is not overly impressed. Mycroft is watching from the other side of the two-way mirror, Sherlock’s name caught between them, as Jim blithely ignores everything his interrogators ask of him.

Jim stares into the darkness with a completely impassive expression. His fingers drum the gentle rhythm of Partita No.1, unnoticed, a little quiet tap tap tapping while his body is broken in and out of consciousness. The song hums behind his teeth, unheard.

Sherlock Holmes plays beautifully. An artist. Jim starts to hum Bach’s Sonata no. 1, the notes tripping off his lips. Jim imagines Sherlock, fingers tracing eloquent stories across the throat of his violin, humming along to it, Sherlock’s bass vibrato against the plaintive mourning of his beloved instrument.

Jim realises he has begun to sing aloud, his dead eyes still lost in the darkness, the string-fine lines of Sherlock’s fingers. The two men questioning him look distinctly unnerved, which is a touch annoying; Jim deserves the unflappable, the unreadable. Not a father of three and a divorced ex-bouncer.

“You’re boring,” Jim sings off, still in key. His eyes remain unfocused. “Shoo.”

They leave. Jim has no concept of how much time passes before they do, but the ending is the same: he told them to leave, and they have left.

Mycroft understands that Jim is impervious to physical pain. He moves into physical disorientation: sleep and food deprivation, designed to shift his resolve, confuse him into responding.

It is the only thing that comes close to working. Jim’s eyes remain fluttering shut and open on nothing and nobody, but his speech is a little slurred, and his concentration is shot. Observation capabilities severely curtailed.

Once Jim establishes that he is compromised, he simply decides not to speak whatsoever. All energy goes into the certainty of not speaking, and they get nothing. Not even Mycroft; Jim knows he cannot trust himself around Mycroft in this state.

Mycroft sits opposite, asks questions, and Jim says nothing. He smiles absently. Mycroft seems quietly fascinated, but Jim does not trust his deductive skills. Mycroft could well look bored. Or distracted. Jim cannot know. It is pointless to try.

Eventually, they bring in water, food. Jim tells them it is of insufficient quality – slurred though his words may be – and they blink at him.

They will not, cannot, let him die. Jim knows this. Therefore, he is perfectly able to demand better food, and they – eventually – will realise that they must. If not, Jim will starve, and that is to nobody’s advantage.

Two weeks pass, and Jim is eating fillet steak and chips when Mycroft walks in. “Hello,” he murmurs expressionlessly, bloody steak pooling in front of him. “How are you, Mr Holmes?”
“You have no intention of giving any information. Certainly nothing of note.”

Jim raises an eyebrow. There is something so incredibly dead about him. Extremely thin now, every sinew of him rolling, fathomless black eyes and even a suggestion of sibilance as he speaks: he is serpentine and alien, and Mycroft can imagine the man swallowing his fellows whole.

Mycroft considers.

There are only so many options available. Moriarty will remain under the watchful eye of the UK intelligence services. Mycroft has a collection of trackers, devices and people, who are exceptionally good at their jobs.

Even a man like Moriarty misses things.

(A man like Q does not, but that is a separate matter.)

The pair sit in a surprisingly comfortable silence, both regarding the other. Neither’s gaze or expression flickers. It is watching two minds touch, explore, and acknowledge. There is nothing that will affect James Moriarty; Mycroft is aware that no threats work on a man unafraid of death, who appears willing to die for his information.

Jim does not intend to tell Mycroft that he would never die for something as silly as a keycode. Jim would never die for information. Jim might die just from stubbornness, or arrogance, or curiosity – but not for anything as dull as information.

Mycroft watches him for another long moment.

It is time to move on.

“Alright. Let him go.”

- 

Jim is released back into the world battered, bruised, scarred, and not even close to broken. The information they wanted is still all his. Jim has managed to acquire a great deal more than his captors have.

A mobile phone sits on the coffee table, when Jim ambles back into his primary flat. It has been weeks. Moran greets him without looking up. Jim rather likes him for that.

The moment the phone is switched on, it rings. Jim smiles, licking his lips slightly as he raises it to his ear. “Hello darling.”

“We’re going to dinner. Do precisely as I say.”

Jim hums under his breath, nodding absentmindedly as Q talks him through how to ditch his current MI5 tails, and ruffles Moran’s hair; he shivers under Jim’s hand, a thrill of sensual pleasure rocking through him. Moran has been reduced, in the last few weeks, to his old habits of fucking and killing young prostitutes.

None of them are even vaguely as interesting as Jim, but they pass the time well enough. Jim doesn’t mind. It is nice to know that Moran has hobbies.

When Q hangs up, Jim tosses the phone away, and moans with delight as Moran instantly throws him against the wall and kisses him with the force of a hurricane. Jim buckles into it, body slithering
closer with a low murmur of encouragement, as though they are meeting again like the very first time.

It hurts. It is agony. Jim’s body is a wasteland of Mycroft’s optimism, and every press and scrape and bite from Moran fires every nerve into overdrive, and without notice or warning, Jim is screaming.

Years have passed since this. Not this. Not this.

Jim screams and collapses entirely with Moran still handling him, still vicious. Moran kisses him, Jim biting with enough force to break the skin, Moran delivering a sharp slap that ravages Jim’s body with electric force as his shoes fill with water for the first time in years.

Moran says nothing. His grip bruises into Jim’s mottled wrists, and Jim is convulsing with the force of his screams while Moran continues blithely on. “Fuck you, Jim,” his voice soars, cutting under the shuddering noise, “I thought I’d fucking lost you.”

Their kiss tastes of blood and acid. Jim’s eyes are half rolling back in their sockets, body pinned to the floor, spine arching and falling in slamming motions, ignorant of Moran or anything outside the defiant shrieking Jimmy, no please, no that fills every hollow of his skin.

Minutes pass before Jim registers Moran’s words. Understanding forces a bubbling, cruel laugh to shiver out of his lips, eaten alive by Moran’s teeth while his body resorts to shudders.

Somehow, he is calming.

Usually, Jim waits for the black. Q used to watch him expressionlessly until he exhausted himself into unconsciousness, and would still be watching when Jim woke up. Moran used to fret, in his own way.

Not now. There has been a shift, and Jim feeds his energy into Moran’s body and soul and the shockwaves ripple them both, but the blackness is shifting into something bleak and gorgeously terrifying.

Jim stops screaming.

His heart thrums hummingbird-fast. His breath begins to warily steady.

The silence ripples with aftershock.

It is the first time in Jim’s memory that the silence has not consumed him completely. Silence has died. All of it is rocking with echoes. Jim laughs into the billowing space of his head, where the gaping maw of emptiness is beaten back by volume.

Jim becomes vaguely aware that he and Moran are fucking. Really, he isn’t sure when that happened, but it isn’t exactly upsetting; he is painfully hard, Moran is just painful, and it is enough.

It is enough.

It is enough.

Jim comes with a throttled moan. Moran grunts. Animal noises. So much sound, Jim is drowning in it, falling backwards.

His head thumps on the floor. A whine rises from the spot. Each part of his body chimes in with its own sound and texture and colour, printing kaleidoscopic over his closed eyelids, the noise almost
tangible, tastes of salt and copper.

Everything has changed.

Jim giggles.
Chapter 13

The four of them meet on a British summer afternoon; it is overcast but unbearably hot, Q seething in sweat, Bond and Moran both equally implacable, and Jim grins in shorts and a vest top that is naturally very jarring when everybody else is still in formal work attire.

“Hi,” Jim says brightly, waggling fingers at Bond. “I’m Jim. I’ve heard so much about you, Mr Bond.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Jim,” Bond says pointedly, and Jim believes him. “Call me James.”

Jim lets out an ooh of appreciation. “It’s nice to meet as ourselves, isn’t it?” Jim says happily. “I’m so sorry for the last time, must have been very confusing for you.”

“Not particularly,” Bond replies pleasantly. “I have five different aliases in different countries, at last count, and only three are officially sanctioned. We do what we must, yes?”

“Yes,” Jim purrs back, looking utterly entranced.

Judging by their smiles, Q gets the impression that Bond and Jim are going to get along swimmingly.

Bond has ordered in pizza, as it seems simpler than trying to cook or indeed locate a restaurant that all consider of sufficient quality, and as they’re trying to keep a low profile Q is not precisely keen on letting Jim blag or blackmail a table in the Four Seasons while they try to arrange some fairly deft criminal activities.

Thus, they sit on dilapidated sofas in one of Q’s more obscure safehouses, and eat pizza. Jim lounges, all but sitting in Moran’s lap. Q and Bond sit next to one another, close but not touching; they have nothing to prove.

Four bored people sit in a room, and chat over pizza about how to take over the world.

“Come on guys,” Jim sings, “let’s get creative!”

Q rolls his eyes, and leaves Jim to quote viral internet videos on his own terms. “First on the agenda: Spectre.”

Every part of Spectre needs to be separately addressed. It is a good thing Moriarty went global a while back; it means that it is substantially easier to find the now-loose threads of the organism and loop them through to their new owner. The vast majority of the enterprises Spectre stage-managed are still running, at least in the areas Q and Jim have managed to annexe: they are simply under new management.

Jim has People. They are deployed to do a number of important things, make contacts. A few of them have been around for a couple of years now, although Jim does recycle his staff from time to time for the purposes of safety and new perspectives. Every replacement alters things, streamlines things, in their area – nothing is traceable to Jim, and no enterprise can ever grow complacent.

However, all of that notwithstanding, there are things that must be done. Apart from anything else, Jim needs to get to Paris, where he has a pair of captives that have been waiting around for four full
days; one needs interrogating, the other is the pressure point, and Jim hasn’t had a good protracted execution for too long and he is getting itchy about it.

“… and Bond, we’ll need you in Istanbul, there’s a mission I can use to cover sending you there, although you’ll still need to drop off-radar for a while,” Q tells him, as he reaches for another slice, glances to Moran. “Are you going to Paris with him?”

Jim nods happily, pulling Moran into a bizarre performative cuddle. “Not goin’ international without protection,” he explains, “and Sebby’ll like joining in, won’t you?”

“Oh of course,” he replies, dry as dust.

Q hums to himself. “Alright – we have some problems in the Chinese neck of the woods, you’ll have to deal with it though, I can’t risk hacking the Chinese servers from here,” he tells Jim, who blinks a nod and takes a long slug of coke from the bottle that arrived with the pizza. “And I don’t think we can retrieve most of the Malaysian area, predominantly gone independent without any issues.”

“I have contacts, just give me time,” Jim says, through a mouthful of pizza, continuing to hum green is not a creative colour under his breath as Seb pokes him with a fork to try and make him eat some of the token salad they had whacked together in an abortive attempt at healthy eating.

They have already lost most of the United States; the various legs of Spectre that had survived found new sources of funding, had enough independent contacts and benefactors that had been hired by Spectre that half hadn’t known Spectre was gone until a good few months later. By then, for intents and purposes, they were standing alone.

It was a pity, but retrievable. Jim intends to go on an extended trip to the States soon, a very extended trip. It is all being planned, it is all picking up speed, it is all so very exciting.

All in all, things are going (more or less) quite neatly. It is, by no stretch of the imagination, easy. In fact, more problems present themselves with every passing day, as one would expect from (almost) the largest global crime syndicate in history.

It is extremely gratifying to realise that Jim is, slowly but surely, taking up that mantle.

“… and the keycode aspects?” Jim asks.

“I have everything in place,” Q explains, reaching for another slice, slapping Jim’s hand away when he goes for the same one. “Pentonville prison, Bank of England, and – of course – the Tower of London; should keep you busy. I want you to arrange some participants to assist in the execution. I cannot seem to have been involved in any way.”

Jim nods lazily. “I can do that,” he purrs. “Just give me a day or two. And the arrest?”

“In hand,” Q nods. “You will be taken in by the Met, before an eventual transfer into a secure facility. Almost certainly the one you occupied previously. The trial will need to be organised, I’d estimate six weeks; very unlikely that they would risk harming you in that period, given that there will be media crawling all over it and they can’t afford the PR – so with some luck, there will nothing physical to contend with, this time.”

“Good. Sebby?”

Moran rolls his eyes at the nickname, as Q turns his attention to the man. “We need you at Pentonville. There are certain criminals who will need addressing post-haste, relocated and distributed in various positions; you will be supplied with a list. Both you and Bond will need to
organise the tails for Sherlock. Jim, you’ll need to handle the bugging yourself, but I have some pretty ones and they’re easy enough to install.”

Jim smiles with sparkling teeth. “Perfect. Big Brother?”

Q cannot help but be rather excited at what will transpire with Mycroft. Soon, the death knell of his and Sherlock’s relationship will sound. Sherlock does not forgive nor forget easily, and Mycroft will spend a good deal of time desperately piecing together whatever is left after Sherlock finds out.

For now, it is more important to ensure that when James Moriarty ‘dies’, everything is perfectly in place. Jim has sourced a reporter, Q is busy creating the false identity, Jim is shooting a children’s show over the next two weeks and a soap opera after that, the alias Richard Brook not exactly new – Jim has had this in planning for years just in case, and yes, that included a stint on Coronation Street that will be brought into the light the moment Richard Brook is truly born – and then it will be watertight.

They have two months. In that time, Jim will spend the great majority of his time on a newly constructed set in one of their old warehouses, creating hours and hours of usable footage to add to Richard Brook’s CV. Q is also going methodically through old shows, altering faces that are similar to Jim’s with merciless precision.

It will eventually be realised. There are years to come before that point.

Jim devours the lion’s share of the pizza, speaking with his mouth full: “You didn’t answer the question.”

Q hums contentedly, peeling the cheese from the base with lithe fingers, tomato smearing under his fingernails. “Mycroft will be a problem, but one we can easily dispatch,” Q assures them, fixing a warning look on Jim. “You will have to be on extremely good behaviour. I will undoubtedly be detained – Mycroft can only overlook me for so long, and he will strongly suspect my intervention where the keycode is concerned.”

“But,” Jim coos, “you have it. Which is what matters.”

“As far as anybody else is concerned, the keycode does not exist,” Q warns, while Jim continues with his purring bouncing energy expungement. “I have little intention of being abducted and interrogated on the matter for any real amount of time; it would put something of a dampener on things.”

Bond’s body tilts a minute shade towards Q’s in a (probably subconscious) defensive gesture. Jim finds it rather sweet; they have both found their own guards, men who can live on the same wavelength as their constituent partners. The four dart connective lines of understanding at one another, lacing their lives inextricably together.

“We’ll have to kill the TV crew,” Jim abruptly points out, the prospect causing a giggling grin. “Will you be joining us?”

Q rolls his eyes. “No. James?”

Bond looks vaguely surprised to have been offered. His glance flicks to Jim’s; intrigued, delighted.

“It’ll take ages with just the two of us,” Jim pouts; Moran has the slightest touch of a smile, a glinting interest. Bond is the newest player in their silly little game, and everybody waits to see whether he is worth anything. “Come on now, Mr Bond. You haven’t had fun in years.”
“I can give you access to some explosives,” Q adds lightly, piquing Bond’s interest further. “Just to mix things up a little, I wouldn’t want any of you getting complacent.”

Jim’s pupils have dilated slightly, and Moran is very slightly animated stone. No doubt Q can read any number of things, but Bond sees merely another soldier, and one who – like Bond – finds civilian life extremely tedious.

This means a new lease of life, outside MI6, after MI6. Double-oh agents are supposed to be dead or retired by Bond’s age. This way, he adds an infinite number of days and weeks and years to his life, and he can enjoy all of them.

And so, a polite smirk. “I would be honoured,” Bond replies, already feeling, sensing, the hot spurt of blood across his palms, the moment a life extinguishes itself out of necessity.

Bond never revelled in torture. Death, however, is a very different matter. Bond courts death. They have a secret love affair that keeps Bond breathing where he oughtn’t, snuffs the lives of irrelevant creatures that catch themselves in Bond’s crossfires; death is a cruel mistress, steals collateral and sometimes – often – those who deserved better.

All the same, Bond loves her dearly, and he willingly sacrifices blood at her altar to stay alive just a heartbeat longer.

Jim is, of course, ecstatic. “I knew you were keeping him for a reason!” Jim chirrups. “Oh now, Mr Bond, this is going to be fun. Sebby?”

“All you call me that,” Moran mutters, making Q and Jim snort in tandem. Moran glances at Bond with a martyred expression, eliciting another smirk. “I’ll organise the clean-up. I have contacts who’ll want the keycode – I’ll set them tracking down Sherlock.”

“Goody.”

Jim’s kiss is greasy, but Moran can’t honestly bring himself to mind. “Q,” Moran realises, detaching a rather handsy Jim from his mouth, only to find Q snaked around Bond’s body like a boa constrictor. “Q.”

Q looks over. His eyes are dilated black, making Moran shiver very slightly, a distinct sense of uncomfortable foreboding. “Yes?” he asks, with the kind of quiet Moran fears on Jim’s tongue.

“If this goes wrong,” he suggests, three sets of eyes boring into his skin, “and if you’re in Mycroft’s custody longer than expected, what do you intend to do?”

Even Jim is taken slightly aback by the lethal edge of Q’s smile. His body tenses very slightly under Moran’s hands, each heartbeat freezing a little more of him as they all look unanimously to Q.

Jim doesn’t understand what Q’s expression means. It frightens him.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” Q replies softly, each breath overloud in the silence. “You need me. If anything goes wrong, you find me.”

Bond looks at Q like he doesn’t recognise the man. Jim sees the Q who had very nearly killed him, once upon a time, and good god he is beautiful, delirious empty space, silence. Q’s power is born from the moment when the noise bleeds quiet, and Jim finally understands power now he has seen the throbbing volume that can live where silence drowns him.

All things calm, in the end. The greatest of storms die out with a whimper.
It is surprisingly easy, in the end.

The showmanship is just superb. Q watches Jim prance deliriously around the glass casing that harbours the crown jewels, watches him dress himself up, all the while his fingers twirling like a conductor.

Q knows he is playing Rossini. There is a particular smile on Jim’s face that forms when he listens to his favourite pieces of music, and there is always a point and a purpose to the music he finds. The thieving magpie blends all things: thievery, sparkly things, and Q. The latter simply due to a concert that neither can forget.

Prison.

Both Jim and Q are imprisoned within an hour of the first alarms going off. Jim smiles, *no rush*, and is escorted out in handcuffs looking distinctly pleased with himself. Q is sat with a cup of tea when Mycroft’s men break down the door, and quietly tells them that he intends to finish it before they haul him away.

There is a brief moment while the message is relayed, and Q is given permission. He drinks his tea, and ambles out of his flat.

Jim re-enters the same cell as he was previously held in.

Nobody quite managed to scrub every *Sherlock* from the wall. Jim looks at it and smiles ecstatically; the game trickles onwards. Sherlock, somewhere, will be impressed. There is a love affair between them that Sherlock cannot or will not acknowledge, which is a pity.

Meanwhile, Q is chucked into another cell quite unceremoniously. It is always irritating, to be abducted or arrested by imbeciles or brutes. Q prefers a classier type of detainment. If being questioned, Q would merrily accede to most demands if somebody sat him down with tea and biscuits and just asked the relevant questions.

Instead, he is placed in an uncomfortable cell and told to wait. Q has no problems with this, but demands basic human rights in the form of blankets, food, fluids and a half-decent pillow. They are not supplied. Q is unsurprisingly pissed off.

When Mycroft enters, Q looks up placidly. “How can I help you?”

“The keycode.”

Q raises an eyebrow. “Now, now, Mycroft. Are we still going to play at all this? You have *nothing* in the way of concrete evidence that such a thing even exists. Certainly, you cannot confirm my part in recent events.”

Mycroft sits opposite him. Q watches him without much interest. The man is tired, overworked. Incrementally thinner than previous encounters. Irritated. Uncertain. Even a little frightened, which is rather gratifying; it means Mycroft has come to some understanding concerning Q.

“How, I do not want this to drag on.”

“That makes two of us,” Q nodded. “Surely it would be prudent to send me out to find how Moriarty *really* did it? I am, after all, the best authority on such matters.”
Mycroft’s expression does not change. “We know you possess the keycode.”

“The ‘keycode’ doesn’t exist,” Q replies blandly. “You ought to know that. Truly? A few lines of code with that much damage? If it did exist, I would both have it and be using it to great effect. Perhaps you have not noticed, but every door in the Western world has not sprung open: this is an isolated incident, revolving around James Moriarty. Ergo, I really should be busy working rather than remaining in an absurdly cold cell awaiting various interrogators.”

Mycroft loves him – or at least, makes a valiant effort to – and it will protect him from lethal damage. It is Mycroft’s sentimentality towards his siblings that Q is depending on. It will keep him safe.

“Either you give me the information,” Mycroft tells him, “or I allow the team in. I would prefer to avoid you coming to harm.”

Q’s eyes narrow. “You would never let me be tortured.”

Mycroft’s eyebrow slithers upwards. “Last chance, Q. The keycode.”

“It doesn’t exist, Mycroft. Think about it from an objective perspective: a handful of lines of code to open any door. It sounds impossible, because it is impossible.”

With poise, Mycroft stands, looks Q over. “If you wish to cooperate, I will be ready to listen.”

Q begins to feel just a little bit frightened. Strange. It has been a long time since he felt fear.

“Mycroft…”

“You have always wished that I were not your sibling,” Mycroft muses, without threat. “Here we are: you are to be treated as a potential threat. Nothing more or less.”

The fear slides into his throat. He is wrong. Q has made a mistake, an extremely dangerous mistake. Mycroft is not protecting him any longer.

Q will not last long under violent interrogation. Q is not like Jim, who places all physical sensations somewhere else, never lets it truly touch him unless he wants it to. Q does not court danger or pain or death like Jim does, Bond does, Moran does. Q is removed and clinical, any pain carefully tuned and modulated for whatever purposes he wishes, and he predominantly avoids it.

Ultimately, Q is frightened, because he cannot trust himself any longer. For all his clever words and cleverer thoughts, he will not last.

The door shuts behind Mycroft. A number of plans have just been scuppered. Q cannot break out, nor be broken out; it will immediately condemn him, and he will have to spend the rest of his life on the run.

Q loves his job. He really, truly does. It simply hadn’t occurred to him that Mycroft would not pull strings. Mycroft always pulls strings to keep his siblings from harm. Q ought to have been arrested years ago, and somehow Mycroft always managed to wrangle it so Q got out without a mark to show for it.

Finally, Mycroft has taken him seriously.

It seems that being underestimated had its perks.
Mycroft spends an inordinate amount of time looking after his siblings. Bane of his existence, the pair of them, but he has spent a lifetime exerting a great deal of energy into their safety.

Sherlock calls whenever he wants something.

Q does not call.

It would be amusing to watch them both, were it not for Mycroft’s genuine care; a chink in his armour, an obvious one. It is actually rather helpful that both of his siblings detest him. It makes Mycroft’s weakness difficult to exploit; nobody thinks that the Holmes brothers care enough about one another to make it worthwhile kidnapping them.

Yet it still breaks Mycroft’s heart, just a little.

Q will be at the mercy of an elite interrogation team, the same that worked their magic on Moriarty and achieved a grand total of nothing. Perhaps they will peel away whatever secrets Q has. To be quite frank, Mycroft doubts it.

This is mostly an academic exercise. Mycroft has no interest in releasing Q himself, not for a good while. There is no doubt in his mind that Q will manage an escape through some means, and Mycroft is watching for a) how long it takes and b) who is involved.

In the meantime, Mycroft stands behind the mirrored window, and watches his youngest brother cry, intermittently scream, collapse into an unconscious puddle of limbs and blood without giving out a word of information.

“Sir?”

Mycroft ignores whoever is speaking to him, steps out of the observation booth to move several cells along, slips into the booth overlooking James Moriarty.

Moriarty is singing. American Pie. Every single verse perfect, impromptu percussion where necessary as he moves around his cell as though he has utter ownership of all he surveys, *Them good old boys were drinking whiskey and rye*, and he is painful to watch because he is beautiful.

*And the three men I admire most*, Moriarty continues, and the accent slips: from impeccable American, he is once again Irish.

He stares directly into the mirror. Mycroft cannot help but wonder what he sees in his reflection, entranced. *The Father, Son and Holy Ghost*.

Mycroft knows the lines are directed to him and his brothers. The three men Moriarty admires most: The Iceman, the Virgin, and Q.

The moment lingers in suspension, and then collapses. American accent and nauseating grin intact, Mycroft watches for a little while longer as the track changes, and Moriarty sinks to the floor, singing something Mycroft doesn’t recognise, but has the easy trickling of an Irish folksong.

Moriarty looks unbelievably young.

He didn’t do this last time.

It is commendable. Moriarty still has the capacity to surprise in the most visceral of ways. It gives Mycroft pause.
This time, he will not enter Moriarty’s cell. Nobody will. This is a true holding cell: until such a time as he is transferred out for his trial, he remains in solitary confinement in the depths of a British government facility.

Jim’s voice trickles through speakers, stalks Mycroft down corridors, chasing him like Mycroft attempts to chase him. *My name is Death – have you not heard of me?*

A sense of something watching him; Mycroft twists, uncertain, the impossible sense of paranoia - illogical, emotional, *weak* - creeping into his body and blood, a strange suspended second where his veins freeze and his body (not his brain, it *cannot* be his brain) registers something new and impossible. Something like fear.

Absurd.

*And you, my darling, must come along with me.*

Jim smiles at the ceiling.

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A week later, and Q is not doing especially well.

Q is doing better than he thought he would, but mostly because stubbornness and livid fury at Mycroft is keeping him running; Mycroft has exceeded expectations. At the end of this, Sherlock and Q will *both* be after his blood, and Q is already concocting every level of vengeful scheme he can stumble across.

It is exhausting. Q has no idea how Jim managed with this, because Q is reaching the end of his tether, and this has no end-date.

Something in Q is snapping. The noise is everywhere. It sinks into blood and bone. There is a part that came half-alive with Jim and when he was young, that need to test the edges of life and death, the same thing Bond does in a very different way. The temptation. Allowing himself to be pushed past breaking point.

There is a sharp snap from his shin.

Q gasps in a breath, and sees the choice in perfect technicolour clarity, glittering behind his eyelids because of *course*, it was always that simple. This is what Jim could never quite communicate. Jim could never feel pain. It was something divorced from him.

In that divorce, there is empty space. Reams and reams and *reams* of empty space, of absolute silence.

It is the first time in forever that Q can remember silence. True, honest silence.

Outside of it, there is screaming. There is snapping, screaming, thuds, rips, tears, squelches. There are the visceral sounds, and there are the voices, and there is a heartbeat and breath and the buzzing, doors slamming open and closed, beeping, all manner of things.

Q can see it. He cannot hear it.

This is what Jim feels. *This* is the silence.

Everything has changed.
Q opens his mouth, and *laughs*.

Chapter End Notes

And here, we have references to Don't Hug Me I'm Scared, the song American Pie, and the folksong Death and the Lady. Go listen/watch, if you don't know them! Jen.
“No defence.”

The poor boy opposite him looks utterly terrified. This is the case of his career. Somehow, he has managed to stumble across Jim Moriarty’s trial, has become his defence lawyer when it is patently obvious that he cannot win.

It will only get better from here: “What do you mean?”

Moriarty stares at him with fathomless black eyes. “I mean,” he repeats, enunciating clearly, “I am not mounting any defence.”

The boy blinks.

Moriarty grins, all teeth.

The boy looks to his papers as though hoping to find a cue card. Moriarty continues to grin. The boy realises that things are quite definitely not going according to any possible plan, and looks up and down a few times helplessly.

“I’ve actually made your job easier,” Moriarty points out. “A lot easier. No pesky people to organise, no witnesses to call. No cross-examinations. Almost no paperwork. Sound like fun?”

A few rapid, scared blinks. The boy fidgets a little. “You should be aware that you will be convicted when…”

“… shh,” Moriarty soothes, voice incredibly soft. “Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that, hmm? All is in hand. If you do as you’re told, there are good things waiting for you.”

The boy does not ask the obvious question – “And if I don’t?” – because he seems to have realised almost instantly that threats are superfluous. Moriarty knows more than he does, has more power than him, (and Jim quite likes him, because he is very intelligent for a lawyer), and thus he nods his understanding and sits back slightly.

Instead, he asks: “Why?”

“That’s out of your paygrade, darlin’,” Moriarty replies, hypnotic lilt and a terrifying blankness in everything, voice and eyes and expression. “Off you pop, we’re done here.”

He leaves, and Jim settles back, closing his eyes and humming snatches happily under his breath.

Q is released into an MI6 hospital with a team of very quiet and very efficient doctors, and left there to rest for a long while. They truly did do a number on him; lots of things bruised and broken, but he will recover nicely and they had the intelligence to not touch his hands, so work can resume.

One day, Q will kill Mycroft for this; not yet.

No. Now is the time to play games. Jim and the keycode and the international assassins throttling half
of London and MI6 work once again and the systems lacing across the world that Q is now monitoring while Jim stacks cards upon cards in his empire; it is every waking moment, and it is spectacular.

Bond is still under MI6 employ, but is being phased out slowly, as expected. It is helpful to have Bond there, and more importantly, for him to leave in an entirely orthodox manner before he is reabsorbed into the Moriarty (and Q) empire.

“You look dreadful,” Bond tells him, as he puts together a curry – Bond is a disconcertingly good cook, after years spent in other countries with people willing to teach him – and Q slides awkwardly into a kitchen chair. “You need to sleep.”

“And you need to stop being my mother,” Q returns irritably; the pain meds are not the longest-lasting of things, and his shin is fucking painful. “ETA on food?”

“Ten minutes, waiting on the rice,” Bond replies, taking a long drink from the glass of red wine next to him. He turns to the table and Q, lays it, sits in the other chair. “You do look like shit, though.”

Oddly, Q smiles.

There is something different about Q. Torture, interrogations, have variable effects; Bond finds it all rather funny these days, laughs his way through most of them. There is little that can truly faze him in those sorts of situations – not because it doesn’t hurt, but because he knows what to do with the pain.

“I have work to do,” Q says with soft danger, and Bond doesn’t question it; he serves the rice, pushes the plate towards Q, tells him in no uncertain terms to finish it or he’ll ram the stuff down his throat.

Lethal edges line both their voices, but they love each other so palpably it is almost absurd.

Q does as told, and all but licks the plate clean, looking to Bond with the clearest expression possible; Bond looks back curiously, and in that moment there is communication, and Bond understands.

“Kiss me.”

They weave themselves together. “I love you,” Q tells him, whispers it into the echoing silence which he can now see, can touch.

Bond does not respond, but he sighs into Q’s throat and Q can feel his lips shape a reply, whisper around it and set Q’s blood on fire with the intensity of it all, every shadow of him, all Bond’s, all Q’s.

The trial is actively hilarious.

Sherlock is, of course, the most obnoxious human being anybody has ever come across. This is the longest Jim has ever seen Sherlock in action, and the man is a peacock; puffs himself out and revels in his intelligence and the ability to show off.

It is for Jim. The man could show off whenever and whenever, but this is about Jim, this is about proving that he is just as clever and Jim should be made aware.

Which he is. Sherlock truly is lovely to watch in action.
Sherlock has been dancing in and out of Jim’s affairs as time wears on. First and foremost was the chaos with the Coventry-Bond air disaster; the Woman succeeded (and promptly failed again through sheer stupidity), Sherlock did all of Jim’s work for him, Jim has a party and ensures the Woman is dispatched within the month.

Jim can see it, the light in Sherlock’s eyes lethal and frankly excited; he exchanges a glance with the good Doctor Watson, and his eyes skip over Jim before returning to his wider audience.

“Do you think you could last for just five minutes without showing off?!”

Sherlock pulls in a breath. “I don’t see that ‘showing off’ is unimportant or unnecessary; you are disputing my ability to act as a character witness, and I am illustrating my credentials. James Moriarty is an international criminal mastermind. His works span most of the globe, and certainly, extends into the realms of mass theft and/or break-ins…”

“… silence, or I’ll hold you in contempt of court…”

“… and if you truly want to even slightly appreciate Moriarty’s importance in the criminal underworld, one merely needs to talk to any major criminal organisation in the world, where the word ‘Moriarty’ opens doors, silences tongues, strikes fear into the very hearts of the most dangerous men alive…”

“… that is enough…”

(Jim wants popcorn – this is amazing to watch)

“… and ultimately, it would be idiocy to let him walk free, given that he can destroy the lives of most people here with a touch of one of the threads that compose his web…”

By now, Jim is grinning, and it seems to egg Sherlock on while behind – almost audibly – Doctor Watson has his head in his hands. The judge is practically puce. Sherlock is so beautifully melodramatic; he rather likes the spider metaphor, smiling disconnectedly while utterly approving of everything Sherlock says.

It is a love letter. Sherlock, detailing every single thing Jim is capable of, with a shadow of admiration that can just, just be heard. Sherlock’s body sings of admiration, the frosty anger of his tone soft to Jim’s scope, beautiful and awful and compelling to watch.

Jim spins his web, and Sherlock dances, and so they go on.

“… THAT IS ENOUGH.”

“… so, given my expertise in this area, and my observation both of Moriarty and the work he conducts, I can categorically state that he must be imprisoned for the indefinite future.”

Sherlock comes to a halt.

Jim gives a slow round of applause, that ensures every eye in the building lands straight on him, and he stares straight at Sherlock.

Their eyes meet, and the hatred, the respect, is extraordinary.

Sherlock is then promptly arrested, and the trial is adjourned.

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Q watches the trial, of course. It makes for compelling viewing; naturally he is not there in person, but still witnesses Sherlock’s extraordinary arrogance and stupidity at play and notes the look on Jim’s face as Sherlock proves himself everything Jim wants him to be.

“All good?” Bond asks, flicking Q a glance from across the room. “Sounds like Sherlock’s…”

“… got himself arrested,” Q completes. “I’m really not surprised, I have to admit. To be honest, we would have been disappointed if he hadn’t.”

“We?”

Q looks up, and is confused for an obvious moment. “… I mean Jim, but that’s new,” he notes to himself. “Well. Anyway. Would have been disappointing. Jim and Sherlock are both the same in that they like histrionics. It’s why I was not, and would never be, enough for him. I don’t play his games.”

“If you did,” Bond asks, “would you have stayed with him?”

It is an almost-obvious question, but sits uncomfortably all the same. “… yes,” Q replies eventually. “I suppose I would. But if I played the games, I wouldn’t be who I am, so it’s all a little academic.”

“If you played the games, England would have long-since fallen,” Bond teases.

Q doesn’t answer, and Bond realises a moment later that is precisely what would have happened. If Q played the games – particularly given that his morality is sketchy at best – then they could devastate everything they touched.

Bond considers it for a moment. Q can see it, can see him working through things, deciding; and Q watches as Bond smiles to himself, privately and honestly. He doesn’t care that Q is inches away from being completely insane, and that there are no words to cover precisely what mode of insane he is. That he and Jim have an uncomfortable amount in common.

But then, Bond is helping him tear down the world, so it is probably a little late to be worrying.

Jim will treasure the look on John Watson’s face until the day he dies.

Q did a sterling job; not a single member of the jury hesitated, all of them acceded instantly to Jim’s demands, and they came to their conclusion almost instantly. Jim ambles out, and heads to 221B Baker Street, driven by an extremely confused cabbie who is palpably glad to get Jim out of his car.

Sherlock has made him tea. Jim accepts a dainty little cup and sits in the wrong chair, carving up an apple and beginning the next episode: every fairytale needs a good old fashioned villain, and Jim is happy to supply.

This is the best game he has ever played, and Sherlock responds with a flat expression and dismisses him with a disparaging word about riddles. He is lying. Sherlock adores riddles.

Jim rings Sebastian. “And how are things with you, my darling?” he asks, lulling. “I’ve missed you.”

“Boss?”

“Who else is it going to be?” Jim snaps. “Let’s try again. I’ve missed you.”

“Stop fucking about, Jim,” Seb replies sharply, and Jim’s anger sparks electric before dissolving into
a rather frightening grin. “Aren’t you supposed to be Richard Brook-ing somewhere?”

Jim sighs, “I knew I kept you around for a reason,” and hangs up.

“… and I understand that you’re frightened, and I will treat it with the greatest of respect, but we do need to meet in person, I’m sure you understand…”

Kitty Riley is an excellent find. A long while later, Jim will kill her. It will take time, and she will spend the duration screaming in confusion and horror as she realises the monumental mistake she made.

It starts quietly, with phone calls and stutters and nervousness and promises, and eventually Richard Brook agrees to meeting at Kitty’s house for coffee and to talk, to explain everything. He brings along a neat file with all the necessary information, and watches Miss Riley’s eyes widen when she opens the door.

He opted not to warn her in advance.

“Fuck. But you’re…”

“… you said you’d hear me out, I told you it would be difficult to believe,” Richard says quickly, looking every inch a terrified twenty-something who’d been bought out and threatened by Sherlock Holmes. “Please, please. I don’t want to do this any more and I need somebody to listen to me, I’m not Moriarty, I’m Richard, Richard Brook. Like I told you. I told you it was a difficult thing but you have to listen to me.”

The woman is not particularly clever, but she is lethally ambitious. It is a tremendous opportunity, whether this man is lying or not: either she has an interview with James Moriarty under false pretences, or she has the single best story she’ll ever come across.

“Okay,” she says softly, exceptionally wary, despite Richard being the literal antithesis of James Moriarty. “Okay. But you have fifteen minutes and there are people who know that I’m meeting a client, it’s standard procedure, so if anything happens to me they will trace it back here…”

“… does anyone know it’s me?” he asks, with blind panic, and Kitty’s expression softened slightly. “I’m sorry, I can’t go anywhere, the Moriarty thing left me homeless because Sherlock doesn’t want me staying anywhere where people can talk to me, and he had people employed but he’s left me on my own and I can’t get a flat any more because obviously I need identification and everybody now knows me as Moriarty, and I…”

“Shh,” Kitty says, definite and controlling, and Richard falls silent.

They talk for the next several hours. Kitty buys it, but it does take well over an hour before she completely softens, another hour after that before she is complete putty, and within the two after that she ends up offering Richard her sofa to crash on,

So for now, Jim needs to move in with the bloody woman.

It is harder than being Denbigh, because it is twenty-four seven and Richard Brook is the most irritating bastard Jim has ever created as an alias. However – it does the job, and Miss Riley et al are excitedly hacking together the best story their piece of sh** newspaper has ever encountered.

“… and have we dispatched the kiddies?” Jim asks; Moran mutters an affirmative, and Jim closes his eyes, smiling in happy quiet. “Perfect. Be on the ball, won’t you?
“Richard?”

Kitty is knocking on the door; Jim glances skywards, just about gathers enough strength to hang up and answer the door with a simpering smile. “Hi Kitty. Are you ok?”

“Spoke to my boss, and we’re running it, my boss wants to meet you…”

“…no, Sherlock will find me,” Richard interjects quickly. “You can’t. If he finds me…”

“Richard, you have to calm down,” Kitty soothes, “come on. I’ll make you a cup of coffee. He will never find you here, I haven’t told anybody you’re living with me. Nobody knows. It’s just us, and you’ll be safe. I promise you.”

Her words are utterly empty, but Jim is happy to let her run on however she likes while he keeps the phone out of the way and texts extremely angry messages as Jim to Q and Moran and even Bond (just because he can, these days) and tries to expunge some of the excess energy from being catatonically bored on a day-to-day basis.

Q very rarely texts back, but he spares a moment to inform Jim of the most recent and most vital development:

*London annexed.*

It is the news Jim has wanted for a long time. It means that the various factions that operate in London – *all of them* – have been absorbed by Moriarty Inc. (as it were). Every single shred of organised crime in London is being monitored or has moles in or *is* controlled by Moriarty.

Years. This moment has been *years* in the making. The criminal world is wide, varied, inconsistent. London alone has enough branches of criminality, national and international, to make most people dizzy. It has taken years of work to find them all, link them, join them, destroy them, rebuild them, watch them.

Jim is not ‘most people’, and this is the greatest success of his life to date.

To celebrate, he tells Kitty he is going to go out for a walk – he’s been doing this more and more often recently, telling Kitty he’s feeling brave and going out for a little while, she’s tasked him with groceries once or twice – and so he heads off into the night and arranges to see Moran.

“Hello boss,” a voice murmurs from behind him, in a back alley that Jim designated.

Jim is slammed against the brickwork, and laughs a high tinkling scale as Moran kisses him with bruising force, as always, as he is supposed to, in the way that makes the silence crow and he feels alive, *alive*

They fuck brutally, just caring enough to ensure there are no scrapes as they press against the wall, and Jim can feel his blood singing.

This is it. This is why.

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Jim is heading off to the United States, and thus he needs to disappear. Sherlock will do his best to dismantle everything of Moriarty’s empire he can find, and probably do a lot of good in pruning off the inept factions. It is like hiring a particularly annoying gardener.
Q has taken charge of matters. Neither Sherlock nor Jim can be permitted to actually die, and so Q has to look after a number of things to ensure it will not happen. Sherlock has already employed Mycroft for assistance, and so it ought to be reasonably simple; it is already a breeze compared to making Max Denbigh die.

“You’re making quite the habit of it,” Q muses, on one of the only phone calls he has permitted during Jim’s time camping out with Kitty Riley. “I mean really, at some stage we are going to have to address your preoccupation with faking your own death.”

Jim’s smile is audible. “Couldn’t do it without you, darlin’,” he purrs. “How are things looking?”

“Days, at worst,” Q replies, the sharpness soothing on Jim’s frazzled nerves. “Miss Riley has submitted the article. Now, it is just about waiting for the Met Police to be predictably moronic. Nice work with the child.”

“I believe we have Mr Bond to thank for that,” Jim corrects.

It was an intriguing mission, from Bond’s perspective. Abduct two children, introduce them to somebody who may as well be Sherlock’s twin, let said somebody terrorise the children beyond comprehension and then feed them mercury-laced sweeties, kill the Sherlock-twin and ensure the body gets to St Barts Hospital, and all to assist a man whom he once would have been commanded to take out.

Then again, the world needs figures like James Moriarty. There always needs to be An Enemy, the bad guy, good old-fashioned villain, the evil mastermind who is held up as everything wrong with the world just so there can be a focus. The spider at the centre of the web, whom everybody is trying to take out.

Really, in the long run, Bond is doing Queen and Country a favour. Better one psychopath then warring factions; less collateral damage. Conflicts of interest between crime syndicates always have collateral damage.

Jim is making things move smoothly. There are always criminals, there will always be criminals. Jim is just keeping them all in check.

Q knows this, is content to let Jim pull all the threads together so that all of them can be monitored. This is how the world should be.

“Yes, Bond had fun, I think,” Q agrees. “Everything is moving beautifully. Sherlock will predictably go for St Barts, the body is waiting – if nothing else, I’ll point him in the right direction so everybody is happy. You’ll have to get Watson out of the way.”

“Easy peasy lemon squeezie,” Jim trills, biting his nails and deciding he should probably get a manicure in the coming few weeks. “They all have friends. Lovers. Easy. How long?”

Q hums to himself. “I’m ready when you are, really,” he shrugs. “I think I know what I’m doing. You should survive.”

“Then curtain up, darling, I’m excited,” Jim crows, before his voice flattens out to something halfway between terrifying and beautiful, low and honest and curious and hopeful and expectant. “Do you love me?”

Q cannot breathe. This is not their way, this is not their life. This is something different.

“Don’t do that.”
“Do you love me?”

Repetitive questions, again and again, the same questions with no hope of an answer. “Jim, stop it.”

“Do you love me?”

“Stop it.”

“Q. Do you love me?”

Jim’s voice is stupidly soft and tender, intimate. Q has no idea what to do; Jim is asking like his answer will spell the end of eternity, Q hearing the half-echoes of a thieving magpie and the light in Jim’s eyes in their stranger days, their beautiful tender days, and Jim’s question stabs in again and again.

“Jim. Stop it. You have work to do, we both have work to do.”

Silence ticks. Tap tap tap.

Jim hangs up.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, as ever, for reading. Jen.
The very last thing, the very last thing, is to say goodbye to somebody particularly special. Jim is about to die. It is obvious, to anybody keeping track, anybody watching the progression: this can only end with Jim Moriarty in a bloodied mess, hole through the back of his head. It's all planned and ready.

Mycroft does not know that yet, because it never occurs to him – not for a single moment – that Jim Moriarty might kill himself. It certainly does not occur that he might fake his death, again. It does not occur that Jim has learned from his previous death, and this one is another tier of watertight, beyond netting andpadding and accomplices and all the rest of it.

That, however, can wait for a moment.

“Mr Holmes,” Jim purrs, sensual and delicious. “Have you worked it out yet?”

“If Sherlock dies, I will kill you.”

Jim lets out a snort of laughter. “You won’t,” he states, comfortable in the knowledge that he is right. “But Q will. And he’ll take his time. But don’t you worry, Big Brother – I have plans, still. I have plans for all the Holmes kiddies.”

And with that he hangs up, not waiting for the beat of silence that marks Mycroft's understanding, his realisation, his horror, his defeat.

- 

A gunshot. Blood spatters. Predictably, Sherlock does not bother to check the body; Jim waits for him to step off the roof, before picking himself up and letting his team handle the lack of a corpse. Jim’s body will be speed-processed before Molly Hooper can get hold of it, but there is a full paper trail of his autopsy with accompanying photographs, unassailable proof of his demise.

Jim is on a flight already. Q had him out on the first available private jet, and did not have the chance to say goodbye. Moran has gone with him.

Bond’s body is curled around Q’s. Q seems unable to sleep. There is something odd in him, a murmur around the edges of himself that Bond doesn't quite understand; he seems to have partially paralysed himself, his mind soaring out and away, and Bond knows it's flown across the Atlantic to follow Jim.

“What did he do?”

Q blinks, looks around at Bond. “What?”

“Jim.”

A small smile quirks the corner of Q's lips. “His usual habit of insistent and annoying questions; I avoid them, generally, but it can play on the mind a little.”

Bond knows there is more to be said, but does not ask.

Q kisses him like the world is on fire.

-
Jim is having the time of his life. America is extensive and exciting, he is completely out of his depth and knows it, and he is bouncing from state to state and city to city to city to city, and there are worlds of criminality. Jim knows that Spectre managed a decent amount of control across parts of the US. Bond cemented a good deal of Moriarty influence in the months he spent post-Spectre, and the name thrums.

Now, there is the man himself.

“If you ask me very, very nicely,” he purrs at a man in his early sixties, “I'll let you keep the fingernails.”

The man is sobbing, absolutely sobbing, but this entirely his fault; he told the truth. Jim loathes people who tell the truth so quickly. This is a man who should have been stage-managing Texas, and it turns out that he's pathetically weak, and so nauseatingly easy to get information out of.

“Please,” he begs, voice keening. “Please, please, let me go, I've told you everything I know, please, I don't have anything else to tell you...”

“A name?”

“Moriarty, that's all I know, I swear that's all I know, please...”

He is lying. Jim knows that. It is going to be his last lie; Jim needs to know names and places of those who have been working in conjunction with, or against, his little empire. Groups, contacts, names. This man will not give any (because his memory is pitiful, stupid stupid man, Jim cannot believe that anybody let this imbecile take control of anything) but there is always a paper trail. In this case, computers. Emails, messages, texts.

This is, of course, Q's area; but Jim is still so angry it makes his breath catch harsh and freezing in his throat, and he will never ask Q for anything again (he will, but he's going to simmer for a while still) and anyway, he hasn't done this in ages.

A pair of pliers. A little one, purple handles, shiny. The man chokes on his own bile.

“I need a password, sweetheart,” Jim croons, untying the man’s right hand, keeping the rest pinned out of the way. He uncurls the fingers carefully, seeing the half-moons of nails digging into palms, even a tiny scrape of blood where the fist has been clenched too tightly, spasmodically. “Pretty please?”

Before allowing a response, Jim lines the pliers against the nail of the index finger, clamping it lightly and tugging curiously; the man whimpers, and Jim yanks. It makes a funny sort of ripping, squelching noise. Annoyingly, the man's scream makes it inaudible.

“Anything?”

The man is not silent because he is trying to conceal information. He is in too much pain to form an answer, certainly not within the handful of seconds Jim gives him, before his mouth is stuffed with his own blood-sodden sock.

Jim sighs happily as the next nail makes exactly the sound he was expecting.

He finishes off the hand, humming lightly to himself. Polishes things off by snapping each finger back, one by one, punctuating his impromptu rendition of 'I Will Survive', hoping that the man at least appreciates the irony.
Jim tugs the sock out. Dripping with blood and spit. Jim makes a face, and chucks it away, letting it sit happily next to the small pile of finger and toenails.

This time, Jim gives him a little bit of time. While the man yowls pointlessly, Jim reaches into his bag – the man watches with naked terror – and pulls out a Milky Bar, instead. He snaps off a piece, licks it, tastes it, chews it, swallows. His eyes do not deviate from the other's.

“Would you like a piece?” Jim asks politely.

The man, sweating, crimson, voice a thin rasp: “... what?”

“Well, while we're waiting for you to start talking, I thought we might have a bit of chocolate. Yes?”

Silence. Blinking. Gasping. There is blood, saliva, bile seeping out the corners of his mouth. Jim rolls his eyes, stands, notes the pronounced flinch, ambles over. “Open up.”

Eyes wide, the man obeys. “Thank you,” he whispers. “Please. I'm sorry, I...”

Jim places a finger against his lips, and he quiets.

“Tell me.”

He tells. Absolutely everything. Everything he can remember. He even makes up a few things for dramatic effect. He then proceeds to cry and wail a bit, begging for mercy.

Jim watches him. He stops wailing. Jim watches. They are both silent. The man is still shivering with sobs. Jim is utterly empty, his silences fathomless.

Jim's voice is childishly curious: “Do you know who I am?”

The man sobs. Again. “N-no.”

“Tsk tsk. You should do. The world should know my name by now. I stood up in front of the whole world and announced myself, I was applauded by the criminal underworld, they all want a piece of me. And you, you're supposed to know who I am, because I'm your boss, you stupid fuck of a man.”

By the end of it, Jim is screaming the words, anger rendering everything bright boiling scarlet before clearing into whiteness, and he smiles patiently and lets the man wend his way towards the answer.

“You're...”

“... yes?”

The man's voice is a hollow whimper. “Oh god,” he mumbles. “Oh god.”

“All I need to do is break a couple of bones, and you spill all my secrets,” Jim notes, voice alarmingly light. “You're supposed to be a foot soldier for me. You are here to look after my interests. I give you money. Your children. Your grandchildren. Your house, your car, your life, their lives. And you betray me. Tsk tsk.”

Eyes widening desperately please don't hurt them please before Jim grins widely, and reaches for his phone; a few swipes, and the sound fills the room, blossoms beautifully, swells like a concerto and drowns the man in front of him.

It takes him almost ten whole seconds to comprehend. His granddaughter – sweet child, maybe five – is screaming, piercingly high-pitched, a mistuned oboe sort of sound. The daughter-in-law is the
one doing the talking and shouting and pleading, her voice shattered with grief and a lack of understanding and pain, so much pain. The toddler is already dead. His wife's heart gave out a while ago. His son is literally being choked as they listen.

Jim sees the moment the man understands, and flicks off the sound.

The man is paralysed, eyes wide, body in suspended shock and the palpable desperation that it is false, it has to be false, this cannot be true, and that is the moment that Jim finds the photograph Moran sent over about half an hour ago.

The comprehension is, surprisingly, even longer. But then, seeing the disembodied heads and limbs and organs and blood of the people he loves most in the world is hard to see at first glance. Moran certainly took it to heart when Jim asked him to be creative.

He vomits, screams, thrashes, his voice an incomprehensible constellation of pain.

“Now don't you worry,” Jim tells, accent almost aggressively Irish; he's having far too much fun. “Nobody else will make your mistake. Cautionary tale. You'll go down in history, sir, you and your lovely family. You had a beautiful wife. Bit of a shame, really.”

Jim looks at the screen.

Most is obvious. There was a bucket of water at some stage (drowning the toddler, Jim assumes) which was knocked over, and the daughter-in-law is lying in the water, the water swirling with dissipating red spirals and there is crimson on her pink-red lips and her skin is tinged cold, cold blue and the water spills across the floor, clear and lying, and there is heat, unbearable heat, and his shoes are filling with water Jimmy and he is drowning, he is drowning, and the screaming reaches a peak and Moran is not here so he cannot make it stop, so he throws the phone at the wall it shatters with a tinkling sound and remembers the moment he isn't supposed to remember.

Her voice.

Jim stabs the man in the arm, in the shoulder, in the thigh, in the stomach, and each one punctures a hole in the sound of her voice and shifts it back and back into the endless silence, swallowed by nothingness. By the time Jim gathers enough mercy to finish the man off, her screaming is all but gone.

Lovely.

It gets easier every time.

-

Q monitors everything that goes on for Jim and Sherlock, of course. The London annexe remains firmly in place – Moriarty's death does not mean the empire disbanding – and Q is happy to keep matters ticking over. As Quartermaster, he is entirely justified in eliminating any criminal factions that try to form or just spring up spontaneously around London, and so he does with precision and elegance.

Weeks and months start to pass with remarkable speed, gaining traction.

Q spends a while watching Sherlock. Bond spends a good proportion of his time working through Europe, taking the damage Sherlock does to the Moriarty empire, and twisting the remnants back to where they ought to be. Sherlock is as predicted: a gardener, who prunes back everything relevant, does a beautiful job.
After all: Sherlock can only attack the parts of Moriarty's empire that he can find. Finding them requires people telling him; the ones who tell are the ones nobody needs, and so their deaths are necessary. If Sherlock doesn't kill them himself, or get somebody to, then Bond finishes the job.

Meanwhile, the ones who don't talk keep doing their jobs, and so the empire becomes that much stronger.

But:

It is starting to get boring. Just a little, just around the edges. Jim might be off having fun, but Q is getting itchy. Bond and Moran come and go occasionally, when they're in the country, and Q needs to keep finding more innovative ways to fuck the world over. As it were.

And then, there is the obvious annoyance:

"Where is he at present?"

Q looks skywards, praying for strength, and twists to Mycroft.

"I'm busy," he says flatly, gesturing at a table full of disembowelled metal, wires, plastic, a collection of coloured lights and something flickering with electricity.

Mycroft does not leave. Q ignores him.

"Q..."

"I am busy."

"You must..."

"Get out of here before I accidently electrocute you," Q snaps, emotion starting to flicker through; Q's shin twinges in remembrance, and Q's hatred for Mycroft continues to fester. "I have no interest in doing anything whatsoever that will make your life easier or assuage your concerns, so get out of my office".

Mycroft does not shift. "I am not oblivious to your actions. Bond has notably disappeared, and there are international concerns over some recent criminal activity in the US..."

"Bond is on holiday. America always has crime. Are we done here?"

"Holiday?" Mycroft intones, scepticism laced in the simple act of asking.

Q glances up, his expression as blank as Mycroft's. At moments like this, Q remembers that they are related; he and Mycroft are disturbingly similar in many regards. Currently, both are impossibly empty. Observers would see the type of stillness reserved for the dead, voices without inflection. Both of them can feign at life. Neither bother when in the company of the other.

The silence blossoms.

"Bond will need to report to MI6 upon his return. They will want a full debrief."

A quirked eyebrow. "No, they will not. Bond is not their concern. His retirement has been successfully cleared; he's a free man, and entirely at liberty to go on holiday. He'll be back soon, I'll send him your regards."

Mycroft's smile is very thin, almost unnoticeable. "He may be at liberty to holiday; if he cannot
account for his actions, however, that will be a very separate affair. Either you send him to M, or I will question him myself.”

Q responds with a grin that doesn't meet his eyes, and smells of an aftershave that he has never worn. “By all means, Mycroft. Question at will. We all know how successful your questioning has been, over the years.”

Q finishes what he is doing, looks up, fixing Mycroft with a bored stare. “Don't be pretentious. It suits Sherlock, not you.”

Mycroft has the audacity to look offended. “Pretentious? A curious idea, from you. You revel in pretension; living under a pseudonym since an exceptionally early age, and…”

“... I'm busy,” Q interjects, and returns his attention to the now rather more emphatic flashing lights in front of him.

Mycroft couldn't look more shocked if he tried. Q cannot see it, of course; he will look – and laugh – later. In the meantime, he works. Mycroft leaves after a while. Q knows he has been talking, but tuned out to the extent that he truly doesn't know what has been said. Again, something to listen to later if he's bored enough.

He is so, so bored, though.

Sherlock is in Austria, and it is almost the end. Mycroft will get brought into things soon enough, regardless; he does not trust Q, (and rightly so), and so Mycroft's people will pick up the trail. Baron Maupertius. Perfect. If he's really lucky, Mycroft might even die.

Unlikely. Mycroft has an amazing ability to survive in the most implausible of situations.

Baron Maupertius.

Q has a certain degree of malevolence, more so since he found quiet. It allows him to do things which, perhaps, he wouldn't have previously done; punish Sherlock for his lack of understanding, for his lack of intelligence. As he wends his way closer to Serbia, Q starts tipping the scales, only a little bit. Just enough to point Sherlock in the right direction, and start the wheels in motion for his return to the UK.

Meanwhile, something very exciting springs up on the very edge of Q's radar. It is something very new and very different, and Q will not allow Mycroft any access to the information. Indeed: Q buries anything and everything that would arouse suspicion.

Except the woman herself.

Q decides to be cordial. It is a little more like Jim's approach; he invites her to have a cup of tea, they meet in a public place with ample witnesses.

Moran is somewhere. He is on a brief assignment back in the UK on Jim's behalf, and Q decides to
gainfully employ him for a few hours. Moran asks no questions. He knows nothing and everything all at once.

(Moran hears Jim's voice in his ear “get back here, now, get the hell back here, I have work for you” (I need you) “get the fuck back here” (come home) and remains expressionless as Q meets up with Moran's old work friend and Moran sticks around to watch, and make sure neither of them kill each other.)

She is beautiful. Blonde hair curled elegantly, short and practical. Posture guarded but curious. Q has never been an analytical marvel; if he didn't know otherwise, this woman would seem perfectly normal.

They exchange pleasantries. She gives nothing away. Q would imagine that even Mycroft might struggle to read her. He would probably know there was something amiss, but the details would likely evade him. Perhaps it is Bond's influence, but Q knows what and how to read, be read, especially in a woman like this.

The entire Holmes clan will be upended by this woman. Irene Adler is insignificant in comparison, and that takes some doing.

“Your reputation precedes you,” Q tells her truthfully, “and hopefully, you can understand why I have involved myself.”

Calm, controlled, but she has a lightness of touch and a little edge of sarcasm and dashes of humour. She's *fun*. “I'd have been surprised if you hadn't.”

“I have no interest in interrupting the life you have created for yourself. I am, in fact, very much in admiration. I simply wish to ensure your continued safety, given that I have a vested interest in some of the company you keep.”

Her eyes, bright with understanding, glance Q up and down. “He's not dead, is he?”

“Not in the slightest,” Q confirms enigmatically. “You must be careful. I wish you to continue as you are, I really will not intervene, but I'm telling you now that if you become 'known', I will not necessarily be able to help you.”

A smile, a wonderful and clever smile. A smile with Jim's sincerity, but without his madness; Q likes her. “I have no interest in returning to that life. You know that.”

“It'll find you,” Q reminds her, warns her. “Once you've started, it never stops. Don't be afraid of it; you're doing better than most, and I know you'll rise admirably to the challenge when you have to.”

“Thank you,” she nods, glancing over Q, seeing almost as much as Sherlock might. Similar to Q, in fact, in deductive capabilities. “It will. I'm ready for it. And by the way – of course I'll keep an eye out for you.”

Q is, for one of the few times in his life, confused. “Sorry?”

Now, her smile starts to tinge with Jim.

“Goodbye, Q. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

She leaves; Q gives himself the luxury of a few moments to reflect, to consider. As he does so, he reaches for his phone, fingers already darting before he has the chance to think about it.
Jim doesn't pick up.

“I'm sorry,” Q says flatly, the calculated emptiness that Jim values most. “Come back.”

He does not add the obvious.

He hangs up.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience, and I hope you enjoy! Jen.

It would be more than possible for Q to intervene in Serbia, and get Sherlock back quickly and easily. The reason he doesn't is simple: Mycroft has no choice but to go undercover himself, in the hope of finding Sherlock before the terrorist attack that will destroy most of London.

Well no, it will not. But there is a dead double-oh agent claiming otherwise, one who managed to report in before his untimely demise. Q then merrily popped in the computer keycode to have a look around a number of restricted international files, found the guilty party, and readied himself to undermine it. They are planning to attack on Bonfire Night, stereotypically enough.

It gives Q, et al, more than enough time to stop things before they happen. And hey, even if they fail, an explosion of such magnitude – and the political upheaval that would come from an entirely deceased government – would be great fun to handle.

And in the meantime, Q gets to watch as Mycroft Holmes, the laziest man in known history and Q's greatest nemesis, is going undercover in Eastern Europe, and will be there for god-alone knows how long. Several weeks, minimum.

Q couldn’t be happier if he tried.

In Mycroft's absence, it also becomes considerably easier to fully investigate Mycroft. His team, his actions, his behaviours, his routines. Mycroft's physical presence makes more of a difference than anybody could imagine: if anybody crosses into areas Mycroft wants hidden, he will intervene in a heartbeat with a phone call or a turned camera or a word. It is instant. Mycroft works all hours of the day and night.

Without Mycroft's finger on the pulse of the United Kingdom security services, Q is able to sneak into the bloodstream unnoticed and find out just what makes Mycroft tick.

There are a number of curious things:

1) Mycroft has been living in his office for a while, despite still being the sole resident of the Holmes mansion. It is probably because Mycroft knows that Q cannot bug his office: it is an underground, concrete complex that Mycroft knows every inch of. If anything is disturbed – even the slightest whorl of dust – he will vacate the place in an instant.
2) He has an unhealthy interest in the Sherrinford facility, for reasons Q cannot fathom.
3) Anthea is an unbelievably good shot.
4) The Holmes parents are under 24/7 watch. As is John Watson. Indicative of Mycroft's overt sentimentality.
5) There are blueprints of Mycroft's offices, both his underground bunker and his quarters at the Diogenes club, that Q can locate and use to his purposes.

And then, the piece de resistance:
6) Mycroft knows that Jim is alive and well.

Jim hasn’t been in touch. Q keeps trying, but is met with stereo silence and the realisation that he has lost control, at least a little bit. If Jim is working with Mycroft, if either of them have crossed that line, Q genuinely has no idea what he’ll do; the anger, horror, (fear), render him incapable of breathing.

“Jim.”

The UK terror alert has been raised to critical. The terror attack is not connected to Moriarty. Q is reasonably certain that the problem has been diffused, partially because it is quite simple to replace explosives with exceptionally good replacements if given enough time.

“Jim.”

Mycroft and Moriarty have spoken to each other outside the realms of Jim's incarceration. There has been contact.

Jim won’t pick up the goddamn fucking phone. Mycroft is undercover. Q is exquisitely angry.

The problems start to spin into each other: Jim is absent and Mycroft is undercover and Sherlock is undercover (but has been caught) and Sherrinford has always lingered on the edges of Q's conscience because it has never made sense that neither he nor Jim have ever spent extended periods of time there, and Sherlock is having the living shit beaten out of him according to some of the phonecalls passing through Serbia and the surrounding areas, and Jim is gone. Jim is nowhere.

“Would it be considered bad form to ensure Mycroft doesn't make it back to the UK?” Q asks brightly, without looking up; he does not see Bond's answering expression, one that makes it wearily clear that killing Mycroft is very bad idea. “I mean, or at least make sure he gets hurt somewhere en route.”

“Well,” Bond muses, “I suppose we could.”

Q hums to himself, trawling through a couple of the intercepted missives from Baron Maupertius and the assorted others involved: Mycroft has been well and truly absorbed into their ranks, and theoretically should be in a position to retrieve Sherlock fairly imminently.

“... but it would potentially delay...”

And his phone starts to ring.

Bond is treated to one of Q's rarest smiles. The type which lights every fraction of his lips and face and body and soul, that makes him look strangely and completely and utterly unearthly. Perhaps on another, it would look transcendent; on Q, it looks terrifying.

Q's voice curves on the name and stabs in the accusation: “Jim.”

Sherlock is home and pissed off.

“... and I swear to god he was enjoying it,” Sherlock whinges, while Q blinks and drinks a cup of tea. “Bastard.”

“Are you going to have a shave at some point?” Q asks, looking through Sherlock's medical file; they're in MI6, Sherlock technically has not returned to the UK yet, and Mycroft has his own
medical team waiting in his underground office to look Sherlock over, get him looking more like a human being again.

Theoretically, Sherlock was supposed to have been taken directly underground. In practice, Q intervened, and got his own team to look Sherlock over first.

Sherlock is actually quite badly injured, although he's doing a remarkable job of trying to prove otherwise. Sleep deprivation is the easiest to combat, followed by malnutrition (although to be fair, Q cannot recall a time when Sherlock wasn't malnourished), and then the horrific beatings Sherlock was clearly subjected to.

Q wonders how Sherlock copes with pain. He seems to be unperturbed. Not quite Jim's level of unperturbed, but unperturbed all the same.

Sherlock shrugs on his shirt and tilts his head in the same moment, communicating something that Q entirely misses. He definitely needs a hair cut. A suit. Something that fits the overlong and over-thin lines of his battered body, perhaps a touch of makeup to cover the blackened circles of exhaustion, something more substantial than a cup of Earl Grey to fill the hollow of his stomach.

“You can't keep putting yourself through this,” Q tells him, with frightening quiet. “You just can't. You're not young enough to go off undercover with fuck-all human contact for two years. If you didn't have me and Mycroft pulling overtime monitoring you, you'd be dead by now.”

“I had to unravel the web,” Sherlock replies, devoid of the cockiness Q usually hears at moments like this. “Moriarty's web. He has strands everywhere, I still...”

Q cannot breathe, entire body lethally still. Sherlock's voice is almost inaudible, as if the louder he says it the more real, the more likely it will become: “Q. I'm not... there is a margin for error. Aspects I may have overlooked. I believe Serbia was the final one, the last elegant step in his dance across the world...”

Sometimes, Q forgets how nauseatingly pretentious Sherlock can be.

“... and whether I got it wrong,” Sherlock completes, and the last words fade into the heavy air.

Considering and considering, and there is Sherlock and there is Jim, and it isn't even hard to hum and pretend happily, happily that Q hasn't the faintest idea, that he too believes Moriarty's web is dismantled, that Moriarty (Inc) isn't the foremost crime syndicate in Europe (and parts of America and some small parts of China, but the latter is very much a work in progress, they've only just started dipping their toes in) and Sherlock bolsters himself and decides that his job is done. He won.

“Mycroft will be getting irritable by now, leave before he realises I got to you first,” Q orders, and Sherlock doesn't argue. As soon as he has left, Q rings Mycroft directly.

“Yes?”

“Any particular reason you've decided to get Sherlock on the case of a terrorist attack, rather than myself?”

Mycroft answers with amused, yet palpably hesitant, impassivity: “You know precisely why.”

“Moriarty is dead.”

“Yes, so I have been both reliably and unreliably informed. The latter is why I continue attempting to pursue the former, with variable degrees of success which you, I assume, have been watching with
“your customary derision.”

Q smiles invisibly. “I watch most things that you attempt with derision, Mycroft, it's hardly new. Sherlock is on his way, for the record, I needed an official debrief with him.”

“No,” Mycroft contradicts, with warm amusement, “you were worried. It's alright, Q. It won't puncture your reputation to be concerned.”

“I don't need your blessing,” Q snaps back, hackles raising, gall rise in his throat. “And you don't know a fucking thing.”

Mycroft gives a beat of silence, which is more than enough to make his point, and Q contains the urge to retaliate further: Mycroft always does this, somehow Mycroft manages to see through him and crawl into him with a warm and disgusting tenderness that makes Q want to scrub off his skin.

Nobody speaks to Q like that.

After all, caressing with a voice is so much more intimate than a body; voices curve around the aura of a person, wrap them close with the press of somebody's care. Bodies cannot love, not like a voice can. A voice transcends, can zip across continents, can seep into skin. Stain.

Q hangs up.

- 

Because malevolence is a hobby of Jim's, he starts to drop hints and haunt far earlier than he had intended (or needed). There are games that he's set in motion (with some help, admittedly) that will last for years and years to come, and the best part is, people will think he is alive while knowing he is dead, and vice versa, around and around in circles until the point where he actually returns from the dead, and will be invisible, simply because he'll have schooled them where to look by then.

Jim is being a magician in the truest sense: the art of misdirection.

Mycroft strongly suspects, but cannot prove, that Jim is currently alive. That is beside the point; Jim is still feeding Mycroft information. By the time Jim Moriarty died on the roof of St Barts Hospital, he and Mycroft had a good thing going, and the best part was that Q had absolutely no idea.

And so Jim breaks cover, because why the hell not, and gives Mycroft a call.

“Remember, remember the fifth of December,” he sings, “gunpowder, treason and plot. I see no reason, why gunpowder treason, should ever be forgot.”

The response is a quiet, hidden murmur: “Moriarty.”

“And what shall we do with him?” Jim asks brightly, the last couplet of the nursery rhyme, his voice still tumbling and dancing across the room.

“What do you want.”

“Aww, c'mon Big Brother,” Jim laughs, “finish the song! What shall we do with him?”

“I will not play games with you,” Mycroft reminds him, voice still level. “And now that I have confirmation that you are alive...”

“What shall we do with him?” Jim screams; Mycroft holds the phone away from his ear, Jim can see it behind his eyelids, Mycroft at work or at home or (ooh maybe) in bed, wouldn't that be fun,
especially as (Jim realises, a moment later) it's the middle of the night in the UK, Mycroft Holmes lying naked and helpless with nothing but a dead man's voice for company.

Mycroft doesn't play games. That is a known fact. Mycroft Holmes does not play the games that Sherlock does, that even Q does on occasion. Mycroft will not, cannot, play games.

“... burn him,” Mycroft says, softer than a prayer, and a jolt shudders through Jim's entire body.

He is playing.

-

Months seep past. Q has no interest in most of it. Jim twists through the USA like the cyclone he is, laying waste to several areas and asserting dominance in others, winding up with more contacts and connections than ever before. He will be coming home soon, but only when there is a suitably impressive *moment*. It won't do to just turn up on an odd sunny day in June. It has to be sometime emphatic, memorable.

In other words, until Sherlock gives Jim his cue.

That will not come for a while yet. In the meantime, there is a pending issue with a beautiful woman who will spell the wreckage of Sherlock and John Watson, and Q is watching with an intensity rivalled only by Mycroft.

Everything is going almost, almost okay. Sherlock seems to have adapted beautifully to the strange new world where his best friend is married and Mary Watson is now pregnant and oh, yes, by the way happens to be a master assassin with a kill rate higher than most people can begin to conscience.

Mary cares exclusively for John Watson. It means, by extension, that she cares for Sherlock: Sherlock is good for John.

Q trusts her. Mary Watson is an intelligent woman, almost more so than Sherlock himself; Sherlock, after all, hasn't noticed.

*Mycroft* hasn't noticed. Not the truth, anyway; he knows something is wrong, but Q has buried in her layers upon layers upon layers.

“Who is Mary Morstan?”

Q raises an eyebrow. “You can't find out for yourself? You're slipping.”

“Middle age,” Mycroft murmurs serenely. “Comes to us all. And in any case, I've never shied away from acknowledging my own weaknesses. I can put some of my people on it, but I thought I would ask you directly.”

Q smiles, disarmingly honest. “I have no idea what you mean. She's chosen to conceal her birth identity, and that's entirely her prerogative. I certainly don't need to tell you. She is not your concern.”

Mycroft's phone rings.

Both of them look to Mycroft's pocket. Mycroft's phone does not ring when he is in meetings. It hardly rings in any circumstance – Mycroft calls others, not the other way around – so the bizarre, loud, almost painful ringing is obnoxiously out of place.
“One moment,” Mycroft adds superfluously, and holds it to his ear. “Ah, Doctor Watson, how may I... Ah. How unfortunate. Thank you for bringing this to my attention; I will arrange the necessaries, and meet you at Baker Street.”

Q straightens slightly, all traces of levity gone. “Excuse me?”

Mycroft looks to Q, and for a moment, Mycroft is naked. His eyes hold a type of raw terror that makes Q's whole body vibrate, causes blind panic to shoot through his veins, because not Sherlock, that is the only thing they have left in common beyond DNA, they have Sherlock Holmes and their pathological inability to emotionally detach from somebody whose selfishness is truly off all possible charts, somebody broken and brilliant and aggravating. Their one, single, pure weakness.

“Sherlock has been located in a known drug den, entirely out of his mind. Doctor Watson is having him assessed in St Bartholomew's, and I am going to despatch several forensic units to his usual haunts,” Mycroft explains quickly, whilst dialling Anthea. “I need a car, now.”

“I can organise the dispatch team to 221B, if you...”

“No. I have an idea for that, and I intend to humiliate Sherlock a little. Could you address his other boltholes? I want to trace dealers and establish precisely what he has been ingesting”.

“A full intervention?”

“I'm going to wait and see what he has to say for himself first,” Mycroft replies, voice back to his customary languid calm. Q can still see the cracks, though; Mycroft is an exquisite actor, but Sherlock's drug abuse is the one thing that breaks him (both of them) apart. “Thank you, Q.”

Q raises an eyebrow; Mycroft accepts his offer of help, and Q tries to remember the last time they worked together. He cannot think of any. Certainly not like this, where both agree to coordinate the resources at their fingertips without hesitation or pause.

In this moment, they are siblings, and they are frightened.

“I'll ensure there is a rehabilitation centre waiting,” Q tells him. “Just in case. You'd better call our parents.”

Mycroft nods his gratitude, and is gone.

- -

It transpires that Sherlock has been using, consistently, for several months now. Sherlock claims just the once, but Q ensures the requisite drug tests; Sherlock is saturated with the stuff, his usual vice of cocaine with a little added frisson of heroin. Speedballing.

“Why?”

“Charles Augustus Magnussen.”

Q is vaguely interested. Vaguely, simply because Magnussen has never blipped his radar, but is apparently of interest to both Sherlock and Mycroft. Somebody of that much importance to both of his siblings should not have passed unnoticed; and yet, he has.

“And that justifies a relapse?”

Sherlock lets out a melodramatic sigh. “It's not a relapse, it's...”
Q slaps him, ferociously hard.

“Say that one more time, and I’ll do more than just slap you,” he tells Sherlock blandly, while Sherlock rubs his cheek and looks rather offended. “This is not something you can laugh off to your idiotic associates, you cannot lie to me, and you will not lie to me.”

Sherlock looks at him like he's never seen Q before. “What's wrong?”

For a heartbeat or so, Q has no clue how to respond. It simply isn't a question he is asked, as a general rule; Bond doesn't always see, and Jim doesn't care.

It is a beat too late: “Nothing. Magnussen?”

“Media mogul and master blackmailer,” Sherlock replies. Q can see the almost invisible trembling of his fingers, worrying at the fabric of his trousers, while eye contact starts to duck and dive and hesitate, and Sherlock needs a fix. In an hour or two's time, he will be getting desperate. “It's for a case. I don't care about him, per se, but a client...”

“... a client has endorsed you becoming a drug addict, once again...?”

“Shut up and listen to me,” Sherlock sniffs; Q raises an eyebrow. “I have to. This man is controlling half of British politics...”

“... so set Mycroft onto him,” Q shoots back instantly. “That would save you a substantial amount of time and energy. I'll take a look, too.”

“It needs to be me.”

Q's stare is flat, expressionless, and terrifying. “I will say this only once: if I catch you with anything more illicit than nicotine in your system, you will spend at least six months in isolation, in a specially designated rehabilitation facility. The bed is waiting as we speak.”

“No need to get Mycroft to do anything,” Sherlock hisses, “not when you've turned into him. You can't threaten me, baby brother.”

Laudably, Q's expression does not change; his anger is intoxicating, but he will not allow a flush to colour his cheeks or a hesitation to slide into his voice. “It isn't a threat,” he states coldly. “I am telling you a fact. Do not compare me with Mycroft.”

“Always a Holmes,” Sherlock continues viciously, “despite all your best efforts. When you disappeared I was actually proud of you; you disgust me now, you're exactly like him. Interfering, personality-free, desperate, boring...”

Q slams the blade of his hand into Sherlock's throat.

Sherlock promptly collapses, Q standing over him; for a physically unimposing human being, Q somehow has enough sheer force of personality to be terrifying when he wishes to be. Jim has that same ability. Sherlock and Mycroft probably could, but don't have to, having both height and physical presence to support them.

For an extended moment, Q stands, watches. Sherlock's rasping, laboured breathing takes a moment to recover from; he struggles to standing, uncertain, expression flitting between shock, anger, pain, and concentrated loathing.

“I will help you,” Q says quietly. “Only, and I mean only, if you submit to drug tests on a regular
basis.”

Sherlock's expression does not clear. “I don't need your help.”

“Don't be a martyr.”

“Goodbye,” Sherlock tells him, his voice blood-sodden, keeping his limbs from vibrating with want. Q watches him leave.
Chapter 17

It is something of a relief when Sherlock finally clocks that Mary Morstan is not entirely what she appears. Q is exceptionally disappointed, and is also increasingly certain that Sherlock has been drug-addled for longer than he is even close to confessing: it is the kind of detail that he would normally see from kilometres away.

After all: Sherlock cares about John Watson beyond anything and anybody, rightly or wrongly. Mycroft thinks that Sherlock did not see it beyond he didn't wish to hurt John, and that wish overrode even his analytical capacities.

Q believes differently: Sherlock cares about John above and beyond everything, and his safety is paramount. An international assassin would constitute serious danger for John Watson, and nothing – nothing but drugs, anyway – can distract Sherlock from keeping John safe.

A.G.R.A.

Q knows all about her, and about them. Jim employed them, as did Mycroft. Q has continued to trace them. AJ is still alive, although not in a good way, and of course Rosamund Mary (Watson) is very much alive; Q even knows who betrayed them, knows the whole sorry story. Vivian Norbury. A secretary, and a lonely one at that. It's amazing what loneliness and loss can do to a person.

In the meantime, though, there are more pressing concerns:

Mary Watson shoots Sherlock.

“... and while I feel a certain degree of sympathy,” Q tell her lethally, “shooting him was...”

“... the only way to save his life,” Mary completes, entirely unconcerned. She is probably right, which is deeply irritating. After all, Mary was, is, a professional: she knows what to do, she is more intelligent – and substantially more experienced – than anybody else Q can imagine. Her entire life, job, passion, was all spent becoming the person she is, and the ability to live the life she does now.

And like all the people Q knows best, her love makes her beyond formidable. John Watson is her world, and her life, and she will end earths for that.

“I told you I'd keep an eye out for you,” Mary reminds him calmly. “I keep my promises. Sherlock Holmes is safer than anybody in the world. He made a vow. I made one too.”

“You made a vow to John Watson.”

“I made a vow to John, which means I made one to Sherlock, too,” she points out. “I love John. I know that loving John means loving Sherlock Holmes.”

“He's really quite impressive in that regard, isn't he?” Q muses quietly, the truthfulness of that statement needling into him. “In any case: if what you are saying is true, I owe you thanks. I don't like owing favours, as a rule, but I'll make an exception for you.”

“Cheers,” Mary grins, and straightens slightly. “You won't tell him.”

Q blinks in slight surprise. “Correct. Why would I?”

Mary nods, and leaves.
Christmas wheels itself around, and Jim makes a very highly anticipated return to the UK.

Helicopter is not a fun way to travel, although it certainly does make an impression. Jim has music blaring in his ears – *I want to break free!* - and slides his way across the sand, making jokes and evidently scaring the life out of the Governor who was waiting for him.

Jim ambles in. This is probably the moment that he gets arrested, incarcerated for the rest of the foreseeable future, but good sweet lord he is intending to have fun before that happens. It's *Christmas*, for god's sake, he's allowed.

“Smell all of that insane criminality,” he breathes, inhaling like it is his last. “Do you have cannibals here?”

“Yes.”

“How many?”

“Three.”

“That's good,” Jim replies calmly; he tried human flesh a while ago, but there seemed limited point in pursuing that craving. Certainly, it is hardly worth a fresh new murder for. Meat is one thing; it is personality, it is souls, that Jim Moriarty devours. “People leave their bodies to science, I think cannibals would be so much more grateful.”

Then, a simple whistle. A calling-card.

Pandemonium erupts somewhere, a long way out of sight. The pity is that these are all the criminally stupid ones: no *good* serial killer ever gets caught, not even by somebody like Sherlock Holmes. Jim knows of a fair number of very high-ranking and delectable murderers that will slip through life without anybody beginning to realise; it is all, ultimately, about intelligence. The stupid will die out, eventually, skimmed away by those who can see.

Dying is an art, like everything else. Murder is, of course, the elevation of that art: only those who understand death can understand murder, and it is not merely artistic, but transcendent.

It should be noted here that killing is not like murder. Murder is a considered and balanced event, designed for a spectator. Manslaughter, death, accidental running-somebody-over-with-a-truck is not the same as murder. Just like dying is not the same as suicide. They are variable and distinct, elegant art forms.

Jim twists death, murder, suicide around and through him, then ducks out of the way, faster than eyes can track him.

When Jim dies – truly, honestly, genuinely dies – it will be more than simply art. It will be poetry. It will be brighter than sunlight and darker than gravity. Jim is an artist, more than anybody could know.

But that is irrelevant, now. Now, there is Mycroft Holmes.

“You know what this place is, of course?”

“Of course,” Jim replies, smiling a patronising smile. “Am I under arrest again?”
Jim watches Mycroft dance around the subject, and raises an eyebrow as Mycroft tries to detach from emotion: “You're a Christmas present.”

“How d'you want me?”

Oh, oh Eurus.

“Me? Who me?” he mocks, hand on his heart.

“She has noted your interest in the activities of my little brother,” Mycroft explains – without really explaining precisely how Eurus knows about Sherlock’s activities – and leans further back in his chair, assessing Moriarty as best he can.

“So,” Jim teases, “what does she have to do with Sherlock Holmes?”

Mycroft's expression remains distant, attempting control with limited efficacy.

“Whatever you're about to tell me,” Jim continues, wondering just how much Mycroft will tell him, “I already know it's gonna be awesome.”

Oh Mycroft, Mycroft. Tsk tsk.

Jim, alone.

Eurus.

Mycroft's eyes.

“I'm your Christmas present,” Jim says sweetly, ignoring every directive and sliding right to the glass, breath misting it tantalisingly, “so what's mine?”

“Redbeard.”

Their heads sway together, serpentine. Eurus seems to truly understand. She is weirdly beautiful. So beautiful. There is an absence in her gaze that reminds Jim of home (of Q).

“You don't feel it at all, do you?”

“Which one?”

“No, no, no, darling,” Jim breathes. “Not to me. Not to me. You know. You know it you know it, it's why you're here.”

Eurus smiles a soft, gentle smile. A lulling sort of thing that makes Jim's spine tingle. “What is it about him?”

Jim's smile mirrors, echoes, augments.

“He's the right...”

“... speed”, they say, in perfect unison.

“He's not watching,” Jim states accurately, not because he needs to, but because there's a little shred of him that wants to prove himself. Eurus exhales brilliance. Jim has known of Eurus like Eurus has known of him: enough, enough to have the reputation and anticipation. “Oh. Redbeard?”
Eurus's eyes glint. “My brother's best friend. They played pirates. I drowned him in a well, and sang songs to Sherlock, and he remembers so little.”

“What?”

There is answer enough in the crease of her brow; Jim knows love like Eurus knows loneliness. It aches, breaks. Jim can see how badly she wanted, wants, to be loved. Being alone is one thing, but loneliness only hurts if you love enough to feel alone, to feel left behind.

“You know Q?”

“There's another?” she replies; she has no clue, no idea whatsoever. Oh Mycroft, Mycroft. “Oh. After me. After I was gone. They had another.”

“His name is Q.”

Eurus smiles faintly. “I like it,” she whispers. “Introduce me, won't you? He's yours.”

For the first time, she is wrong: “No. I'm his.”

Her expression is exquisite. “Jim Moriarty. Jim. You'll make this fun, won't you? I have plans. I need your help. This is just an introduction; the people who matter already know, and you are here because Mycroft thinks he is clever enough to outwit me. Not by much, but he genuinely believes it.”

“I doubt it,” Jim points out. “Mycroft is remarkable.”

“And I'm better.”

It does not occur to Jim to disbelieve her; she knows Mycroft better than any other. She knows everybody. “I will introduce you. He's more like you. You'll find him slow, though. He's a little slow.”

“Everybody is.”

Jim grins. “Apart from Sherlock, of course. I'll be back. You want to destroy Sherlock?”

Eurus breathes a moment of confusion. “No,” she replies, very honestly. “I want to understand. Mycroft I'll happily let die, that'll be fun.”

“Oh?”

Her eyes are pale and bright. “If I faced Sherlock with a choice,” she murmurs, “of Doctor Watson, and Mycroft...”

“He wouldn't even blink,” Jim replies lovingly. “Oh, oh. I'll be dead, by then.”

Eurus laughs, head thrown back, dark hair scattering over her spine. “Yes,” she laughs, and with every passing second she is ever more perfectly alive. “You will be, that will be perfect. You'll terrify them, won't you?”

“You frighten Mycroft.”

“And you frighten Sherlock,” Eurus replies, without hesitation or pause. “I want to see Mycroft die.”

“Why? Not that I disagree, but...”
“You had a brother.”

Jim has never, ever spoken about his brother. “How...”

“You expression, your posture; the word causes a movement in your body and I can see it,” Eurus explains placidly. “Obvious. You are jealous but moved on a long time ago. You imitated him. You killed your mother.”

There is a moment where Jim feels dizzy, sick. “What?” he half-whispers.


“You can’t know that.”


Jim feels his world tilt on its axis. “He was a stationmaster,” he explains, with manufactured flippancy. “Walked onto the tracks and never came home. He was the clever one.”

Eurus laughs. It is a sound that doesn't feel quite right; it has the right sounds and the right cadence, but there's an element of reality that's sadly lacking.

“Q will want to meet you.”

“Is he clever?” Eurus asks.

Jim takes a moment to consider.

The answer is a shock to them both: “Yes. More so than the others, but not how you'd expect. He's more like you.”

Eurus inhales so softly the air barely twists. “Me?”

“You and I,” Jim assures her, “are going to have so much fun.”

“I know,” she replies. “You're going to take me home, James Moriarty. Home to my brother. You promise?”

“Oh darlin’,” he says, with exquisite honesty. “Oh, sweet, sweet creature. I promise. Don’t you worry. I promise.”

There is a whisper in her eyes that speaks of a desperation beyond imagining.

Jim has rarely been so honest: “I promise.”

Sherlock shoots Charles Augustus Magnussen, and is banished from England. It's as good a cue as they could hope for. Q chooses to let Sherlock get as far as airborne before clicking the right buttons, his keycode, and hijacking every single screen in England.

Did you miss me?

Mycroft calls Sherlock first, not Q, which is how Q knows that Mycroft is unsurprised. Q is second.

“I assume you can disable it?” Mycroft sighs blandly. “Will you?”
“No,” Q replies cheerfully. “Not until you answer several vital questions regarding your relationship with the assumed deceased James Moriarty.”

Mycroft sounds stunned. “Excuse me? Do you truly have the audacity to twist this situation, when I am aware of your...”

“You're been desperately trying to make out that I have a personal relationship with James Moriarty. Something you have never managed to prove, but has been an obsession of yours. Does it not follow, really, that you protested far too vehemently? You always clung onto anybody who Sherlock loved, and we both know why.”

There is a small but exceptionally notable hesitation. It is the span of a thought. The suggestion, the connotations. Mycroft's thought tripping up on itself and stumbling, visibly, and Q feels like every single Christmas came at once as an errant thought Q's harboured for years gains oxygen.

“You and Moriarty...”

Q's point has been made, and he ends matters on a high note by hanging up.

Did you miss me?

Another phone call, and Q's ears fill with laughter.

Jim's voice sounds younger than Q can remember hearing in years. It is the silvery thing from tube ride and a dead drug dealer, the childish delight of two little boys who have so much life to live, and so many deaths to survive.

“Come home;” Q smiles, and feels electricity in his fingertips. “Jim.”

“My Q,” he hums. “Q, Q, Q.”

There is a knock on Q's door; the smile doesn't die, in fact heightens, as Jim's voice still murmurs Q, Q, Q, Q like it is the last sound they will ever hear, his lips ghosting to Q's, to his ear, again and again, kissing him, unlacing him, years and months and days and hours and centuries, like they are strangers again.

Do you love me?

Jim starts to scream, and Q slams the heel of his hand into Jim's sternum, his body nervelessly ricocheting off the front door, rebounding into Q's arms, Q stifling the scream with his hand, his body, throttling Jim and finding no resistance, just the stifled scream and the choked nothing, Jim's eyes throbbing wide and terrifying.

Q slams a foot directly into Jim's knee, and feels it give beneath him; the noise Jim makes is ecstatic, a whimper as he slides to the floor. “No,” Q warns; Jim does not give up, he does not make this easy. “Up.”

It is amazing, just how strong Q is. Jim is hoisted up by his hair, and their kiss is bloody; Jim bites, Q snarls. “I have so much to tell you,” Jim hums. “Really, really darling. I made a promise. I made a promise, and you don't even realise, you have no idea...”

“Later,” Q hisses, and Jim's eyes roll back in his skull as he crowls like Peter Pan, crows out freedom to the skies and feels alive, so desperately and beautifully alive, and nobody but nobody makes him feel like this, nobody can.
“You're never going again,” Q breathes, pants, sobs; they will both pretend to forget this moment, like they pretend and don't to remember entire lives. “Never. I don't care if the entire fucking world is falling to pieces, you need me.”

“I need you,” Jim confesses, on his knees, pleading. “You...”

Pain. Pain that is beyond reason or explanation, that whites out thought. After so many years, Q is finally doing what Jim always prayed he would, letting himself do that which he only has done once before, that beautiful and incandescent once.

Jim does not underestimate Q.

At last, at last, he does not underestimate Q.

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Case: BT198255D./SH
D Notice – 100 years

Q deals with the footage, just in case anybody asks unpleasant questions about how Sherlock has circumnavigated a first-degree murder; nobody but all (four) of the Holmes siblings, Jim, Bond, Moran, Hangnail, Porlock and Love (as the codenames go) know.

“We have some very talented people working here,” says a man Mycroft puppets. “If James Moriarty can hack every TV screen in the land, you can be assured that we have enough tech to doctor a bit of security footage. That is now the official version.”

There is a moment of understanding between Mycroft and Sherlock: yes, Q has saved Sherlock once again. He always has, and always will.

But now, there is some time to be wasted while the next act begins.

Q has a sister to meet.
Chapter 18

Sherlock is broadly occupied awaiting Moriarty's return, which in practise means his life remains utterly normal: he moves back into 221B Baker Street, solves crimes, watches Mary give birth, looks after a vomiting mess of a newborn human being and refuses to acknowledge Q's existence.

Q doesn't mind unduly; it is only when A.G.R.A crawl out of the woodwork that things get problematic.

“Mary Morstan is a surviving member of A.G.R.A?” Mycroft rails, in one of the happy moments Q has been able to make him homicidally angry; he has stormed into Q's office (without knocking, the bastard) and is now ranting. Q cannot help but wonder just how naïve Mycroft is, that he could not connect the dots earlier. “This was vital information, Q, and you...”

“She has a right to her own life.”

Mycroft lets out a harried, unpleasant sound that Q supposes must be like a laugh. “Your idiocy is overwhelming,” he hisses. “Another member of that group is alive, and seeking Mary. To the extent that he very nearly killed Sherlock.”

Q has to confess to being somewhat blindsided by that piece of information; he had been reasonably certain AJ was out of commission, and certainly in no state to be murdering his ex-colleague. “And said individual is...?”

“Mary Watson has disappeared,” Mycroft replies, voice vaguely brittle. “We need to track her down. Sherlock is intent on...”

“... I wouldn't worry unduly,” Q interjects. “I supplied him with a very high-spec tracker which is currently monitoring Mary, and he also gave me the opportunity to read every scrap of information on A.G.R.A. Well done, by the way, it is a tough call between you and Moriarty as to who used them more.”

Mycroft becomes stiller, incrementally. “Moriarty employed A.G.R.A?”

After their last conversation, Q enjoys the evidence that can curl around Mycroft: he and Jim have always crossed over, more than Mycroft begins to fathom. “Don't you have a lot in common,” Q comments lightly, with a tiny latent dash of cruelty.

They are both quiet for a moment.

Then:

“I am only going to ask once,” Q says quietly, ensuring that his tone reflects that this is no longer mockery, and no longer anger. This is one of the only questions Q will ever ask Mycroft that anticipates an honest answer. Q is, if only a little, vulnerable; Mycroft will lose more than he could know if he lies.

A polite nod. “Yes?”

“What is your connection to the Sherrinford facility?”

There are very, very few things that terrify Mycroft Holmes, and almost all of them are related to family: losing Sherlock terrifies him, Q in general terrifies him, anybody hurting his parents does
(although he'll lie on that theme) terrify him.

Which means that Jim was telling the truth, because now, now, Mycroft is the type of terrified that makes Q instinctively revolt: it is like Sherlock relapsing, that precise same rawness.

“Mycroft.”

Mycroft's breathing is erratic, faint. “Sherlock doesn't know either. It is a secret that remains buried, even beyond you. With all of your resources, you have not been able to establish the secrets living in the Sherrinford facility and, for a variety of reasons, I cannot disclose it to you. This is not to condescend, nor to patronise. Sherrinford remains secure. I ask you, on whatever level we understand one another, to not pry into this issue.”

Q has to give credit where due: Mycroft has not lied. That fact is enough to earn Mycroft a moment of mercy.

“I cannot promise that,” Q replies quietly; Mycroft's expression is cold and steady, the brothers closer than they have been in a lifetime. “But: I will not interfere, not unless I must.”

“A boon I did not expect,” Mycroft acknowledges, with a slightly wary dip of his head. “Thank you, Q.”

Q nods, and Mycroft correctly takes himself to be dismissed.

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Jim is bandaged up and grinning like the demented lunatic he is, while Q hacks into Sherrinford, and discovers that he really does have an older sister.

“You weren't lying.”

Jim gasps melodramatically. “I don't lie to you! Why would I lie to you? You never trust me, I'm offended.”

“I have a sister.”

“Yep,” Jim replies, all bright and sparkly now. “A totally bonkers mad as a hatter ridiculous gorgeous insanely intelligent and also just insane. She's got mad skillz.”

Q looks up at Jim, the last words causing a grimace of distaste; Jim really is trying very hard to cling on to a youth he's never had. Mostly, he is doing it to be annoying – which Q knows perfectly well – but it is alarmingly effective.

“I need to go there.”

“Oh good,” Jim says brightly. “I need to pop over there myself, without supervision, there are a couple of people I want to say hi to. The lunatics are running the asylum and I love that that's literal, it's never usually literal. I was going to ask: you could be really helpful in all this.”

Q hums that he's listening, but he cannot shift his thoughts from Mycroft's expression. It troubles him.

Mercifully, Q's mind is deflected elsewhere by the entrance of his boyfriend; Bond glances at the pair of them, noticing Jim with a solid three seconds of amusement, before kissing Q deeply.

“Welcome back to England,” he says to Jim, pouring himself a glass of whiskey; he gestures, Jim
accepts, Q rolls his eyes yet demands one of his own. “Having fun already?”

Jim cannot walk, his breathing sounds very peculiar, he is attached to various intravenous substances and he's still stubbornly bleeding from somewhere on his abdomen despite several layers of bandages; Q really did have a field day with him. “Never better,” he replies honestly, unperturbed. “And you?”

“Been worse,” Bond shrugs. “It's good to be home. Q?”

Q looks up at him with an unrecognisable expression. “It transpires that I have a criminally psychopathic genius as a sibling, and no, I'm not discussing Sherlock or Mycroft.”

On instinct, Bond's eyes dart to Jim, and the question is almost audible; Jim bursts out in cackling laughter. “No, no, no, not me, not me. There's another.”

“There's another,” Bond repeats, stunned. “What do you mean, another?”

“A sister that I was never told about, and Sherlock deleted from his memory,” Q tells him, as he drains his glass. “Killed Sherlock's best friend, burnt down our ancestral family home, burned down another institution, and has subsequently been directly responsible for killing an admirable number of people, despite having been incarcerated in a supposedly secure institution for a very long time.”

Bond sits down.

The three of them sit in companionable (and slightly nervous, in Bond's case) silence. Jim's monitors beep.

“I'm assuming we're going to be breaking into said institution in the not-too-distant future?” Bond asks lightly; Jim glances up, impressed. “Well, you two can be quite predictable.”

“Hark at him, he's getting lippy,” Jim smirks, looking at Bond with renewed interest. “So. Up for joining us?”

“To meet the, what, fourth Holmes?” Bond asks. “Is Moran coming with us?”

“Nah, I want Sebby to stay out of the limelight where possible, I don't go travelling as me with Seb,” Jim explains. “Safer that way. Big G knows me, knows who I am, so he can't know Seb.”

“Internationally, everybody with half an ounce of intelligence knows that Sebastian Moran is your bodyguard.”

Jim blinks, vaguely affronted. “And you have...”

“More than half an ounce, and enough to notice,” Bond completes. Q, without looking up, snorts; Bond really has developed a spine that Jim is only just realising. It is precisely what Q is in love with: this particular shade of Bond, the man who is a mass murderer and innovator, aware of his failings but electric in his triumphs. “When are we leaving?”

Q deigns to look up; Jim shrugs. “Remember: lunatics, asylum, blindingly intelligent sibling, really very fond of me. Now?”

“What has she asked you to do?”

There is a quiet, a reflection in Jim's smile, a sad one somehow. “A lot of videos. Little films. Remember, Sherlock and Mycroft don't know...”
“... no, Jim,” Q interjects, with a quiet that Jim knows better to contradict, “just Sherlock. Mycroft knows.”

Bond looks between them with genuine alarm. “Mycroft knows you're alive?”

“Yep, and invited me to Sherrinford as a Christmas present to his insane baby sister,” Jim completes, apparently unperturbed by the magnitude of that statement. “It was a Stradivarius the year before. I'm almost flattered.”

“I wouldn't be,” Q comments unkindly. “But if you like...”

“Helicopter, by the way,” Jim interjects, voice pointedly cheery and directed solely at Bond. “Boat is possible, but it's such a bore, you have no idea...”

“You're not going anywhere any time soon, surely?” Bond points out, glancing up and down Jim's destroyed body. “I...”

“Don't you worry your pretty little head about me,” Jim grins, all teeth and ferocity. Bond notices that he has, in fact, detached his morphine drip; the man must be in staggering pain, perhaps explaining the semi-delirium he's exhibiting. “I'll be fine. We have a wheelchair.”

“Of course we do,” Bond replies, almost wearily. “I have a few people I'd like to speak to, actually, while I'm there...”

“... way ahead of you darlin', I've got friends in there, not like yours, proper...”

“I can get us onto a helicopter within the next couple of hours,” Q continues, his and Jim's voices binding together eloquently, winding through each other. “Mycroft is in back to back meetings and Sherlock remains oblivious...”

“That was my next question: how did Sherlock not know?”

Jim giggles slightly, Q shrugs: “Sherlock has an incredible ability to rewrite or delete information from his brain if he doesn't like it. His first formative experience of grief and pain, and he chooses to eliminate it altogether, and in doing so deleted the entire existence of his insane sister.”

Bond is visibly discomfited at that explanation, but does not argue. As he tries to wrap his head around it, there is – instead – a song that trickles out of Jim's lips, like a song from a dream.

“The East Wind blows,” Q joins in unintentionally, freezing, attention flickering away into nothingness, eyes falling shut. Jim quiets, letting Q continue. “Sixteen by six, and under we go.”

“What was that?”

“I don't know,” Q says, still in that untouchable quiet. “I remember it. Sherlock used to sing it in his sleep, sometimes when high, it was a nonsense song. He never seemed to know what I was talking about when I asked, but I remembered it. But it would have been at Musgrave, wouldn't it? Not the Holmes Manor.”

“She told me about Redbeard,” Jim tells Q, as the song vibrates on his lips. “Drowned him. Sherlock's best friend. Oh, oh, and she has such wonderful ideas. She's going to give Sherlock a gun, and tell him to shoot either John Watson... or Mycroft.”

Q's mouth falls slightly open. “No,” he breathes. “You're kidding?”
Jim shakes his head, deliriously happy. “We're going to see Sherlock kill Mycroft, it's gonna be awesome.”

“But I don't think he could,” Q contradicts uncertainly, excited beyond measure at the concept but unable to really see it. “Sherlock is... he's too emotional. He loves Mycroft, almost as much as Mycroft loves him. Sherlock would far rather die himself than be responsible for that. Although to be fair, he's also terrified of death...”

“Let's see how it goes, and if it doesn't work, we'll find another way,” Jim bounces, clearly more excited than he's been in a long while. “Shall I get the helicopter?”

“By all means.”

- 

Jim wheels off to chat to a few previous and/or potential colleagues, while Q wends his way to his sister. As he approaches, she is playing the violin, and the sound is utterly exquisite; she has an eloquence that comes with perfection, rather than soul.

The lift door opens, and Q walks in; Eurus is facing the opposite direction, her music swelling, her body neutral. Q watches her for a long moment, her long hair falling down her back and the white, comfortable robes hide her body from view.

She glides to a close, and turns around.

Their eyes meet, and Q knows that every single part of himself has just been seen and catalogued. Q's entire life, entire world, has no secrets to Eurus.

“My name is Q.”

“Hello,” Eurus states quietly. “Little brother.”

Q takes a step forward, breaking the three-feet rule; there is no doubt that Q could be programmed by her into whatever creature she chooses, but Q is helped by the knowledge and understanding that she has no reason to.

“You're not like the others,” she tells him, with the smallest suggestion of a smile. “They're so emotional, but you're not, are you? Not like the other two.”

“I am more like Jim,” Q agrees; to his surprise, she instantly shakes her head, finding the prospect apparently amusing. “... no?”

“You're like me,” she tells him, steady and flat. “I can tell. This is going to be so much fun. Where's Jim?”

“Doing business upstairs, he'll be down here shortly,” Q explains; abruptly, he notices a streak of lurid red blood across the floor, by the hatch she presumably gets given food through. It leads up to, and quite evidently under, the wall: a door, then. “You...”

“I have a bathroom.”

“You have a body in there,” Q responds, only faintly a query. “Who?”

Eurus blinks at it as though seeing it for the first time. “I never knew a name, just one of my guards, I was bored.”
“Bored?”

“I only wanted to touch,” she explains, without melody. “He was happy, I thought.”

Q can see why she gets on so well with Jim. “You didn't notice?”

“Not until he stopped breathing, there wasn't much else to notice,” she tells him flatly. “He was very dull really, all the way to the end but you, I know you won't disappoint me. Mycroft is terrified of you, yes?”

“What makes you say that?”

Eurus smiles, vaguely. “It's obvious. Mycroft never mentioned you, never even suggested that you exist. Tells me reams and reams about Sherlock, but never about you.”

“Yes. I frighten him,” Q confirms. “He isn't a deft enough liar to properly hide it.”

“Mycroft might die, you know.”

“I hope so.”

Eurus's smile lifts to something more visible. “He needs to solve my puzzle.”

Q does not ask. Eurus is unnerving. Her eyes grow unfocused as she sings a melody Q can almost recognise from the edge of a nightmare (and under we go) and Eurus is a long way away from him. As such, Q interrupts her reverie: “Would you like to come out with us?”

Eurus’s eyes widen faintly, a tenth of a millimetre. “Now?”

“When was the last time you left?” Q asks, with a creeping, intuitive sense that it has been far too long.

“Not since Mycroft locked me up,” she whispers, and her voice holds a hairline crack that only Q can hear; to anybody else, she has no inflexion, is a black hole that seems to suck in anything that suggests emotion or engagement. It is sing-song but flat. “I only wanted to go home.”

Q takes another step forward, lifting a hand to touch the glass that separates them. His fingertips leave the slightest of prints. Eurus takes two silent steps of her own, lifting her own fingers to press against where Q's were; they match, mimic. Q always had small hands, and Eurus's have a similar elegance to his own: her fingers hold deep trenches of violin string indentation, his are burned and scraped and blistered.

“Let me take you home.”

Eurus closes her eyes, and Q sees the smallest glint of water in the corner of her eye, her smile the sound of a gasp, the promise of a home.
Eurus breathes fresh air, and her body is a song.

True, this may be partially because the oxygen levels are higher than the recycled air that conditions her cell. As such, she has a slight euphoria, heightened by circumstance, that makes her smile glow in the dark and her eyes sparkle like an imploding star.

There are a multitude of things that need to happen. 'Need' is a relative term, but Eurus has no distinction between 'need' and 'want'; they are synonymous for her. She has a sense of showmanship that proves her a Holmes: Mycroft's intellect, Sherlock's drama, and Q's imagination.

Jim and Q are more than happy to help her on her way. She has at least five alternate identities to assume – Jim's favourite is the therapist, Q's is Faith Culverton, Bond likes the subtlety of the Eurus who'll be distracting John Watson with a compelling Scottish accent, Seb likes a further version who'll be doing other random things, Jim forgets – and it means there's a lot of fun to be had.

In the meanwhile, Sherlock is doing everything in his power to convince the world he has entirely lost his mind.

To an extent, he has. Any thoughtful processes have been outweighed by the delirium of his drug addiction. This is his atonement and his penance, as he would have John Watson believe; Q knows better. Q knows this has happened because Sherlock wanted a ready-made excuse to go off the rails, and is using the death of his best friend’s wife to do so.

What it means, at least in part, is that Sherlock does see an end-date to this flirtation with death. Previously, it has been more than possible - likely, even - that Sherlock was waiting to die.

Q visits Sherlock unexpectedly. He slips in through the front door without disturbing Mrs Hudson, slides up the stairs and through the front door.

The smell of unwashed body and expired food is evident, and Q can taste the chemical strangeness in the air around him; Sherlock has more or less constructed a meth lab in the kitchen, watched over by a fellow druggie whom Q knocks out with a spray of his own making, directly to the face. The druggie collapses with an amusing degree of melodrama, narrowly avoiding cracking his head on the fireplace.

Sherlock is insensible. Lying in front of the couch where he clearly fell off, sweating copiously. It is not the first time Q has walked in on Sherlock high, but this is an extreme; indeed, it is inches away from an overdose, and Sherlock is sweating out death as Q watches.

Q walks to him, stands over him. Sherlock’s pupils are shot to hell and his breathing is ragged. He looks a little like Jim did, after Q had finished with him, only Jim’s bliss had been absolute while Sherlock’s is tortured with the knowledge of its falseness. Some part of Sherlock knows this is artificial, this will end.

“Sherlock.”

He does not respond, and Q had not expected him to. He does not even moan.

This was always Mycroft’s job. The bedside sitting, mopping Sherlock’s brow with a monogrammed handkerchief, telling the necessary lies, waiting for the peak to ebb and die and holding Sherlock as he vomited into buckets and kicked, throttled, threw things at Mycroft. Q was always shielded from
the worst of it.

But he remembers the day he found out that Sherlock had been raped. Q had been fifteen. Sherlock was twenty. Sherlock had come home - a rare occasion - and just cried. Q had walked into Sherlock’s room uninvited to find Sherlock with his upper arms bruised from a repeated tourniquet and lower arms riddled with broken veins and pinprick holes of ink black, shivering to himself, crying silently as he stared at the ceiling.

“Sherlock?”

That time, he had shifted. Indeed, he had flinched, a full-bodied thing that betrayed a) his terror and b) where he was hurting.

“Prostituting yourself?” Q asked, voice flat and unmerciful. “I thought we’d passed that particular vice. Let me guess: somebody was too harsh with you? Didn’t stop to pay attention to the crack whore beneath them?”

Sherlock looked at Q, and his expression was sheer murder. “I didn’t want it.”

“Come on, Sherlock, I’m not twelve years old any more,” Q snapped back. “You don’t have money, I get that, but really? After the HIV scare?”

“I didn’t want it.”

“And still you do it,” Q retorted, misreading Sherlock’s grief as self-involved which, to be fair, it usually was. “Don’t expect me to be sympathetic about it, you choose to get yourself into these situations…”

“Q. You’re not listening to me. I didn’t want it.”

Sherlock’s cheeks are flushed pink with heroin and arrogance and sheer, desperate shame.

Q understands with the kind of rush that makes his legs feel weak and spine seem to melt. “You… oh fuck. Fuck. Sherlock…”

“My dealer,” Sherlock managed, his voice sounding like he is speaking from somewhere deep underwater. “I paid him. I had the money. He tied me down. Him and his friends. I was high, really fucking high, couldn’t… I couldn’t do anything.”

There is nothing in Q’s emotional arsenal to deal with this sort of thing. “You were at his flat?” he asks instead, information-gathering; Sherlock mumbles a London address like it is the last thing left in his mind, something he will cling onto when the rest of his life is falling to pieces, the address he will go to when he is dying of desperation. “Sherlock…”

“Nothing I could do,” Sherlock continued, voice trickling through a split lip and bruised throat. “I tried. I tried. Got… he gave me lots, after, I have a stash, I’ll get a new… new dealer…”

“You’re still going to persist in this? After you were just gang raped by your current dealer?”

The harshness of Q’s words seemed to actively wound Sherlock, make him gasp in a sob, his body remembering and remembering and remembering. It would always remember.

“I’m going to speak to Mycroft.”

“Don’t tell him,” Sherlock bit back, voice sharp and frantic and pleading. “Not about…”
Q nodded, once, and immediately left to phone Mycroft. Mycroft, who immediately dropped
everything to go home and check Sherlock into rehab. Mycroft, who never found out about what the
dealer did, saw the physical signs and assumed, as Q had, that he had prostituted himself willingly.
Again. Sherlock had sat through a lecture and never again, to Q’s knowledge, admitted to a single
human being what had happened.

But Q knew, and Q remembered. Q visited that flat in London barely two months later, and
announced that he was moving in, otherwise he would go to the police about the grimy little man’s
method of income.

Stunned, the man had agreed. He had very few alternatives.

Now, Q once again stands over Sherlock, resplendent in his high.

Q kneels down, leaning his head close to Sherlock’s ear, a quiet and cruel murmur. “Do you
remember it?” he asks, not expecting an answer, hardly imagining that Sherlock can even hear him.
“How it felt. All those men fucking you. The ones who paid, the ones that didn’t…”

Sherlock lets out a high-pitched keen. “Please, no,” he whispers. “Stop it.”

“You deserved it,” Q hisses. “You deserved it then, and you’ll deserve it now, when they use you
like that. Asexual? You really think a single damn person believes that? Do you wish you could be
functional? Normal?”

Another keening, strangled sound; Sherlock can’t speak yet, wondering if this is a hallucination, a
cruel something that speaks with his brother’s voice, talks about the only thing nobody knows about,
his secret, the secret he will carry with him to his grave.

Because Q doesn’t know this: Sherlock does not remember telling Q what happened.

There is no reason for this. Q knows that he is torturing Sherlock at his most vulnerable, and he can
feel the slight thrum of enjoyment that comes with letting his latent cruelty have breath, but it is tiny
compared to the thrumming constancy of insane anger and something like grief.

Q kicks him viciously in the stomach, and Sherlock contracts inwards violently, coughing and
gagging. “I’m never going back to that,” he manages, through his pained gasps. “How do you… you
know?”

“I’m not here, Sherlock,” Q tells him, fucking with him because he can. “Why would I be? Why on
earth would I care?”

To Q’s shock, Sherlock doesn’t reply. Instead, a steady string of tears creeps down the side of his
face, dissolving in the buzz of stubble. Q almost misses Sherlock’s unvoiced rasp “I’m sorry” and
feels prickles shoot up his arms, raising the hair on the back of Q’s neck.

“You’re dying, Sherlock.”

Again, almost inaudibly, Sherlock rasps out: “I know.”

Q shudders slightly, which remains unseen. “You’re going to get hurt.”

This time, Sherlock’s sound is a genuine sob: “I know,” he repeats. “I deserve it. This is my fault, all
my fault. Mary I’m sorry, John, I made a vow, a vow, I don’t want this either. I don’t want to die.”

“Then stop.”
Sherlock’s unfocused eyes try and try to fix on Q, swimming towards and away again. “Soon. I promise. Soon.”

“You have one week. One.”

“Two,” Sherlock whines. “Two. Two weeks, and I’ll stop. I will stop.”

By the time Sherlock’s eyes can focus, Q is gone, and there is no suggestion that he was ever there.

- 

Eurus has a holiday, away from Sherrinford. She constructs identities with extraordinary ease. Her accents are flawless, physical quirks mimicked like nothing Q has ever seen. True, he does not have the deductive capabilities of his brothers, but he can barely see through a single one of her disguises.

Sherlock doesn’t notice a thing. Q watches with a type of sadness, Jim with disappointment: Sherlock is simply not as good when he’s drug-addled. He should have seen. Instead, Sherlock is facing the genuine unravelling of his brain, partly because he is now internalising that he’s hallucinated both Q and Faith Culverton in the space of a couple of days.

Of course, Sherlock catches the serial killer. In the end.

“I’ve been watching him for years,” Jim comments, with the weighty disappointment that comes with watching his favourite plaything be boring. “Even sponsored him a bit, towards the start. He was messy to start off with, enjoyed it far too much. Bit bloody, bit messy, too traceable. Silly man. He’ll be dead within the month.”

“Dead?”

Jim shrugs. “Not by me, unless I really fancy it,” he says brightly. “No, no. He’s had his applause and he won’t be released from prison. Prison’s boring on a life sentence, or so I’ve heard. Suicide. He’ll do it himself, or he’ll pay someone. That’s a good point. Alright, I lied - maybe I’ll do him myself. I don’t like renegade assassins that aren’t on the payroll.”

“We’ve got a rogue up in Liverpool, speaking of which,” Q notes; Jim grimaces. “Yes, I know you hate the place. No, you can’t just level it.”

“Nobody would really mind,” Jim whines. “Might even thank me. Liverpool’s a shit hole.”

“No.”

“Send Bond?”

“God no, he’s too important for bollocks at this level,” Q chastises immediately, Jim pouting. “Come on. I have a sleeper up there, Matthews, I think his name is. I’m on it, either way. Thought you should know, though.”

London was annexed a very long time previously; the UK is basically theirs now. Ireland is Jim’s little project. He will be going out for a couple of months, for the first time since he left as a child. There are many places he needs to visit, people to meet.

First, though, there is Sherrinford to deal with. Q is showing a remarkable degree of malevolence about the whole affair, partly because he and Eurus have grown very close, very quickly; Q hates Mycroft, hates Mycroft with every fibre of his being, and he is loving the opportunity to help Eurus and (hopefully) destroy Mycroft.
It is very, very close.

“I’m going to shoot him.”

“With a tranq dart.”

“It’s still shooting him,” Jim points out. “Which is pretty fun.”

“You’ve got bullets, can’t you…”

“I used them on the therapist,” Eurus replies, unperturbed.

Q’s sigh is almost audible. “I gave you a full magazine, you used the whole lot? I somehow doubt she put up a fight, you could have saved just the one for Doctor Watson…”

“Oh stop whining, she’s allowed,” Jim tsks. “Watson can’t die now anyway, it would ruin everything. We’ve got plans, Q, stop being impatient.”

Jim accusing Q of impatience. That has to be a first.

Eurus is in the therapist’s house, waiting for John Watson to turn up. She intends to go through a decent part of the session, get some information out, before revealing herself. To everybody’s relief, the almost-affair she’d constructed over text was not coming to fruition (partly because Eurus cannot think of anything duller than sex with John Watson, and also because she has a nasty habit of accidently killing people she has sex with).

Naturally, she and Jim have had a go. Jim had barely recovered from Q - still bandaged, but walking - before deciding it would be a bright idea to fuck his big sister. Although to be honest, it was more that Eurus was fucking Jim; there was no doubt whatsoever who was dominant in that particular encounter.

Part of the problem was that Eurus genuinely had no idea about physical sensation, from start to finish. Jim’s gauge of pleasure and pain was entirely unlike any other human being, which certainly didn’t help her understanding of Normal People.

None of them have any understanding of Normal People, nor will they ever. Jim survives sex with her; he screams out an orgasm in a haze of blood-sodden skin, slamming her head into the bedstead, her own body a confusion of pain and want and need and pleasure, and Jim is second only to James Bond in his knowledge of women: he plays her body like she plays her violin, (with the help of a bullet vibrator that Jim keeps on him for moments like this) and she cries out an orgasm of her own, somewhat surprised at having done so.

“I’ve never had that before,” she says, not quite as flat as usual, betraying a shred of surprise. “Thank you, Jim.”

Jim is giggling to himself, mopping the blood away with baby wipes and occasionally antiseptic. “That was fun,” he grins, kissing her bare shoulder because it’s in reach; she looks around at him with flat confusion, with no idea why he would bother. The sex is finished, after all.

“Why?”

“…. afterglow,” he says, after another moment, and smiles at her a little too softly.

Eurus stares at him, and looks - amazingly - rather disgusted. “Don’t do it again,” she tells him placidly, and walks out of the bedroom stark naked, startling Seb somewhat on her way to the
bathroom. He’d been waiting patiently for them to be done.

“Sebby,” Jim calls, Moran’s cue; he walks in, shuts the door behind him, and indulges Jim’s afterglow with warm arms, dry kisses, brushing them against Jim’s bare skin, across the bone of shoulderblade and softness of stomach, letting the blood smear onto them both, binding them, staining.

Everything is ready. Happily, Sherlock and John have the same level of theatrics that Eurus, Jim and Q have: they have rigged the Holmes manor to cause the absolute maximum amount of mental torture possible for Mycroft. They’re making the portraits cry blood, for god’s sake, it’s awesome.

Q gets involved to make sure Mycroft’s security is fully disabled, warns Sherlock about the pistol in Mycroft’s umbrella so he can remove the ammunition, and then Q, Jim, Bond, Seb and Eurus sit back and watch.

“Mycroft’s started smoking again,” Q comments, as things get started, and Jim mouths the words along with Mycroft (which is weird, Q never knew Jim had such a penchant for old films; but then, Jim has spent an enormous amount of time on planes. He has to watch something). “He’s stressed.”

“This’ll help,” Moran adds; Jim smirks. He loves his sense of humour.

The home video kicks into gear. “He really was a fat child,” Jim says aloud.

“Lost most of it by the time I was old enough to notice, but I think he was bulimic for a while,” Q replies, eyes still trained on the feed from the house. “He’s always been sensitive though.”

“And Sherlock’s hair.”

Eurus isn’t speaking. There is a sadness in her eyes that is beyond measure, beyond thought, and nobody present intends to comment.

“Oh, here we go.”

Mycroft’s terror is transparent, especially when a clown comes at him with a rapier; he yells a bit, genuinely does try to stand his ground, but by the time he spots Sherlock his voice has a recognisable tremble: “Help me.”

He doesn’t ask, he expects, and that will be his downfall.

Sherlock’s voice is stretched, his expression flat: “Conclusion: I have a sister.”

The fear turns to anger, Mycroft’s face contorting; Eurus has the smallest, slightest smile playing in the corners of her mouth. Mycroft has weaknesses, and in every incarnation, it is his siblings. Despite his best efforts, not a single one are under his control.

(Despite his best efforts, not a single one is safe)

“There’s an East Wind coming,” John Watson announces, and strides out, Mycroft watching him go with a tight, livid constellation of expressions.

Q had told Mycroft that he wouldn’t interfere. Now, he sits with his impossible sister next to him, watching Mycroft fall apart when he thinks nobody can see (idiot, he should know better) and must admit that he loves it. This is Q’s long-awaited revenge (and his shin twinges in remembrance, as it
does every time) and it is exquisite.

“Pizza?” Jim suggests. “While we wait?”

Q removes himself from his little reverie, and nods. “Pizza.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

And so we have the fucked-up world of Sherrinford - hope you enjoy, there's lots of fun things a-coming... Jen.

The next stage begins with Mycroft at 221B Baker Street. While they wait, Bond makes tea and Q orders the pizza - a novelty Eurus has never been introduced to, to Jim’s utter horror - and so by the time Eurus is piloting a DX707 patience grenade through the kitchen window, they've eaten the better part of five pizzas and a collection of sides.

... Sixteen by six, and under we go...

Q’s body shivers with remembrance as Eurus, next to him, sings a song that Q remembers from a nightmare.

They listen to the three men talk, saying goodbye in the disjointed way they can. Their ineptitude is a bit tragic. At least they’re trying.

Jim hums slightly, looks at Q. “… and was he a good Lady Bracknell?”

“Shh,” Bond hisses; Jim pouts, prods with a redundant fork. Bond raises an eyebrow, and Jim grins obnoxiously at him. “I want to listen!”

“Ah fuck it, we can listen again later,” Jim points out; this time, Q also hisses at him to shut the fuck up, Jim, so Jim takes a martyred sigh and sits back.

The microphones all white out in the same instance.

“Happy?”

“At least one should have sustained major injury,” Moran says, his tone slow and steady. He always sounds slow. But then, he’s just not that bright; it can’t be helped that he works at a slower speed. “Although it’s unfortunate that Mycroft was closest to the door.”

Jim’s smile has a different tone: okay, not that stupid. He certainly knows how anything and everything military. He organised some aspects of the grenade explosion; Jim often asks his opinion on hits like this, because after all, Jim is a specialist in death, rather than living, and this time they’re not supposed to die. None of them are supposed to die.

As such, the grenade underwent some modifications at Q’s hands and Moran’s instruction. The explosion was slightly more directed - upwards, so the floor didn’t go - and nowhere near as powerful as the original DX707 was designed to be. The flat should remain structurally sound, although singed around the edges, and the kitchen should be mostly retrievable assuming that Sherlock isn’t keeping anything unduly illicit in the cupboards.

(He isn’t. Eurus checked. Another alias, a cleaner; Mrs Hudson and Sherlock didn’t notice anything amiss about her, and so she did the cleaning, planted some bugs and checked around).
The safest exit would have been through the door of the flat, and down the stairs. The stairs would afford cover and structure when the building was blasted, while jumping out of the window would need youth and a very intelligent, quickly-considered landing. Something Mycroft would be far less able to do. The man was far fitter than he used to be, but athletic ability would never be his area.

Sherlock has barely recovered from several drugs-related near-death experiences, and most recently also smothering. John Watson is a little older with several previous injuries to contend with. One of them, statistically speaking, should have sustained an injury. Or at least be pretty rattled.

Jim perks up a bit now they’re getting back to the fun parts. “Off to Sherrinford we go,” he says brightly, standing, clicking out his back in series of loud popping noises that make even Q glance up in mild distaste. “What? We can’t be late, that’d be awful.”

“One moment, my scout on Baker Street should be…” Q’s phone rings, and he smirks, holding it to his ear. “Yes? Noted. Anything else? Thank you for your service.”

Jim shoots off a text message. Q hangs up just after he hears the gunshot, for safety’s sake.

It’s Bond’s fault, really. Bond is paranoid, more so even than Q. Bond knows how many agents would turn or speak or betray. Jim takes betrayals with the livid, honed precision of somebody who has a wicked vengeful streak. Q is paranoid, very paranoid, but Bond has seen the worst of people and trusts nobody: he insisted that, to ensure Mycroft knows nothing and will continue to know nothing, Q persists in the false trail he is creating.

As such, the agent who had gone to check over Sherlock, John and Mycroft was originally one of Mycroft’s people. Somebody quite far down in the pecking order, but easily corruptible: when one of Moran’s people shoots him through the head from two buildings across, it will look for all the world like Mycroft knew what was coming.

(fucking with Mycroft shouldn’t be one of their favourite pastimes, but it’s just so much fun)

Now, they need to get themselves over to Sherrinford. The weather is horrible, which makes helicopter almost impossible for anybody who isn’t extremely experienced or a tad suicidal. Between them, the five fit that criteria nicely, so off they head on a helicopter in the midst of a horrendous storm. Moran drives.

Glass removal and setting up Eurus’s cell has already been done. There is more than one cell that fits the brief, identical to Eurus’s; it is an easy matter to divert the lift onto the wrong floor for Sherlock, to a cell that mimics Eurus’s barring the glass, and then imprison them in the identical cell the next floor up for the next bit.

Almost all of this is Eurus’s planning, and she’s ridiculously good at it. A throat mike, projected signage. It is so obvious. So, so obvious. And yet, Q admits - when he looks at the set-up in detail - that it is also very difficult to see through. (haha).

The only thing they didn’t foresee was just how Mycroft, Sherlock and Watson would break into Sherrinford. It is actually rather inspired. Mycroft - in an insane costume with accent and all - cons the Governor almost without effort, while Sherlock dresses up as a guard (which was the bit they’d expected).

Mycroft is sublime in his anger. The Governor doesn’t actually know, not really, how far any of this goes: he is a pawn in the scheme of things, and will not live long. Eurus is exquisite, but lacks experience; it is the help of Q and Jim that is making this plot come off without a hitch.
The three of them chat in the Governor’s office, while Sherlock goes off on his own.

Q watches Mycroft, wondering whether he’ll notice, or whether John Watson will do so first. Mycroft should notice it the instant the tapes begin playing, but does not. He is too frightened by all of this. His body reads his hatred of the place. His eyes are steady, a scapegoat for the fury that he employs to cover the fear: Mycroft is the best actor and magician of them all (or was), and the anger is perfectly modulated misdirection.

Q knows better.

Something in Q, though, hears the promise he made Mycroft. One of the only times they have spoken as equals, and one of very few promises Q has made.

“I will not interfere, not unless I must.”

Jim watches Eurus with Sherlock, transfixed.

Q cannot tell who this is for, not any more.

To Jim, this is for Sherlock.

To Q, this is for Mycroft.

To Eurus, this could be for any of them, and most poignantly, it is about herself. Not like Jim’s ventures about himself - self-indulgent, arrogant bastard that he is - but more like this, whatever this is, is about her understanding. Q does not think Eurus herself yet knows where all of this will go.

Eurus is a constellation of emotions more complex than her intellect can rationalise. Every synapse that fires in her brain fires more emotion, more sense, more intake. A woman who can see every particle of dust, feel the quarter-shift of air, hear symphonies in another man’s silence, who can taste histories on a breath that for mere mortals seems like empty air. There is so much, so much, and nobody is there with her: alone in a world where every sense screams at her in an infinitude of different ways every second she is awake, and she is so tired.

Sherlock reads their present world. Mycroft can read their entire lives. Eurus can read them to their very atoms.

For now, Eurus is speaking to her brother. Sherlock is just as entranced by her as anybody else has been. Sherlock can be such a silly, young creature. He believes he will be above everybody else’s petty concerns, and Mycroft clearly thinks so too: he sent Sherlock, rather than going himself. Hoping, perhaps, that Sherlock will be immune.

Idiot.

“Look at the violin.”

And Sherlock looks, but cannot see. Will not see. Eurus, she is beautiful, and she turns it in her fingers and is disappointed and loves Sherlock with every echo of her being.

“No, no not Bach, you clearly don’t understand it, play you.”

And he does, and both Jim and Q tsk in perfect unison. It is him - of course it is - but it is Sherlock how Sherlock wishes to be seen. Elegant, certainly, but the mourning cry of somebody who wants to prove himself in any way possible. Eurus can tell, and she lets him get through scarcely an instant before cutting him off.
They continue:

“How did you get out.”

“You already know.”

It makes complete sense to Q when Eurus knocks Sherlock unconscious with two extremely forceful and exact hits on both temples - both Q and Jim are pleasantly surprised by the precision - and screams as she batters him. The Holmes siblings are hilariously bad at coping with love.

And now, now things get interesting.

John Watson makes a run for it, and is rewarded for being annoying by being hit very hard over the head and dragged over to Eurus’ cell unconscious. The Governor puts up very little fight, apparently internalising having been betrayed by Eurus almost immediately; he evidently expected little better.

Mycroft is frogmarched. It is ridiculously funny, mostly because Mycroft is terrified.

All of this has been designed for the heightened aesthetic, and to make sure that everybody involved has their little bit of fun. Q was the one who requested that Sherlock be delivered to the cell unconscious: Mycroft and the Governor have been locked in themselves when Sherlock’s limp body is poured onto the cell floor in front of them, and Mycroft’s composure is utterly shattered.

“Wow,” Jim comments, with a low whistle. “Big brother is freaked.”

The panic is absolutely intoxicating. Mycroft is instantly at Sherlock’s side, feeling for pulse and breath, looking somehow implacable but so painfully, stupidly, moronically readable in his visible terror that Eurus would be so dull as to kill Sherlock straight off the bat. As though Sherlock, just for once, isn’t the protagonist in everybody else’s life stories.

The Governor props himself up against a wall, staring into the middle distance.

“You have no idea what you have done;” Mycroft tells him, without looking up, his body curved over Sherlock’s. “You stupid, naive man.”

There is no forthcoming response; the Governor is still, pale, faintly sweaty. He is almost on the verge of speech when Sherlock moans theatrically; Mycroft steps back as though scalded, refusing to allow Sherlock to see his moment of comparative weakness.

Sherlock’s expression is remarkably calm as he faces his brother. Mycroft looks straight back, and there are novels to be gleaned in the few seconds they have to communicate.

At that moment, John Watson is delivered into the cell, dumped unceremoniously in the middle of the floor by a handful of guards. Nobody bothers trying a dramatic break-out, which is sensible; Sherlock goes to him, assesses, a mimic of Mycroft.

“Are you sure?” Jim asks, eyes on Q, his voice a quieter murmur that speaks of their odder days, something of a true concern. “There’s no going back.”

Q does not respond for a long moment; then, finally, the shortest of nods.

Jim, turning his happy attention back to the screen, takes a slug of something indeterminate from a hipflask. “This is the best, best thing ever,” he murmurs, handing over the hipflask to Q; he ignores it, and Jim tsks. “You’re so boring, sometimes.”
“I don’t drink when I’m working.”

An immediate cackle of laughter. “Darlin’, this isn’t work. This is just fun. Go on. Let loose. Enjoy it. Eurus, babe?”

“Don’t call me that,” Eurus replies without looking up; she is sat at the Governor’s desk, staring intently at a screen that shows precisely the same as Q and Jim’s. Her tone is flat but somehow dangerous, and Jim knows better than to press the issue. “Six minutes.”

Q restrains the urge to ask if she’s certain; she is always certain. Q cannot read as she does, looks at John - who is being lifted from floor to bed by Sherlock and the hapless Governor - and unlike her, has no clue how long it’ll take for John to regain consciousness.

Jim tries to coax Q into drinking. Q grabs the hipflask and lobs it at the glass of the office door; the hipflask sails through, shattering the glass en route, and Jim pouts and whines but cannot be bothered to retrieve it, not when their captive audience have started to chat to each other.

Sherlock’s voice is brittle. “Why’s he here?”

Mycroft gives the Governor a cursory, derisive glance. “Presumably, Eurus has decided he has outlived his use as her puppet,” he says blandly. “As to his further use in the proceedings, your guess is as good as mine. I can only assume there is further amusement that Eurus intends to glean from this scenario; I’m sure that will become evident shortly.”

The door to their cell is closed, and Eurus herself knows that they cannot be released from the inside. There are three doors in the cell: the entrance, the bathroom, and the interlinking cell doors that will be used to guide the three survivors through the rabbit warren of Sherrinford.

Jim had a fun bit of interior design fun, on that theme: he went to find a dispensable friend who had been a Sherrinford resident for a few years, killed her, drained a decent amount of her blood into a bucket, chopped off her ponytail, and used it to paint the walls of the rooms that were going to be put to use.

When he ran out of blood, and the hair got a bit sticky, he went off and repeated the exercise with another. He got through three altogether before running out of time.

“Here we go,” Jim breathes, leaning in, shattered office door and hipflask utterly forgotten.

In the same instant, Mycroft speaks: “Doctor Watson is waking.”

Ten seconds elapse, and Doctor Watson groans.

“Ready?” Jim asks Eurus, who ignores him: of course she is ready. “Q?”

Q spares a heartbeat to glance up at Jim, and grin.

Eurus is in charge of everything in Sherrinford. This ranges from falsifying the voice of a terrified child on a plane (which she can do eerily well), to basic sound and lighting, to intercom, to Jim’s video recordings, to three men dangling outside a window (although to be fair, Q was the one to get them all there, and Moran the one to string them up), to the necessary precautions of sedative darts should the last part of this game game go awry.

Q and Jim get involved after that. There will come a point when Sherlock and John need to be airlifted to Musgrave Hall; the box Sherlock will wake up in, chaining Watson in a well with a skeleton, rigging Musgrave Hall with the relevant screens and intercom, everything. It is a massive
undertaking. Sherlock and John will both be sedated for almost thirty-six hours, so a medical team is also on standby.

Part of those thirty-six hours are for Mycroft. On the happy assumption that he survives the oncoming storm, there are revenges that have festered for years, decades, and with Mycroft Holmes in their possession and utterly at their mercy, the three of them sit together and are breathless with hate and desire and sheer want.

(Q’s shin twinges in remembrance, Eurus’s eyes darken a fraction, and Jim just *laughs*)

But just for now, there are more pressing matters.

Eurus plays a child so well it cannot be misconstrued: this is a woman with issues and desperations that span her entire life, and this whole exercise will bring her home, to a home she never quite had and knows she never will. Eurus is going all-out for this moment, this time, because this is her final chance, and she does not forecast a moment beyond this.

It begins with Sherlock, and a gun. Eurus does not relish the situation in the same way as Jim, who is visibly hard already, or Q, who feels satisfaction curl comfortingly in his stomach.

Sherlock extends the gun to Mycroft. Mycroft looks as though he has never held a gun in his life, never fired one, never seen blood and gore spatter (Jim smiles without humour) and the three spectators all understand.

“I can’t. It’s murder.”

“Hamming it up a bit,” Jim breathes to Q, who nods, transfixed. “Is he really…”

“I will not kill,” Mycroft continues, and holy hell, the man is a sublime actor: his eyes wide, trembling faintly, chalk white and horrified. “I will not have blood on my hands.”


Jim murmurs: “What do you reckon?”

“I don’t think he can,” Q breathes back, as John Watson’s hands tremble.

Eurus smiles thinly, which serves as her response: this is what she had anticipated, every aspect. This is an experiment, certainly, but one with safely and intelligently projected outcomes; Jim and Q had argued elements, but Eurus was proving herself utterly right.

John gives up, turns away. The Governor wastes less than a heartbeat, and Eurus’s smile broadens faintly; Sherlock, John and Mycroft all cry out, moving in to stop him as the man cries his last and shoots himself through the head.

It is messy. It is not messier than anything Mycroft has witnessed previously.

Yet, he makes a big song and dance about retching against the wall; Jim and Q roll their eyes, while Sherlock and John exchange looks and quiet words with an easy intimacy that makes Q wonder why they haven’t shagged yet.

“Overdone,” Jim points out disdainfully, disappointed. “He’ll blow it, Sherlock isn’t that stupid.”

Q shakes his head slightly, his heartbeat thrumming in his throat. “You’d be surprised. Shh.”
“Sherlock, pick up the gun,” Eurus tells them.

Mycroft, just for a shadow of a second, betrays himself: a slight relaxation in the shoulders, slackening of the taut panic in his face, a split-second yet perfectly readable calm in his eyes as he acknowledges that he has played this game correctly.

Q has been waiting for this moment.

Sherlock, John and Mycroft filter into the next room. While Jim’s (extraordinarily annoying) video clip plays, their spectators exchange rapid-fire dialogue at breathtaking speed, they overlap:

“Does this make him suicidal?”

“Possibly.”

“Yes.”

“He knows…”

“... so does Sherlock, but he won’t…”

“... he’s lining this up, maybe he anticipates…”

“... he certainly anticipates, Mycroft has no interest in dying…”

“... but for Sherlock?”

“He’d die for Sherlock.” Q cuts over sharply, emphatically. “And he intends to. Mycroft knows this is his fault, and he knows he is outclassed - his pride is shattered and he’s terrified, dying for love would be the romanticised heroic ending he otherwise won’t have, it’s that or die alone…”

“Quiet,” Eurus says sharply, and the next stage begins.

Q is less interested in this next bit. Jim just wants to see the Holmes boys working together - John is an annoying add-on - but Q has no interest.

Mycroft continues his little mini-game with great aplomb:

“Am I being asked to prove my usefulness?”

The lovely subconscious murmurs keep going and going. Sherlock knows Mycroft, but he does not know Mycroft under stress, and Sherlock is trying to cope with his world imploding under the microscopic gaze of the psychotic sister he has only met in passing. Mycroft’s bizarre behaviour can be written off, or at least overlooked.

Three brothers, all dead. Moran and Bond’s parts are now done - they were there waiting on the green light from Eurus, to cue them cutting the ropes - and they’ll arrive shortly.

Indeed, Bond opens the office door in silence, looks at the broken glass and deigns to not pass comment. Nobody looks up as he sits in a chair next to Q, as he catches up with what is going on and is there in time to watch Sherlock utterly lose his mind having spoken to Molly Hooper.

“No now that, I didn’t see coming,” Jim comments; Eurus has cut off the video link for a moment, leaving Sherlock to a screaming, sobbing, livid attack, the type Q remembers from withdrawal-addled fury and sheer desperation. He smashes the coffin to pieces and slams into the bloodstained wall, sliding down it to stare into nothing with the gun discarded next to him, the sound echoing and
echoing back, the wounded pain of somebody who has no idea, not the slightest idea of how to cope with what is happening around him.

For the first time, Eurus looks discomfited.

Q catches her eye; she has been staring, gaze misty, into the empty space where a coffin had lain until seconds ago. “You didn’t expect that either,” he states quietly.

Eurus’s gaze is so bleak, so lonely. “I did,” she denies, with a curious heaviness. “I wouldn’t love him otherwise.”

Sherlock betrayed her so utterly. Sherlock ignored her, and forgot her. Eurus has had decades to harbour the impossible torture of being utterly forgotten by those who claimed to love her, and all because she doesn’t understand how to love like everybody else does.

Q wonders, distantly, if Mycroft ever told Eurus that her parents never stopped loving her.

“Why hurt him?” Bond asks, with honest curiosity. “If you love him so much, why hurt him?”

Eurus’s gaze has meandered back to her screen, and her entire world is Sherlock. “I need to know what he’ll give,” she murmurs. “I need… he has to understand. I just wanted him to…”

“… notice,” Q completes, very quietly.

She looks to Q, and there is the smallest glitter of caught light in her sclera as she nods. The smallest, most transient suggestion of a tear, one that disappears as quickly as it appears.

“Psst,” Jim beckons, nodding at the screen. “We’re on.”

Eurus sits up a little straighter, and everybody present has been waiting for this moment: Sherlock walks into the next room like nothing has happened, with John and Mycroft following shortly thereafter.

Sherlock’s bravado wilts as fast as it sprouts:

“It’s make-your-mind-up time!” Eurus tells him, her voice ringing with very genuine excitement; Q, Jim and Bond watch, captivated. “Whose help do you need the most - John, or Mycroft?”

Jim grins, winks at Q.

This is going to be fun.
Mycroft has prepared for this. From the instant he entered the first cell he has been considering: the Governor was evidently dispensable, and for maximum psychological impact it would need to be one of the cell’s occupants who disposed of him. Assuming a continued lattice of psychological tortures of varying natures, predominantly focused around Sherlock, the ultimate would have to be the extreme: Sherlock making an impossible choice.

Jim proved, several years ago, that Sherlock loves enough to die. It would be fascinating to see if he can kill for that same love.

Faced with that, Mycroft has to consider his position. It is not truly a question; Sherlock can survive without Mycroft. He will not survive without John Watson, and certainly not if he is forced to pull the trigger. The decision is easy.

Mycroft, therefore, places hints from the outset. The subliminal messages are calculated and clever: Mycroft is out of his depth, cannot help, is difficult and disconcertingly weak. Any ‘use’ that Mycroft would usually fulfil - from intellect to violence desensitisation to simply coping under stress - he makes certain fall into question.

By the time they reach an empty room, John has proved himself a thousand times over. John Watson, trusty John Watson, is all the things Mycroft is not; Mycroft may have analytical ability, but in all other areas John appears superior. Sherlock’s decision is made exponentially easier without him noticing.

The final death knell sounds, the cards are placed, and Mycroft makes his final play:

“We’re not actually going to discuss this, are we?”

Sherlock has an instant of genuine confusion. John is still quite a long way behind the times, the emotional impact of it hitting hard enough to blind him; it takes a sentence of explanation for him to realise what Mycroft is saying.

Mycroft has an expression of calm expectation, although he is kind enough to voice some token compliments in John Watson’s direction.

“Make your goodbyes, and shoot him.”

Jim, wordlessly, hands Q a tenner.

Mycroft plays it perfectly, even the melodramatic parts; Sherlock knows he is lying, he’s transparently lying, but the important moment is Sherlock’s declaration, and the swing of the gun:

“... which is why this is going to be so much harder.”

He chooses Mycroft, and Mycroft has succeeded.

Nobody breathes.

Mycroft has the smallest of smiles. This is a man prepared to die.
Perhaps there are options, perhaps this situation will end differently. Mycroft knows full well that nothing is certain, not where Eurus Holmes is concerned, but he is equally comfortable with dying here and now at the hands of the person he loves most.

“Jim Moriarty thought you’d make this choice. He was so excited.”

No word of a lie: Jim is all but bouncing in his chair, and Q can see that whatever happens next, he is going to need a good hard fuck to balance his brain.

*And here we are, at the end of the line. Holmes killing Holmes.*

Jim stops bothering with pretence, and happily masturbates in front of everybody present, watching his own face smirk in sheer satisfaction while Sherlock and Mycroft say goodbye in utter silence and John Watson tries so very hard to intervene, so very pointlessly.

*This is where I get off.*

And then, Sherlock does what Eurus and Q expected, because this is what Sherlock does best: self-sacrifice. The only get-out clause he has available. Wraps it up in pretty statements and the defiant set of his jaw, tucks the gun beneath his chin and starts a countdown. It is so stunningly, predictably and beautifully *Sherlock*.

Mycroft is transparent: he hadn’t considered this.

Eurus cues Moran: two darts, one for Sherlock and one for John. Sherlock has enough time to pluck it from his neck, examine it, before the world is dissolving into paint spatters. John still wears his expression of horror and shock, of helplessness.

They hit the ground with inelegant thumps.

Eurus is on screen, smiling slightly.

Silence rushes into the space that adrenaline and fear occupied, swallowing Mycroft whole for a distended moment. Eurus allows him the chance to collect himself, the silence stretching far enough to allow Mycroft to hear Sherlock and John’s breathing, satisfy himself that they are alive.

Mycroft’s expression is unreadable, as he looks towards the screen.

“So, dear sister,” he says, with laudable calm, “what now?”

While Mycroft play-acting was very amusing, seeing Mycroft being his true self is far more interesting. The manufactured manner has evaporated, along with the strange aura of ineptitude.

(in the background, Jim gasps out an almost-silent orgasm; he couldn’t look more satisfied if he tried, cleaning himself up with a few tissues. Q blinks at him in weary disapproval before slipping out of the room)

“This isn’t about you, Mycroft,” she tells him softly. “But you know that already. So on you go.”

A door slides open.

Mycroft stares levelly at the screen. If he has an instinct to look down to Sherlock’s unconscious body, to check him over, to care, then he suppresses it without visible effort. “What exactly do you have left to do?”

“Have a look,” Eurus coaxes. “Oh, and take the gun with you.”
Mycroft has to leave Sherlock and John behind, and he is transparently reluctant to do so. “What are you going to do with him?”

Eurus’s expression doesn’t change, and it is evident that he will not have an answer.

“You will not hurt him,” Mycroft says, and it is as much a question as a statement. “Eurus. Why not kill me? You want to.”

“Do I?”

Mycroft’s head tilts a fraction to one side, and he is exquisitely patronising. “This entire circus was for Sherlock, which I appreciate. You and I never exactly saw eye to eye, even when you were a child.”

“Because you were jealous, and afraid.”

“How insightful,” Mycroft replies, with bland sarcasm. “Now, Sherlock has confirmed whom he would prefer alive, for him to split his attention, and I can only assume that Doctor Watson will be dead by the time you’re sated.”

“That depends on Sherlock,” Eurus replies calmly. “As did this exercise. My parts of this are for him. Clever, clever Sherlock. Saved your life.”

“Quite, but you pre-empted that, I’m sure.”

Eurus flickers a nod, a concession. “Indeed. And so you, Mycroft, get to experience what comes next. It’s all for you, now.”

“Yes, but why.”

Eurus shoots a very particular look at Mycroft, fed-up annoyance; Mycroft is being deliberately slow, and she has no patience for him when he is stupid.

“Ah,” Mycroft murmurs, as the obvious realisation hits. “I see. Jim. I assume he is there with you?”

Eurus finally, finally smiles fully. It is utterly terrifying.

Jim slides on screen. “Hello, Mr Holmes,” he waves brightly. “Thank you for your cooperation in all this, it’s been so much fun. Now off you pop into the next room, there are things to be discussed and now, my love, this is my bit of fun.”

“Not exactly five minutes, then?” Mycroft comments drily.

Jim shrugs sideways, looks at Eurus, looks back. “Don’t try to pin the blame elsewhere, Mr Holmes, this is still all your fault,” he smirks. “Introduced us, you really should have seen something coming. Like I was going to leave this beautiful creature all alone. Not like you. Leaving your sister all alone…”

“I do not need you to detail my mistakes.”

Quicker than breath: “Then acknowledge them, by all means.”

“Eurus,” Mycroft says, with an edge of iron, “I only did what I thought best.”

“For who?” Jim asks, antagonistic and yelling and livid. “Best for who, Mycroft?!”
“Shh,” Eurus murmurs placidly; Jim stands down without hesitation, grins widely and winks at the screen before sitting back. “Now, Mycroft. Pick up the gun, and go.”

Mycroft allows himself a look down, a lingering glance over Sherlock and a cursory one for John. They are alive, and Mycroft can do nothing but obey, and trust the quiet certainty he has that Eurus does not want Sherlock dead.

The gun is in Sherlock’s hand, limp and broken somehow. Mycroft slides it away, entirely at ease with the weight and proportions, comfortably flicks the safety back on and tucks it into his jacket pocket.

Jim and Eurus share the screen easily, disarmingly comfortable with one another’s physical proximity.

Mycroft leaves Sherlock and John behind, and walks into the corridor.

For obvious reasons, the door slams obnoxiously behind him, taking his brother out of his grasp.

The corridor is silent, and there is no sign of life anywhere within it. Mycroft walks slowly, calmly, maintaining whatever semblance of control he possesses, cataloguing everything and cross-referencing with the internal blueprints he remembers of Sherrinford.

Mycroft walks into the next room, and does not pause when he sees the two bound and gagged women in front of him. His heart leaps into his throat, naturally, but his focus pointedly remains on the screen above the pair, where Jim is already laughing and Eurus seems to be holding her breath.

“Oh,” she says, after a moment, when Mycroft fails to react. “I’d hoped for something a little more demonstrative, you were doing so well earlier. Not so much fun without your audience.”

“Really hammed it up a bit at points,” Jim adds. “Not your most subtle.”

“I wasn’t aiming for subtle,” Mycroft replies calmly; one of the room’s bound occupants is making frantic noises, the terror rolling off her in catatonically sweet waves. “It worked as I had intended, which is what matters in this instance. What now?”

Eurus actually rolls her eyes, irritated. “You’re just not that stupid, Mycroft. Surely you can work it out.”

“Tell me,” Mycroft commands, without changing tone; the command is implicit, and the man’s tension is tangible. “I want to hear it.”

“Easy,” Jim crows, “easy peasy, Mr Holmes.”

“Choose which one to shoot,” Eurus completes, with no small degree of enjoyment. “And please note: this is not a game with a get-out clause. If you elect to shoot yourself, I would enjoy it just as much.”

“I’d love it,” Jim supplements, in a stage whisper.

“This is unnecessary cruelty, and serves no ultimate purpose. Why bother?”

Jim shrugs. “This was just my idea, couldn’t resist,” he tells Mycroft happily, and can see a rolling hum of sheer loathing that pulses in Mycroft’s body. “I just wanted to see what you’d do. This is just the beginning, Mr Holmes.”
“And if I don’t?”

“I can wait,” Eurus replies calmly. “As long as it takes, I can wait.”

Anything and everything has been accounted for. Mycroft knows that there are no options. He also knows that Eurus has probably already guessed what he will do.

Lady Smallwood, and Anthea, both watch him in a strange suspended silence.

Lady Smallwood is unapologetically terrified, has clearly been sobbing for a while, her makeup running in lines across her cheeks. She is still hiccuping slightly as she tries to calm down, tries to control herself, and looks at Mycroft with sheer desperation whilst still trying valiantly hard to appear more composed.

Anthea is still, and quiet. Mycroft has trusted her absolutely for many years, and she in turn trusts him. Anthea has known, from the earliest days of her association with Mycroft, that her job has risks; she maintains her professionalism, her composure. Mycroft himself schooled her in that, and she has never disappointed him.

“Your lover or your PA,” Jim adds happily. “Shouldn’t be a tough call, should it?”

Mycroft fixes the screen with a look of such amused contempt Jim could swear the metal melts. “Lover is a little strong, and PA a little weak; you know full well what you are doing, and I do not require the verbal prompting.”

Lady Smallwood hiccups again, sniffs slightly. Anthea does not move.

“This game is more fun with you,” Jim comments blithely. “Sherlock’s so predictable, honestly. Truly, Mr Holmes, I have no idea how you’ll handle this. I know who I’d go for. Eurus?”

“I already know,” she says comfortably, with a touch of smugness that really seems to have come alive now Jim is in there with her; she’s starting to truly, properly enjoy herself. “So come on, Mycroft, don’t dither.”

“As the lady says,” Jim nods, with a quirk of his head towards Eurus, who replies with a grin that is mostly teeth.

They make a very compelling double act. Mycroft is all but frozen, and it is not only his legendary self-control that is rendering him immobile; Jim and Eurus are absorbing one another more with every breath, their movements somehow orientating around each other, symbiotic.

Mycroft pulls the gun out from his interior pocket, fingers dancing over it. Seconds tick by.

The decision is obvious, but far from easy. Anthea is more valuable. Lady Smallwood will be a tragedy to lose, and will require a lot of governmental shuffling - the woman is like Mycroft, shockingly influential with surprising reach - but Anthea has been Mycroft’s centre for a long time.

Oh, and there is also the fact that Mycroft has never killed anybody with his own hands before. He has ordered a dizzying number, organised many, been instrumental and involved - but never faced a target and pulled a trigger. Certainly never executed an innocent, sobbing woman as she pleads wordlessly in front of him.
Jim and Eurus sit back. Jim hums a song under his breath, and Eurus harmonises effortlessly; it is symphonically beautiful to listen to, and entirely not what Mycroft needs in this moment.

“I’m sorry,” he says to Lady Smallwood, doing her the courtesy of a goodbye. His voice does not shake. “I am truly sorry.”

Mycroft is an excellent marksman. The movement is quick and perfunctory, the gun moving from by his side to primed to shot in a single organic motion that goes directly through Lady Smallwood’s forehead and takes Jim somewhat by surprise in its fluidity. Mycroft does not look at the body, but immediately addresses Eurus:

“And now?”

Eurus watches him, expression gentle and curious. “I didn’t expect you to obey so quickly,” she admits, fascinated. “You are so much more interesting on your own. Such a pity.”

“What is?”

“This,” she murmurs.

A bullet goes through Anthea’s skull.

Mycroft does not look, He closes his eyes for a moment, opens them; his breathing is broken, his fingers twitch with tension, and there is a shuddering moment of incandescent anger, flashing through every nerve in his body, electric. He looks like Sherlock in this moment, that same anger that made Sherlock shatter a coffin and scream like the world was on fire.

Death would have been so much kinder, which is why Eurus never intended for Mycroft to die.

Several long moments elapse in utter silence, nothing audible but Mycroft’s breathing; Eurus and Jim are in solemn silence, the gravity of the situation not going unnoticed.

Mycroft looks at the screen, expression unfathomable and voice calm, utterly level:

“Let me speak to him.”

Jim does not understand, not immediately.

Eurus does, and is taken aback, delighted: Mycroft is so clever, it is easy to forget just how much. Jim looks at her with an unspoken query, and her eyes do not shift from Mycroft, drinking in every facet of him.

There is nothing left to be said, not between them. Mycroft looks at her steadily, and she looks back; Jim watches them both, and can see flickering understandings and apologies and hatred and resentment and loss, and the pair of them have so much history that hangs between them. They were always too similar and too different at once. This is a relationship irreparably broken, that neither expect - nor want - to be fixed.

Behind Mycroft, another door opens.

“Thank you,” Mycroft says to her softly.

Eurus nods, wordless.

With tremendous gravity, Mycroft turns away, and walks through the door.
“Hello.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for staying with me. This fic is a part of my body and soul, and I hope you lovely people are still enjoying it - there's still so much to come... Jen.
“Hello.”

Q is sat at a small table with a thick file, holding a cup of tea to his chest. There is an empty chair opposite him, with a filled mug of something on the table in front; it takes Mycroft a moment to smell coffee, and he does not doubt that it has a splash of milk and one zero-calorie artificial sweetener, as he usually takes it.

Mycroft sits at the table without speaking.

Q opens the file, takes out a handful of photographs, and spreads them in front of Mycroft.

An image of Mycroft speaking to Jim, red handkerchief in hand. Another of a meeting that never took place, in what looks like Mycroft’s office. Their genuine meeting in Sherrinford. Another three of a similar nature. CCTV footage of the impossible.

Q continues:

Phone logs, emails. Classified files that even Q should never have been able to access. Reams of information, exquisitely manufactured.

Mycroft looks through every one of them. Sits back.

Q takes a sip of his tea.

The pair of them watch one another for a very long time. Q is unconcerned; anything Mycroft can observe or deduce - both of which he is attempting to do with amusing fervour - he has seen before, or will never see.

“I assume you intend to blackmail me?” Mycroft asks, when the silence starts to irk him (drown him). “I will admit that this is excellent work.”

A small smile, a nod of thanks. “Thank you,” Q replies, as though nothing is amiss in this bizarre set-up. “And no, as it happens. Blackmail is simple, I could have started blackmailing you easily many years ago; there just didn’t seem any point.”

Mycroft has wondered this before. Naturally, it was never something he was likely to enquire about.

“Then...?”

“This is just to indicate the gravity of the situation,” Q explains, still curled around his mug and looking terrifyingly nonchalant, “and also as an advertisement.”

“What, that you can doctor footage?” Mycroft scoffs. “Hardly revolutionary.”

Q’s smile is a quiet razor. “Mycroft, stop acting like an idiot,” he say, with lethal calm. “You may think it does you credit, but it does not. You are infinitely more intelligent than you are currently behaving, and I do not have the time nor inclination to indulge you.”

Mycroft drops any and all pretence. “You are able to access information far beyond your known abilities. You have your computer keycode, and I assume it was always your invention; publicising that information was an easy way to attract attention, and I would imagine that large swathes of the criminal underworld emerged from the woodwork into the spotlight, even if they had previously lain
dormant or evaded your notice.”

“Good,” Q nods, “and?”

“You either absorbed or eliminated those swathes, consolidating your existing control; your reach presumably encompasses the obvious home territories, and the power vacuums in Spectre’s absence. Moriarty’s false death allowed space to move uninhibited, at least for a short period of time. Expansion into America, at a guess?”

“Indeed.”

“Further to that, your work in MI6 is primarily through your own self-interest and amusement, rather than true investment in the role.”

“Obviously,” Q agrees, with mild annoyance. “I’m not looking for the obvious here, Mycroft, I am expecting more.”

“I am not here to jump through hoops for your amusement.”

Q blinks at him, amused. “No? Because you’ve done an excellent job. Every single test we’ve thrown at you, you’ve passed with great aplomb.”

It is hugely satisfying to see Mycroft completely lost for words, even if it is only for the most fleeting of moments; Q can see the cogs whirring, see him abruptly slot everything into place and understand.

“Go on,” Q prompts.

“I never gave you enough credit,” Mycroft muses, probing, still with a degree of uncertainty. “When you disappeared…”

“… no, Mycroft,” Q interjects, with unusual patience. “This is not about me, at least not entirely. This is about you.”

Mycroft nods his understanding. “Alright,” he agrees. “Fine. At least as far as you are concerned, this has been a test from the outset. Quite how, I’m not certain. The outcome is also a little confusing; you do not intend to kill me, blackmail me, or remove me from my job. As stated, you had the ability to do so a long while ago. Which leads me to the inevitable conclusion that you have a proposition for me.”

“More than that,” Q says, with a thin smile. “This, Mycroft, has been a job interview. And I am delighted to say that you have been successful.”

To his credit, Mycroft does not so much as blink. “And the test?”

“You made a split-second decision, and committed to it utterly whilst under extreme emotional duress from somebody we know you are terrified of,” Q listed, “and were prepared to die, without hesitation or pause. You knew there was a substantial chance of your survival - you will have predicted Sherlock’s reaction, although I’ll concede you acted convincingly otherwise - but your consistency is notable.”

“Your little stunt with Lady Smallwood?”

Q remains emotionally flat, leaving nothing for Mycroft to bounce off; he tries to pick a fight, that much is evident in his tone, but Q just doesn’t bite.
“Obvious, surely?” he replies instead, mildly. “We were testing how long it took you to make the decision, and of course how you conducted yourself. The speed surprised even me, so congratulations on that score. The comfortable manner of your execution indicates that you are more than able to stretch your morality, if pushed. Finally, your response to Anthea’s death proved your exceptional deductive capacity, and circumstantial emotional regulation.”

“We? This is still Moriarty’s venture, then.”

Q, unexpectedly and loudly, laughs.

(the screaming rocks backwards into silence and Q’s shin twinges in remembrance and he understands, understands everything Jim always tried to tell him and this, this is what he always wanted, utter control and utter silence and he laughs with unchecked joy into the space that used to be screaming)

“Good lord, Mycroft, you are adamantly that I am beholden to Jim Moriarty,” he snorts, shaking his head in utter disbelief. “Does that make you feel better? Does it terrify you too much to think that I was always the one in control?”

“Nobody controls a man like Jim Moriarty.”

“Want to bet?” Q asks, flippant and light, and there is perfect silence barring his own heartbeat and Mycroft’s breathing as he starts to truly consider, really and properly internalise just how wrong he has been. “But that is something we can address later. For now, I need your response.”

Mycroft raises an eyebrow. “I don’t know what I am agreeing to yet.”

“Apologies, yes, getting ahead of myself,” Q agrees, and Mycroft has never been so utterly terrified of his youngest brother. “I need somebody placed in the British Government, with your connections and scope. We know what you are capable of. Currently, you are stagnating; while you are intrinsically lazy, the complete lack of anything to fill your time has seen you expanding internationally in ventures that pique your interests. Frequently of questionable legality, and you have carefully ensured that any political affiliations you possess are buried beyond anybody’s reach. You have no loyalties, and no dependences.”

“Correct.”

“I am not necessarily going to call on you to do things that are distasteful,” Q continues, carefully gauging Mycroft’s response and honestly having the absolute time of his life, this is amazing to watch, Mycroft is out of his depth and drowning by inches. “Merely, matters that fall under our remit.”

“Why?”

Q still hasn’t shifted so much as a shadow of expression. “Why to which aspect?”

“Why me. Why now.”

“The ‘you’ is self-evident. The ‘now’ is convenience.”

“Why not kill me, now, while you have the chance?”

“What would that prove?” Q queries, still sipping his tea, curled in his favourite cardigan with the sure knowledge that he’s torturing his brother far better than a scalpel could hope to. “Again: I’ve had the chance on a multitude of occasions. I have already indicated that destroying your job,
livelhood, relationship with Sherlock, personal life, actual life are all exceptionally easy.”

“As I could to you.”

Another small snort, derisive now. “Mycroft, if you even breathed in my direction, I’d have intervened. Our entire relationship has rested on neither of us interfering with the other. I have failsafes for my failsafes, when it comes to you. The moment I created the keycode, I owned you; it wouldn’t matter if you took me out here and now with your bare hands, you wouldn’t be out of the door before I’d systematically destroyed every single facet of your existence.”

Oops. Lost his temper.

Mycroft has the audacity to look mildly smug, before his face drops into something more appropriate:

“I refuse.”

The last resort of the desperate.

Q raises an eyebrow, curious. “Why?”

Mycroft’s jaw has a harsh set to it, and Q wonders - for the first time - if Mycroft will disappoint him.

“I am not a criminal.”

“Is it the morality?” asks, genuinely interested. “Because that seems… implausible, given the rest of your activity, and indeed your behaviour today. This has been quite carefully assessed. Hypocrisy is not unlike you, but even then…”

Mycroft is modulating his responses as much as he can, but the man cannot talk his way around Q. Any number of others - from dull peons all the way up to Sherlock himself - would be wilting, tied in knots by Mycroft’s sheer force of personality. Q is immune, as is Eurus, and that has always been the way (and the thing Mycroft fears most).

“It’s about me, yes?”

Mycroft’s gaze darts up, and Q knows he has the man caught.

“No.”

It is a transparent lie. Q does not respond, just watches Mycroft as he stutters on thoughts, the silence leaving him nowhere to hide; this is what Q does best, just waits and watches with disconcerting patience.

Jim would have lost his patience (and temper) ages ago.

Mycroft grows frightened of the silence far earlier than Q, who is embracing it with every part of his body and soul.

“You and Moriarty…” Mycroft tries, and the sentence withers and dies when Q refuses to complete it.

Another attempt: “What about Sherlock?”

Q sighs inwardly; he had forgotten how dull Mycroft can be sometimes. “What about him?”

“Moriarty…”
“Call me Jim,” a voice says brightly from the doorway behind Mycroft, and Mycroft - bless him - actually jumps. A testimony to the fractured nature of his attention and concentration. “Mr Holmes. Mycroft. We’ve earned first name terms, haven’t we?”

Mycroft’s nod is curt and strained. “Fine. Jim.”

Jim slides in, walks over to the pair of them and sits on the table; Mycroft is forced to move his chair to be able to see Q properly. “You ignored your coffee,” Jim points out, sounding scandalised. “Tsk tsk. How rude. Now you see, Mycroft darlin’, this is how a good interrogation works. Less of the goon squad and more of the manners.”

“Duly noted,” Mycroft replies drily, perhaps relieved that a verbal sparring partner has finally arrived, to fill the voids of silence Q creates. “Oddly enough, I’m disinclined to drink anything that either of you, or Eurus, have made.”

Jim picks up the coffee, keeping solid eye contact with Mycroft, not even blinking: he takes a long, noisy slurp, and puts it down in front of Mycroft as a blatant challenge.

(Jim hears Mycroft’s voice burn him and waits for him to play because he will, Jim is certain of it)

And a long moment later, Mycroft picks up the coffee, and takes a refined sip.

Jim grins, entire being sparkling.

He’s playing.

“If I wanted you dead,” Q tells him, so quietly Mycroft can almost pretend he imagined it, “you would already be screaming.”

Jim lies back on the desk, sprawled spread-eagled and smiling vaguely at the ceiling, allowing the Holmes brothers to see one another, while creating a very deliberate metaphor that Jim hopes Mycroft appreciates.

If the very small tilt in the corner of Q’s lips is anything to go by, (which it is), Q has noticed, and indeed approves.

“Sherlock does not factor in to this,” Q says, answering a question Mycroft had almost forgotten. “Although it would kill his pride to find out, Sherlock barely brushed the surface of what we do.”

“Dismantling your organisation in Europe?”

“We directed him to where he needed to go,” Jim shrugs, “and good boy, off he went and did all the hard work for us. If Sherlock Holmes can find it, and destroy it, it doesn’t deserve to be there.”

Mycroft forgets - deliberately or otherwise - to hide the small smile of approval. “Elegant.”

“I felt so,” Q agrees, while Jim giggles to himself. “Sherlock and Jim have their own games, but that is nothing to do with Moriarty as a name and institution.”

Mycroft’s eyes narrow faintly. “If you aren’t in charge,” he says to Jim, who is having the absolute time of his life, “then why isn’t this under your banner?”

Jim makes a dramatic erghhh sort of noise, and dramatically headdesks with a reverberating crack, showing off his amusing commitment to the dramatic.

Mycroft rescues the coffee mug with barely an instant to spare, and rolls his eyes.
He doesn’t notice that Q, across the table from him, has done the precise same thing in perfect unison; Q notices, however, and that is what matters.

Jim is speaking: “Mycroft Mycroft Mycroft, don’t ask stupid fucking questions. Why do you think?! This is Q. Q who doesn’t have a name and never has or will because it’s Q, why the fuck would he try and front anything?! Sweetie,” he continues, addressing Q, “you’re not a front man, are you? You wouldn’t want to be.”

Q sits back in his chair, smirking unapologetically. Gestures at Jim. “Like he said.”

“You want to rule the world, the pair of you.”

Jim giggles slightly, while Q adds a smirk of his own. “Not quite,” he amends. “Not rule, that would require far too much politics. It is an absolute waste of energy. No, we intend to run the world. All the fun and none of the drama.”

“Why criminal?”

“Faster, more efficient, more effective,” Jim interjects, before Q can. “Mycroft, our dear Mr Holmes, you know that as well as I do. Silly boy. Legal is for the poster children and those who want to be loved.”

Mycroft refuses to be satisfied. “But why? What’s the point?! You’re not egalitarian, you don’t have political axes to grind. You certainly don’t want to ‘change the world’ or make it any better, you have nothing, no reasoning.”

“I want to,” Q says simply.

“I like it,” Jim supplements.

And Mycroft Holmes is faced with the terrifying prospect of two people running the world for no better reason than it taking their fancies.

“And you want me to fill the role that neither of you can,” Mycroft completes, with careful finality. “I am known enough to be of importance, but invisible enough to be forgotten.”

“Bingo,” Jim crows. “So, how about it?”

Jim may be the one making all the noise, but Mycroft and Q are absorbed utterly in one another, and they have nothing to say that needs words or actions.

Mycroft looks at Q, really and properly looks. For the very first time, he chooses to see what is there: his brother, his youngest brother, the brother who was Eurus and Sherlock and himself all together, the brother he has been so frightened of that he never knew what to be frightened of. The brother who ran away to have a life that he wanted, and Mycroft never bothered to understand.

Q, who has spent a lifetime being completely and utterly overlooked, and - and Mycroft finally knows, Q can see that he knows - underestimated.

“You want me dead,” Mycroft states, almost accurately.

It is not quite correct. Q does not want Mycroft dead.

Q wants Mycroft utterly destroyed. Q wants to see Mycroft broken down into infinite component parts, and when there is nothing coherent left, to set fire to the remains. Q wants Mycroft to all but
beg for an ending, and perhaps Q will be kind enough to grant it when the time comes.

Death would be far too simple. Satisfying, yes, but a satisfaction that would be very fleeting.

Eurus was the one to suggest it, partly because she has a number of her own grievances and death is so utterly irrelevant. After so long with Jim, Q has a huge fondness for - but also is slightly inured to - murder. Add that to his personal proclivity for sadism, and it is hardly surprising that Q’s reflex is to take Mycroft and personally ensure that he does not die for at least five days, all of which he would be screaming for.

This way, Q leads Mycroft into his own destruction, eyes wide open.

Mycroft knows, of course. Q is hardly disguising it. Mycroft will die eventually, and it will be at Q’s hands. If he’s very unlucky, Jim will help, but only if Q gives him permission.

If he agrees, Mycroft will extend his life expectancy by another day, week, month, year. For for the first time in a very long while, he will be busy. He will be challenged. His morality will stretch and, eventually, shatter. He will be beholden to those he fears, and he will thrive on that fear.

He will belong utterly to Q.

And Mycroft Holmes, who has been so steady and constant and consistent all of these years will, just for a little while, not be so fucking bored.

Jim bleats on between them, as he will always.

Q watches him with excoriating intensity.

Mycroft considers the fabric of the world he knows, and the world he is touching the edges of. The potential is extraordinary. Fathomless.

Q sees the instant Mycroft makes up his mind. An almost imperceptible shift, but then, Q has always known Mycroft far too well.

“Good,” Q says softly, before Mycroft can say a word.

While Mycroft is still computing what on earth is happening to him, Jim jumps up from the table, clapping his hands together with childish glee. “Wonderful! Now. We have to be going, but we’ll be in touch,” he says, with a wink. “Please walk through the door behind you, and wait for somebody to retrieve you.”

Mycroft looks a little uncomfortable, uncertain. “You’re leaving me here?”

“Don’t ask us, ask Eurus,” Jim shrugs merrily, grinning wildly. “This is all her fault, really. We had it all organised, y’know, and this is her bit of fun. Off you go, Mycroft. I’m sure they’ll get around to locating you at some point.”

“Let me guess: Eurus’s cell?”

Jim giggles. “A little predictable, but will successfully freak you out,” he states correctly, and waves. “Bye!”

Q has nothing to add, and so he does not speak.

Mycroft debates asking further, but the words refuse to come. They stick in his throat, throttle him by inches. There is nothing he can say, and even less he can do. Truly, he is exhausted now, in every
sense, and he needs to go and think in quiet for a while, until matters begin to cohere once again.

The door shuts behind him.

“Well done,” Jim says quietly, surprisingly grave. “Really thought you’d kill him.”

Q doesn’t speak.

Instead, he yanks Jim towards him, and kisses him with force enough to split Jim’s lip with his teeth, acrid blood smearing their lips and tongues. Jim lets out a theatrical moan as Q slams his head backwards into the desk and climbs onto him, the small table rickety beneath their weights, slipping side to side to side and eventually, two legs give up the ghost and send the pair of them flying.

Bruises blossom and neither notice, Jim keening throatily and Q utterly silent, one of their hands slitting open on the edge of a shattered mug and there is lukewarm coffee and boiling hot blood seeping into fabric, water everywhere just like him and Q already knows that Eurus will never come back, Q will always be left with Jim Moriarty and the desperate prayer that sits in his throat and chokes that please don’t you ever fucking go again, don’t you dare, Jim, you will never leave me and Jim promises some promises that he does and doesn’t mean all at once do you love me yes yes love me yes no please please love me and Q collapses with the emptiness of forever and ever taking root in his blood.

Q fucks Jim into the floor, on top of one of the mugs, Jim feeling the skin of his back puncturing and slicing into strips, the blood dissipates in the swirling water and Jim is finally drowning Jimmy please no and his mouth is filled soaking swirls of her hair and choking him.

Everything has and is and will change, but they will always have this.

The voices seep from out of one and into the other. Jim’s silence seeps into Q’s brain, and what is left is textured with Q’s breath and body, his own heartbeat, immediate and perfect and awful.

This is what they have.

This.

(it is enough)
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Jim's losing his marbles...

Hope you enjoy! Jen.

Eurus never comes back.

It is precisely what they expected, but a small part of Q’s soul closes into a dead thing that cannot heal fully. Eurus needed Sherlock, she needed to fill the gaping black hole of her childhood and know that she is loved, completely and utterly and unapologetically loved. And what is more, she always was. And always will be.

Q arrives in Sherrinford as soon as Eurus is returned there. Nobody queries his presence, and he goes to Eurus’s cell unmolested.

Eurus is lying on her bed in absolute silence.

Speaking matters very little. Instead, Q sits to one side and works for a while. His fingers are tap tap tapping in a rhythm that colours his world, consistent and elegant in counterpoint with Eurus’s breath, the steady rise and fall of her chest and slowly, slowly, her fingers twitch almost invisibly, the tap tap tapping following her into wherever in her head she’s been trapped.

Q stays for several hours.

He leaves without looking back.

- Sherlock slams into Q’s office with the force of an avenging demon.

Q has no time to do so much as look up before Sherlock - Sherlock Holmes, that paragon of arrogant detachment - wrenches him from his workbench and pulls him into a hug, crunching him into his strange awkward arms in a way they haven’t done since they were children.

“... and this is in aid of…?”

Sherlock looks Q over, a search rather than a passive glance, assuring himself: Q is fine. Q is alive. Q has not been touched by Eurus, Q is safe.

“Mycroft has told you?” Sherlock asks, and there is a strangeness in his voice.

Q nods, slowly. “I know,” he replies, an understatement and a half given that a good amount of it was his fault. “But it’s fine, I’m fine. Mycroft is too, I made sure he was properly checked over…”

“I know Mycroft’s alright,” Sherlock replies, and there’s that sound again, a type of snipped noise, like the start of something he will not complete. “She didn’t get to you. I thought… Mycroft lied to us. Both of us.”
“Yes,” Q agrees, and thinks of his promise, the promise he’d broken, to not interfere.

And there again, Sherlock is watching him like Q could vanish, a type of love and attention and simple care that Q hasn’t seen on him for years, not for Q. They have always been family in action rather than emotion: they protect each other, orientate around each other, but this is a demonstrative gesture that they are not accustomed to.

“I love you, Q,” Sherlock tells him, and the snip in his voice is slicing away the chasms of vulnerability lurking inches away from being voiced.

Q feels his breath freeze for a moment. The Holmes boys do not talk in this way. Their love is anger and competition and resentment and dependence, but not this.

Sherlock is not a child any more. Nor is he a broken adult. No: he is starting to understand himself, and feel in a way that the Holmes siblings fundamentally deny.

Which is why he does not wait for a response that Q is unable to give; instead, he nods at Q sharply, disconnectedly, and leaves before the moment blossoms into something impossible.

-

Jim goes off to Ireland, for the first time since he left decades ago. He goes alone - Sebby is busy, and there are a million and one things that need to get done - and lands on a bare airstrip with a car idling in wait.

Ireland is damp, and Ireland is green, and Ireland is drunk and Ireland is dirty and Ireland is breaking and Ireland is home.

(this is not his home)

The sky is throttled with clouds, and the fields stretch out impossibly. Everything seems curiously infinite in this part of Ireland, a strange suspended oddity that does not tally with the thick angry smog of Dublin. This is the Emerald Isle, green and heavy with promised rain, dew dangling elegantly from a razor-sharp blade of grass and this, this is not Ireland.

This is not his home.

This is not his home.

(this is so much harder than Jim had imagined)

Jim travels into Dublin. Halfway through the drive, he asks the driver to pull over, tells him to get out of the car. Jim leads him into off road, out of sight - they talk a little, and the man’s accent makes Jim’s throat close - and shoots him neatly through the head.

He drives the rest of the way himself.

Of course, much of it has changed. Not enough, though, for Jim to not uncomfortably feel like the walls are closing in on him and he’s nine, ten, eleven and this is claustrophobic and this is not his home.

Jim walks streets he half remembers.

Jim recognises a pub with an antique sign swinging in the half-breeze, creaking with incredible noise, a man walks past and in, another, another, and one or two of them look at the stranger
standing in the middle of their streets staring without seeing.

Jim orders a pint, his demeanour creating a several-metre radius that none dare enter, and feels his body flinch as the taste explodes over his tongue with a memory so profound it stops him breathing.


Jim does not check into the hotel he has booked. Instead, he walks a route that his childhood has tattooed into every bone, and finds himself in front of a council estate that has not been touched.

(this is not his home)

Jim doesn’t hesitate, not for a moment.

Jim walks up one flight of stairs, and counts down doorways. There is nobody present, nobody to challenge him. The CCTV is either broken, or will certainly be in the imminent future, and it does not matter because Jim keeps his face covered and will be nothing but a shadow should they choose to chase.

Jim’s fingers do not trail over the gun he has in his jacket, with a very lovely silencer Q made specially for him: it is thinner and shorter than usual models, not to mention lighter. It makes a pretty little sound, less of a ‘pop’ and more of a ‘gasp’, elegant.

Jim reaches for his lockpicking set instead, and it takes less than twenty seconds to open the door.

(there was a chain there once, too, and Jim pointedly does not wonder where it went)

Jim walks into a blackened flat, and nothing has changed.

(they have changed the carpet, changed the appliances, changed the wall colour, changed everything but the things that matter)

Jim draws his gun, just on the off chance, but nobody is supposed to die here tonight. This is just for him.

(the only one dying is supposed to already be dead)

Jim pads, quieter than his childhood self had ever been, into the kitchen. The sink is in the same place, and he looks at the floor to see a dream of running water pass over his feet, not permeating the leather to his socked feet, not staining.

Jim watches, as the water - polished linoleum floor, the same floor, the same dimensions, her limbs cast in different directions and all but filling the matchbox-sized kitchen - seeps spirals of pink, darkening, hypnotic.

Jim shivers as icy water floods his shoes.

Jim stands there, and tries to remember how to breathe.

- Mycroft enters Eurus’s cell, and does an almost comical double-take when he spots Q sat to one side, tap tap tapping like he does every time he comes here, every time he sits in perfect silence with his elder sister and the pair of them just are.

(after everything that’s happened, Q is surprised Mycroft can bear to be here at all)
“Does she speak to you?”

Without looking up: “Ask her.”

Mycroft looks between Eurus - sat on the bed, staring blankly at her cell wall with no explicable focal point, lost in worlds no other can reach - and Q, and of course elects to ignore her.

“Q…”

“You’re terrified. Why are you here?”

Mycroft breathes in, lets out a long sigh through his nose. “I… well. I wanted to see her.”

Q stops typing.

Eurus breathes in a snatched half-breath, the tiniest of things but - to Mycroft who can see everything, and Q who can see Eurus - noticeable.

Mycroft genuinely, honest-to-god pales. “Eurus?”

Eurus does not respond, and Q didn’t expect her to. Mycroft is still watching her as though she will abruptly fly through the glass and throttle him, or speak more words that will rock the foundations of his earth; instead he watches for five, ten, fifteen, twenty seconds before turning back to Q.

“Eurus has been deemed high risk. Even being in her presence is…”

“… she won’t hurt me,” Q says calmly, as he puts his laptop into his bag, zips it up with a *snicking* sort of noise that makes prickles rise on Mycroft’s skin.

“You cannot know that.”

Q fixes Mycroft with another flat stare. “I do. She’s my sister. I love her. She loves me. I know you, and your psychiatric team, are convinced she’ll go on a murder spree if she was ever allowed out; you are wrong.”

“She has killed dozens of people, I’ve looked at the records - several of this institution’s staff, a number of people in her mission to destroy Sherlock’s…”

Before Q has the chance to interject, Eurus herself does: a high-pitched, childish, energetic laugh, open and honest and spine-chilling.

Silence echoes.

Q gestures loosely at her, and smirks. “You have no clue,” he tells Mycroft, not cruelly. “Have you tried? To understand, I mean? Or have you just internalised that your sister is a psychopath and is beyond reason or understanding?”

“I… Q, I faced her as a small child, slicing her arms open, unable to identify pain. She doesn’t understand emotion, or indeed feel it how others do.”

Q clears his throat. “Have you ever asked her?”

Mycroft doesn’t hesitate. “Yes, and the only conclusion I could reach is that her understanding of emotion is stunted. Evidently she feels no empathy. She calmly murdered…”

“Mycroft, perhaps she doesn’t always distinguish emotions, but did you ever consider that she does,
in fact, feel it? Perhaps more so than any of us? Look at her. Imagine that she feels at the same intensity that she thinks. Imagine how frightening that would be, how exhausting. All-encompassing. Perhaps she doesn’t know which is which all of the time, but perhaps if somebody had listened to her when she was a child, she could have been taught. Helped.”

“You can’t begin to understand, she burned down our home.”

“Out of grief.”

“Grief?” Mycroft replies, with a harsh and unpleasant laugh of his own. “Grief at what? Her tragic life? With parents who would do anything for her, brothers who looked after her and, in my case, tried exceptionally hard to make her happy. Our family…”

“You obliterated her from our family’s history, and locked her in a secure asylum - with complete human isolation - when she was six years old. A desperately lonely child, and you thought it would be a bright idea to lock her away from every single fucking human being alive and inform everybody involved in her care that she was not to be spoken to or interacted with in any way whatsoever.”

“Uncle Rudy…”

“Don’t pull that shit with me, Mycroft,” Q snaps, and his anger is blazing under his skin like nothing he can remember, and he hates Mycroft so much it makes him slightly giddy. “You were fourteen, and I’ve read the records. You spoke to Uncle Rudy, and even if you want to deny that, you had ample opportunities to redeem the situation. You were the one to guarantee that Eurus was locked away, and forgotten about. You were so mind-numbingly terrified of somebody more intelligent than you, who you just didn’t understand, that you did all of the worst possible things.”

“Q…”

“You tortured her,” Q continues, and let’s be honest, he is no longer thinking or arguing or caring beyond his need to make Mycroft listen and maybe, just maybe, truly understand what he’s done. “And it is torture, Mycroft. Psychological torture.”

Mycroft almost tries to speak, but Q isn’t done, talking straight over any possible protests:

“She just wanted somebody to listen to her, and love her. You placed a six-year-old in solitary confinement for over twenty-five years because you didn’t understand her, and because you were jealous.”

Mycroft went past ‘white’ a while ago, and has turned a pasty shade of green.

Q skitters to an abrupt halt, breath harsh in his throat and eyes stinging with a form of fury (a form of pain) that he does not feel often. It is the same pain of Sherlock’s relapses and Jim’s betrayals. Blood and body are so angry he is utterly delirious.

Silence throttles them both, and Q glances in Eurus’s direction.

Eurus is crying. Not a single atom of her body has moved, but with each blink, another tear trails silently down her cheeks, gaze still fixed at the vanishing point somewhere in the back of her head.

Q’s heart pulses in his throat.

Mycroft is shaking. He all but vibrates, in fact, and he darts his glance between Q and Eurus as though both of them are strangers, and the room seems so much smaller now, he cannot breathe and cannot think, and sees Sherlock for a heartbeat where Eurus is sitting.
Without a word, Mycroft turns on his heel and walks out.

Jim wakes up on a park bench three miles from where he started, and has no idea how he got there. It is ferociously cold, even when cocooned in coats and jackets. Dimly, Jim remembers that he left his belongings in the car from the airfield, but cannot for the life of him remember where he parked.

Tomorrow (today?) he has business meetings, at least two executions, and one - maybe two - full interrogations. Which means he should probably find the car and get changed and smile with bared teeth and continue to spin the world in his favour.

Ireland knows of Jim Moriarty just as the world knows, so this should be very like Jim’s trips anywhere, but it’s also different because the rain tastes of somebody he doesn’t want to remember and a woman cries out in his ear when he closes his eyes.

It begins well.

The first meeting confirms a foothold in Dublin, at least, and the second is relegated to a phone call and a deputy being deployed, which actually then turns into a third unexpected meeting where he winds up sponsoring a gun and drug-running ring who have stretches into many of the smaller cities and quieter towns, small but fun things.

Five people die in the process, but Jim is happy; slightly higher death toll than anticipated, but then, so is the pay-off.

Matters then degenerate rapidly.

The interrogation is a woman in her early thirties, with dirty blonde hair and eyes so dark they seem black, thin and angular and shadowed with histories that Jim recognises, and he tries to smile in that way that feels like sheer control and cannot make the motion start.

Under his gaze, the woman weeps.

Jim feels dizzy, nauseous. The earth beneath him is spinning, and this is so much harder than he had even begun to expect, this is not his home and there is nothing to mourn because Jimmy, little stupid naive Jimmy was never there.

“Q.”

“Yes? I’m busy.”

“Q?”

“Yes.”

“Q.”

“... Jim?”

Jimmy her voice shrieks, shrill and impossible as pregnant drops of rain blind him and he is drowning in the middle of Dublin, speaking to a man with no name while his mother sobs and screams and begs, and Jim sees grubby blonde hair splayed out in a puddle and her eyes are the same ink black that his are, swallowing him whole.

“Jim, talk to me.”
Speech has vanished, Jim’s own pulse seems to jump erratically in his temples and his headache bursts into a protracted scream of a name that he never had.

“Jim.”

At a loss, Jim slits the woman’s throat open with the scalpel that should have been used to skin her legs instead, and blood rushes out, a burning hot heart in the palm of Jim’s hand as his shoes fill with icy cold water and his shirt is irreparably stained.

It has been years. Years.

(it gets easier every time)

Not here.

“What’s happening to me?” Jim whispers, so broken, so much younger than Q has heard him be.

“Jim. Your name is Jim Moriarty. It says so on your passport.”

“She won’t stop screaming.”

“This is in your head. This is all in your head.”

Jim’s laugh is devoid of the manic terror he feels, but sounds instead like the laugh he once had, a long time ago, before the clever one walked onto the tracks because he couldn’t bear being so fucking clever.

The woman in front of him is weeping ice cold water, spiralling in the soaking, boiling blood that coats everything from the neck down, but her face is clean and her eyes watch Jim with ink black, and Jim can hear her mocking him.

Jim flees, Q’s voice bubbling in his ear, fastening his coat with trembling fingers (it is stained, all stained) and staggering into the streets with the light blinding him, and the noise is eating him alive and she won’t stop screaming.

“... get the fuck out of the way of passers-by before you get arrested for public disorder,” Q snaps in his ear, and Jim tries to cling onto that, the fragments of words he can hear through the incredible din of her screaming.

“Jimmy?”

Frantically, Jim glances around and isn’t sure if he’s screaming out loud, but nobody is looking anyway, nobody but a young boy who has his brother’s eyes, the ones from his father, a piercing green, the brother that never came home.

“Walked onto the tracks,” Jim whispers, as each raindrop refracts into people he once knew, “and never came home. He was the clever one.”

“Jim. Jim, get out of there.”

“He was a stationmaster.”

“Jim.”

At the other end of the phone, there is motion. More motion that Jim feels is necessarily relevant, but there is no stopping Q when he gets an idea into his head, just like his brother, nobody could have
stopped him but Jim still sometimes wonders, wonders if it could have been different, if she had questioned why her son is standing too still and too upright, and why he is dressed in his nicest coat, and has a bag in his hand.

This is not his home.

Q is.

(Sebastian Moran is)

(Sherlock Holmes is)

There is a life and world that Jim Moriarty (not James, not J, not Jimmy, it’s Jim) has created and moulded, and there he is home.

He never liked green.

Jim does not know how, but when a car pulls up next to him and the automatic sliding door opens with a pneumatic *hiss*, he does not question it, topples his body into the footwell and feels the more usual spasms electrocute every inch of his being and the screaming eats him alive, over and over again, until he screams himself into blackness with the phone still held against his ear, Q’s silence following him into the oblivion he screams open.
Chapter 24

Q wakes with Bond’s arms curled around him, cradling him close, the solid immovable presence unlike anybody else; he smells musky but clean, a slight sweetness, acrid mint and a touch of vodka on his breath.

“Don’t even think about it,” Bond mumbles, as Q makes to move. “You haven’t slept in weeks.”

A small smile, one that Bond will not see. “It has not been weeks,” he replies, voice deliberately grouchy. “It…”

“Shh,” Bond breathes into Q’s shoulder, chasing it up with a kiss, a dry one, followed by the tip of his tongue tracing down the ridge of a shoulderblade, little prickles shuddering on Q’s skin in his wake. “Sleep”.

Feigning defeat, Q slumps back against Bond; he stills, and Q wiggles a bit to encourage him to continue.

With a low chuckle, Bond obligingly continues his track of attention, coating Q’s body with promises; they have become something truly joined now, ticking together and through one another as though they would not survive alone, and maybe they’re old enough now that they won’t.

Death is so much closer than when Q was a child. Then, Q had spotted a boy on the tube and they had lived as though death was a promise for other people, and for years, that had been true: playing god, with no time to remember that they themselves are mortal.

Q sometimes wonders if they aren’t, but just do not know it yet.

“I need to go to Xi’an,” Bond tells Q, so softly, so gently. “I won’t be long.”

Q’s body twists in one motion, legs sliding and arms pinning, until Bond is trapped (he is not, but they allow the pretence, just for this moment) and his voice is angular and hissing tight in his throat “must you?” and Q has started to hate, truly and utterly hate every moment Bond is gone and he cannot say why.

As time trickles by, and everybody Q has ever known dies one by one by one by one, it becomes difficult to keep on running.

“If you want to keep expanding across China, then yes,” Bond replies, calmly and logically, and Q hates him for that, he was irrational and angry and passionate but that’s not what Bond is here for, Bond is for consistent and stubborn and so loving it aches with every breath. “Two weeks, three at worst.”

Q does not speak, but Bond’s expression shifts minutely as he starts to understand just how deep Q’s paranoia runs. “Q…”

A sharp shake of his head, and Q returns to the room. “It’s fine,” he says sharply, calmly. “Mildly irritating, and I blame Jim entirely for this…”

“… it was entirely your idea,” Bond cuts in, with a smirk that makes Q debate punching him. “It’ll be worth it. I’m the only person high enough up in your organisation who speaks Chinese that well. I was going to ask if you’d mind me going into Nanjing too, but that would add another…”
“... fine,” Q interjects, fearful for a strange moment that Bond can hear his heart beat faster, can sense the idiotic and unnecessary panic that Bond will leave and never make it back. “Necessary evils, as they say. I’ll debrief and kit you out, there are some nice things you’ll enjoy. I…”

Bond kisses him, and Q feels the ferocious anger ticking back and forth and dissipating on the tip of their tongues, fizzing into something halfway manageable, but Q is scared and that fear never seems to leave any more.

(Jim calling him, half-crazed and sobbing, has not helped)

“We’re too old for this,” Q says softly, after it has been so long that Bond is sleeping lightly, his chest rising and falling in that predictable constancy. “I won’t lose you, James. I can’t.”

Q’s fingers trace invisibly over the cobweb wrinkles that span Bond’s face, trickling downwards from deeper frown lines to simple suggestions, age printing deeper with every passing day, his hair and beard bristles speckled with white and grey. Quietly, slowly, Bond is draining from technicolour to sheer white and black, moment by moment, as Q watches.

One day, Q will do the same. Already he can see lines that will not fade, muscles that are too slow and incrementally weaker, ache more easily, heart pounding too solidly for too irrelevant things.

Jim must feel the same, but Q cannot (will not) see it. Jim is immortal and eternal. When Q looks at Jim, he sees a child, teenager, adult, amalgam. Jim is everything and nothing, and Q cannot imagine a world without Jim Moriarty.

Age, Mycroft’s voice murmurs in his ear, comes to us all.

Q allows himself the luxury of a single shudder, a protracted one.

Sleep does not come easily.

-Jim is still in Ireland. He can tell by the taste in his mouth when he wakes up.

Everywhere has a taste. More so even than smell, places taste distinct. Jim has always had a certain affinity for it; it makes him a hilariously fussy eater, when every atom is distinct and separate and somehow overpowering in their own rights. A curry is a gastronomic fireworks display, and Jim has an unparalleled ability to distinguish between each spice, analysing it into constituent parts.

And so he muses on such things as he tastes the air of rural Dublin. He is not in prison, nor the car he fell unconscious in. The air is heavy with stale salted sweat (as everywhere is, to a greater or lesser extent), coffee, blood (his own), blood (not his own), metal acid oiled in a way that speaks of a gun or twelve, his tongue itself - his saliva, more specifically - is heady with a sedative (very distinct taste, very particular) and Jim focuses on every element of it, piece by piece by piece by piece by piece.

Add the scent, the obvious next step. The sweat becomes overwhelming, gagging. Two immediate, and several other bodies which have passed through. Cotton. Leather. Wool. Plastic. Lots of plastics, each with their own elegant signature. Rubber (shoe soles). Rubber (other, difficult to confirm, visual confirmation required). Denim. More fucking coffee. Even more blood. Bodily fluids in the next room (oh good, there’s a bathroom) and there are four(ish) guns, visual required for the make and model.

To be fair, he isn’t a bloodhound, so some of this may be a tad incorrect, but he’ll get there soon enough.
And the next layer: touch.

Oops. He’s tied up.

(Jim considers that maybe he should prioritise sensory deductions a little more carefully)

Tied up, blindfolded, not gagged, still dressed in his second-best Versace suit. Rope rather than handcuffs rather than zip ties, which is unfortunate; rope is hardest, especially when tied with some very beautiful knots that Jim’s fingers skim over curiously before passing over. Metal folding chair, which is more fortunate. No shoes. Nor socks.

(the floor is raggedy under his naked feet, something damp, sticky, slick, and there’s the blood and it won’t stain, it will not stain, it will not)

Moran will probably be here soon. Jim knows he has been drugged, which adds an indeterminate amount of time. The air is cool, though, the cool both of the rain Jim remembers and the edged element of nighttime. A single window is open, opposite the bathroom, behind and to Jim’s right. A thin breeze. Ground after rain. Something cinched around his throat.

(looky look, he can prioritise)

Time is probably not a friend right now, but moving too much is confirmation of wakefulness so he is reasonably wary.

A brief moment for a personal inventory, because Q and Moran would murder him outright if they knew how long it had taken for him to bother.

There is the aftermath of sedatives, mostly in the taste (god-awful taste, takes days to fully go) but also in some muscle atrophy that he feels upon shifting incrementally. Pain is severe but manageable: battered around a bit at some stage, some deliberate and some accidental. Shins bashed - usually from accidental impact when being lobbed into somebody’s boot, shins impacting on the rear bumper (experience from both himself, and from others he’s done it to). Breathing unimpaired barring the thing around his throat, so ribs are clear but sore. Kicked a couple of times in the stomach if the ache is anything to go by. Will probably be pissing blood for a week.

Altogether, absolutely fine.

(fuck you, Sebby, I am fine I promise)

And so there is the matter of why he is here.

(this is not his home and fucking hell he should never have come back)

They don’t want him dead, or he’d be dead. They don’t want to torture him, or they’d have left him
far more uncomfortable and woken him up themselves. Information is most likely, interrogation, or maybe it’s a plain ol’ hostage situation.

Fun fun fun.

Better let these two know who they’re dealing with.

Without warning, without a single shift in his body, Jim whistles liltingly, a clear three-note query; very predictably, the two shift in abrupt shock, lunging for weapons or phones or whatever the hell they fancy lunging for.

“Now now, you two,” Jim purrs, his accent so thick it’s almost impenetrable, “let’s all be grown-ups. Who’s that next door?”

A sharp exhale from the less experienced one, apparently female judging by the timbre; Jim grins outright, all teeth. “Hello dearie,” he trills. “Such a pretty one. New to the game, hmm? So tell me, darlin’, what might your name be?”

“That’s enough, Moriarty,” the other voice says, as Jim expected. Announcing in one breath that a) he’s male b) he’s in charge c) he knows who Jim is and d) he genuinely thinks he has control in this situation.

“Just makin’ conversation,” he hums, “thought I’d say hi, since you’s tied me up. I like ladies at times like this, makes for more fun.”

(no but seriously, Q will take the piss if he ever hears just how ridiculous Jim’s accent has got in the exceptionally small amount of time spent here, he’s a leprechaun)


(but no, too much green, he never liked green)

“So,” Moriarty continues, and grins with every tooth gleaming, “what can I do for you lovely creatures?”

“Shut up,” grunts the man, and stands, walking to Moriarty in four crisp steps, circling around in two steps, shutting the window behind him, walking most of the way to the bathroom, presumably peering in no wait shutting the door, circling back to rest in front of Moriarty’s bound body.

(wonderful, perfect, dimensions of the room, all becoming easier to hear and to sense, and this is so much fun, Jim hasn’t done this in far too long, he remembers Q doing this as a mental exercise once in a while, knock Jim out in some way and stage a full-blown kidnapping just so Jim can keep these skills honed, sensory deprivation, letting him have one sense at a time and tell Q everything he could sense, absolutely everything, until he had worked out enough detail and Q was satisfied enough to let him go)

“Shutting up isn’t really one of my specialities,” Moriarty continues, tongue tapping against his teeth, voice hypnotically melodic. “So come on, boyo. What d’you want? Or what does your dear lady friend want, hmm? This is your party, isn’t it love?”

“Don’t call me that.”

Moriarty crows with laughter, trembling over octaves; she’s given herself away beautifully, it is her initiative. Curious. “Could little ol’ me have caused so much drama?” he queries hypnotically.
“Really me? Me? Who died, darlin’? How d’yous know it was me? Me, I don’t kill. Not many. Not really. Not so’s you’d think. Here and there and everywhere so,” he continues elegantly, “what was his name? It was a he, wasn’t it? Nobody gets this upset for anything less than family or lover, so tell me his name.”

The last is a garbled shriek, a terrifying one. Moriarty is one of very few people who can be quite so in control whilst blindfolded and tied to a chair.

“Her name,” (Jim chastises himself, it’s always the gender, but in his defence balance of probability still suggested male), “was Caroline.”

Moriarty hums again, a tune he borrowed from Eurus because it sticks in the head somewhat and under we go and thinks about death, thinks and thinks, and he lets the time spin out despite being reasonably certain of who is being discussed.

(Jim knows all of the names killed under official Moriarty Inc colours, has them all filed away neatly in alphabetical order. They are only names, sometimes ages and places, not stories, but Jim has paperwork for this exact reason: memorising.

There have been eight, no, nine Carolines. Ireland narrows the search criteria, and simple common sense eliminates another six. The answer is obvious, and the thought process spans about half a second. He waits for another twenty, each second making the female present incrementally angrier)

“Ah,” he smirks eventually. “Caroline Williams. Tsk. Tsk tsk. Silly little girl, in the end, aren’t they all? And you never answered my question: who’s in the bath?”

“How the fuck do you know…”

“... your bodyguard,” the man interjects sharply, cutting over the slightly shrill woman who is clearly (predictably) very offended that Moriarty didn’t know who Caroline was immediately, as though that woman had been anything more than a blip on a very large radar, as though Moriarty had even met the woman, as though he gave a flying fuck.

Moriarty takes a second, raises an eyebrow over the blindfold. “Bodyguard?” he repeats, somewhat amused. “You mean the driver? Oh honey, honey, that’s not a bodyguard. That’s not even a little bit of a bodyguard. Except that he’s a body, but apparently a dead one. And not guarding an enormous amount. So really, altogether a bit of an epic fail. As they say. Kiddie kid kids. They say. Apparently. I’m not sure, I don’t like them all that much.”

“Stop talking.”

“Yeah, but why,” Moriarty whines, giggling wildly and deliriously and oh good lord this is so much fun, he should do this more often, and he would, he will, and he will go onwards for ever if only the air didn’t fucking taste like home. “If you wanted me dead, I’d be dead. You don’t. So what do you want from me, little one? Might not be your type but I can certainly amuse you if y’like. If y’ask nicely.”

“I want the names of everybody you have embedded in my organisation.”

Moriarty snorts. “And that organisation would be…?”

An impressively hard punch in Moriarty’s gut, driving all air from his lungs and making him hack in breaths and coughs all in one go, painful and unpleasant and utterly hilarious.

“No but seriously sweetheart,” he rasps, when air comes back, “do you ‘spect me t’know
everything? I’m a genius, not superhuman…”

… and this causes racking whorls of laughter that spasm through Jim’s body beautifully and this is so much fun but her voice is still there and water is filling the bathtub next door and it is going to spill over, spill and seep across the floor and stain his bare feet that slide sticky, slick over his toes and he’s staining, staining and her voice…

“… so you’d better start talking, Jimmy-boy,” the man is saying, and there is Jimmy and the water in the bathtub is spilling over…

… and this, this is less fun.

“… I haven’t the slightest idea what the you’re talking about,” Moriarty completes, and there is no mockery left, no laughter. “I don’t know. I don’t know. So you can keep hitting me if it makes you feel better, but…”

They hit him.

The woman’s voice is sharp and unhappy. “Yeah, I feel better.”

… and that, that is hysterical, but oh sweet god her voice sounds just like hers did, and all he can hear is screaming so really, why not scream a bit himself because at least he might outweigh one or the other, maybe just maybe, just maybe.

Jim Moriarty is losing his mind.

There is little to do but enjoy the whole losing-his-mind thing, and hope very hard that a rescue attempt will be forthcoming.

- 

Q’s phone rings at three thirty-nine AM, approximately thirty-nine minutes after Q manages to fall asleep. It is fair to say he is not particularly pleased. However, only three people have that number, and one is in the room with him.

“Yes?”

“Secure?”

“Of course it’s fucking secure,” Q snaps at Moran, as he always does; in Moran’s defence, he asks on every single call or contact, which is excellent protocol. Jim never bothers and it drives Q crazy. Although, Q’s personal phone (along with Bond, Moran and Jim’s) is always secure, it’s a prerequisite of Q’s communication devices.

Anyway:

“Jim’s been abducted,” Moran says, without preamble. “Never made it to the airstrip.”

Q lets out a rather inelegant moan as he sits up in bed, Bond immediately bright-eyed and bushy-tailed (git) and asks for clarification: “The pick-up was confirmed, I watched - nothing since?”

“Car intercepted, no sign of driver or Jim.”

Which wouldn’t be quite so urgent if Jim hadn’t been hysterical and quite literally psychotic during his last phone call. Q had called in several billion favours and contacts to get a car to Jim in less than twenty minutes, organise a plane from a nearby airfield, get Moran airlifted from Edinburgh direct to
an airfield a few hours away from Dublin, and organise a plane (and a doctor onboard) for Jim and Moran to come straight back to London.

“Alright,” Q replies, after a moment of consideration. “Get yourself into Dublin, wait for my instruction. You’re equipped?”

“Yes.”

“Go.”

Q hangs up. The next phone call is Mycroft. “We’re potentially going to get some bad traffic in Dublin, I need a whitewash until morning.”

Mycroft sounds gratifyingly sleepy, to Q’s endless amusement. “You have,” a moment while Mycroft consults a clock, “five hours or so, come sunrise I can’t cover any further.”

“You’ll cover as long as I need,” Q replies, and hangs up.

Bond’s voice: “Anything I can do?”

“Tea,” Q replies on autopilot, reaching under the bed for his laptop and whining dramatically as Bond turns the bedside light on. “And toast. Lots of toast.”

“I’ll make waffles,” Bond says to nobody in particular, and strides out of the room, shrugging on a dressing gown that had been hooked on the back of the door.

Q doesn’t notice, yawns expansively while the laptop boots up. The first job is to find CCTV and start tracing Jim the good old-fashioned way, find a location and call it in to Moran, get them the hell out of Ireland and work out what in the name of god happened to Jim in Dublin.

The first bit was the easy bit. Things get a little tricksier after that point, but not impossible; Q traces CCTV that Mycroft (bastard, he always knows) streams directly to him in batches of plausible footage, narrowing down the search (okay so Mycroft is useful, even if he is an utter bastard) and finally finding the elusive non-footage between cameras of where the car is hijacked and then, a few cars to follow but it’s easy enough to trace.

Out of Dublin for about ten minutes, off to a rather ordinary looking street. CCTV cuts out, but Q sends Moran in the right direction while he works out which house is most likely - deeds of ownership, electoral register, usual traffic in and out, even electricity bills, all give indications of the people in and around the area - and eventually singles out one house which is most likely.

Simple.

A little while later, Moran is in position. The house is conveniently confirmed by virtue of being the only one with lights on at five o’clock in the morning, and Moran goes in all guns blazing.

(blazing is a little strong, mainly because subtlety is appreciated; he picks the lock very elegantly, slips through unnoticed, whispers up to the first floor, dispatches the two kidnappers and retrieves Jim)

Q listens over their communications system:

“leave me alone, mam, go, no, no don’t cry shh, shh little one, s’just me, James, Jay-ems, James, mam I’m leaving, mam”
There is a piercing scream, protracted, like needles entering every millimetre of a human body at once, one that speaks of inhuman, unbearable pain, that degenerates into cackling laughter, a bizarre laugh that becomes a song Q remembers, an Irish folksong, Jim used to murmur it from time to time when he missed home (and thought Q didn’t notice), and he somehow is laughing in tune come along with me.

Jim Moriarty has completely lost his mind.

(this is going to be a very long day)
Jim has to be very heavily tranquillised to get him to shut up and calm down, and even then, he still manages to mumble insistently under his breath in a haze of pure psychosis.

Moran is standing guard by him while Jim cries almost silently, a trickle down either side of his face, and he is humming and singing a multitude of songs, from Justin Beiber back to folk songs with no known origin.

“Anything coherent?”

“No,” Moran replies flatly; Q can see the unease in his body, his concern and (poor man) love for the insensible man in the next room. “I refused to allow psych assessments until you arrived, Mycroft sent some over, full clearance.”

“I’d imagine they’re Sherrinford in origin,” Q muses, as Jim seems to choke on nothing and keens through a closed throat. “Alright. Did he recognise you?”

“No.”

Q nods once, and walks briskly into the room.

“Jim, stop pissing about.”

“And I’m Jim,” Jim murmurs, and smiles disconnectedly. “Do you remember?”

Q does not have Jim’s memory, and so no, he does not remember the first words they ever exchanged; Jim remembers, though, he always remembers. “You’re a runaway. You have somewhere you’re staying?” and then, a mimicry of Q’s voice, and it is uncanny: “I know somebody. I’m assuming you’d like to come with me?”

It is his voice, Q’s voice, down to the intonation and tone and pitch, every single aspect is identical. In it, Q hears his childhood, and it causes a rolling shudder of memory, horrifying and immediate.

Jim cackles with laughter as Q slaps him, hard.

“Jim. Get a fucking grip.”

“What if I can’t?” Jim hums, with the innocence of a viper. “I know you, don’t I, honey?”

Q raises an eyebrow. “Of course you fucking know me,” he replies, hoping very hard that this approach will work, because he’s fucked for alternatives. “Jim, you’re in London. Your flat. I don’t especially want you to be examined by doctors, because we’ll have to kill them afterwards, and they might be useful later. So pull yourself the fuck together.”

(Distantly, Q realises that he only really swears around Jim, at least substantially more than with anybody else, and wonders what it is about Jim that makes him an utterly different person, every single time)

Jim moves so fast he practically levitates, darting to kiss Q with brutal intensity; Q tastes blood explode over his tongue (Jim’s managed to split his own lip and bit through some of his cheek) and
returns it with his usual dispassionate, livid force.

“Q”

Q ignores him, and kisses him as though nothing else matters.

And then, of course, Jim starts to scream again.

Moran is there in an instant, with a hypodermic. Q looks at it, at Moran, and shakes his head: “He needs to get whatever this is out of his system. Leave him to it.”

Jim is vibrating like a viciously whacked tuning fork, and the screaming is an extraordinary pitch and volume. This is what Q remembers, this is the sound of their childhoods, and he watches Jim screams out hurricanes while Q pins him to the bed with his full bodyweight, and while he’s nowhere close to Jim’s strength, he has leverage and angles on his side.

Q holds on for dear life.

- 

Inside Jim’s head, there is utter chaos.

The short version: the silence isn’t coming to swallow him whole, not this time, and Jim is fighting back with all his body and soul. There is a terror, and Jim refuses, he refuses to fall prey to it.

In doing so he has completely lost his grasp on conventional reality.

This battle, this ridiculous war, is being waged far away. It is spanning his life and experiences, sifting through aeons of time and thought and memory and experience and understanding and sheer intelligence.

Jim’s mind is breaking. His mission is to ensure that it breaks in the right places, the places that can either a) be fixed or b) be ignored without consequence. The battle is absolute and all-encompassing, and at the end of it, a different creature will be left.

Even a man like Jim Moriarty has nightmares.

(but maybe soon, just maybe, he won’t)

- 

Q’s body is heavy, solid. Immovable. Despite weighing roughly the same as a ten-year-old girl (as Bond likes to tease), Q is adamant.

Instead of violence, or shouting of his own, Q elects instead to curl himself over Jim’s body like an exoskeleton, a turtle shell. A shield. Q’s whole body devotes itself to smothering every inch of Jim he can, crunching him up tighter and tighter, until Jim cannot breathe in for sobs and Q’s body shakes with the force of Jim’s.

It is new, it is odd.

(Moran is watching with an expression of delicate concern and indisputable confusion; it is quite endearing)

Q hushes him with true tenderness, places a kiss into the tangled mass of his sweat-slicked hair, stays still and solid and everything Jim isn’t and Jim needs and Jim wants, somebody to love him that
Inch by inch, Jim’s earthquake stills, calms. Q holds on with that same care, like he is afraid Jim will bruise, protecting the man with the fabric of himself.

They have always been this. They just didn’t always realise.

“Do you love me?”

Jim is crying with the force of a child leaving home, and leaving himself behind. An inexorable combination of Eurus and the Holmes boys and home has left him gasping for the thing he doesn’t have and never will have, or never thinks he will have.

Time has kept all of his secrets, and she swore she would, but Jim is drowning under every single one of them. It has grown too much, far too much. The simple there-ness of moments from before he realised who he was through Q, always Q, and on to being Jim Moriarty hi and running half of the world.

Once, Jim thought he was made of secrets.

Now, he knows that is untrue. He is made of the bits in between.

“Do you love me?”

“Why did you kill her?”

Jim is a child, and Q sits in front of a computer that he’s pieced together from various parts, in a flat that used to belong to a drug dealer and now is theirs, they pay the rent each month on the dot from a dead man’s account and so nobody notices.

Steam spirals from a cup of coffee; Jim has acquired the taste, partly to irritate Q and partly because he can.

“I needed to.”


Jim stares into space, and is quite obviously not in the room any longer, but flying across the Irish sea to a place he refuses to admit is home, was home. It is one of the few questions Q has yet asked that Jim refuses to answer.

“Jim?”

“What’s your name?” Jim asks, voice a poisonous lullaby.

Q does not respond, but Jim fancies that he sees a nerve jump in his jaw, anything, anything to betray that Q is actually human. “You wanted her dead?” he asks instead, inflexionless. “She was getting in the way?”

Jim’s laugh is a sharp and ugly thing, shutting off as quickly as it starts. “Nothing that obvious, darlin’,” he says, his voice flat but not quite as flat as Q’s, he falls short of that, that bit where he
wants so badly to be like Q and show nothing, betray nothing.

(he’s too emotional, he knows it, and he hates it and loves it all at once)

“What was it, then?”

The truth is so far away Jim can hardly remember it. It exists, certainly, but in an annal of his brain he doesn’t intend to examine in too much detail; he is afraid of what it will show him.

- He can see it.
- 

Really, this is all Eurus’s fault.

Eurus swept into Q and Jim’s lives and proved to be something neither of them had anticipated. Villains are predictable, heroes are dull. Villains always have a hamartia that makes them embarrassingly easy to topple, while heroes can be tripped over by their own righteousness.

Eurus had been neither. Eurus was an equal, and in many regards a superior. Both Jim and Q fell in love with her in a remarkably similar way, and she exposed the underbelly of both in a way neither had anticipated.

Emotion and intellect are uneasy partners. They are both independent and interdependent, and the Holmes boys (and Jim, of course) exemplify that to a greater or lesser degree. Ignoring one, minimising one, or using both extremes and ignoring the coexistence that sits in the middle. If used well, one can feed the other.

And that was Eurus. Her intellect feeds her emotion feeds her intellect, and her sheer brilliance comes from the constancy of both.

Jim knows he could be more. Jim has spent a lifetime trying and trying and trying to be more, and never quite worked out how.

Now he knows.

- “Do you love me?”
- 

Q is being so gentle it is frightening. There is an impossible delicacy and quiet adoration in the feather of his touch, and Jim pleads for freedom under his breath while being appalling (and so transparently) loved.

“T’m here,” Q murmurs, lips tracing Jim’s face, fingers eloquently picking up tears and displacing them elsewhere as Jim looks at him, sees him and through him,

No, not through: into. Jim sees into him, in a way only Jim Moriarty is capable of doing. Jim retains the uneasy honour of being the only person who has ever quite managed that.

(except for Eurus)
“Can you hear me, Jim?” Q asks, and strokes Jim’s hair, body still hemming him in, away from all harm. “I’m here.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Q.” Q replies with complete calm, as though this is normal, this is alright. “I am Q.”

“Q,” Jim replies, and Q feels his body start to relax very slightly, very slightly, tension bleeding out of him. “My Q.”

A small, almost shy smile. “Your Q.” Q agrees, because of course that is true. Q is his, and Jim is Q’s, and this will be forever, this is their forever. “What’s happening, Jim? You’re safe, here, I’ve got you. I’m here.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

“Well, tough luck,” Q replies, unusually without venom. “I’m here, all the same. Talk to me.”

(Moran has gone from mildly confused to all-out alarmed; in the endless stretch of years he has spent with the pair, they somehow never fail to shock him)

“You asked me once. Why I killed her.”

Q knows without asking which ‘her’ it is, and feels his heart hiccup a moment: it is a question he had assumed would never be answered, could never be answered. One of the secrets Jim has kept, even from Q. One he has held to his chest and never released.

“Yes?”

Jim’s body ripples abruptly, and he lets out a soft, wounded keen. Q keeps him held close, tethering him to the here and now and hoping his brain would follow.

“Where’s ‘Bastian?’”

Moran jumps a solid foot in the air, evidently not expecting to be addressed this side of ever. “Here, boss,” he says, with only Q to have spotted the moment of shock. Good soldier, he’s supposed to be perpetually implacable.

Q knows that Moran does, truly, love Jim.

Q knows that Jim loves Moran, too.

(Q also knows that Jim loves him, and that’s the scariest part of all)

If only any of them knew what in the fuck love actually means.

- 

Jim can feel the world start to slow into something manageable, and the insanity of the situation is not lost on him: Q is behaving in a way Jim can only describe as psychotic (that makes two of them), but it is inexpressibly comforting.

Right now, Jim feels like a child. A child screaming for his mother.
And Q, demented lunatic that he is, is here hushing and petting like a parent and Jim has never been so grateful.

The water is ebbing, slowly but certainly trickling backwards and away from him, leaving him bone dry. He can see flashes of her hair in the corners of his vision, but the central part is all Q, and Jim clings on with breaking fingernails, the very particular colour of Q’s eyes and the ironic bent of Q’s smile.

He wants to ask what are you doing, and instead finds his mouth spilling secrets; he arrests himself before giving away the pearl of it, and instead blindly seeks for the other man he knows will be here, waiting and loving in a way more acute and considerably less subtle than Q.

Jim is so tired it has become absolute.

And yes, there is more to be said, because once it is said it will free him. The core of his being centred on the one appalling fact, and this is Eurus’s fault because after her, Jim cannot deny or avoid emotion, she taught him better than that. Jim needs to use it, not constantly hold it back, and when he does, he will be unstoppable.

“I loved her too much.”

- Q knows as the words fall from Jim’s lips, and he understands.

Jim Moriarty. An impossible and extraordinary man by anybody’s standards. And his secret, his deepest one that he has just managed to utter after decades of silence, is so extraordinarily obvious.

Gradually, Q sits back, leaving Jim room to breathe: he is back, now. Mostly.

“She knew,” Jim is continuing, the cathartic force of it making his eyes flutter faintly, sighing out words with utter relief and ownership. “I wasn’t like anybody else, and she…”

Jim’s eyes snap to him, and this will be Q’s test.

“Q.”

Q’s expression does not alter.

“Yes?”

Jim’s voice is calm, certain, and unequivocal. None of the rampant madness or desperation or anger or need or pain, but a single question that needs, has always needed an answer, because with that answer Jim can set the world on fire.

(and so can Q, but he has to believe it first)

“Do you love me?”

This is his test, and Q has his answer:

“As much as you do me.”

It is perfect. Jim smiles like the child he is exorcising, and sighs out breath that has been held for longer than he cares to remember; finally, finally.
The moment holds its own for a few minutes. Nobody particularly wants to break it, least of all Moran, who is aware that this is a moment of quite terrifying weight, and he probably wasn’t supposed to have been present.

“Jim?”

“Yes?”

Jim is a familiar stranger, and they orientate around each other, unforgiving as gravity and perfectly, beautifully balanced.

“Want to run the world with me?”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a part of my soul, somehow, and holds huge weight for me; I'm not sure quite why. I thought, for a while, that this would be the ending for this fic - and yet, there are still too many stories that haven't been told, elements to explore, people to meet, and I realised that I couldn't leave Q and Jim behind just yet. So there's more to come...

But I also want to briefly say a tremendous thanks, to you fine creatures who are here with me on this strange journey. This is a niche kind of pairing, of story, and it means the world that you are still here. Every comment, kudos, subscriber, makes the next bit and the next come alive: without you wonderful people, it may have died a far earlier death.

And so with all my heart, thank you. Jen.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Q is having a very, very bad day.

No day is ever likely to end well if it is starts with a missive from Q’s hysterical middle brother, who tells him - in a voice like grated blood - that John Watson has gone missing.

The first thing Q does is call Jim.

“Please tell me you haven’t abducted John Watson?” Q asks wearily, quite entirely prepared for that to be the case. “I know you’re trying to go back to your roots, but tormenting Sherlock will guarantee me being less than constructive when it comes to domestic terrorism charges.”

Bond looks up, mildly concerned; Q winks, mouths just the Waterloo bombing and returns his attention to Jim, who sounds quite genuinely surprised: “Not me. Honest guv.”

“In which case, it looks like I’m going to have a busy day of things,” Q tells him, “so hold fire on the Chicago interrogations, I won’t have time to get Mycroft to cover. You’re clear on New York though. I want an update regarding the Moreau gang before close of business.”

Jim sighs, clicking his tongue behind his teeth. “You’re so demanding,” he croons. “I like it.”

“Could you put some feelers out of your own regarding Watson?” Q asks, not really expecting Jim to acquiesce; to his surprise, Jim agrees. The surreality of Jim being quite so helpful is enough to provoke concern: “… are you sure you aren’t involved?”

Jim laughs like a child, unchecked, and it makes Q’s own lips shiver into something approaching a smile; there has been a shift, since Jim’s breakdown, or whatever they are calling it. They have a strange element of peacefulness. Q would never have thought it possible, once upon a time, but here they are and here they stay.

Moriarty Inc spans countries and continents.

It is very, very close to being the largest global crime syndicate in history.

It is, without question, the largest independent crime syndicate. ‘Moriarty’, as a single name, as a single person, in a single lifetime. ‘Spectre’ had existed for generations, and was more of a franchise than a single organism, no matter how hard they tried; they had an internal system of government, diplomacy.

Neither Jim nor Q have the time or patience or interest in diplomacy. It is a tremendous waste of energy.

But it does require constant attention. London has long-since been annexed, most of the UK is under Jim’s direct care and influence. All but three major UK crime gangs are Moriarty’s, directly or indirectly; whenever rogues, independents or attempted groups spring up, they are quickly and efficiently dealt with. Most are dispatched, but those with scope or ambition are occasionally employed instead.

Q hums disconnectedly under his breath as he calls Mycroft.
“... yes, he’s contacted me too,” Mycroft sighs, sounding immensely put-upon. “No demands, nothing. Nobody claiming responsibility, not formally, which makes me think it’s personal. Have we ruled you out?”

Mycroft still has the endearing habit of discussing Moriarty and Q as ‘them’ vs ‘him’, which - given that Mycroft is a fairly fundamental part of Moriarty Inc, these days - is quite amusing.

“Nope, all clear here, and no leads,” Q replies, already feeling the irritation; Sherlock does not have the right to interfere in his day-to-day life and yet he somehow always does. “Bond’s on site though, so I might send him out to scout.”

Bond’s expression turns silently mutinous, which makes Q smirk outright.

Then, there is a beep; Q hangs up on Mycroft without warning, picking up Jim once again. “Yes?”

“Gotcha,” he says brightly. “And you’re supposed to be the professional…”

“... fuck off,” Q tells him without venom; it reads as remarkably fond. “Where?”

“Texting you now. And I have an emergency for you: we need Bond to go over to Tashkent. And I’m going to kidnap Mycroft.”

Q sighs. “While I empathise…”

“... there’s a coup planned,” Jim interjects, before Q can fully chastise him. “Turns out that our dear Big Brother chose not to pass that along; it undermines my entire operation in Uzbekistan. I only want to rattle him.”

The excitement in Jim’s tone is what convinces Q to allow it: Mycroft would benefit from a bit of a scare, particularly the type of scare Jim tends to construct. Not to mention that this is utterly unacceptable.

(although completely expected; Mycroft was never going to roll over on his back easily, or without a bit of a fight. Q and Jim have been waiting for this to manifest. It’s actually a testimony to Mycroft’s intelligence and subtlety that it’s taken nearly six months for a problem to arise)

“By all means,” Q says, therefore. “No more than three days, however. I’ll redirect resources from MI6, but I don’t want to push our luck.”

(they keep speaking in plurals, these days, and Q cannot bring himself to mind; perhaps it was inevitable, that he and Jim would merge, in the end)

“No problem,” Jim replies cheerfully. “I’ll get that mobilised, is tomorrow morning alright?”

“If you can wait until midday, there’s an internal meeting with COBRA; after that, he’s all yours. Actually, if you can abduct while he leaves the building, I get an excuse for a budget hike for internal security,” Q parries, thinking happily about what he could do with a few extra hundred thousand; he could make the ‘Spooks’ revolving door/scanner thing actually happen.

After all, there’s no point being the Quartermaster of MI6 if he can’t have some fun.

Jim laughs, surprisingly lightly. “No problem,” he purrs back. “I’ll be with you this evening, sweetie, if Seb and Bond are out of the country…”

“... nine o’clock, I’ll be back from work,” Q agrees; he and Bond communicate eternities in the space
of a glance, and Bond goes into the bedroom to pack while Q taps out a few lines on his computer, getting Bond onto an immediate flight. “Bring dinner. Oh, and do me a favour and really go all-out on Mycroft, would you?”

Bond doesn’t seem to mind about Jim. Whatever strange dynamic Q and Jim thrive on, Bond seems content to just let it be, and doesn’t get jealous or anything absurd like that.

Jim snorts, a little disparaging, and hangs up. Of course he’s going to go all-out. Jim’s pathologically incapable of doing anything less.

Which leaves Q with the odd realisation that he’s going to be storming into action solo.

It isn’t as though Q hasn’t, doesn’t, or can’t go storm whatever and wherever, whenever he needs to. Q is a spectacular active agent. He is a better shot than Bond and Moran combined (and that’s even with both getting exceptionally competitive and trying very hard to beat him).

What Q lacks is the human element. Humans have never been his area. His brothers and Jim are all sociopathic to some extent or other, but they see people, they know what people do even if they do not understand the reasoning. Q does not. Never has.

For something like this, he believes it doesn’t matter.

Which is one of the many reasons why Q is on the verge of a very, very bad day.

Jim is having a delightful one, thanks for asking.

Firstly, he is busy with five major side-projects. Jim still sponsors criminals from time to time, and now has a pet serial killer who’s working their way through Southern France, a drug cartel that’s feigning independence in Salvador, several counterfeitters in various locations around the globe, a burgeoning sex trafficking operation through Thailand and into some less regulated Malaysian states, and they’re suggesting expansion up into India, and then there’s a really exciting new enterprise in Brisbane for a cult leader turned murderer who’s on a revenge jag after his daughter was gang raped.

And all of those have checked in with very positive reports, so Jim coasts through the day basking in his own tactical brilliance.

Secondly, Asia is basically under control (which is awesome), Europe and Americas (yep, both of them) are Jim’s, because Spectre were ambitious but flawed, and too many cooks quite definitely spoiled that particular broth. A single figurehead to take control is received with eager welcome by most; they think they have a scapegoat. Jim knows better.

After all, in the UK, Jim is still technically dead.

And so Moriarty is everywhere all at once, and it’s so fucking cool Jim doesn’t know what to do with himself. Going by his expectations and projections and Q’s occasional reminder of reality and the importance of achievable targets, he should have most of the world by next June.

Jim occasionally remembers how it felt when he was younger, his ambition. The child’s desire to rule the world.

Seventeen more months or so, and Jim will actually have it.

Thirdly, Jim is about to kidnap Mycroft Holmes, and then stage a very dramatic rescue (because
rattling Mycroft is one thing, but letting him believe that Q and Jim are his *saviours* reaches a level of sadistic joy that cannot be surpassed).

So yes, Jim is having a frankly splendid time of things.

You know, up until the point when he discovers that somebody has kidnapped Q.

- 

Back to Q’s bad day, and being kidnapped: he went in to retrieve John Watson, which was actually a really lovely idea and indicative of Q’s recent decision that he was going to get more involved in morally sound pursuits just in case God was keeping a balance sheet that nobody had warned him about.

Last fucking time he tried for *that*.

Q is now tied up.

Things had gone marvellously well before John fucking Watson had decided to be *noble*. Q stormed in, demanded Watson’s release, shot one in the knee and the other in the direct centre of his forehead, and they had unsurprisingly decided that, on reflection, it was probably sensible to release their existing hostage.

If John fucking Watson hadn’t decided to try and disarm a kidnapper whilst injured and still partially bound (and Q blames Sherlock entirely, John Watson is more intelligent than that, Sherlock has imbued him with a sense of immortality that just isn’t justified) then Q could have easily got the pair of them out without breaking a sweat.

Instead, Q very nearly gets shot, and instead gets the living shit beaten out of him.

Now, Q is attached to a chair and really spooking John Watson, who is also tied to a chair, the pair are back to back; Q has refused to give a name, an organisation, an affiliation. Watson is aware of having been almost-rescued by somebody he does not recognise.

“Are you alright?” he insists on asking, while Q is there doing the intelligent thing (staying quiet) whilst awaiting an optimistically forthcoming rescue.

However, Q is aware that Bond is on a plane, Moran is in another country, and Jim will not notice a problem for another six hours or so (when Q doesn’t turn up for dinner later that evening) which realistically means seven hours before anybody will turn up guns blazing.

“Shut up,” Q snaps at Watson, who has the audacity to look offended, although mercifully Q cannot see it. “I’m sure this kind of shit happens to you on a regular basis…”

“… it’s my fourteenth kidnap to date,” John agrees lightly, unperturbed; Q rolls his eyes, lets out a strange half-voiced moaning. “… I’m sorry to annoy you?”

“Annoy me?” Q parries, sarcasm all but dripping from each syllable, “don’t worry, John Watson, annoying me is the *least* of your current problems. They’re debating which part of you to cut off to send to Sherlock, and by the way, he’s been so useless in this particular effort that he had to employ *me* to track you down.”

“And you are…?”

Q let out a nasty, cackling sound. “Are you really that fucking stupid, Johnny-boy?!”
And oh, oh the reaction is stellar. Q only regrets that they’re not face-to-face. As it is, he feels Watson abruptly freeze, his breathing taking on a very strange slightly rasping *nnk* quality. “What did you call me?”

“Johnny-boy,” Q echoes, with the gentlest shade of an Irish twang. “Why? Problem?”

Good lord, Watson is stupid. Q does not doubt he is an excellent doctor, and his intelligence is established through his job and experience; however, insofar as flat intellect, he is so extraordinarily outclassed it is almost amusing. Even Moran could probably beat him in a basic IQ test, although that assumes that anybody could coerce/threaten/blackmail Moran into sitting down somewhere for more than ten minutes at a time without shooting someone.

“No problem,” John replies, with a passable attempt at calm. “Just reminded me of somebody.”

Okay, so laudably calm, under the circumstances; Q can see why Sherlock loves him. Sherlock needs and wants and thrives on having an audience. It wouldn’t be nearly as fun if the audience was stupid, but equally they cannot be too clever; John Watson balances perfectly in the middle, enough to challenge but not enough to outclass.

Plus, given Sherlock’s proclivity for harming himself and others, it’s very useful to have a doctor on hand.

Q is split between hoping that their captors let Watson have a look at his injuries, and hoping that Watson doesn’t get a better look at him. Either way, Watson is going to have quite a few questions that Q does not particularly want to answer.

Sherlock is going to owe Q from now until the end of time amen.

But now, their captors have come back for questioning, round two.

“Your name.”

Q blinks at them. They punch him.

Now, Q has more than enough experience with torture. If Mycroft and his little collective couldn’t get him to say a damn thing, it’s very unlikely that a more junior group will manage anything.

It doesn’t change that it hurts like fuck, though.

Watson, meanwhile, proves that he is perhaps passably worthwhile in a crisis: they start to get a little more creative, cutting Q away from the chair to leave him collapsed across the concrete floor, which prompts Watson shouting his head off to distract them, and indeed negotiate with them to give Q medical attention.

Q is not speaking, not a word. He duly screams when necessary, when unavoidable, but time keeps passing and they still do not have so much as his name, let alone why he was there or how he knows John or what in the ever loving fuck he was doing there.

These people are out of their depth. They half suspect it.

“What do you want?” Watson asks boldly, bravely (bless him). “Leave him alone, he’s not involved in this. This is about Sherlock, right?”

Villains, particularly small-scale ones, are prone to a lack of professionalism; particularly, in this case, vague threats and transparent lack of ambition. They are not even competent enough to realise that if
Q could find them, almost anybody else could.

To be clear: Jim also monologues. The man is a master of monologuing. Jim Moriarty will go to his grave having the last word, and if that means he has to come back from the dead to do so (as he has already done at least twice) he will quite definitely do so.

These guys are junior, because their monologuing does not serve a purpose. It’s just showing off, but regrettablly, they’re not good enough criminals to merit showing off.

Jim is going to eat them alive.

“Sherlock Holmes will come running for you,” one of them jeers, so palpably pathetic that Q actually groans; they kick him viciously in the stomach for his troubles, but Q cannot bring himself to mind. “And you, you must be one of Sherlock’s minions.”

Q snorts with laughter, when he has breath to. “Sherlock fucking wishes,” Q rasps, tasting blood in his mouth, feeling it running from his nose. “No, no no. He’s secondary here. You’re in deep trouble, gentlemen, and you don’t even realise how much. Because I have somebody more impressive than Sherlock coming to find me.”

One of them stamps on Q’s leg; he feels a sharpening of terrifying pain, not an all-out break but certainly a hairline fracture. “Who?”

(Q’s shin twinges in remembrance, as it always does, always will, always always)

Q whistles out a perfect, three-note melody; John Watson, without realising why, feels shivers creep across his exposed skin, as he listens to the notes that haunt the very fringes of his nightmares, the odd tune of a man John has not seen in person since Richard Brook and an abortive attempt at a trial, years and years ago now.

One of the kidnappers stills, very slightly.

“You know,” Q says to him, trilling and bright; if he and Jim are going to become a single organism, Q may as well dine out on the perks, and abandoning conventional sanity to terrify some junior criminals is definitely a perk. “Say the name, sweetheart.”

(and if Q’s accent becomes softly, softly Irish-tinged, not a soul will survive to notice)

There is a strange silence. The kidnappers look at one another. Q regrets not wearing contact lenses; his glasses are smeared, with general grime and a fair bit of blood. He would have loved to see the expression of utter terror that should, by rights, be painted across the man’s face.

“Moriarty,” the man breathes.

(Q takes notes: this is somebody who must have had the odd, terrifying, regretful experience of actually meeting Jim, probably more than once, if he recognises the calling cards. Somehow, this ostensibly useless insult to oxygen has managed to get involved in things a long way above his station.

Either that, or the terrifying strange interplay of Jim and Sherlock’s life has officially crossed over completely)

On that theme, Q suddenly understands:

“Oh my god,” he says aloud, “you’re fanboys, aren’t you?! You’ve picked up John Watson to try
and emulate Jim, haven’t you? Oh, you utter *morons*. You have no idea just how badly you’ve fucked up. Like, off the sodding *charts.*”

They are not very pleased with this statement, which is how Q knows he is correct; criminals try to mimic other criminals all the time, either to ride on coat-tails or to forge a comparison that may make them look impressive.

After ten minutes or so, they get bored of randomly hitting him for the absurd crime of having worked them out; Q is left alone with Watson again.

“... you knew Moriarty?” John hedges; he cannot see Q properly, tries to crane his head around, seeing nothing but a young man with dark hair and blood everywhere, a strange echo of Sherlock and Jim combined.

Q lets out a soft, strange laugh. “You could say that,” he agrees lightly, when he finds how to speak again. “You don’t need to worry, by the way: I’d estimate our rescue no later than half-past eight.”

“What’s the time now?”

It is tempting to groan at Watson’s stupidity, but Q restrains himself. “Well, given that it’s late January, and already dark,” Q explains, in a rare instance of deduction, and not exactly a complicated one, “I’d say sixish?”

Sherlock, Mycroft and Jim could probably tell him the time to the nearest five minutes. Q cannot. And he doesn’t really care.

“And who’s coming?” John asks, quite reasonably. “I’m guessing you’re one of Mycroft’s people?”

Q can honestly say he has never been so insulted in all his life. “Not even slightly,” he snaps, pain addling his usual desire for subtlety. “Mycroft would sell his soul to have me under control, he’s been trying since forever…”

“Who are you?” John repeats, more emphatically.

Q laughs softly, melodically, and the strange white-space of silence beneath and beyond what was once terrifyingly loud feels perfectly and beautifully empty.

“For your sake,” he murmurs to John, “it’s best that you do not know.”

“Fuck that,” John replies, admirably indignant, Q keeps seeing more and more why Sherlock can bear him. “You know Sherlock? And Moriarty?”

Q sighs vaguely. “Yep. Stop asking questions, John, just trust me when I say you are safer not knowing.”

“Too many people try to make that decision for me,” John retorted, with the angry edges of a man who has been underestimated too many, too many times (and Q hates how he empathises) and he wants to know, he wants to be involved, even if this world that Sherlock has introduced him too swallows him whole, he’d prefer to die with his eyes wide open, even if Medusa-like, the truth kills him with a glance.

Q shifts; the unbelievable morons have left him sprawled across the floor, handcuffed with hands in front of him and just a little bit battered. Q debates using this entire incident as a training session for MI6 agents, on *what not to do with a hostage.*
“Who are you?”

Q moans; why, why does everybody but everybody seem to think that asking the same questions again and again and again will actually achieve something. “No. Not happening. For so many separate and distinct reasons.”

“Just your name.”

“Oh sweet jesus will you give it a rest!?” Q yelps at him, trying to pick the handcuffs; he makes these fuckers for a living, it shouldn’t be rocket science to break his way out. These amateurs haven’t even fully searched him; he has a small length of wire laced into his trousers that he engineered for precisely this moment, easy enough to curve into the right angles to spring the cuffs open. “I’m busy.”


”Not quite,” Q replies, which is remarkably honest under the circumstances; he lets out a small hum of contentment as he frees one of his hands. “They’ll be back in a moment, I’d imagine, try not to talk. You seem to have an extraordinary ability to make a bad situation considerably worse.”

“How so?”

Q laughs as he picks himself, annoyed at his leg for the insane degree of pain; how Jim manages to coast through life as a masochist is completely beyond him, Q just does not find pain that enjoyable. “You talk too much.”

John snorts himself. “Yeah, I’ve been told that before,” he comments, before exhaling, slowly. “Are you alright?”

Q rolls his eyes skyward, hobbling his way around to John; the man looks at Q with outright shock for a moment, scanning over the obvious blood and injury and seeming somehow terrified at Q’s composure.

“Been better,” Q supplements helpfully, eyes darting around the room; they’re in a fairly standard warehouse, not particularly scenic nor exciting. “Now try not to be stupid, I’m going to release one hand.”

“How?!?”

“You live with Sherlock Holmes,” Q tells him, with uncharacteristic patience, “and you’re surprised at somebody who’s able to pick handcuffs?!”

John shrugs lopsidedly. “It was the speed I was particularly taken with,” John admits, building on Q’s calm to borrow some of his own (plus, the man is an adrenaline junkie; Mycroft was absolutely right, this is a man who needs the conflict, desperately needs danger to thrive). “You’re used to this, right?”

Q shoots him a level glance. “Stop trying to get information out of me; it’s not going to work,” he recommends gently. “And if you do, I’ll have to hurt you. So it’s best for both of us if you stop asking questions.”

John is silent for approximately seven seconds.

“... but...”
And Q has to remind himself that killing John Watson would probably be an unpopular idea in the long run.

(but holy hell, it’s tempting)

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, you beautiful, wonderful people, for the immense response for last chapter - it means more than I can possibly say, and has fuelled a considerable amount more writing! <3 Jen.
“My-croft.”

For a bisyllabic name, Jim has a unique ability to make it sound like forty-five minutes later he’s still lingering on the consonants; Mycroft sighs with the acquired weariness of one accustomed to his entire life turning to shit with very little warning, and turns around.

“Yes?” he asks, wondering just how many more things can go badly wrong in the space of a morning; thus far, with a pending election, a betrayal or twelve, the combined efforts of the CIA and MI6 in Barbados has turned unpleasant, Mycroft is learning a very specific dialect of Urdu for reasons that cannot be printed, and Sherlock has lost track of his pet army doctor, which shouldn’t be Mycroft’s problem and yet, of course, somehow is.

Moriarty turning up unannounced in his very heavily guarded and locked-down office should be a concern. Mycroft can barely bear to muster a vague sense of annoyance.

“We have a problem,” Jim tells him, bopping on the balls of his feet, more alive and less human than a person should be able to maintain. “Q.”

Mycroft quirks an eyebrow upwards. “Yes?”

“Gone AWOL,” Jim replies brightly. “And all the King’s horses and all the King’s men, need to get Q home to London again. Look. It rhymes. And has the right scansion.”

“And you want me to…?”

Jim grins, all teeth. “I know where he is, I know how to get there,” he tells Mycroft, bright as the proverbial gleaming brass button, “and I want to make sure that nobody interrupts me. I’m not gonna be subtle. They hurt Q. I’m going to make sure the world knows I’m back, and I mean business.”

“You want to officially come back to life?” Mycroft confirms, uncertain. “I suppose it has been rumoured for long enough…”

“... I want to come back with a bang,” Jim nods, playful and darting. “And more importantly: Sherlock needs to know.”

Mycroft’s expression shifts into a pained rictus. “You’re going to start your games again?”

Jim shrugs, still smiling like the sun itself. “I don’t know,” he trills, “but he should know, he should start to understand, don’t you think? He’s thought he won for ever so long, it’s about time, my darling.”

“Don’t call me your darling,” Mycroft replies, more reflexive than considered, and realises as he speaks that he has just completely ensured that Jim only ever calls him ‘darling’.

The realisation makes him passionately want to kill Jim, very slowly; however, while sadism is a practised art for Mycroft, outright murder is not.

“So, darlin’,” Jim says obnoxiously (and Mycroft pictures the murder; he could kill Jim in seven different ways in less than fifteen seconds, and would probably be heralded as a public hero for the joy), and smiles in a way Mycroft finds oddly compelling. “Are you ready for me?”
It is so, so tempting. Mycroft is unlikely to get another opportunity like this for a long while. One on one with a man who falsely believes himself untouchable; Mycroft could rip his head from his shoulders, his skin from his flesh from his bones, break him utterly. It wouldn’t even be a difficult stretch.

But Mycroft would not be Mycroft if he gave in to those urges, if he surrendered.

“You have until Saturday,” Mycroft hears himself saying, while Jim’s eyes taunt him, mock him. “Do feel free to take your time. The relevant parties will be informed, and you can do whatsoever you like when that happens. I will get in touch.”

Jim slides closer, inexorable, a force of nature; Mycroft reads him, can see everything Jim will and will not confess, unlacing him with a look and Jim isn’t even trying to hide it, there’s no point.

Mycroft could, he could.

The man’s fingers are disconcertingly soft, tailored, manicured. They trickle along Mycroft’s cheek, dancing to his lips, caressing more intimately than any kiss; Mycroft finds himself paralysed, his mind tripping up on itself, Jim’s breath warm enough to tickle against his chin, the man almost laughably short by comparison.

Across the years, they have crossed one another’s paths, never truly touching; even when Mycroft was trying to interrogate him, giving tidbits of information on Sherlock, failing and trying and breaking, but they never touched. They were never close enough.

For a wild, uncontroletable moment, Mycroft considers what could happen, how much could change, how this would rock the foundations of their worlds.

Imagination makes him briefly breathless.

The moment ends as sharply as it arrives, and Jim dances out of Mycroft’s office, leaving nothing behind but pregnant silence and the afterthought of a dream.

-

Q is inches away from saving their captors the bother of hurting John Watson by doing it himself; the man is impossible, absolutely fucking impossible, annoying and stupid and fucking will not give up. The tenacity is equal parts laudable and inexpressibly annoying.

“You…”

“I swear by all things holy I will end you,” Q snaps at him; their captors look a little bemused, but then again, they’ve had the honour and relief of not being with John fucking Watson the entire fucking time, they get time off. Q had hoped that their return might actually mean that Watson shut the fuck up; apparently not.

Their captors are rather confused. Visibly so. “We want information…”

“Well don’t you all,” Q snipes back. “I just do not care. I have nothing for you. So go fuck yourselves. In a nice way.”

John snorts with laughter, which Q ignores and their captors find increasingly perplexing. “Don’t you want to keep him safe?” they ask Q, assuming - wrongly - that Q actually gives a flying fuck about John Watson beyond the effect his death would have on Sherlock. “You came to rescue…”
“... and I have no idea who he is,” John points out, very unhelpfully; Q really does not want their captors to clock that he’s somebody of interest. “So beating him up isn’t really a necessary thing…”

“... so who are you?” one of them asks coldly.

Q is not as worried as most people would be in his situation, mostly because he knows the psychological profile of different forms of criminal: these are not killers. Q killed one of their number upon breaking into the building, and their response was tellingly shocked; they are not used to, nor keen on, death. Murdering Q is extremely unlikely.

That doesn’t, however, preclude the possibility of injury. Innovative torture is, again, unlikely; they’re just used to beating people about a bit. Unless they kill him by accident or negligence, Q shouldn’t have too many issues in the long run.

For Moriarty fanboys (only boys, no women; Q’s been listening out) they are depressingly feeble.

“You boys are disappointing me,” Q trills, and as he speaks, he understands why Jim has always enjoyed situations like this, “so tell me, darlin’…”

(John Watson flinches at the accent, the tone, the bouncing quality)

“... are you worth my time?” Q completes, each vowel bastardised into something new, and this is fun; Q is beginning to understand.

Regrettably, he still doesn’t have Jim’s enjoyment of pain. Q tries as he might, but he simply isn’t wired that way; pain is pain, unpleasant, and he misses the sense of power and control he has when stage-managing from elsewhere, he is a Quartermaster not a double-oh for this reason, he makes things happen. The front line is not his home.

All the same, he moves with accustomed fluidity as he disarms one of his captors; they made the pitiful mistake of thinking he was broken, and naturally, thought he was handcuffed. It takes a handful of seconds to disarm and start shooting.

And oh, thank god, Doctor Watson shows he can be useful: Q throws him a handgun, and he manages to a) catch it and b) start firing, and even went for non-lethals.

True, this is probably more due to morality than practicality, but all the same, it has the necessary result: Q needs at least two of them alive to interrogate later.

Between he and John, they get the requisite people cuffed and stabilised. Q does the former, John the latter. Five altogether, not including the dead one. Each has a gun and handcuffs on them - which is hilariously helpful - so subduing is a remarkably easy endeavour.

“You’re used to this,” John says obviously, again, and Q feels a twitch in his arm that comes close to shooting John Watson through the heart, an appallingly easy shot…

… and because Jim is a massive twat, he arrives precisely after the nick of time. And he’s singing. Utter fucking ridiculous arsehole.

John Watson nearly shoots him.

Before he can manage it, Q walks to John’s side, and very calmly confiscates the (extremely confused) man’s gun with nothing more than a “let me look at that a second” before he’s even started to contemplate action; he has assumed (rather foolishly) that Q is on his side.
“You’re…”

“Q, darling!” Jim calls brightly, and Q very sincerely contemplates shooting him there and then. “Not your best rescue attempt…”

Temper snaps, Q fires; it lands an inch left of Jim’s foot in a puff of concrete smoke, and Jim (impressively) manages to not respond beyond a too-casual glance at the hole in the floor. “That was a warning,” Q tells him, very seriously, and Jim knows it’s true: Q does not miss. “In the meantime: Doctor John Watson, Jim Moriarty.”

“We’ve met,” Jim purrs, seductive as all hell. “Although it’s been ages. Last time was in dear Kitty Riley’s flat, wasn’t it? I’ve kept tabs, of course, but…”

“... how the hell are you still alive?”

Jim blinks innocently. “I never died.”

“I figured that much out for myself,” John replies lividly, making Q snort with unkind laughter; at least the man has managed to figure out something. “And you’re… you’re Moriarty’s?!!”


It is one of maybe four occasions Q can recall Jim apologising for anything. “You’re not even slightly forgiven.”

Jim grins, all teeth. “We’ll see,” he parries, and Q feels a strange and lovely calm settle in his chest. “Injured, love?”

‘Love’. A newer nickname, and one Q cannot say he minds unduly; Jim loves him. Jim loves him more than he should, more than Q can understand, and sometimes it makes his whole world feel right. Like Jim puts everything into perspective. It is not a pathetic, weak love; it is a meaning, a dose of sharp and awful and wonderful reality.

“Nothing exciting,” Q replies easily; Jim leans in to kiss him, and Q feels everything explode in his soul, bright and alive. Nothing hurts, nothing of relevance. He is safe. “So - shall we?”

Jim briefly looks over John Watson, apparently unimpressed. “And him?”

Q flicks a glance at John, who evidently has a number of comments he’d like to add. “Doctor John Watson. You never saw me, is that clear? You were alone for the duration.”

John looks flatly horrified. “And I’m supposed to lie to Sherlock Holmes about anything?” he asks, with a lethal rhetorical edge. “Especially that Moriarty’s alive…”

“... I announced being alive ages ago, you just didn’t want to believe it,” Jim points out, lacing his fingers with Q’s in a weird and not entirely unpleasant attempt at intimacy. “Tell Sherlock for me, won’t you?”

“You’re letting me just… walk out of here?” John asks, and Q has to marvel at the man: most would have the simple self-preservation instinct to get the fuck out of the room. Q cannot decide whether it is stupidity or bravery, and figures that it’s probably both.

Jim smiles pleasantly. “I don’t have to, if you don’t want?”
John looks between the two of them.

They look eerily similar, shades of the same person, a single organism.

“I’d better go,” John says instead, correctly realising that his life expectancy is in the hands of two people who have very little patience. “I… it was nice to meet you, Q, was it?”

Q stares at him with merciless, unpleasant precision. It is so much fun to bully a creature like John; he is not a total walkover, but also not too much of a challenge.

“I think it’s best for all concerned that you don’t ask questions,” Q tells him softly, “and if you elect to tell Sherlock what has happened here, I promise you, I will find you. It would be easy.”

John refuses to quit give up. “You came to rescue me,” he reminds Q, so immensely curious. Bless his heart. “Why would you bother?”

Q shrugs one-sidedly, trying to avoid the question as best he can. “I felt like it.”

“You know Sherlock,” John says instead, determined, and the man just does not seem to have a sense of his own mortality.

Or possibly, more worryingly, he has (correctly) realised that for some reason, Q wants him alive. Q came to rescue him, find him. Q sacrificed life and health to keep John Watson safe. Even when he had the chance, the choice, Q chose John Watson, and John is intelligent enough to understand that there had to be a reason.

Therefore, Q graces John Watson with the truth. “Yes, I do.”

“How?”

“I know Mycroft, Sherlock and Eurus better than you could begin to imagine,” Q tells him softly, “and they are the most vital people in my world. If you elect to keep digging into this, I promise you that your life expectancy is less than a month. Let me live, thrive, and your life continues indefinitely.”

John assesses him, curious and ridiculous. “You don’t want to kill me.”

Q raises an eyebrow. “You have survived this long with Sherlock because you haven’t encountered me,” he explains easily. “So - forget me, Doctor John Watson. Because if you don’t, you’ll meet me again. And if you do, it’ll be the last thing you see. Do I make myself abundantly clear?”

It is an uncertain, confused thing, but Q can see something in John’s eyes that he doesn’t like: an understanding. John Watson is not of Holmesian intellect, but he is clever, and he looks at a younger version of Sherlock and hears Mycroft’s intonation, puts two and two together and arrives at something that scares the living shit out of him.

Watson decides to leave.

“I want to kill him,” Q whispers, so honest it makes him ache. “How…”

“You might still need to,” Jim replies at normal volume, unconcerned at Watson overhearing. “He has no intention of lying to Sherlock.”

Q huffs out a faint laugh. “Then I’ll get to make good on my apparent threat.”

Jim tsks, bringing Q’s hand to his lips and giving the handcuff abrasions a soft, feathery kiss.
“Sweetheart, we both know you won’t kill him,” he reminds Q, forgiving him for the weakness of it, “and you won’t let me do it either. John Watson is immortal.”

“Only for as long as Sherlock is,” Q replies, with the first thread of happiness creeping into his voice. “Then we’ll kill him.”

If Watson hears them, as he walks away, he doesn’t miss a step.

Meanwhile, Q and Jim have to deal with the random collection of Moriarty fanboys that are tied up at their feet, all looking understandably terrified, given that their idol is standing proud in front of them without any concept of his supposed mortality.

“Hello, boys,” Jim murmurs to them hypnotically. “You hurt my friend. Bad idea. Terrible idea in fact. You don’t even begin to understand what you’ve done. How badly you’ve fucked this up.”

“We’re going to kill you now,” Q tells them blandly. “And your cooperation will ensure that you die reasonably quickly. If you do not cooperate, we will take our time.”

For a man with a probable broken leg, bruised kidney, cracked ribs, blood smeared over a number of places and trickling in a number of other places, bruises darkening as they watch, he somehow manages to be utterly terrifying.

Jim, by comparison, looks wonderfully mild. “Boys,” he continues, “time to start spilling. I want your organisations, your friends, your families. Tell me now, and I don’t hurt them. Tell me later, or die first, and I’ll make sure they join you up in God’s green heaven once they’ve been sliced into at least two dozen different pieces. Hey, do you think in heaven, you turn up looking like how you died?”

“I hope not,” Q replies mildly, eyes fixed on the man who had broken his leg (broken, fracture, it doesn’t matter, but the adrenaline is kicking back and he needs painkillers). “Morphine?”

Jim reaches into his jacket, and hands over a sealed hypodermic. “I spoil you,” he tells Q mockingly; Q rolls his eyes, smiles in a remarkably honest way, unsheathes and empties it into his arm. “So what do you reckon turn up in heaven looking like?”

“I’m not the person to ask,” Q replies drily, “as a militant atheist…”

“I’m Catholic, sweetheart,”

“In the most elastic way possible,” Q parries, while Jim shrugs, perpetually unrepentant.

Indeed, his voice is hypnotic: “Our Father, who art in heaven…”

“Now who’d like to volunteer to start all of this off?” Q asks brightly, sailing over the devil’s lord’s prayer. “The first volunteer will be killed with a neat shot through the head, assuming you give us at least three pieces of relevant information first.”

Jim glances to Q, mildly surprised. “You’re giving the orders?”

“You were stalling,” Q shrugs, “thought I’d get things started.”

For a moment, Jim holds Q’s gaze like he has never seen the man clearly, as though he is emitting light or something equally odd. “You’ve never done that before.”

Q’s smile is gentle and lulling. “First time for everything,” he says, so lightly, the world shifting
softly on its axis while several tied-up morons watch with palpable confusion. “Now. Boys. Our first volunteer.”

They exchange looks.

“You have five seconds.”

One - utterly sheepish and visibly terrified and trying not to look at his fellows in any way or form - tries, absurdly, to raise his bound hands.

“We have a winner!” Q coos delightedly. “Oh, how lovely. Jim, take it away.”

And Jim, eyes bright, grin sparkling on his lips, does precisely that.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

I wish you all a very merry Christmas - this is for those who, like me, need something to transport them this Christmas. I wish you all safety, and hopefully happiness.

Be brave, my darlings. There is a world for us.

Jen x

The collection of corpses are found in a variety of exotic locations, in a truly imaginative collection of limbs and organs and bones and skin, and neither Q nor Jim nor John Watson intends to expand on quite how or how long it took or why blood and organs are artistically arranged in a way that spells miss me?

Most of the British government is having kittens about this, barring the handful of people who orchestrated it.

(meanwhile, Q is ‘rescued’ by MI6 from a staged kidnap to replace the kidnap he already broke out of by himself; Jim was kind enough to get some of his associates in place. Otherwise, all of this becomes very difficult to explain to Q’s superiors. Including things like broken legs which mean reporting to a rather annoyed Medical team in MI6 and debriefing with M, who is a touch suspicious but does not press the issue)

“Q?”

As always, a call from Sherlock is the best way to establish that everybody is going to have a very long day; the man has that tight, painful sound that signifies an emotion. “It’s only been two days, surely he hasn’t managed to get kidnapped again?” Q asks, only barely trying to keep the contempt out of his voice.

Sherlock is silent. “Q.”

“Yes, you just said that,” Q replies, and he can feel, sense, knows that something has happened, and he has a nasty idea of what. “… Sherlock?”

“Is James Moriarty alive?”

Oh, John Watson. Good, steadfast tin soldier.

“Yes.”

There is a pregnant silence from Sherlock. “How long have you known?”

“A while,” Q replies honestly, and wonders just how much Sherlock knows, how much John Watson told him. “Sherlock, this does not concern you…”

“I will be at your flat in twenty minutes,” Sherlock says icily and hangs up without another word.
Q sighs. Bond looks at him, eyes catching light, a glinting blue diamond as he watches with such easy, understated love. “Watson told him?”

“I would imagine so,” Q replies, with a slight shrug, dialling another number and holding the phone to his ear, listening to the ring. “I rather expected this. It had to happen some day.”

“And you…”

The man on the other end picks up. “Jim, Sherlock knows. Bump up Mycroft’s abduction, we could play this very much to our advantage. No, you can’t. Shag him later, this is important. Yes, me too, if you want, just make it happen. Yes.”

Q hangs up, and goes to make a pot of tea. Bond gets dressed. Q makes toast, and when he inevitably forgets about it, Bond retrieves it before the toaster catches fire and hands it to Q with butter and raspberry jam. Q barely notices, just eats it in a handful of bites, his mind a million miles away.

The knock on the door comes as Q is absentmindedly licking jam off his fingers, and Bond is making coffee so strong it would constitute an act of attempted murder if he served it to others.

Q opens the door, and moves to one side in a fluid motion as Sherlock attempts to attack him.

Now, it should be noted that Sherlock is an experienced boxer, and even better street fighter. However, to be truly accomplished in that area requires diligent practise, experience, the body being taken care of, and the ability to not allow emotion to bleed into a fight. Emotion knocks everybody off balance.

As such, Q - who was forced through MI6 self-defence and basic fighting principles, despite loathing every single second of it - was able to knock Sherlock instantly off his feet by simply tripping the man up. Another important fact of note that Q’s leg is in plaster and the bruises look absolutely horrible in the clear light of a Thursday morning.

“James?” Q asks, gesturing at Sherlock, who is clearly ready to try for another punch; Bond looks at him, rolls his eyes, and is still holding his coffee in one hand whilst he pins Sherlock with the other.

Having a double-oh around has its perks.

“Get off me,” Sherlock snaps, writhing like an eel out of water and causing enough annoyance that Bond reluctantly hands his coffee to Q for safekeeping. “You lied to me, you were working for Moriarty all along!?”

Q raises an eyebrow, one that Sherlock can’t see due to the aforementioned writhing. “I was not working for him, no,” he tells Sherlock, and is mildly amused at how honest he is able to be. “Our paths have crossed, however. Now, would you like to explain what all this is about?”

“John. He told me everything.”

“And ‘everything’ would be…?”

“Let me up, and I’ll talk to you,” Sherlock bargains, clearly a tad humiliated by how easily he was outclassed physically; then again, after years of drug abuse and facing a professional, he really shouldn’t have been surprised.

Several more long moments pass. “… please?”
“The ‘please’ is a good start, but still insufficient,” Q tells him. “Sherlock. I am not working for Moriarty, never was.” (true) “We are, however, currently working together for reasons pertaining to public safety.” (less true, depending on perspective) “As you saw, he was primarily involved in rescuing Watson from his kidnap du jour. And indeed, me. It transpires that somebody like Moriarty is invaluable in international counter-terrorism operations.”

Sherlock grows just a touch stiller. “He’s helping MI6?”

Q considers just how to craft this stage of the lie, and does so with a lightness of touch and at least a nod towards something even partially resembling truth. “Naturally, it’s not something we’re publicising, but yes. I believe it has more to do with avoiding boredom than anything to do with Queen and Country, but it’s a start.”

Bond makes the decision based on behaviour, and removes himself from Sherlock, retrieves his coffee and does not apologise. Sherlock gets to his feet, and accepts a tea from Q with an expression more suited to a petulant child than a grown adult.

“But…”

“But nothing,” Q interrupts without hesitation. “You do not have jurisdiction over MI6, the government, or any other force. Your background may have left you with an augmented sense of your own importance, but Sherlock, that is not true. You are a private detective.”

“I’m…”

“Sherlock,” Q continues, unperturbed and calm as the ocean, “you have to listen. Between myself and Mycroft, we have kept you from any serious harm. Do you have even the slightest idea how many times we’ve ensured you weren’t arrested, or convicted? We’ve had to work constantly.”

Sherlock’s expression has taken on a new shift, and Q knows precisely why; a few long moments, ticking and ticking, and Sherlock finds words: “Mycroft knows?”

Q has played his cards absolutely perfectly. He allows a shadow of sympathy to flicker across his face, an impeccable actor, leading Sherlock towards the emotions Q needs him to feel. “Yes,” Q admits, after a pause that lasts a heartbeat too long, and Sherlock looks like the world is falling from under him. “I’m sorry.”

“Mycroft lied to me?” Sherlock echoes, half-audibly. “No. I don’t believe you.”

“Call him,” Bond suggests, playing into the strange little family pantomime that is erupting in front of him, and Q has never loved the man more. “Mycroft hates lying to you.”

Sherlock looks at Bond with a strange type of confusion, darts back to Q. “How much does he know?”

“I trust James,” Q says simply, and allows that to be enough.

Sherlock’s eyes still dart, but settles on Bond, unravelling everything that he possibly can.

The moment sits, stays, waits.

“Is he lying?” Sherlock asks Bond, and of course, Q’s heart leaps into his throat.

It is so easy to underestimate Bond. It is incredibly easy. James Bond, double-oh agent and gun-toting Queen and Country agent, so masculine it rolls off him in toxic waves, physically gorgeous
and well-trained in combat, and utterly completely unappreciated, because let’s be serious: being all of the above takes intelligence.

Bond can speak six languages fluently, and a handful more conversationally. Bond is a trained agent, who can analyse a situation in a half-second and react accordingly, who can manipulate anyone as easily as breathing. Bond can lie better than any actor, can create universes in a sentence and be believed. Bond understands people better than any Holmes brother could hope for, because he sees so much, too much.

So very simply put, it is excruciatingly easy for him to lie to Sherlock Holmes convincingly.

“No.”

Sherlock holds Bond’s gaze for several long seconds. He casts looks across every inch of Bond’s frame. He all but vivisects the man.

And at the end of it, he believes Bond quite entirely.

“James Moriarty is back. He never died. Mycroft knows?”

Bond slowly, carefully, nods; Q does not flinch when Sherlock’s own gaze hardens into something frightened and angry and pained and horrified and betrayed, utterly and completely betrayed.

“Mycroft lied to me?”

Q nods very, very slowly.

Sherlock looks like parts of his world are collapsing in around him because Sherlock, oh Sherlock, Mycroft is not somebody to love. To rely on, depend on, need, want; absolutely. But Mycroft Holmes is not a man who can be loved.

“I trusted him,” Sherlock half-breathes, half mouths, as though the words themselves are acid. “Q… what do I do?”

Sherlock very rarely, so rarely, asks for Q’s help.

Q smiles faintly, with a type of manufactured sadness. “Ask him,” Q suggests. “Talk to him. Mycroft cares about you, he won’t lie to you.”

And thus, the Holmes boys fracture themselves into component parts, and Q watches it with analytical fascination: Mycroft is Q’s, Sherlock is Mycroft’s, and Q is his own person just for now, if only for now, because Jim is Sherlock’s and Q is the only person left who can bind them together into something passably functional.

Sherlock taps in a number, and holds the phone to his ear.

They all wait. Bond drinks his coffee without changing expression; he catches Q’s eye at one point, and the lack of animation tells Q all he needs to know. Bond understands. Bond is his.

The knowledge is enough to make Q want to fuck him against every single available surface, makes him want to consume Bond entirely, break him down and absorb him into every element of his life and soul and future because James, he understands, he shouldn’t but he truly understands.

“He’s not picking up,” Sherlock says, and the tightness of his tone is everything:

Mycroft always picks up the phone. Mycroft has several numbers in his personal phone that
supersede everyone and everything. Mycroft can be in a meeting with every world leader, every superpower, and he will pick up the phone, because that is a phone that never, ever rings.

The simple fact of Sherlock calling should be enough.

It isn’t.

Sherlock’s gaze meets Q, and it is naked terror. “Q?”

Q behaves as he is expected to, of course, and uses his private phone to call a number that will not be answered. “… okay,” Q says, and allows a careful measure of fear to enter his tone, “I’ll deal with it. Sherlock…”

“… I’m staying here,” Sherlock says distinctly. “If Mycroft’s in trouble…”

“… then MI6 are best placed to handle it,” Q says, eyes on his Moriarty Inc mobile, where Jim has just texted:

*Mycroft intercepted. We’re on, baby.*

Irritating bastard.

“Okay,” Q says instead; his tone sounds measured, as though he is concealing emotion. The truth is that he’s *adding*, that he would be unperturbed except that Sherlock needs the right cues, he needs to feel needed and wanted. “Sherlock. Get onto your network. I’ll get the right things moving at my end.”

Sherlock is in motion because, bless his heart, he really does believe he is useful; he all but sprints out of the flat.

If Jim has done his job properly, then MI6 will be formally aware of Mycroft’s disappearance already; a phone call is to be expected in three, two, one…

Q’s work phone rings, and he is informed that Mycroft Holmes has been abducted from right outside the central intelligence building complex.

Jim texts the address that Mycroft’s been taken to.

“I’ll be with you in fifteen minutes,” Q says calmly. “Anybody claiming responsibility?”

In one hour, a missive will arrive from a very secretive group who call themselves the Pins. A rather unimaginative name, drawn from their habit of abducting various-ranked officials in governments or independent organisations who are known to be lynchpins.

Really, it’s quite remarkable that they haven’t kidnapped Mycroft off their own bat; certainly, it will be of no surprise to anybody when they claim responsibility.

Q’s private phone rings.

“The Network are sending out links, somebody will find him,” Sherlock tells him. “Where and when was he taken?”

“Directly outside the MI6 building, go there now, I’ll make sure you have clearance,” Q tells him, more than happy to dispatch Sherlock off somewhere out of the way while the real work takes place. “I need to talk to some sources.”
“Moriarty?”

“Almost certainly,” Q agrees, while a text beeps on his Moriarty phone: Mycroft is in a decoy location for the next fifteen minutes, before he will be moved out and taken to a second decoy. And then a third for luck. “Don’t sulk.”

“I’m not sulking,” Sherlock tells him, utterly unconvincing, and hangs up.

Q calls MI6, and commands them to allow Sherlock Holmes access to the kidnap scene, which should have been fully locked down by now. He also establishes that all other governmental figures of interest have had their protection upped, including M.

Q would also be subject to the same increased protection, but that he’s Q, and he has James Bond living with him. Most people consider this ample.

Bond, who watches with patent amusement. “You’re enjoying this.”

Q’s eyes are electrically alive, bright and that very particular shade of emerald that Bond swears he only gets when his life is worth living, that shade which flashes in anger and burns in orgasm, a colour that is entirely his, a smile that’s somehow exhilarated and shy all at once.

“Tremendously,” Q confesses and - because he has eleven minutes before anybody should need his attention - decides to launch himself at Bond with unashamed enthusiasm, plastered leg notwithstanding.

Now this is the most fun Q and Jim have had for a while, because it’s deliciously difficult. It requires extensive planning and management, because everybody involved has access to a different latticework of lies:

Mycroft needs to believe that he has been abducted by the Pins, and rescued by Moriarty. MI5, who will be in charge of his retrieval, need to be seen as competent but outclassed. Even the slightest whiff of suspicion and this entire effort will collapse like the proverbial house of cards, and there is too much at stake: they could lose Mycroft entirely, and just as he is getting so gloriously pliant.

Sherlock needs to feel useful, believe the Pins are responsible, and believe that Moriarty and MI5 are working together, even though they’re not.

(This includes Sherlock and Jim having a conversation at some point, although Q is trying to avoid that at more or less all costs because he’s an idiot and cares far too much about both of them and Q knows, he really does know that they will be the deaths of each other one day)

MI5 need to know as little as humanly possible. Given that Mycroft Holmes is a Category One hostage - and thus the highest priority retrieval - this could be tricky.

The Pins need to all swear blind that they are responsible for the kidnap. This is by far the easiest bit. Moriarty Inc infiltrated them years ago. However, they also need to convincingly not be Moriarty satellites as far as Mycroft is concerned.

And all of this is happening while Q and Jim are conducting the damn thing.

Mercifully, information is not expected. The Pins are there for very straightforward hostage situations; the only thing interesting about them is their choice of targets, and their professionalism. They average about six hostages per year; not much, but given that they get a minimum of a million for each, it’s not bad-going. They’re quiet, quick, violent, efficient and ruthless.
A lovely collection of adjectives, but they’re also a bit dull these days, and there are better-established groups that do the same thing for better rates.

(plus Jim really, really hates their name)

This will be their final abduction.

(more or less)

- Jim does not always tell Q everything he is planning. He really, really should. Jim Moriarty should have learned years ago that fucking around with Q’s life is only ever going to cause catastrophe.

But because he is Jim Moriarty, he’s damn well going to do it anyway. And enjoy it a ridiculous amount.

Q and Jim planned out this whole operation, but there are serious flaws that Jim can see: mostly, that Q needs to be lying to too many people. M, MI6, MI5, Mycroft, the Pins (erghhhhh that name), Sherlock, et cetera et cetera and of course, Jim needs Sherlock, he needs to show off to Mycroft and Sherlock alike that he’s back and he is utterly in control.

Therefore, the Pins are going to kidnap Q. As well as Mycroft.

And Q has no idea.

(yet)
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Q is going to murder Jim exquisitely slowly when he gets hold of the man.

-

Precisely twelve hours after Mycroft is abducted, an envelope is delivered to M; he is the most likely decision-maker in this particular abduction, a fact the kidnappers are well aware of.

Inside is a typed note, two molars (both with fillings) and a single embroidery pin.

M knows immediately. He has been waiting for this, for the official demands to be sent out. His first move is to buzz in Moneypenny, who immediately bags the contents and takes them down to Q-branch.

There are no doubts in M’s mind that the molars belong to Mycroft Holmes. This is their modus operandi; that, or fingernails. Removable parts of the human body. Permanent but non-lethal, and not particularly life-altering. Violent, with scope to escalate.

Given that Q has only just been retrieved from his own kidnap, it is absolutely not what M needs today. M needs a holiday, somewhere reasonably sunny, and to turn off his work phone for more than six consecutive hours. Cornwall will do at this point, he’s not fussy, just as long as he can get away from London and kidnaps and murders and espionage and oh, who is he kidding, he fucking loves his job.

And, M is one of the only people privileged with the knowledge that Q and Mycroft are related. He knows for precisely moments like this: to ensure that Q will not be emotionally compromised.

M already knows he will not be. Q is never emotionally compromised, it is one of the man’s surprising strengths.

All the same, he calls Q.

The phone rings out, rings and rings.

Voicemail.

Which is the point that M realises that Q is also in trouble.

-

Bond and Moran meet in a pub to share a pint and lament at their respective partners, because they have a day or so off while Mycroft’s kidnappers do their thing. Q pretends to try and track them down, Jim watches, and Sherlock runs around like a headless chicken.

Two pints of ‘64 down apiece, and they’ve moved onto spirits, because why the fuck not. Bond is cradling a remarkable amount of Żubrówka and Moran has straight cachaça which really confused the teenage-looking bartender for a while, before Moran pointed out a dusty bottle in the back row which looked like it hadn’t been used in several years and to be honest, probably hadn’t, but that would teach Moran to order something quite so niche in a central London pub. Moran made up for it
by fixing said bartender with a look that explicitly detailed what would happen if he passed comment.

The traumatised kid passed over the whole bottle and didn’t say another word.

And now the two are happily drinking, comparing a few stories and yes, frequently lamenting “well at least yours hasn’t stabbed you” and “never cleans or cooks, just breaks everything he touches” and “hasn’t eaten in days” and “lives exclusively on tea and I don’t understand how he hasn’t keeled over yet” and “why don’t we go holiday without them” and “good idea, except they’ll probably nuke London in the meantime” and so they drink more and dream of things that will never take place.

Bond’s phone rings.

Sherlock.

Bond rolls his eyes for Moran’s benefit, and answers; Sherlock is already monologuing, long strings of words “… and I haven’t heard from Q for hours, he was going to direct me towards…”

Odd. Bond hangs up on Sherlock mid-sentence, one of only a handful of people who have the nerve to do so, and calls Q’s mobile. As it rings, he downs the last of his vodka, and - as it goes onto voicemail - sighs.

“Q?” Moran asks.

“He’s not picking up,” Bond tells him, “which is rarely a good sign…”

Moran looks confused for a solid ten seconds before deigning to speak. “Q will have been taken in by now.”

Bond’s gaze snaps up with quiet shock and, right at the back of his eyes, a weary understanding that makes him feel very old and very bored of chasing around after skinny dark-haired psychopaths. “Taken where?”

Another moment, and Moran understands; Bond can see the same weariness in his own expression.

The pair of them, in perfect unison: “Jim.”

-

Q has been beaten up and tied to a chair for the second time in less than a week. This is not something to be recommended. Q is in quite a lot of pain and really fucking fed up of kidnaps.

And this one is made all the worse because a) he should have seen this coming and b) he’s been kidnapped with Mycroft.

This is everything Q never wanted to happen.

“Q…”

“… not now,” Q rasps, with blood on his tongue, “just… a moment. I’m due morphine. This hurts. Just…”

“Are you alright?”

Q spares a moment to look up and shoot a truly withering look in Mycroft’s direction. “What do you fucking think?”
It is gratifying, at least, to see that Mycroft is a little the worse for wear: his jaw is swollen and there is blood around his mouth from where teeth were removed, he has quite definitely had a few kicks and punches along the way and he is going to look so much worse in the not too distant future.

(plus his voice is slurring because of the aforementioned missing teeth and Q knows how much it annoys Mycroft to not be able to speak with precise and correct diction)

“I believe they are the Pins,” Mycroft manages uncomfortably. “It’s their usual methodology. We can hope they will not feel the need to extract any of your… appendages.”

If they do, Q will personally break every single bone in Jim’s feet. One by one. Twenty-six per foot. Fifty-two bones in total. Carefully and methodically. Jim - because he’s a masochistic bastard - would probably enjoy it, but it would make Q feel marginally better knowing that he’d have to be in a wheelchair for at least a little while.

“We can hope,” Q says aloud, for Mycroft’s benefit. “Shit. Shit. R’s going to take the piss, I can’t believe I’ve been abducted again.”

“You are making quite the habit of it,” Mycroft lisps. “Perhaps you ought to be a little more careful. You have ample protection…”

“… shut up,” Q snaps, before Mycroft can continue, his tone more than a little contemptuous. “Have you not read any of the manuals? You don’t run your mouth when kidnapped, I appreciate that may be challenging for you…”

“… it’s hardly a challenge,” Mycroft snipes back, oddly petty, but then that’s what happens when Mycroft is in an unfamiliar situation without control. “In any case. I assume various parties will have been alerted by now?”

Q blinks. “Obviously. Do engage your brain. They took you directly outside the MI buildings, half of fucking London knows. And no. To what you’re presumably thinking, no.”

No, it wasn’t us. No, it was not pre-empted. No, Jim can’t save us right now. No, I don’t know where we are or how we are going to get out of this.

And then the only truth, and even then it’s only a half-truth:

No, I had no idea.

“But there are sufficient resources to handle the situation presumably?” Mycroft continues, and Q smiles invisibly as blood trickles sluggishly from the corner of his mouth, along the slightly squishy contours of Mycroft’s chin.

Q shrugs as best he can with hands bound and shoulder dislocated. “We can but hope,” he agrees. “Your brother is involved, too, so that will certainly rally the troops. Assuming, of course, that they find us in time.”

The original plan was to keep Mycroft for a good few days, make sure he was suitably battered by the time he was retrieved. Q hopes to fuck that Jim is not going to draw it out that long, because that will ensure that Q gets (further) injured and Jim forgets that Q is not a masochist, he is not like Jim, and he doesn’t enjoy nor can compartmentalise pain.

But Q also knows Jim. He knows Jim better than anybody, and he knows that Jim simply will not care. This is a means to an end, and the more injured Q gets, the more secure their position is, and the less Mycroft will probe.
And so, Q tries to gently accustom himself to the very likely possibility that he’s going to be crippled for a while.

(but hey, upsides: he will do so much worse to Jim)

“Q, I’m sorry.”

Q blinks at Mycroft, bemused. “What for?”

Mycroft’s mouth crooks into a strange, halfway smile. “I never gave you enough credit.”

“What did I just say about running your mouth?” Q parries, irritated and just a tiny bit frightened. Mycroft doesn’t do this. “Mr Holmes…”

“There are no surveillance cameras or bugs in this room,” Mycroft says, with the confidence of somebody who can vivisect dust, “and the acoustics make me perfectly confident that nobody is able to listen. Q. I underestimated you from the moment of your birth.”

Q restrains the instinctive response. “Is this really the time?”

Mycroft crooks a sideways smile. “I fear the only time I will ever be able to fully capture your attention is when you have no alternative but to listen to me.”

“... so when I’m tied to a chair?” Q parries, voice liberally dripping with sarcasm. “Clearly you’re doing this whole caring-thing perfectly. This is why you’re not renowned for…”

“... shut up,” Mycroft snaps, with remarkable weight for somebody who must be slightly nauseous on their own blood by now, having swallowed a fair amount, “and listen to me. When you were born, you seemed to be ridiculously slow. Do bear in mind that, after Eurus, we were expecting…”

“... a psychopath?” Q completes, very coldly. “And then I turned out to simply be stupid.”

Mycroft, mercifully, doesn’t try to lie. “Yes. After a year or so it was patently obvious that you weren’t at Eurus’s level, nor mine, nor indeed Sherlock’s. You weren’t like us.”

Q’s smile is bitter and unpleasant. “As I said: I was the stupid one. You could barely stand Sherlock, and of course, now I know that you were simply terrified of Eurus. Even if I’d never… if I’d been everything you hoped, I still would never have been enough.”

Maybe it is the pain or the situation or sheer fucking exhaustion, but Q is more emotionally wrought than usual. It is something Q can see and hear and feel but cannot quite stop, because there is a distinct part of him that wants to know why, why and how and what it was that prevented Mycroft from even passingly caring.

“Yes,” Mycroft agrees, and Q gasps in a strange wonky breath and tries to make the world right itself. “Even if you had been a carbon copy of myself, it would have been met with suspicion.”

Q’s smile is rueful and angry, “and of course I turned out to have a personality all to myself.”

“You disappeared,” Mycroft parries, and there is a strange, hurt urgency that Q doesn’t want to understand, it cannot exist and he will not let it, but Mycroft is still talking, “and I spent years trying to find you, searching for you. You were too clever, so clever that it took me the accumulated expertise of the branch you now run to track you down. I, alone, was insufficient.”

Q refuses to look at him, instead staring with murderous intensity at his own thighs. “Is this your
“Penance?” he asks unpleasantly. “Finally acknowledging your faults?”

“I was not at fault for being suspicious of you,” Mycroft points out fairly, “but at the time: certainly. I ignored you. Forgot about you. I assumed you were normal - at least, more normal than myself or our siblings. Perhaps if I had devoted time and attention, you…”

“… would have been what you wanted?” Q completes, trying to keep the anger (and pain) out of his voice. “Wouldn’t have run? Wouldn’t have managed a forge a life all on my own where I didn’t need you? Sherlock needs you. Is that you wanted? Another sibling who would always be exactly what you wanted, even when we weren’t?”

An unpleasant, shaded smile. “Now, don’t be putting words in my mouth,” Mycroft hums. “I never said anything of the sort.”

Q laughs tonelessly, “and yet you did,” he corrects, and lets out a soft sigh. “Why did you… why did you pull me out? I always assumed it was because you couldn’t bear me being out of your control, but that doesn’t correlate with your behaviour. So why?”

Mycroft breathes out slowly, softly. “I was worried.”

A sharp snort. “No you fucking weren’t.”

“Q,” Mycroft emphasises, a ridiculous intensity burning in his eyes and these words, these things that were never supposed to be said. “I spent two years trying to find you, and I was truly frightened in that time. As were our parents. And, particularly, Sherlock. He relapsed…”

“… don’t you fucking dare blame Sherlock’s relapse on me,” Q hisses back, angrier than he knew he could be, the anger making him dizzy and furious and desperate and oh god he needs morphine because his leg and a couple of ribs and loose shoulder are thrumming every heartbeat with hot white pulses of pain. “Sherlock was not my fault, he was not.”

Mycroft shrugs as much as he is able. “By all means, continue to tell yourself that.”

Q tries to get sufficient leverage to do the whole dislocating-thumb-thing that he can usually do, and fails epically. He refuses point-blank to break anything (because that’ll fuck up his work schedule) but relocations only take a day or two for him due to hypermobility (which Q has had since a very young age).

Which means Mycroft is still talking.

“Sherlock blamed himself,” Mycroft continues, “for your disappearance. For your absence. Bear in mind that he had already obliterated one sibling from his mind; he took your absence as a personal slight against him and his ability to nurture his sibling.”

“He was in prison,” Q points out. “So that’s definitely not my fault, that’s his.”

“Sherlock, addled on drugs, realises that his youngest brother has run away and nobody - not me nor anyone else - could locate him. The scars Eurus left re-ignited; as I said, Sherlock blamed himself.”

Q can feel his throat close, wants more than he has ever wanted anything to just go, to be able to sprint out of that door (okay, sprint may be optimistic, but at least hobble with conviction) and get the fuck away from Mycroft and Sherlock and the past that is not his, was not his.

Because it does not matter.
Because even if it was his fault, even if he could have saved Sherlock, he would never take it back. Not for a single fucking heartbeat.

Because there is nothing on this earth or any other that could substitute for Jim.

“Stop it,” Q hisses instead, throat closed and furious and painful beyond expression, “Mycroft, stop it. Enough. You are doing your best and I understand that but I am not going to listen to this right now, I…”

Mycroft stops talking, and that is the only way Q knows that their captors are nearby, some swirl of atoms or an echoing breath, and Q can do nothing but love his mind, to topple over the edge and scream.

And this is not Q, this is not, this is not Q. Jim is the one who screams at the sky and sobs for attention and needs to be heard, needs to be seen, Q is his own, he is alone and strong and put-together, he is the one who patches Jim and Sherlock and all the rest together, Q is the one who stays strong.

In this moment, Q is everything and everyone he has never, ever been.

Q screams.

- 

Jim is having great fun. Genuinely. It’s been ages since he’s had this much sheer enjoyment out of one of his strange machinations, since being able to settle back and eat popcorn (literally) and watch a handful of people hurt people he likes and dislikes for the sake of generalised enjoyment and possible long-term gain.

And so:

“Hello darlin’.”

The man at the other end of the phone sucks in an audible breath, perfect, exactly how Jim imagined.

“Moriarty.”

Jim smiles, all teeth and true, orgasmic joy. “Hello, Sherlock,” he replies, soft and lulling and hypnotic, truly and gloriously compelling. “We have a problem.”

“You do, perhaps,” Sherlock replies archly, his voice as dispassionate as he can manage whilst still somehow remaining laced into Jim’s every syllable.

“Darlin’,” Jim hums, “my problems are your problems are my problems. Always have been, always will be. And our problem today, sweetheart, is that your brothers are in big trouble. Big, big trouble. And we, we, need to handle it before things get out of hand. Yes?”

Sherlock is silent for a very long moment, evidently weighing up exactly he wants to do with this change of circumstance. “And why would I work with you?” he asks coldly. “You’ve tried to kill me, more than once.”

“And succeeded, for a little while,” Jim agrees. “But you’ve missed me, you have so missed me. Haven’t you?”

“No,” Sherlock replies, far too quickly. “Why would I miss you, why would anybody with half an
ounce of intelligence miss somebody like you?”

It is odd, how it wounds Jim. It shouldn’t. Sherlock is lying, obviously, but their strange semi-dependent love affair works because Sherlock spends endless time and energy being a performing monkey for Jim’s benefit, because he loves Jim more than anybody and hates him in the same breath, because he feels, and when Sherlock Holmes feels with the intensity of a tornado Jim, just for a while, is totally wonderfully perfectly utterly alive.

“I’m a practised hyperintelligent psychopath with a lot of issues,” Jim replies brightly, no shadow of his voice reflecting the pain, “so I’d imagine you’ve missed me every day since we parted, my dear Sherlock Holmes.”

Jim’s voice caresses the name, cradles it, kisses it with the tenderness of a long-long lover.

“St Barts. As before.”

“Nope,” Jim replies, popping the ‘p’ obnoxiously. “Nice try, but no. We don’t have time. Mycroft’s teeth have already turned up in MI6, and Q’s only just got back from his last kidnap. He and John should chat, if they’re both going to make habits of being kidnapped…”

Sherlock’s voice is betraying his interest, and Jim listens, desperate to hear the hum of approval, the slightest suggestion of warmth that will tell Jim everything he needs to know: “Q has never had the slightest interest in meeting John.”

“Good for him,” Jim brushes off, as though he doesn’t know every echo of Q, and his voice starts to dance. “I just need him back, he and Mycroft. Time’s a-ticking, Sherlock. We have places to go.”

“My homeless network have sent out feelers, they should be imminent,” Sherlock tells him, trying to show off, “and Q taught me enough to allow me to trace his tracker, if he’s bothered to keep it attached.”

Jim makes a wet clicking sound with his tongue. “And the criminal underworld is reeling, I’ll let you know when I find some fun stuff to follow.”

“I’m sure you will,” Sherlock replies.

There. There. It is the smallest and yet the most vital sound. A warmth, a respect. It is somewhere, hidden in the bright languid sarcasm and the curve of a vowel, in the ever-so-slight attacking emphasis of ‘you’ and the confident bind of ‘I’ and ‘you’ and the promise of ‘will’ and Jim moans out aloud and hangs up before it becomes too much.

Jim will text Sherlock a location, when he can, when enough time has elapsed.

For now, he laughs at the sky and retrieves his popcorn, grinning broadly as he settles back against the comfortable solid mass of Sebby’s chest and watches, watches, as Q screams and Mycroft bleeds and the world is warm.

I’m sure you will.

Oh, sweet Sherlock. Sweet, innocent, ridiculous Sherlock.

He has no idea.
I'm sorry it's been so long, Jan/Feb have been very busy in a Real Life sense!

Thank you, thank you, to everybody who stays with me and still loves this strange fic. Your comments genuinely make my life, it brightens every day.

I hope you're all doing well, and my love to you all. Jen x
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

And we finally have Jim and Sherlock meeting up for the first time in years, Mycroft and Q negotiating their way through a kidnap (and fever), step by step everybody's interacting!! Hope you all enjoy, and thanks again for your patience. Jen.

Sherlock stares at Jim with an arched edge of expression, asking an infinitude of questions that Jim need not answer, the replies are patterned into his skin and bone, and Sherlock is more than capable of seeing it, every echo of it.

As such, they don’t bother to speak for a solid twenty minutes. In that time, their expressions shift incrementally, their eyes soften and turn flint-hard, the smallest crook of a smile in the corner of a bowed lip and the crease of wrinkles that are getting harder and harder to cover.

They are so much older these days. Age has crept up on them: two children with too much life and experience, and far, far too much pain.

“I don’t know why you don’t just shag him,” Jim says eventually, the first sentence he has uttered to Sherlock in person since they were face-to-face on a building, before a bloodpack and a fake death and a fall and the end of everything they had constructed between them.

Sherlock raises an eyebrow most of the way to his hairline. “Not my area.”

“Sex?” Jim clarifies, and whistles through his teeth. “Pity, honey, you have no idea what you’re missing. A virgin to the last.”

“No quite.”

“Rape doesn’t count,” Jim parries, and is kind enough to not notice the most minute of flinches. “It’s not a problem, is it? Asexuality suits you. You and your work.”

The word is both congratulatory and derisive in the same breath: Sherlock’s work is so small, so lacking in scope, not when Sherlock could be famous and infamous and unforgettable. He is known, but hardly enough, not for somebody like him.

“I never saw the point,” Sherlock tells him, voice controlled but not quite managing unaffected. “Sex seemed something of a distraction.”

Jim grins, “I think you’ve just not had the right kind of sex,” he suggests mockingly. “Maybe we can convert you. Show you the temptations of carnal lust…”

“It’s not a case of repression,” Sherlock tells him, with a little too much edge, too close to the bone. “I simply do not find sex of interest. Too… messy. I can give myself the biological benefits of orgasm on my own terms, I…”

“... oh Sherlock, darlin’, just call it as it is,” Jim crows, “masturbation. It’s normal. Human. Like you. Masturbating is normal, human, and wonderful, isn’t it? Such fun…”
it should be mentioned here that they are in a coffee shop with a good number of yummy mummies, gossiping teenagers, squalling infants, somebody who looks like an accountant or something equally dire, a couple sharing their drinks and a panini, and Jim is all but shouting the word, revelling in it and utterly unconcerned for their scandalised glances and small *umphs* of distaste).

“... if you’re done?” Sherlock asked drily, and Jim giggles. “I simply do not see the point of sex, is all I was trying to say.”

The exact shade of Jim’s smile should probably be illegal. “You sure?”

And, of course, he scoots his chair around, closer.

“No,” Sherlock tells him flatly. “Whatever you’re...”

Jim kisses him.

Sherlock is all but paralysed, his body reflexive and confused and disgusted and intrigued in equal measure.

They stay bound together, bodies, moulding and merging, Sherlock’s inexperience and Jim’s excitement and the impossibility of something they had both long since thought impossible.

(but then, Jim specialises in the impossible, so perhaps this was inevitable)

Those around them gasp and clear their throats and mutter and cough louder and look utterly horrified and disgusted and embarrassed in ways they will never verbalise because they’re British and the worst condemnation they can give is an aggrieved *tsk*.

Sherlock is, naturally, the one to break away.

“What was that supposed to prove?” he asks levelly. “That you have a sexual interest in me?”

Jim crooks a perfect smile. “No,” he murmurs. “No, Sherlock. That you have a sexual interest in me.”

Sherlock abruptly shunts his chair back, expression livid and alive in a way Jim hasn’t seen in a long time, and his voice is closed: “You’re wrong.”

“Does it matter?” Jim parries, with an all-encompassing shrug, as though he isn’t trying to turn Sherlock’s world inside out. “You need me, Sherlock.”

An instinctive head shake, but not as categorical as he probably wanted. “Of all people,” he says dangerously, “you’re the last I need.”

“Which brings me back,” Jim croons, “to why you haven’t shagged him yet. John Watson. John Hamish Watson. Widower and soldier. Exactly the type you need, don’t you see? We all need our tin soldiers.”

Sherlock plays with an arrogant smile. “You may have a guard dog, but I don’t need one.”

“John follows you around with a gun wherever you go, ready for action,” Jim points out fairly. “No difference between me and Sebby, only you don’t admit how much he gives you. Seems a little unfair.”

“I’m not going to sleep with him, so stop insinuating it,” Sherlock snaps, with too much friction to be ignored. “I trust John. He’s my... friend.”
Jim raises an eyebrow. “The audible ellipsis says otherwise.”

“And our relationship says fact rather than speculation,” Sherlock parries, wounded and irritated and on the defensive, so much so that needling him is embarrassingly easy. “John…”

“You love him,” Jim cuts in, without any respect for Sherlock’s attempts to explain. “You know, Sherlock, that’s the most dangerous thing in the world? Loving?”

Sherlock snorts, “as though you’d know.”

Inch by inch, Sherlock is getting more unnerved. Jim’s familiarity, the constant repetition of his name, the physical closeness, it is all part of a complex of behaviours that Sherlock just does not want to be wrapped up in.

And so, Sherlock sits up as straight as he can and faces Jim Moriarty in the eye.

“You’ve missed me,” Jim murmurs, with a softness, a vulnerability that Q finds irksome in its contrivance. “This is us, Sherlock. My, my Sherlock Holmes, you…”

“…we’ve strayed from the subject at hand,” Sherlock points out, in a visible attempt to wrest back control of the situation. “We need to retrieve Mycroft and Q. You know Q?”

The dangerous part; Jim plays it perfectly: “Only as far as work allows. Pretty little boy, isn’t he? Tempting, so tempting…”

Sex remains the easiest way to spook Sherlock: the way Jim’s tongue rolls over Q’s name, his description, is uncomfortable in ways Sherlock is unequipped to handle.

“He’s hardly little,” he therefore says, unconvincingly, “but I can see where you make the mistake, given the geriatric predecessors in Q-branch…”

“No no,” Jim corrects. “Just pretty.”

Somewhere, Jim knows, Q is being hurt. Despite the injuries inking his body, they will add to them, colour him better than any book or palette could hope for, follow the violet blackness of bruises through the uneasy red to the dark blood smears, to the greeny-grey-yellow of healing, seeping into white bandages and staining the skin, so many stains.

Jim feels a touch unwell, and so stops talking.

Sherlock watches like Jim is unrecognisable; good or bad, the man is new.

“We need to get to Mycroft and Q,” Sherlock says instead, again, with a tad more conviction. “Q’s injured already…”

A quick nod from Jim, a phone call, mobile cradled against his ear. “You have information?” he asks casually, singsong and alarming. “Oh good, good girl. Now, run along and find me a postcode, before I have to kill your dear dying daddy…”

Instantly, the tension in Sherlock’s body cranks up a painful notch, the wonderful angelic part of the man who isn’t like the others but is, the one who can’t watch the innocent die yet understand that every war has sacrifices.

“Why threaten?” he asks instead, discomfited. “She would have done what you asked regardless.”

Jim looks up, glances, eyes vacant. “I can’t trust people like her,” he says instead, with a curious
weight, a heaviness Sherlock doesn’t understand because Jim doesn’t regret, he does what must be done, no more nor less (but then, maybe a little, but nobody is counting).

Sherlock’s phone beeps. He looks at it.

A moment of silence.

“The Homeless network think they’ve found him,” Sherlock says aloud, after a moment. “Or at least, the group involved.”

Jim inclines his head with a modicum of respect. “So where are we storming in?” he asks playfully, “or have we not reached that far yet?”

“You think you can get there first?” Sherlock returns, cold and contemptuous and disbelieving. “Even you aren’t that influential.”

It takes everything in Jim to not cackle with laughter. Sherlock is so slow in the single, most important respect, the one thing Jim has always known: genius is knowing when you are outclassed. Intelligence is knowing you are clever, cleverer than those around you; genius is the understanding of one’s own shortcomings.

Example: Jim knows that jealousy is his greatest vice, along with boredom. Jim knows that there are plenty of people - Mycroft, Eurus, the dead cabbie from years ago now, strange odd creatures he has met en route - that massively outstrip him insofar as intellect.

Sherlock has yet to realise that Jim is not merely an equal, but something slightly elevated.

The reason, of course, is Q. Because Sherlock is alone bar his army doctor, but Jim has - and has always had - Q.

Q, who is not even passingly as clever as Sherlock, Mycroft, Eurus, Jim. Q, who is something separate, elevated from the common rabble but nowhere near at the level of the squabbling genii who comprise the upper echelons. Q, who doesn’t care about such things, but is the absolute untouchable master at his part of the world, of his interests.

Anyway; Jim’s mind meanders back to the subject at hand, and to Sherlock. “You just leave these things to me,” he suggests softly, “and we’ll take it from there. My contact should have an address imminently. Let’s see who gets there first. Who wins.”

“How long have you known Q?” Sherlock asks directly.

This is Jim’s moment. He could shatter a family in the space of a few words, here and now, watch the Holmes siblings crack down an infinitude of fault lines, and it would be all him. Jim could finally demonstrate the breadth of his control, of his knowledge.

And so, he takes a breath.

The world teeters on the knife edge Jim has crooned into existence, and it is so close he can breathe it, taste it.

“I don’t know him.”

Jim cannot believe the words spilling out, the truth of the matter: no, he does not know Q, he does not understand, Q is something different, perfect in his imperfections, and Jim refuses to let Sherlock anywhere near the truth of Q.
Sherlock believes him. There is enough truth in his voice to let it carry.

“We’d better get going, though,” Jim points out, with enough artificial brightness to make it work. “Before they get too badly hurt…”

“Yes,” Sherlock agrees, voice flinty, “we had.”

Jim’s smile outshines the sun.

-

Q is having a good approximation of a breakdown, but is still miles away from Jim; Q screamed a bit, but has mostly calmed down, eyes rolling back in his head as his brain wheels around in frenetic circles and he tries to remember who he is.

“I…”

Mycroft’s voice, soft and simple. “Q, breathe. Q. What is your name?”

A sharp gasp of breath. “Q.”

“And mine?”

Q looks up, eyes frantic and wild. “My. My?”

“Yes,” Mycroft replies, with laudable composure, seeing his brother aged two, three, four, five. Before Mycroft chose to walk away to university and to work, to a job, to government and to a world he barely knew and now exists on the pulse of, every part of him thrumming to the beat of those who drank and smoked and socialised their way through university into something impossible. “I’m here. Q…”

“Stop calling me that.”

“What would you like me to call you?” Mycroft fires back.

Q’s eyes are sharp and intense and everything, everything. “My name, Mycroft. My actual fucking name.”

“Q…”

“No.”

And there it is. There.

Mycroft says a word Q remembers from the edge of a nightmare.

His name.

And suddenly, in an instant, there is true peace. Mind, body and soul suddenly still and stall and stop, and Q can see clearly for the first time in longer than he can remember, before the cloudy milieu of Jim and MI6 and home and Jim and Jim and Q-branch, his minions and his department and his world, his whole entire world, everything he has made for himself and James, his James Bond.

Not Jim, but James.

James.
The forgotten factor in all that has been going on. Q forgets him far too easily. Everybody, absolutely everybody forgets and forgets and forgets and it isn’t fair, James deserves so much better.

“James,” Q murmurs aloud.

Mycroft is watching him, unusually gentle. “James is not…”

“I need him,” Q whimpers, Bond’s bright blue eyes filling his thoughts and mind and soul and body because yes, yes, James will save him. James will always, always rescue him, even at the end of the world itself. “James?”

“No, still Mycroft.”

Q snorts, “oh fuck off, you stupid moron. I’m aware Bond isn’t here.”

“Yes?”

If all else fails - if Q lives until the end of time itself, if he never works another day, if the world collapses at his feet - he will never lose the certainty that Bond will be there, James Bond will rescue him without a word of protest nor warning, Bond will be there and love him in the steady, ridiculous, perfect way he has.

And my god, the man knows how to make an entrance.

Q betrays himself utterly.

“Bond?”

And there are eternities in that word, that single word. “Q?”

Bond is there faster than Q can keep track of, his mind whimpering on the edges of sanity. “How are you here?” he asks, Bond’s smile bright and perfect, teeth glittering white and eyes darting glinting focusing. “Bond…”

“Q, careful,” Mycroft tells him, voice too distant for Q to understand. “Q…”

“No.”

“He isn’t who you think he is.”

Q’s eyes snap to Mycroft, who looks a very long way away suddenly, and oddly young, without the trenches of scars and wrinkles he is accustomed to. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t listen to him,” the voice wearing Bond’s face coos. “Q…”

A sudden jolt, a sudden sense that his throat is closing and chaos is erupting. “Bond, what is my name?”

“Q.”

“My name.”

“Q.”

“My name.”
The creature wearing Bond’s eyes and his smile grimaces into something unpleasant and unrecognisable. “I don’t know. You’ve never told me. Mycroft?”

“Not a hope,” Mycroft replies, somewhat flatly. “I will not support your admittedly avant-garde attempt to force Q into complicity. By all means take out such aggressions on myself and/or Q, but to be honest, it would save time if you realised that Q knows nothing and I refuse to tell.”

It is odd and endearing to realise that Mycroft will quite happily sell himself down the river to keep Q safe.

Q has barely noticed. Q is aware that he is almost close to the end of his sanity; pain and exhaustion and fever will do that, and even Q - even somebody who likes to think themselves impervious to pain, to coercion - even Q is vulnerable.

Everybody is. Everybody, absolutely everybody, has their breaking points. From Q to Mycroft to Sherlock to Jim, everybody, absolutely everybody. It is absurd to think otherwise. Sometimes those breaking points are harder to reach, harder to find, but it takes a master to find a person and know precisely, perfectly, how to apply the smallest amount of pressure for the largest degree of pain.

Physical pain is the simplest. Emotional pain is often preferable, but harder and more expensive to organise. Combining the two is by far, by far the most visceral and effective way to extort information.

Disorientation is very much an active part of physical torture. Q is tired, hurt, hungry. Q is trapped with somebody he hates in a situation fraught with danger, aware that his life is hanging by a thread and his relationships are lethal and he wants, he prays, to go home somewhere and be held, loved, cared for.

(good god, age is coming to them all, to us all, and somehow Q has found himself in the heart of it)

“You only want money.”

A small moment of a sad, strange smile. “What money? I want you, Q, it’s just me, just your James.”

Q’s eyebrows crinkle in a moment of soft confusion. “We’re at work. You’re not James at work. You’re not… you’re not,” Q continues, as comprehension dawns, and he feels anger flood him, hotter than the fever that is sparking delirium. His voice turns cold, icy cold. “Well done. Truly, well done. You’ve come closer than most, than any. Tell me my name.”

“You don’t have a name.”

A soft, trickling laugh. “Oh sweetheart,” Q muses, and blinks, trying to dislodge the film that has formed over his eyes, the grease of drugs and exhaustion and pain, and can’t. It has become too much, Q knows his senses are shutting down, his body and brain are compromised.

And not being a super-genius and all the rest, he didn’t even notice. Had it not been for Mycroft, Q would have collapsed like a slinky, breathing his stories to these bastards who were primed to listen.

(Q will hurt them more than they can begin to envisage: nobody does this to him, nobody, nobody does this, seeps in, stains. Corrupts.)

Instead, Q mumbles into space: “Where the fuck is Jim?” in a voice like grated glass, and Mycroft’s expression is everywhere at once, his invasive gaze, the impossible degree of knowledge and understanding that Mycroft always fucking has, and Q has no clue what to do next, he just needs to live, he needs to survive, he needs Jim.
James.

Jim.

Fuck it, either will do at this point.

The expression from his interrogator is livid. “You will regret this, Mr Holmes.”

“Will I?” Q snorts, without realising: they do not know he is a Holmes.

Well, they didn’t know. They sure as hell do now. Which means that they will not leave this building alive. And anybody - everybody - who they attempt to contact will also have to die. Bit of an organisational nightmare but that is still entirely doable, Q may be past the point of usefulness but if Mycroft and Jim join forces they should be able to destroy even the remnants of this organisation.

Their fate is sealed.

Q decides that he does not care a whit. They have manipulated him to the edge of his knowledge, his understanding, and Q will let them do whatever they must to make this all stop.

Stop.

Enough.

“Q?”

“Take it away,” Q trills into the air, an invitation that will not be ignored nor denied.

Jim and Sherlock take their cues, and the proverbial locusts descend.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

In which everybody realises they are no longer children, and that all actions - eventually - have consequences.

Thank you guys; this story is taking on another twist, and I can’t wait... Jen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sherlock and Jim do make an amusing pair. If they could agree on a single given topic for more than five minutes at a time, they would be spectacularly effective and could probably unlace the world in a day or two; as it is, they spend half their time bickering and the rest competing.

Every minute counts. More so than they realise; both, in their arrogance, are more concerned about the style than the substance and - in doing so - they waste minute after minute.

Oh, and Sherlock does not deal well with stress. Ever. Especially when emotionally compromised and frightened and lividly, boilingly, absurdly pissed off at needing to work with his previous arch-nemesis to save his siblings, one of whom he really doesn’t like. At all.

It takes a day or so, and by then, both are perfectly prepared.

Indeed, Jim and Sherlock storm the warehouse containing Q and Mycroft, along with a handful of backup agents, mostly comprised of Bond, Moran, John Watson, and several trusted others who are not trigger happy and are comfortably disposable; when Jim and/or Q and/or Mycroft (maybe) gets hold of a handgun they will simply line up everybody and shoot them all.

It means that a good dozen or so will need to die, which is a frankly ridiculous level of necessary clean-up, but it doesn’t matter: clean-ups are generally reasonably simple matters, in the end, certainly compared to the general carnage that precedes them.

“Q?”

Q - who has a man crouched in front of him, and is patently delirious - grins madly. “Take it away!” he calls aloud, hazy and slurred.

And so they do.

“Ladies and gentlemen, hands behind your heads!” Jim crows, firing a warning shot at one of the captor’s feet; concrete dust puffs up, the man scuttles back and falls into one of Jim’s men, who spins him around to against the wall (to ensure the bullet doesn’t pass through the body and injure anybody unintentionally) and shoots him.

Rinse and repeat; the various captors are executed, and - as per Jim’s orders - against a single wall, rather than in multiple places. Sherlock knew it was going to happen, but objects nonetheless.

Indeed, Sherlock has the precaution of a gun and yet insistently doesn’t use it. “Moriarty, allow them
to live,” he tries to insist, as Moran dispatches another. “They can be reasoned with, they…”

Moran is very busily getting on with it regardless. “I’m afraid that isn’t possible,” he tells Sherlock, with an edge of enthusiasm that so rarely has oxygen. “Not the way we deal with things.”

“We?” Sherlock echoes, looking somewhat aghast. “What do you mean, we? We’re not a we.”

“We,” Jim reminds Sherlock brightly, gesturing at Moran. “Our kind of ‘we’. You’ve chucked your lot in with us now…”

“... and you’re supposed to have ‘chucked your lot in’ with MI6,” Sherlock reminds them. “Do you think they’d approve?”

Jim snorts, “I certainly don’t think they’d mind at this point,” he shrugs, teeth bright and shiny. “Mycroft?”

Mycroft considers objecting, but then he looks at Q, and decides that mercy is too kind for creatures of this ilk. “You have my personal assurance that this will be entirely overlooked by the security services of this, and any other country that may be affected,” he tells him, with an amusing lisp and a lot of wincing.

Bond rounds up the last captors for Moran to execute, and goes to Q, who is running a very nasty fever and potential sepsis.

John does a quick once-over on both Q and Mycroft, and the decision is patently obvious; Mycroft’s jaw is swollen and he’s a little pale, but Q is sweating out his own imminent demise opposite.

Jim goes to Mycroft, smiles at him in a way that is frankly hypnotic.

Behind them, Moran orders their spare staff - the allies with nice big guns, all of them, Moriarty Inc employees who will not be missed but know too much, now - to line up in a perfectly straight line and - of course - starts to pop off neat head shots to each, one by one.

Bang.

John, however, is less happy. “They’re our allies, they, what the hell are you doing?!?”

“They know too much,” Moran says coldly, calmly, and doesn’t care in the slightest, just carries on with the clean-up; it is not only John who is objecting of course, the soon-to-be murdered clean-up team who are more than a little miffed at their imminent demise.

(bang)

John decides, on balance, not to query Moran; the pair haven’t met in person since Moran abducted him, took him to a swimming pool, festooned him with explosives, and went next door to loudly shag Jim.

Unsurprisingly, not one of John’s favourite memories.

And anyway, Q is making strange noises, is giggling strangely through his nose, and rather desperately needs medical attention.

(bang)

“Mycroft, want to help Sebby with the shooting?” Jim croons, as he deftly picks the man’s handcuffs and slides his wrists free, a fluttering finger resting on his pulse, Jim’s fingers proceeding to dance to
his throat whilst the other extends the heel of a handgun in Mycroft’s direction, his smile liquid mercury. “Oh, oh, it’s been too long, far too long.” (bang) “Mycroft, My My My Mycroft. My, oh my.”

It is a visible challenge, but Mycroft straightens up and raises an eyebrow, trying to remedy the cut-off circulation in his fingers. “Not my area,” he tells Jim firmly. “Murder is best left to the experts.”

“Tell that to Lady Smallwood,” Jim snorts, and ducks out of the way as Mycroft - in a movement that would have been optimistic in the best of health, but after a kidnap, exhausted and a bit battered around the edges, was absolutely ludicrous - tries to punch him. “Sorry big brother, sorry…”

(bang)

Mycroft straightens slightly, looking around the room, uncomfortably aware of having soiled himself several hours previously - after all, kidnappers are not there to optimise dignity and self-worth - and thus is extremely dishevelled, a state he does not enjoy when in front of Jim, his brothers, and their entourage(s).

“John?” Mycroft asks instead, distracting himself. “Q has been variably delirious, couldn’t recognise faces, easily suggestible. I am very afraid of sepsis, which is looking increasingly likely…”

(bang)

Sherlock, meanwhile, is in front of Q, his eyes sharp and soft and desperate, literally on his knees, a sacrifice at his alter. “Q?”

Q can barely recall his own name.

And yet, as Sherlock melts in front of him, Q can see the obvious: Sherlock’s eyes are swimming, pupils blown in a way Q recognises, and Q instantly goes very, very still.

John briefly panics, wondering if Q has outright died on him; yet, no. No. He is breathing, but the rest has stopped, and there is a thin ribbon of blood-streaked bile in the corner of his mouth.


(bang)

“I’m not high.”

A look, a single look, is more than enough to kneecap Sherlock utterly because Q knows, he knows every shadow of Sherlock, he has loved and cared and wanted even when Mycroft - for god’s sake, Mycroft, Mycroft who knows everything, every echo - even when Mycroft didn’t immediately notice.

Even when Mycroft didn’t immediately notice.

“You…”


“Nobody deceives like an addict,” Q whispers, a mantra that has followed the Holmes brothers through so many years, and he is sweating bullets and unable to focus his own eyes and his speech is almost unrecognisably slurred. “Sherlock…”

“Q, calm down,” John tries to tell him, as medical personnel (organised by Jim) flood the room, but are very possibly too late for Q. “I need you to concentrate on breathing…”
Q has absolutely no interest in listening; he cannot really hear, sounds around him are buzzing, his own voice is reverberating into strange screeching sounds that he cannot distinguish, and to be honest, most people in the room are finding it very hard to understand Q’s garbling:

“Sherlock, you didn’t have to. You could have found me on your own, it probably would have helped, you know. It would have helped for you to actually be sober. You think it makes you faster, it doesn’t. I know you, I know addicts, I know. I know. And it does not, not for a microsecond, make you cleverer.”

Sherlock is a strange shade of greeny-white. “It’s not about that.”

Q cackles at the sky, “of course it fucking is,” he sob/screams. “Your cleverness, your desperate fucking need to be the cleverest. We keep you alive because you’re the one in all of our stories, we’re just peripheral characters in your narrative - but Sherlock, it is always about you. And it’s not fair, it’s not right.”

For the very first time in Sherlock’s life, he begins to comprehend, to understand what has happened and what will happen, how hard they will all fight to look after him. “Q, I…”

“No,” Q snarls. “You are not sorry. You will not apologise. You…”

And with that, Q’s consciousness slides into something entirely beyond conversation.

John is barking instructions at anybody who’ll listen. Mostly Jim, as it happens, who does what he’s told with surprising ease. Moran continues to polish off shooting the captors (bang) and Mycroft shrugs himself free of pain and exhaustion and goes to Sherlock.

“You’re an addict,” Mycroft adds, so cold and so unpleasantly, mopping the blood and spit from the corner of his mouth as delicately as he is able. “Sherlock, this isn’t fair. This is not fair. Not to Q, not to Doctor Watson.” (bang) “You are trying to maintain a lie, and it is not sufficient. If Q can see that there is something evidently wrong with you, can you imagine what I can see? The list, Sherlock. Now.”

Sherlock shoots a look at him of sheer, unadulterated fury. “There is no list.”

Despite missing teeth, despite injury, despite his youngest sibling dying feet away from him, Mycroft manages to dominate with a hand at Sherlock’s throat and untapped fury in his gaze. “Now. You will tell me now.”

“I told you,” Sherlock rasps, as best he can. “I don’t have…”

Mycroft tightens his grip, and Sherlock’s voice grates, his breath rasping desperately; Mycroft is surprisingly strong, just enough to overwhelm Sherlock, who didn’t see it coming. “Now.”

Q’s head is lolling nervelessly, and he doesn’t respond much as the medical team work around him.

From within his voluminous coat, Sherlock produces a scrap of paper, waves it above his head vaguely.

(bang)

“Sherlock….”

Promptly thereafter, Q goes fully into septic shock.
Sherlock is intelligent enough to not push the boundaries. “Q, listen to me…”

“Moriarty,” Sherlock is saying, with Q almost unable to hear him, “James Moriarty. Jim Moriarty.”

“Repeat it all you like, my darlin’,” Jim croons, “but it won’t change a thing, not a single little thing. I’ve got you, I’m here, I am here, I am all yours and will always be yours, I’m here, here…”

Sherlock - quite rightly, it must be said - punches Jim in the face.

“I’m going to die with you,” Q whispers, inaudible to everybody, and only Jim can hear the edges of it; his gaze flickers over briefly, but delirium has set in and Q can feel his heart beating far too loudly.

Mycroft is holding Sherlock’s list like a talisman, and Q knows, he is certain that Sherlock will be safe from hereon in, they have reached that point, somebody else (Mycroft again, it is always Mycroft and Q is so sorry but it is always Mycroft, always, always Mycroft, nobody else is enough) will look after Sherlock and they will all live, all survive.

This time.

“You will not die,” Mycroft tells both of them, his brothers dying under his fingers, all of his worst nightmares realised. “Neither of you. Listen.”

And of course: Q and Sherlock are conducting a strange half-inaudible conversation past the edges of normal consciousness. “Greyhounds in the slips…”

“We are not going back to that shit,” John says sharply. “Sherlock…”

“… in the slips,” Sherlock attempts to say again, his voice slurring. “Don’t worry, John, not a word, I just… knew.”

“Even I knew,” Q supplements, with a vague half-shrug., “even I knew, understood from the off,” and oh, oh didn’t he understand, not even a fraction of understanding that death is haunting the edge of a dream. “Cry God for Harry, England…”

“… and Saint George,” Mycroft whispers passingly; or at least, Q thinks he does.

Nothing is making sense any more.

In perfect unison, Sherlock and Q pass out.

- Bond is mostly asleep at Q’s bedside when the man finally wakes up for longer than a strangled handful of seconds. It is nighttime, but that strange suspended nighttime that one only finds in hospitals: monitors bleep, green and yellow and white, occasional pulses of red, bags of fluid dangling and distorting the light, myopia blurring it all into a strange mosaic.

There is no need to look; Q knows Bond will be there.

“Bond?” Q’s voice asks therefore, crackling oddly, very distant and almost inaudible.

In the way only a secret agent can, Bond wakes up and is instantly moving, hands darted for the nurse call button and a glass of water, turning the lights up fractionally. “Q. You’re awake.”

“Yep,” Q returns, dry and tasting a gooey, foetid gunge clinging to his tongue. “Fuck. How long?”
Bond puts the straw to Q’s lips, and he takes a minuscule sip. “Two weeks,” Bond replies, correctly guessing the full question. “You’ve woken up for a few minutes here and there though. Pain?”

Q manages a soft, strange laugh. “Ridiculous. Like… wow. Ow. Really, ow.”

The door opens, and a nurse comes in quietly. “Oh!” she says, clearly startled at Q being conscious. “You… let me get the doctor, he’ll be able to have a better look at you.”

Q nods dreamily, examining his cannula with distanced curiosity. “Wow,” he murmurs once again, dimly aware that he cannot feel his legs and his ribs hurt and his vision is pretty dismal. “My head’s spinning.”

“You do look, sound and smell like shit,” Bond agrees, sounding disgustingly cheerful. “For what it’s worth, you almost look healthier than Sherlock, who is detoxing in the highest-security facility known to man.”

Q’s eyebrows contract vaguely. “He’s with Mycroft, then?”

Bond nods, “Yes. Mycroft’s working from home and Sherlock is being forcibly detoxed with John assisting. They’re all living together, well - Sherlock is trapped in precisely one double-locked room. Rosie was being looked after by Mrs Hudson, but now Mycroft’s all but installed a nursery in the Holmes manor so overall? Absolute carnage.”

A small giggle bubbles onto Q’s lips.

The door opens. “And he’s awake!” Jim crows, far too loud and far, far too obnoxious. “Hello Q.”

“I hate you,” Q parries immediately, and - in unison - Bond asks “… how did you get here so fast?”

Jim shrugs brightly, bounding to Q’s side and planting a kiss on his forehead. “I hooked up the nurse call button to my phone.”

“Yes, but how are you here?” Bond repeats, still confused (bless him) and with a strange expression, the blue in his eyes glinting sharply. “As in, the hospital.”

Q snorts, and winces as the pain lances through his chest and oh lord, the longer he’s conscious the more he realises how absurdly painful literally every atom of his body is. “Sentimental muppet,” he tells Jim, and it sounds almost fond. “You should go home, Seb will be…”

“… guarding you anyway,” Jim completes. “You think I’m letting you anywhere without a full complement of guards? It would seem you’re a trouble magnet, and the next time almost certainly will kill you outright so between me, Sebby, and our Mr Bond perhaps we can avoid anything else.”

A dizzy smile from Q. “Sentiment,” he repeats, trying to sound judgemental and failing entirely, can hear his solid pulse on the beeping monitors and cannot quite believe he’s alive. “Jim Moriarty. Sentimental.”

“Absolutely,” Jim agrees, strokes fingers across Q’s cheek in a way that seems strangely motherly, and Q wonders if he’s dreaming, wonders what strange parallel universe he has sunk into. “Sentimental.”

“Absolutely,” Jim agrees, strokes fingers across Q’s cheek in a way that seems strangely motherly, and Q wonders if he’s dreaming, wonders what strange parallel universe he has sunk into. “Sentimental.”

Q’s eyes narrow. “Okay, now, what’s happened. Why are you all being weird?”

Jim and Bond exchange a look. “Can we put this off until you’ve been proven conscious for more than a handful of minutes?” Jim tries, with a whining note (far more Jim, the petulance) and Q
understands.

(or thinks he understands)

“You’re expecting me to yell at you for getting me into that situation?” Q suggests, and good lord, he can already feel exhaustion tugging him lower, tugging him under. “Because yelling is the least I’m gonna do to you, I’m…”

… and with that, Q’s voice dies out, and he falls unconscious again.

Which leaves Jim and Bond looking at each other Q’s slack body, chest rising and falling rhythmically, monitors beeping that somehow - somehow - he is still alive.

Q very nearly died. Indeed, briefly, he did. Septic shock. It will take weeks, months, for him to come even close to full recovery, and that doesn’t even take in the Serious Problem that Q will need to be informed of.

“He’s going to kill you,” Bond tells Jim, and there is not even a suggestion of friendliness; Bond is still considering murdering him, but if he does, it will mean Q won’t have the pleasure. “Get the hell out of here.”

There have only been a handful of occasions, in Jim’s life, when he has really felt the repercussions of his actions. Where he has come even close to regret.

And on most of those occasions, Q was involved. For example: when they were children, when Jim pushed Q too far, when Jim came exquisitely close to death while Q cried without expression and Jim really, truly, honestly realised what he had done.

This is the worst so far. It is the worst it will ever be. Jim has made a mistake, a colossal one, and this is not one of those situations that they can whistle through, skating past too severe injury: the pair have broken bones, cut skin, bruised to hell and back, whacks to the head, drugs, handcuffs (recreational and non) and all the rest, good god. Jim has faked his own death so many times it has become passé.

They pale in comparison to this.

Jim is a strange white shade, too still, and the manic flare of his smile is dimmed entirely, as it has been for the last fortnight, while Q lay dying. “I couldn’t have predicted this,” he whispers, the same words he has tried to say again and again, to himself and to Bond, the only ones who know this is his fault. “I could never have…”

Bond lets out a sharp snort of contempt. “I’ve known you, and the Holmes siblings, long enough to know what you are capable of. You could have seen this coming. Fuck, I could see this coming, which is why you didn’t fucking tell me. You’re not children any more, you can’t bounce back like you used to. You have to behave like a fucking adult.”

“Ooh, language, tsk,” Jim parries, without thinking; Bond darts a hand across the bed, over Q’s unconscious body, and grabs him by the front of his shirt, wrenching him forward, Jim almost toppling over. “Bond…”

“Get out,” Bond tells him, dangerously level. “If I see you, I will hurt you. When Q wakes up, when I tell him, you will be nowhere near. He may like you now, and I don’t get you two, never have - but believe me. He’ll never forgive, and he sure as hell won’t forget.”

Bond drops him.
Jim - for one of barely a handful of instances in his life - does exactly what he is told.

He leaves.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, I've left more questions unanswered but that's me guys, I'm horrible :P don't worry. You'll find out.

I cannot thank you enough for every comment, every kudos, every subscription, every bookmark. I love writing and sharing this story, and it makes it all worthwhile when I see these things pop up <3 so thank you guys, as ever. Jen.
Hey guys. I'm treating the subject matter with as much respect as possible, as ever, but you all know there's something coming so... well. Here it is :P Jen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Forgive me father, for I have sinned.”

It has been years since Jim came within spitting distance of a church, and quite considerably longer than that since he entered one; whilst religion has hardly been a mainstay of his life to date, being brought up in fear leaves some ghosts, and not any that Jim intends to cross.

Also, he’s Irish. Jim grew up leaving stones in fields well enough alone, healthily aware of fairy rings, and has no intention of ever touching a hawthorn tree for the rest of his life.

“It has been… a while since my last confession.”

“A while, my child?”

Jim is quiet a moment; he has half-forgotten the routine, the words coming from some strange muscle memory he thought had long since died. “Yes,” he echoes, soft, “a while.”

The priest is kindly, one of those types who thinks he’s seen it all. “And what brings you here today?”

“I sinned, what do you think?” Jim snipes back sarcastically, before consciously trying to relax, breathing out slowly; sarcasm is not helpful, he does not need to be unpleasant. “Sorry. I… have turned away from the church. I’m seeing whether I can… I got something wrong. Hurt somebody.”

“Tell me,” the priest coaxes, and Jim feels himself being lulled by the darkness of the confessional, the heavy curtains that taste of dust, the gritted normality and tradition, candles flickering outside and the priest’s aftershave and the sunk-in perfume of however-many previous penitent sinners. “My son, remember that God will always…”


The sodding priest is so calm. “To err is human.”

Jim almost spits out ‘good thing I’m not human then’ but restrains himself. “Yes,” he says instead. “And to forgive, divine. So let’s hope He can forgive me because God knows the person I’ve hurt is…”

“... remember, the Lord’s name should not be taken in vain.”

“If you’re goin’ to get upset about that, then this whole confession-thing is gonna go very slowly,” Jim snorts, a laugh on his lips, and his accent is sliding back in; he remembers being a child, stealing sweeties and confessing in a childish lisp, correctly identifying that the priest was fiddling some of the choir boys, and it’s oddly comforting. “Now, d’you want to hear my confession or not?”
The priest shifts, tangibly a little uncertain. “Of course, my son,” he says leisurely, although an edge of encroaching tension can be heard. “Allow God back into your life, and He will heal and protect you. Tell me all you can. You can always return, you will always be welcome…”

“... yes, I get it,” Jim cuts in, extremely uninterested in the God-bit; indeed, this is beginning to feel like a mistake, one that may end in the most absurdly clichéd thing in the world, a dead priest in his own confessional, and Jim promised that he would never be (knowingly) that stereotypical. “I hurt a friend.”

Jim falls silent again, for a long moment.

The priest follows the silence out, more comfortable with it than Jim could hope to be; so many years and he still, still cannot handle silences, it is almost laughable.

Eventually, the priest ventures: “How so?”

Jim breathes in, lets out a slow breath, opens his eyes to stare up at the wood panelled ceiling, eyes tracing the woodgrain patterning, committing it to memory. “I put him in a dangerous situation, one he’s used to but… should have warned him, should have… it had consequences.”

“Can you explain a little more?”

“Not really,” Jim replies, rather blithely. “Too intimate. But I can’t undo this. Now, I should also mention that I’ve broken… literally every single commandment,” he continues, a smile creeping into his voice, some type of animation sneaking back in, “erm. Except maybe adultery by virtue of not being married, but I’ve fornicated. Male, female, somewhere in between, bit of both... lots of fornication. And masturbation.”

Now, this is becoming fun; Jim segues away from the things he doesn’t wish to say, and wheels confidently into new territory whilst terrorising a priest who is probably going to need therapy.

“I am not that easy to shock, my son,” the priest replies, to Jim’s mild surprise, quieting him down. “You are hardly the first to not take confession seriously, and you will certainly not be the last. Yet you should think carefully. Allow the Lord into your heart, truly and completely.”

Jim feels his heart jump arrhythmically, just for a second, as though trying to open and finding it too frightening.

“I’ve killed,” Jim says softly. “More than once. I’ve hurt people. Coveted, stolen. Father, if the Lord is up there, I’m a long way past return. There are some things you can’t come back from.”

The priest is on more familiar territory now, although understandably pretty wary. “You cannot know the Lord’s mind; your responsibility is to yourself, your repentance. Do you feel repentant, can you repent your sins?”

“Not all of them,” Jim admits, wondering why he is being honest, wondering why on earth he woke up this morning and decided to do this. “Because I don’t. In fact, most of it, I don’t. But…”

“It can take time,” the priest encourages, the warmth of a smile in his voice; Jim has a moment of wishing he’d had a father, somebody who could say these things to him when he was young enough to believe it

(and water fills his shoes Jimmy)

but this priest, this man, he is promising more than any parent could hope; salvation, absolution.
“Do you believe in God?” Jim breathes, the question curiously and cautious. “You’re supposed to say yes, but do you? Do you believe people can change, do you…”

Jim’s words trail out.

The priest, mercifully, takes the time to consider the question and his answer to it, rather than trotting out a standard answer that Jim will scoff at. “I believe that we all can - with honesty, with work - join Him at His side. I believe that He will forgive those who are prepared to try. Perhaps it will take time for you - the journey is long, and hard - but in the end…”

There is an odd feeling of disconnection in Jim’s thoughts, eyes closing, time and place evaporating, the warmth of words, somebody promising Jim everything he never thought he could have.

“I…” Jim tries, trying to let himself believe, trying to make his mind and heart widen enough to entertain the idea of something he gave up a long while ago, something he does not believe in but wishes he could. “I want to. I have tried, before. I just… can’t.”

“Do you repent?”

(Q, I’m sorry)

“Yes,” Jim breathes, and feels a strange wash of purpose, a strange tingling feeling in his fingers. “Yes, I do.”

“Do you remember the prayer of…”

Jim’s phone buzzes in his pocket.

And, before the priest can do so much as think a Hail Mary, Jim is gone.

- 

Q wakes up to be told, by a very polite doctor in a pristine white coat, hair tied back in a high ponytail and an assured but very slightly apologetic smile on her face, that he went into septic shock and - in attempting to save his life - they had needed to remove both legs below the knee.

It takes Q a moment.

Another moment.

And another.

A very long time ago, when Q-branch had been blown up, Q’s eardrums had ruptured; the damage was pretty extensive and he’s had hearing aids ever since, never really thinks about it, just adjusts them and tinkers and changes the batteries regularly and it’s never been much of an issue.

This is not something that will ever be ‘not much of an issue’.

This is going to change his life in ways that are only barely comprehensible right in this moment.

Q feels his heart, a throttled stuttering that he can half-hear, half-feel, and it makes his skin violently prickle and a strange ringing buzz in his ears, echoing back and back on him.

Bond doesn’t speak, something which Q is very grateful for.

Q asks all the relevant questions: prognosis, healing, physio appointments, prosthesis viability (all of
which are answered in a tone that is careful enough to not seem callous, but bright enough to avoid being patronising) and timelines for the above.

That is only the legs. Q is also going to have to contend with potential post-sepsis syndrome, which will have a lengthy recovery period all on its own. The doctor runs through some potential symptoms, Q tells her that he wishes to see his old therapist post-haste to assess the emotional fallout, and of course, to support through immediate recovery.

The doctor is kind and clearly very intelligent, which is sufficient in ensuring that Q trusts her judgement. This is a complicated situation. Q and Bond’s flat is being adapted as necessary, and will be ready for him the moment he is well enough to be discharged. The practical elements are all in hand, and all Q needs to do is focus on getting well.

Q breathes in, breathes out. The doctor leaves once she has ensured that both Q and Bond understand the situation.

Then, Q takes a further moment or twelve to let the news properly register, along with all the implications.

Legs.

His legs.

Jesus fucking holy *christ*.

“Q?” Bond asks, which is how Q knows he’s making some sort of noise, a strange sound that is trapped at the back of his throat and just cannot, will not properly manifest, “Q, breathe.”

“Fuck off,” Q hisses, the words taking more effort than he knew possible, eyes wide and staring wildly, hands knotted in the sheets and legs, well. Absent. Fucking *not there*.

The sound takes on a frightening, inhuman quality. “Q…”

“I…” Q tries, and swallows the words back down, unable to think, choking, body jack-knifing somewhat and he tries so hard to understand, hand shaking madly as they shiver down his thighs, glancing over his knees and further, the *emptiness*.

That’s the thing, the terrifying thing: a broken arm you can touch, feel it respond, pain. The lack is *a lack*, something entirely gone and something entirely irreplaceable, yet Q could half-swear he feels his feet and can wiggle his toes but he tries and a flat sheet stares back at him, laughing at him, challenging.

Q is crying. He does not know this, but he is. It makes the breathing so much worse, but he cannot calm down, he can’t think, nothing; vision slides in and out of coherency and the sound is more open now, hitching sobs and a keening that pierces every cell of Bond’s skin at once.

In this moment, it doesn’t even hurt.

All Q can think or see or feel is the bluntness, bandages wrapped tightly, air where his shins should be.

Unconsciousness, when it comes, is a blessing.

-
“I can see you,” Mycroft tells him.

Jim doesn’t move, doesn’t shift, does not react in any way. “You’re not the one I’m hiding from,” he replies eventually, his voice strangely dull; Mycroft is used to a dancing, melodic quality, rather than a frightening monotone, level and low.

Mycroft stands, watches. “Is Q…”

“He’s awake. Properly, I mean. They’ve told him.”

A sigh, heavy with understanding. “Ah.”

“Quite,” Jim agrees flatly. “Seb’s up the corridor, he’s a bit twitchy though. I’d go before Q passes out again. If he hasn’t already.”

Mycroft doesn’t move. “And you aren’t in there annoying him because…?”

Jim shoots over a strange, impossible look. Words are nowhere close to happening, there are no words even close to covering everything in Jim’s mind now, the absurdity of it all.

“You’re afraid.”

Jim just stares absently, and he looks disarmingly young; he is cradled in a bay window, the MI6 hospital being based in what was once a sprawling country house, fields as far as the eye can see. Knees bent, hugged into his chest, he is small and overshadowed; not something Mycroft ever expected to see from James Moriarty.

“It’s not fear,” Jim amends, slowly and carefully, gaze trailing back to the darkening edges of the skyline. “However: I cannot help but feel… responsible.”

“If you hadn’t arrived when you did, he would certainly have died,” Mycroft points out, correctly, but whilst still completely missing the point. “You and Sherlock are to be commended.”

Jim shifts the conversation, painting an expression onto his face before Mycroft can see the obvious problems. “Now it was fun, working with Sherlock. How is he? How’s the home rehab going?”

“That’s Sherlock,” Mycroft shrugs, more than sufficient as an answer. “I doubt anybody will ever truly be able to help him through the psychiatric aspects; he is too intelligent, far too intelligent, and he does not truly wish to stop. It will always remain something in the back of his mind, an open option for when the stakes are high enough. A user rather than an addict, as he likes to call it.”

“About as well as one might imagine, but at least with me, he cannot break out,” Mycroft explains, with a very tired smile. “Secure institutions have always been child’s play to him. He is through the physical detox stage now, which is encouraging, but the mental is - as ever - the more challenging aspect.”

Jim nods languidly. “How long?”

“It’s Sherlock,” Mycroft shrugs, more than sufficient as an answer. “I doubt anybody will ever truly be able to help him through the psychiatric aspects; he is too intelligent, far too intelligent, and he does not truly wish to stop. It will always remain something in the back of his mind, an open option for when the stakes are high enough. A user rather than an addict, as he likes to call it.”

“He truly is an idiot,” Jim replies, without judgement. “Sometimes I wonder why… why he somehow has that draw. That appeal.”

Mycroft considers, a tranquil expression in the corners of his mouth. “Yet he does, all the same.”

“He’s not too clever,” Jim muses. “Not too antisocial, not too… he thinks he’s all extremities, but no. You’re cleverer. Q’s more antisocial. I’m more of everything else. We all have our roles, but he’s…”
somehow… different. I don’t know how.”

“Elegantly put,” Mycroft agrees. “I always thought you’d be more interested in me; not to give myself undue importance…”

Jim smiles, something that finally seems to hit his eyes, although he continues to stare out of the window, as though trying to catch something at the edge of the horizon. “You’re boring,” he points out, softly, heavy with sadness; Jim seems to hear it in his own voice, and overcompensates with a teeth-flashing grin. “Speaking of dear darling Doctor Watson, how are you enjoying have a little one to take of?”

Mycroft - to Jim’s deadened surprise - shrugs. “I was twelve years old when Q was born,” he explains easily. “And while children are hardly my favourite of creatures, I can certainly manage them admirably. Of course, being the child of an international assassin and a qualified doctor, she seems to have a passable degree of demonstrable intellect.”

“Something I am sure will only be helped by your fine influence,” Jim supplements, and Mycroft cannot quite tell if he is being sarcastic or not. “An odd thought, you as a parental figure.”

A slightly sharpened laugh from Mycroft. “You’ve met my siblings; I have been assuming a pseudo-parental role for many years.”

Jim twitches a half-smile, edged. “You should bring Sherlock here. If he can. While Q’s… here. Recovering.”

“It’ll take time for him to be ready,” Mycroft replies, and is careful in choosing his words, deliberate. “The drugs are not his only problem, I regret to say.”

Another darting glance from Jim, abruptly alert. “What do you mean?”

Mycroft takes a moment, finding the right words. “He… is struggling in the same way as you,” he tells Jim carefully. “In feeling responsible. A normal response, of course; I forget how… emotional, you two are.”

If Mycroft sees the look of incandescent fury that flickers in Jim’s eyes briefly, he pretends not to.

Jim closes his eyes for a long moment, opens them again.

“James…”

An exaggerated ergh of annoyance. “Still Jim,” he hums, but again, the melody of it is uncomfortably absent (like Q’s legs, his legs, oh Q). “Jim. James is… dead. Gone. Like Q’s name. His first name, the one you knew him as. He never told me. Never told me.”

Jim’s voice slows down, dies out. I’m sorry.

“I’m sure Q would…”

“Go away, Mr Holmes,” Jim asked, and the note of a plea is unmistakeable.

Mycroft has never heard Jim ask for anything in his life, not even passingly; a plea, a soft half-sound of desperation, is so utterly wrong, so completely opposite to what Jim does. Everything he does.

“You’re…”

“Please,” Jim repeats, “Mycroft. Go away.”
It is an absolute relief when the man does, his steps confident and umbrella clicking on the floor from time to time; he recovered from the kidnap remarkably quickly by virtue of necessity and lack of interest in being on medical leave.

There is silence.

Chapter End Notes

I cannot tell you how interested I am to see your responses to this; it's a big life-changing event for Q (obviously) but also has such a huge impact on Jim/Bond/Seb etc. Game-changers. Our boys are growing up, whether they want to or not...

It honestly means the world to have your reactions and thoughts and feelings, the support for this fic has been inspirational in the most literal of ways, I don't know how I'd have got to this point without the support you're all giving me by staying with me! :) Jen.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim is not afraid.

This is something he continues to hum in his head, again and again, even as he approaches Q’s room and Seb shoots him a look of outright warning and Bond has gone home briefly to get changed and have a shower and eat some food and so Jim is there to hold his continued vigil, replacing Bond, there to keep Q safe in any way he has left.

Q is awake, on a laptop. Not his usual laptop, Jim notes - the one with stickers and duct tape - but one that presumably has less important data and modifications because really, Q shouldn’t be trying to work.

Shouldn’t, but undoubtedly will be, because it’s Q.

Jim opens the door, and steps in.

Q doesn’t look up. There is a gentle tap tap tapping from the keyboard, but it sounds odd, distorted; it has the perfect rhythm, but too slow.

“Go away,” Q says quietly.

Jim stands motionless. “Q…”

“I do not want to see or speak to you,” Q tells him, still quiet, still refusing to look up. “I know you did precisely what you thought was best. I know you have excuses. I do not doubt that you have compelling reasons and you might apologise but I am the one whose life has just changed, irreparably. Not yours.”

There is no need for the exceptionally quiet, almost tranquil tone of voice; there are no other patients in this part of the hospital, nobody to disturb. This is both MI6 and Mycroft and Jim’s doing: they clubbed together and ensured Q got more or less the best treatment available in the whole of the UK (and a fair bit of Europe).

“Q…”

Q’s eyes snap to his, and Jim cannot remember a time when he has seen so much pure, utter loathing. “Not this time, Jim.”

“You would have done the same.”

A cold, tingling feeling in the tips of his fingers. “You should have told me,” he hisses, still so quiet it makes Jim’s spine crawl. “I don’t ask you to do a fucking lot, Jim, but you should have told me. You should have checked. Monitored. That’s what I do, every fucking time, that’s what I do.”

“How many kidnaps have I done?” Jim parries, louder, the silence of Q’s voice drowning him. “You let me do this shit because you know I’m the best person on the fucking planet at this, I do this for a living.”

“And what precisely do you think I do for a living?” Q returns, and Jim despises him for sounding so
calm, the ridges and sharp corners of his voice still implacable. “You might kidnap more people, but half my job is managing abductions, kidnaps, from both sides of the equation. Valiant effort, try again.”

Jim swallows, and the cold of his fingers is fury, creeping up his arms. “This was unique,” he insists. “Sepsis? This is a first, and I’ve been doing this for…”

“…for as long as me and frankly, Jim, you should have known better,” Q tells him, so simple, so utterly quiet and controlled but not forced, this is Q, this is Q who is never betrays himself but he does to Jim, he always has to Jim.

In this moment, they are strangers.

“Tell me what you want,” Jim asks, equal parts pleading and outright aggressive. “How can I…”

“Make up for it?” Q finishes lightly, querying; he pretends to consider for a moment, before smiling dangerously. “Oh now, Jim, really?”

Jim smiles back, an odd sideways thing that seems weirdly reluctant. “Thought I’d ask…”

Q’s expression remains lethal. “…but trust me,” he continues, Jim’s voice trailing off, “I’m going to repay you for this, and you cannot - and will not - stop me. I am going to revel in hurting you, and when I’m done, we’ll go back to whatever form of normal we pretend to have on a daily basis.”

“Q…”

Q lifts up a finger, just a single finger, to silence him.

Jim quiets.

“I assume Mycroft is none the wiser?” Q asks patiently, and Jim cannot help but wish he would start shouting or screaming or something; instead he just waits, and Jim nods. “Good. Judging by our earlier conversation, it has certainly had the desired effect. Commendable.”

“Commendable,” Jim echoes, very softly. “That’s what we’re calling this?”

Q’s smile could kill. “I can call ‘this’ whatever the fuck I like,” he replies politely, “and I’m calling this, overall, something of a success. Barring, you know. My fucking legs, Jim. Now stop acting like a pathetic moron; I will not be patronised, I will not be pitied. You behave like you. Not a facsimile, but you. So fuck off until you’re able to be normal.”

“I’m being normal. Even I have moments. I’m allowed moments,” he returns, and, in an ugly mock-baby voice: “My sweetheart’s in hospital.”

Despite himself, Q smiles. It is a minuscule thing, but there nonetheless.

Jim stands to leave, partly to ensure that he avoids Bond; the last thing he needs is a punch or ten in the face, which Bond quite evidently wants to give him.

“I mean it, Jim,” Q tells him softly, “When I pay you back for this - which I will - that will be where this ends. No further recriminations from either party. We lay it to rest and get on with our lives.”

Oddly, this actually seems to sound like a reasonably logical idea to Jim’s ears; while he isn’t looking forward to losing a limb or two, he has enough guilt and enough masochism to bear it, and it makes sense to not accidently wind themselves into an endless cycle of both petty and not-so-petty
vengeance.

“Okay,” Jim therefore agrees.

Q narrows his eyes. “If you break this agreement,” he says simply, “I will rain havoc. I mean it, Jim. You’re easy enough to find and pick up. Do I make myself completely clear?”

Jim takes a moment and considers, properly considers.

“Yes,” he says brightly, and grins. “Okay. Would you like me to present my kneecaps now, or…”

Q shakes his head, looking - weirdly - almost confused. “Oh don’t be stupid, I’m not going to simply replicate your mistakes,” he scoffs, disarmed by the absurdity of it. “No, I already have an idea of what I’m going to do. So piss off. James will almost certainly do whatever the fuck he fancies to your kneecaps, and I’m not prepared to stop him.”

Jim laughs, a bright and lovely sound that makes Q’s heart contract weirdly. “Okay. I’ll keep my distance.”

The memory - the odd, strange sensation of something he’d forgotten for a half-second - reinstigates, and Q feels a lurch as he remembers that his legs are gone and he had his first fucking physio session today and he spent an hour trying to lift his thighs off the mattress, one by one.

“Go away,” he therefore rasps out, feeling the panic, the pain seeping back in, like grief, forgotten for a fragment of a moment before the force comes back like it was the first moment he was told.

Jim seems to realise that something has shifted, although he doesn’t understand what; idiot, he never understands. This is the root of the problem: he never, ever understands. Nothing ever touches him.

“Do you want to see?” Q asks, with a dangerous sing-song quality that sends shudders up Jim’s spine, and a smile that could wither plants at twenty paces. “The result of your fine work?”

“Q…”

Q puts his laptop to one side, whisks the sheet up and off his legs.

Jim feels his throat completely close. Instantly, he cannot breathe, he cannot even passingly breathe. “You don’t have to… I mean…”

Over the course of his career, Jim has seen every part of the human body, and has inserted something sharp through literally every single imaginable inch. Jim has skinned, sliced, chopped. The glisten of bone, the lurid familiarity of blood, stitches, scabs, wounds, bruises that kaleidoscope through every colour imaginable, all of it is familiar, almost like a homecoming. Nothing is quite so soothing as the arc of arterial blood and the gurgling desperation of a creature on the edge of death.

But: this is Q. His Q. Who cannot be fixed, stitched back together.

Jim is shaking, actually shaking, while Q unwinds the bandages over the stump of his left leg to show it off and Jim finds himself trying not to vomit, unable to think, unable to breathe, bile rising acrid and sharp and bitter.

“I’m sorry,” he breathes, a career of pain narrowing to just this single image, turning Jim’s perception on its head. “Q, I’m sorry. I am so sorry. Q…”

Jim is abruptly treated to the surreal feeling of being lifted off the ground by his shirt collar; a button
around his throat is threatening to pop off entirely and if he couldn’t breathe before, he certainly can’t now. Further, an arm is pulled behind his back and is threatening to part company altogether.

“I told you I’d tear you to shreds if I caught you in here,” Bond hisses in Jim’s ear, pulling the arm a little further. “Do I need to dislocate it?”

“Preferably not,” Jim drawls, his eyes still trapped on Q, dimly aware that his entire world is tilting on its axis. This changes things. He doesn’t know what, not truly, but something strong, something fundamental.

Q watches with an extraordinary flatness. He seems unconcerned with the idea that Jim could get hurt, and that scares Jim one hell of a lot; Q always cares, even if it’s distant, dispassionate.

After a long moment - Jim flails vaguely, his breath barely hissing out of his throat, vision blurring - Q talks: “Let him down.”

Bond drops him; Jim, in an unusual show of physical ineptitude, loses balance entirely and collapses like a house of cards, falling to his hands and knees.

“Go,” Bond orders him coldly, the very first time Bond has dared give Jim a direct order. “Or not even he will be able to stop me from tearing various limbs off you and scattering them around the countryside.”

Q doesn’t intervene, just watches, and there is a weird sadness and that indescribable thing again, that thing Jim doesn’t understand. “Q…”

“Now.”

Jim goes, with the weight of Bond’s eyes - only Bond’s eyes, Q doesn’t bother to watch, and that hurts in ways Jim is ill-equipped to describe - following him.

Sherlock visits the next day.

“My god, and I didn’t think anybody could look worse than I do right now,” Q quips as Sherlock is brought in with Mycroft, and a couple of Mycroft’s security detail, tailing him.

Sherlock is wearing clothing, and that’s about as much effort as he’s made. Beyond that, he looks (and distinctly smells) like it’s been a while since he last had a shower, is dressed in pyjamas and a coat Q doesn’t recognise, neon flip-flops clacking on the floor, several weeks of unkempt beard growth and the hollow cheekboned look he always gets after detoxing.

He throws himself into the only chair that looks halfway comfortable. “You’re not dead,” he comments acridly. “Good. Lovely. Hooked up to anything fun?”

“If you even entertain the idea of taking my painkillers, I’ll hack your legs off with a spade,” Q retorts, and means it. “How’s rehab?”

“Some rehab,” Sherlock shrugs, trying to be supercilious and more or less failing. “I’ve detoxed. Now Mycroft keeps bringing in psychiatrists and psychologists and psych-whatever-the-fuck to try and keep me clean and never go back again.”

Q raises an eyebrow. “And how’s that going?”
“It isn’t,” Sherlock replies. “It’s pointless. It’s a waste of time. I’m not an addict, I’m a…”

Q shoots Bond a look, and Bond smacks Sherlock around the back of the head. “That’s from me,” Q supplies helpfully. “I can’t reach you from here, so Bond’ll be slapping you on my behalf. Isn’t it nice to have a partner who looks out for you?”

Sherlock’s eyes - which had been dull, simmering - abruptly blaze. “I do not need a partner to feel complete, unlike some.”

“How is John?” Q asks obnoxiously. “And, you know. His daughter.”

“She cries, he yells at me,” Sherlock sulks, propping his legs up on the side of the bed in a way that makes Q’s throat briefly close as he remembers, before he swallows the pain down and Sherlock keeps talking, “which is dull, I want to get back to work.”

“We’ve discussed this,” Mycroft says from the door, where he appears to be lurking. “Only once we have had demonstrative proof that you are not going to immediately return to old habits.”

“I won’t.”

“You do realise,” Q adds, “that a shower might go a long way? And shaving? And brushing your hair?”

Sherlock scoffs, “if my own mother can’t force me to wash, you and Mycroft damn well can’t.”

“Then you’ll stay in Mycroft’s custody,” Q replies, entirely unfazed; he agrees wholeheartedly with Mycroft’s methods at this point, and lauds him for being so persistent.

Sherlock is behaving like a child. And so, he will be treated like one until such a time as he deigns to behave better. At the moment, he is railing against the world because it ruffles his feathers and while that was manageable when he was seven, seventeen, even twenty-seven, by the time he’s approaching forty with a good deal of conviction everybody’s patience has worn well and truly thin.

“How’s… everything,” Sherlock manages, somewhat limply, gesturing vaguely at Q’s non-existent legs and yes, there’s that lump in his throat again, but every time it gets a little bit easier and a little bit harder at once, he is getting accustomed to the idea, it will be alright. His life is not over.

Q smiles very faintly. “I’m responding well to treatment, apparently, and I detest being in hospital so I am pushing to be released whenever it becomes realistically possible,” he explains, “but of course, this is contingent on me staying conscious, able to do basic tasks, physio exercises learned and performed halfway competently. There has also been damage to my kidneys, but it is uncertain yet whether that is permanent or not. Hopefully not.”

Sherlock nods, and his expression says everything: he blames himself entirely, it’s patently obvious.

“Q…”

“No,” Q interjects, before he can start self-castigating. “No, absolutely not. It was not your fault. You could not have done anything differently. I am not going to hold your hand or baby you, I’m just not. I have quite enough on my plate right now without needing to deal with you. I expect you to get a fucking grip on yourself and go back to your normal life, and stop behaving like a recalcitrant child.”

Sherlock is quiet for a moment. Mycroft is so still he has all but blended into the wallpaper, bland and invisible and lethal all at once.

“You’re my little brother,” Sherlock says, in the smallest voice Q has heard from him. “It’s my job to
look after you.”

Mycroft shifts weight, and that action speaks volumes: the guilt is shared, the guilt lives in them both, and Mycroft has it worst of all: one drug-addicted, one legless, one an institutionalised serial killer.

He has failed entirely, and Mycroft will never recover. Even if Sherlock stays clean forever, if Q learns to walk, if Eurus starts to speak just a word, just something, it will still torture Mycroft for the rest of his days to know how completely he failed.

“And you failed,” Q acknowledges honestly, “but that doesn’t change anything. You’re still my brother. You’re always going to be.”

(And Q’s eyes flicker to Mycroft for a quarter-second, and that instant is something Mycroft will remember to the day that he dies)

“I’m sorry, Q.”

Q smiles, just about. “I know you are. But you’re not sorry about the drugs, not yet.”

Sherlock looks over to Mycroft, to the closed door, to the closed windows, a cage by any other name. “No,” he agrees, “I’m not.”

“You think it helps you?”

Sherlock inclines his head, gives a vague shrug. “I know it does. But I don’t use it unless it’s an emergency.”

“Like you nearly died saving John?” Q posits, and Sherlock nods. “And that would hold out, it really would, had I not known as a point of absolute certainty that you didn’t stop once John was safe. You kept dabbling. Bits here and there. Not enough that anybody would notice, of course.”

“I…”

“And I take blood samples from you on a semi-regular basis, so I know full well this isn’t a one-off.”

Sherlock pales slightly, and Mycroft’s eyebrows contract faintly. “You… but how…”

Q raises an eyebrow. “Sherlock, I legitimately do things like that for a living, of course I can do a regular blood panel. All I need is a two-minute duration knockout or confusion dart, or just somebody walking into you, brief distraction, lists are endless: I have teams that do this sort of shit daily.”

“I’m a graduate chemist and I don’t know of drugs like that,” Sherlock points out, with patent confusion. “I…”

“You don’t work for MI6,” Q cuts in, unapologetically. “If you ever fancy working for us, by all means I can put a word in for you, but while you insist on traipsing around London getting bored on a daily basis because cases aren’t coming through fast enough…”

“Can I part-time it?” he asks immediately. “Like… can I come in as a consultant?”

“A consulting chemist, as well as all the rest of it?” Q asks, considering it in real terms:

Sherlock is a nightmare. An unmitigated nightmare. And barely stumbled through his Cambridge degree due to testing out a load of drugs en route and god almighty no the last thing anybody needs is Sherlock having regular access to any form of drugs.
“... no,” he therefore says, after a moment. “But I’ll send you through some master studies of different chemical compounds we’ve been working with. If I catch you so much as thinking about recreational usage, I’ll end you.”

At least Sherlock doesn’t put up a fight; he visibly considers it, before deflating a little. “Okay,” he murmurs. “Fair. If I stay clean…”

“If you stay clean for eighteen months, uninterrupted, I’ll seriously consider it,” Q tells him firmly. “Until then? Not a chance.”

Nothing riles Sherlock quite as much as a challenge.

Maybe this will work. Maybe an opportunity will enough to entice him, captivate his interests enough to keep him away from his vices; Q can but hope, but honestly, he has no energy left to cope with Sherlock. He has exercises to do, sleep, try to get well enough to be discharged, cope with the emotional fallout and talk to his psychiatrist, who is more than a little surprised to have been called back to handle Q after over a decade.

She’s nice. A bit feeble, but she tries hard and Q isn’t unkind, not like Sherlock or Mycroft would be. Q tries to help himself, tries to tackle the issues head on with utter self-awareness, but it isn’t that simple and the trauma and exhaustion and illness: shot concentration, muscles aching, phantom limbs itching and twinging, medication making his face swell into a strange moon shape, vision blurry, so many things he can’t even tell what it used to be like before, there is no ‘before’, there is only ‘now’ left.

Q will get well. He will move on. Already, he has researched prosthetics and is starting to make amendments on what will be his future limbs, he can improve on what exists, he can make this work. This is not the end of the world.

(but god, it feels like it)

Sherlock is escorted out and disappears, Bond doesn’t leave Q’s side; he starts to sleep in chairs, expands that into a camp bed, and eventually insinuates himself onto Q’s bed to curl around him as though he can guard Q from all the evils of the world (up to, and including, James Moriarty).

It breaks Bond’s heart, but not as much as might have been expected; Bond was in the Navy, he knew soldiers who had been injured, he understands. Boothroyd, the last Q, had most of his left hand missing after something explody went wrong on the job, it goes with the territory.

But he isn’t lying: Jim comes anywhere near, and Bond will rip him apart.

In the dark, Q whispers his pain, his fear. He curls into Bond’s hard, familiar silhouette, sobbing softly into a silent room with Bond breathing kisses into his hair, talks about what he’ll do, the adaptations he’ll have to make in the branch, how his life will change, how badly he wants this to all be a dream and how tired every single atom of his body is.

Bond cries once Q is asleep, once the tears are drying, once the machines are beeping regular, steady, familiar beats. Bond cries in a way nobody will see, cries so that in the morning, he can be what Q needs him to be.

They will survive this.

Bond just can’t help wishing they didn’t have to.
Thank you to everybody still here with me guys, especially with recent events... I cannot thank you enough for the support, comments, reads, all the rest. It means more than I can say. Jen x
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

The boys attempt to deal with love. Badly. Because neither knows even vaguely how.

Chapter Notes

I’m sorry it’s been so long, ladies and gents, life intervened as it is wont to do. Hope you enjoy! Jen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It is three o’clock in the morning when Jim realises precisely what Q is going to do, and he sits sharply upright in the blackness of his bedroom with Moran curved around him and snaps on the light.

Moran is Moran, and thus is instantly very conscious (although rather unimpressed at being woken up). “Jim? What’s wrong?”

Jim fumbles for his phone, “I need to make a call,” he tells Moran sharply, with a single look at him; Moran immediately reaches for his Glock (the pretty one, not the nicely-weighted one) simply on the back of that look, the unfathomable terror that Moran has only seen Jim wear on a handful of occasions.

“What is it?” Moran asks; Jim ignores him, flapping a hand in irritation as he holds the phone up to his ear.

Moran takes this as his cue to prime battle stations, for what he assumes will be an imminent assault; his clothing is piled up neatly, folded as it is every evening, ready for the morning (or, apparently, 3AM emergencies). He dresses in less than fifteen seconds, half an eye on Jim as he holds the phone tight to his ear, muttering come on come on come on and snarling in loud, livid fury when nobody picks up.

Jim instantly stabs the buttons to redial, and holds it back up to his ear; he starts to mutter, mumble, and Moran can hear Q’s name, again and again, in a constellation of different ways.

The moment he picks up, Jim hisses in a breath that seems to ricochet through his whole body.

Jim’s voice is in a million fragments: “You can’t.”

“Because telling me what I can and cannot do is always well received,” Q parries back drily (although a touch sleepily). “What do you want, Jim?”

Jim cannot find words, they trip and stumble in his mouth, toppling over one another, losing balance. “You can’t,” he manages, “Q, please, please, I know what you’re, you, you and I and this, I said…”

“You said you wouldn’t object,” Q responds with airy calm, so utterly in control it makes Jim want
to scream. “I get free reign.”

The insane, terrified, screeching sound of imminent disaster is ringing acutely, agonisingly, in Jim’s ears. “But this, no, no. Tell me not this. Tell me you won’t. You won’t.”

Q’s laugh is soft and delicately cruel. “I do what I want.”

“I made a mistake, you know I made a mistake…”

The almost crowing, vituperative edge to Q’s voice does not go unnoticed. “And as you’ve always told me, mistakes are for the morons of this world, people like us? We don’t make mistakes. We make calculated risks, and this time, you miscalculated. More than you realised, apparently.”

Jim cannot breathe, his heart pulsing painfully in his throat, and his voice is a raw whisper: “Not him.”

“You can’t ask me that,” Q teases, and the melodic, bouncing quality is more Jim’s preserve than Q’s, it’s weird to hear it from the other side. “If I want to, that’s my prerogative. If I want to make sure that he suffers endlessly from now until I get bored…”

It’s true, oh god, it’s true. “Q, I will give you anything you wish for.”

Q pretends to consider, mocks him, taunts him with it. “Can you give me my legs?”

Jim is hyperventilating. “Be reasonable,” he tries, hissing and furious and trying so, so fucking hard. “Q…”

“No,” Q replies simply.

He hangs up.

Jim screams like the world is ending, screams until his jaw clicks with a partial dislocation, screeching like his eardrums will split and his world is ending, crumbling into pieces.

Seb’s arms close around him, cradling him too close, squeezing the life out of him because somehow, he understands, he knows, just from the side of the conversation he can hear.

“I can’t lose you,” Jim rasps, throat closed, throttling him, and his eyes are wide, eerily unfocused. “Not you. I’d kill him first.”

Moran smiles into Jim’s hair. “You can live without me,” he says honestly, feeling old; it’s hard to feel anything other than old, with Jim the perennial five-year-old who is mid-tantrum and he, who has lived so long, survived so long.

Sebastian is a clear decade older than Jim. He is getting slower, duller. Eventually, Moran will need to be traded in for a younger model, as Jim has mockingly threatened for years.

The thing nobody expected - least of all Jim - was for him to wind up actually wanting Moran. Not just needing him for practicalities, or for warmth, or for protection; no.

Moran has become something so much more. Jim’s heartbeat, his pulse: impossible to live without, completely unnoticed until its absence.

Moran closes his arms yet tighter, ringing Jim into a circle of imperfect but absolute protection; Seb will merrily die a thousand deaths before allowing Jim to sustain so much as a scrape.
“I won’t lose you.”

The smell of Seb’s skin sinks into Jim’s soul, the perfect familiarity; nobody smells quite like him, the combination of skin and sweat and gunmetal and anger and exhaustion and alcohol and aftershave and this, this is everything Jim needs when his pulse hammers in his throat and he knows, he knows this is not forever.

Moran drenches Jim’s hair in kisses, and murmurs - in a voice Jim hardly recognises - that “losing me is nothing, Jim. You’re enough on your own.”

And Jim wants to parry, wants, I don’t want to be alone but does not voice it because no, he is not that pathetic. He refuses to be.

“We need to get you somewhere safe,” Jim says into the empty air. “Where you can’t be found.”

Moran’s smile is invisible. “You don’t know for certain that he’s…”

Jim’s unpleasant, cold, terrified cackle is enough to hijack Seb’s speech; he continues “I know him, and I know full fucking well that he is trying to make me pay for his…”

“... his legs,” Moran completes neutrally, and he does not judge; for a man whose life is very much in question, he has somehow managed to capture tranquillity, and he seems curiously unafraid.

Jim sighs, “indeed.”

They curve, curl, into one another.

Moran almost misses it.

Almost, but not quite.

Jim breathes into Moran’s ear, his words distinct but on the edge of inaudible, so subtle they are almost a suggestion, perhaps a figment of Moran’s distant imagination, everything he wishes he could hear but never, not since the beginning, not since a prostitute and flick knife and assassin and agent and perfect enigma, beautiful and impossible, a creature that is Jim’s shadow, inextricably laced into every facet of his being.

“I love you.”

Moran’s breath gasps up and out, making him almost dizzy, and his voice is gruff and level. “No, you don’t.”

Jim keens, and he just about manages to make his voice bleakly flat. “Fuck you. I do.”

The smallest of smiles, Seb leaning in and pressing a perfect kiss to Jim’s lips, leaving him wanting more and less all at the same time.

“I’ll get you somewhere safe,” Jim repeats, his fingers trickling along Moran’s cheek, feather-light touches and suggestions that will never be fully acted upon. “I will keep you safe. If it’s the last thing I fucking do, I’ll keep you safe. Do you trust me?”

Moran raises an eyebrow, his smile curiously lethal. “I don’t have a choice.”

And then, then there is a flash of Moriarty, and the voice is sing-song lethal, so wonderfully familiar, finally what it should be. “That’s not what I asked, darlin’.”
“I trust you,” Moran confirms.

Jim’s smile is all teeth and delectably murderous.

“Good,” he grins, and starts the wheels in motion.

Q is, on paper, doing alarmingly well: leg wounds closing, bones mending, passably sane, avoided the worst aspects of post-sepsis shock and is now slightly better nourished.

Physical therapy starts to take over his life a little: every moment he is physically able, he is doing the best he can, each second he is conscious he works and exercises and sleeps when he must and ensures he does everything he feasibly can to maximise recovery speed and efficiency.

It comes as very little of a surprise when he discovers that Sebastian Moran and Jim have both dropped off the edge of the world, outside where even Q can find them. It’s a smart move: Q would do the same, under the circumstances.

However, they had an agreement. And Q does not suffer those who evade him, who lie to him, who betray him.

“We’re going to war,” he therefore tells Bond softly. “Jim will be after you, too, so we’ll have to keep you equipped and ready for action at the drop of a hat, understood?”

Bond nods, a little slowly, tinges of reluctance in his voice. “Are you sure about this?” he queries, as gently as he can. “This is not to doubt your abilities…”

The look Q shoots him is homicidal and merciless; Bond makes the smart move of not pursuing the matter further, and instead comforts himself by supporting Q through his exercises and ignoring the strange look of pained intensity that paints itself into every crevice of what was once Q’s smile.

“Were you always planning to kill him?” Bond asks, a while later, as Q yawns elaborately. “Or did you have something else in mind?”

Q shrugs lopsidedly. “I didn’t know,” he replies carefully, as honest as he is capable of being. “The idea had occurred. I thought… I was going to do something big, of course. But I like Sebastian myself, too, and he’s useful.”

“But now?”

A tired, sad sort of smile. “Jim has shown his hand. He doesn’t intend to honour our agreement. There’s no coming back from that.”

Bond raises an eyebrow, expression quietly sceptical. “You two always come back from it.”

“It’s different now,” Q replies, with a vague shrug. “We have too much to lose.”

(Jim’s voice croons at the corner of Q’s dreams, and he follows them out as though he will find absolution and finds a bare emptiness that makes his soul ache)

“But it’s Jim,” Bond points out, as though that is a sufficient explanation.

Q can only laugh, the sound trilling off his lips and tongue, “yes, yes, I’m sure he’d want that,” he agrees, “but I won’t let him do that to me any more. I’m done with it.”
Bond has an eyebrow quirked in evident scepticism, the type that makes Q want to punch him hard in the nose. “You love him.”

Q lets out an unpleasant, raw cackle. “I love you, too, so go figure,” he retorts, in a voice so hostile it trickles into Bond’s own self-confidence and tries to undermine it.

“Q, you…”

“Why do you love me?” Q asks, so softly Bond wonders if he has imagined it.

He thinks for a long moment.

Bond is not like Q. His thoughts are more ‘normal’, as it were, and he assesses the world around him with eyes that are kinder, more patient, than Q is ever likely to grant.

At the end of it, Bond loves, so simply and so easily it is all but insulting.

Q stares at him, watches, cold and flat and hateful. “Why?”

Bond tries to think, tries to make his body and soul conspire. “That’s not…”

“I asked a question.”

And Bond thinks, tries, wonders.

The silence stretches unpleasantly; but then, it was hardly a fair question in the first place, no answer is going to make undue sense.

“I don’t know,” Bond answers, therefore.

Q looks at him, his expression cold and unusually hostile. “And if that isn’t enough?”

“Q,” Bond tries, “you have to give me some credit. I love you. It isn’t a case of loving you because something or other, I’m past that. Regardless of what happens to you I’m still going to love you.”

This has the opposite effect to what Bond had hoped: “Oh good. So you’re loving me in spite of all my flaws?”

Bond takes a moment to find the right words, and when he does, he is aware of their inadequacy and furious, at the same time, that he has been corralled into trying: “It isn’t a case of measuring you up against a dozen options,” he hisses, trying to make his voice flat and balanced, like the Holmes siblings can manage, but he isn’t a Holmes.

He continues: “I love you because of your flaws. Because you’re a frankly unpleasant human being. Because you’re not like your siblings, and because you’re exactly the same as them. With legs, without legs, with your constant inferiority complex and all the rest of it. Q, I love you, all of it.”

Q looks livid beyond belief. “I don’t want to be pitied.”

“It’s a damn good thing I don’t pity you, then,” Bond replies with practised ease, as though he’s been waiting for this conversation and long-since prepared himself.

A raised eyebrow, voice mocking and unpleasant: “What, did I deserve this, then?”

“To be honest?” Bond poses, body far too still, holding back the curious tremble of anger he is doing his best to temper, “Yes. You did.”
Q briefly stops breathing.

Bond is solid, immoveable. There is no shift in his eyes, his expression. No apology nor concern (which counts as points in his favour, because apologies after a statement like that could only ever be shadows).

“Excuse me?” Q murmurs, so dangerous Bond can feel his own skin slitting open with each pristinely clipped consonant. “You think I deserve…”

“Q, for fuck’s sake,” Bond snaps, another rare instance of him swearing that is not lost on Q. “I’m not going to be your punch bag. If you’re unhappy, take it out on somebody that isn’t me, I’m done with this.”

“You can’t be unkind to me, I’m an amputee,” Q tries, with a note of superciliousness that Bond simply isn’t willing to entertain. “Bond… James. Stay.”

Bond is visibly debating what to do, where to go; Q is being as manipulative and cruel as he is capable of, and Bond refuses to play games when he is being like this.

And so he sets rules, on the implicit understanding that should Q break them, he will leave. “I won’t just do what you want, the instant you want it,” he says carefully. “You’re my superior at work, not at home. You don’t get to abuse that privilege, and I wouldn’t recommend testing my limits too much.”

“Jim.”

Bond’s smile is oddly wonky. “I wouldn’t recommend it for him, either, but if you insist I won’t argue too much,” he replies, with a bubbling laugh that Q topples into on instinct, losing himself in a broad note of genuine joy. “Q, he didn’t mean…”

Q’s spine freezes, an odd sensation; paralysing hate, murderously cold, usually only reserved for Mycroft. “Don’t,” he tells Bond therefore, voice a gunshot, and Bond does the intelligent thing and decides to move away from that avenue of conversation.

“So what are we doing first?” he asks Q instead. “I’m assuming there are a number of options? Tearing down Moriarty Inc?”

The strange atmosphere that had been building thankfully defuses without incident, as Q shoots Bond one of his more frightening smiles. “I’m not touching our business; this is a personal vendetta, and apart from anything else, I’m not throwing away the last several decades of work, that would be an utter waste. No. This is personal.”

Which is considerably more worrying than the alternatives, but Bond isn’t about to press the point.

“So…”

Q grins like a maniac, and returns attention to his laptop. “As I said,” he purrs, “we’re going to war.”

Chapter End Notes

The continued support for this fic continues to overwhelm me, especially when life is challenging - I read the comments and see the kudos even if I'm not always able to
respond at the time, they keep me uplifted and return me to writing without fail. Thank you, you wonderful creatures. Jen.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Action-packed, this one! Hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

All of Jim’s electronics die in the same instant.

Jim’s various aliases start to unravel around his fingers: identities are flagged by police systems, cards are declined. Moran’s too, and that’s dangerous, they need to disappear together if they have a chance in hell of surviving.

In the end, Jim goes back to how he started: a cache he has with clothes and the bare bones of an identity he cobbled together as a last resort for moments like this.

It is not going to be sufficient. Time has moved on, electronic identities are constantly necessary, and Moran could get picked up any given moment if Q’s decided to do a call-out for sightings or popped him back on the UK’s Most Wanted list (which naturally, he has).

Jim can survive without Q, of course he can.

It’s just so much harder.

Also, Jim realises very quickly how much Q has done for him over the years. Even when they weren’t speaking, even when on separate sides of the world, no matter what was between them, Q has been there and protected him, watched him, guarded him.

Hiding from Q feels like an impossible ask, but he’s going to try it all the same, for every second he can.

Hell, it’s probably a good exercise.

“We’re moving out,” Moran tells Jim, looking out of the window of a dingy flat that is, amusingly only a handful of streets from Q’s flat. Hiding in plain sight. Fortunately, it is winter; it is easier to move around disguised when in winter, when everybody is wrapped in layers and scarves and hoods and gloves.

Jim looks around, immediately on guard. “Why?”

“Motion from across the road, I don’t think it’s accidental and I don’t like being this brazen, Jim, we’re not fucking about,” Moran informs him. “I’d really prefer not to be picked off by a sniper, I…”

Moran stops speaking and throws himself at Jim, getting him below the window line, out of sight and - as though on cue - a bullet sails through the window. If Moran hadn’t noticed the dull glint of gunmetal, he would have been shot neatly through the head.

“This isn’t Q’s style,” Jim muses, pulling out his own gun from within his jacket pocket, while Moran considers options and slides across the floor to the second window in the room; out of line for an easy shot, but enough that Moran should be able to establish if the would-be assassin is still
lingering.

Moran takes a breath, and ventures above the parapet; he focuses on the correct area instantly, drinking in every aspect of detail in the space of microseconds before ducking down again. “Okay, one hostile, possibly with backup. They’re on the penultimate floor of the hotel opposite.”

Another gunshot, this time through the window Moran has been looking at; he’s slow, this sniper - and yes, only one, if there were two they’d have taken one window apiece and wouldn’t need to reline shots each time they saw movement - which means he’s likely less experienced, if only marginally, than Moran. This is a good thing.

Jim is lying on the floor, on his back, humming to himself. “What fun,” he drawls. “How are we handling this one?”

“Depends on which of us they want dead,” Moran replies, rolling his eyes at how damned relaxed Jim seems to be. “And whether they’ve infiltrated the…”

Moran falls silent again. Jim stops pissing around, and pays attention; if they’re under siege, they need to act quickly and efficiently.

Footsteps in the corridor.

Moran indicates to Jim, the pair communicating in perfect silence, the beautiful anticipatory rush of adrenaline when their lives are on the line; Jim dances with less substance than a shadow where Moran instructs, out of direct sight of the flat’s door and towards the kitchen, staying necessarily low, with a very specific goal in mind.

Jim doesn’t watch as Moran pulls out a small hand mirror; he angles it, studying the hotel opposite in the miniature square and establishing just how fucked they are.

There is still some motion from the hotel window. Moran gestures as much to Jim, who understands the routine instinctively; they’ve gone over scenarios like this so many times, and experienced it on occasion.

It should run like clockwork.

Jim skitters over Moran’s Kalashnikov from the kitchen drawer they’d stashed it in, and whispers himself to standing just inside the kitchen, listening very carefully to the motion outside the flat.

Movement at the door’s lock, the rattling sound of somebody picking the lock.

Amateurs. Anybody professional should be able to silently pick the lock in about half the time it has taken so far; this is encouraging, as it means whoever these people are, they can, will, and are making mistakes.

Moran readies himself. He will need to move very quickly and effectively.

A quick motion to Jim, who raises three fingers; it correlates with the number Moran can estimate, based on the sounds of their movements, but of course this cannot be confirmed.

Moran crouches, ready to move in an instant, and fires off several shots directly through the door.

Whoever was busy picking the lock dies quickly. The other two escape injury, but notably don’t return blind fire: they want somebody alive, and both Jim and Moran can make a educated guess on who.
Jim moves quickly, slipping around the edge of the kitchen to shoot another bullet through the bullet-splintered entrance door to the flat; Moran, meanwhile, acts with incredible speed, stands, and fires off several shots through the window towards the hotel opposite.

Not for the first time, Jim is so damn grateful that Moran spends a minimum of an hour per day practising his shooting. Usually more. Every single day, without fail.

For all that Jim whines (and he does, Jim gets bored or feels neglected and constantly moans at him) it is what makes Moran able to fire out a couple of shots, with almost no hesitation in aiming, and actually meet his mark.

Moran dives towards Jim, to the only place in the flat that has no clear sightlines for other snipers, just in case there are any.

A querying expression and a nod, and Jim knows the situation is precarious but in hand.

Now it is his turn to develop the situation, and indeed take back control: “Tell me what you want,” he croons, loudly, while Moran checks over the guns, grabs a few other incendiaries he has stashed in the kitchen (this is still routine, all routine).

“We have you surrounded and outnumbered, Moriarty,” a voice shouts back, rough but confident. “Surrender your weapons.”

“No, now,” Jim replies lullingly (and while he’s talking, Moran hands him some ear protectors; he slings them around his neck, waiting for his cue). “Is that really likely?”

A sharp sound, a kick to the doorframe most likely; they are in the flat.

Jim slips the headphones on, shuts his eyes, and Moran chucks a stun grenade around the corner.

The moment he feels the explosion, he opens his eyes and - with Moran leading - heads out to open fire on anything that moves.

Their interrogators didn’t stand a chance: blinded, disorientated, tripping over one another and bathed in smoke, Moran and Jim pick them off. Moran is responsible for keeping at one of them alive for interrogation; he does so, slamming the butt of his handgun down on his head to knock him out.

There were four, in the end. The dead lockpicker, two others dead fairly quickly, and one unconscious. Then add in the assailant in the hotel opposite, and that’s a full compliment of five.

Moran looks around the corridor, satisfied that there are no further issues. “Clear the area,” he orders Jim, who doesn’t bother with nodding, but instead moves confidently around the flat to gather their (mercifully sparse) belongings, keeping strictly away from windows, ducking and darting while Moran yanks the unconscious man upwards, balancing his weight easily.

“Clear,” he says, after a moment. “Two minutes for analysis.”

“You have one,” Moran replies, efficiently gathering the guns from the dead men and continuing to cover the corridor. “That will have attracted more than enough attention.”

Jim wastes no time, scanning the dead men one by one with adrenaline spiking his mind into intoxicating clarity. “Done,” he says, with less than five seconds to spare, and falls into position by Moran’s side. “Nothing immediate. Vehicle?”

“Can’t risk the stairs yet, I need to secure the building if there’s nothing of note,” Moran replies, “Flat
two doors down. Ten minutes.”

Moran always ensures there is a backup. This time, a flat that is connected to nothing and nobody, in easy reach, stacked to the eyeballs with offensive weaponry and a bolthole within a bolthole.

The three of them - Jim, Moran, and unconscious assailant - let themselves in to the secondary flat. Moran dumps the unconscious man on the floor and leaves Jim to wait for the allotted ten minutes. If, after that, Moran is not back, he needs to pick his way out to backup vehicle B.

Waiting has never been Jim’s forte. He hates it. It is, without a doubt, the worst part of dangerous scenarios. But he also trusts Moran with his life, and he obeys every single order without question or pause because Jim is not stupid enough to think he knows best, not when compared to somebody like Sebastian Moran.

(he’s said it before, and he’ll say it again: true genius is knowing your limitations)

And so Jim is left with an unconscious man in a flat filled with munitions. He moves around it like the ghost he is, picking things up, leaving no trace: Moran will expect him to have gathered absolutely everything he can physically carry and be fully geared up by the end of ten minutes.

(there are so few times in life Jim gets to wear a full ammo belt, strapping stun and hand grenades across his chest, a few guns in holsters, the works - it’s so much fun, he feels like a child playing soldiers)

Minutes tick down, and Jim is just about ready when Moran returns to the door, taps on it in a predetermined pattern; Jim - gun extended - opens it enough to let him in. “Clear?”

“Clear,” Moran agrees, scanning over Jim, festooned in weaponry.

“Worth taking the spare?”

“Yes. Uncertain allegiance.”

“Are you sure?”

The expression on Jim’s face is unlike anything Moran has provoked before; he looks somewhere between shocked and gravely wounded, a surge of sheer horror. “What the hell do you mean, am I sure?!”

Moran never asks that, never. Across the years, he has known better than to question Jim. Jim is always sure, and Moran has always believed, without question or pause; he has always known that Jim is right.

This probably classifies as the most profound betrayal Jim has experienced in living memory, and given that Jim hasn’t ruled out that the people trying to kill him aren’t there at Q’s behest, that’s quite an accomplishment.

Moran doesn’t repeat the question, mercifully, but Jim simply isn’t prepared to let it go: “Why. Why ask? I don’t make mistakes.”

Moran’s expression says it all: you did with Q.

Jim wants to kill him, there and then, on the spot. Painfully and with conviction, with a malicious
loathing that infects every part of his brain and body and he just can’t breathe, can’t cope with the anger, this was always his weakness, the anger that pollutes and stops him stone dead just when he needs to be all action and motion.

“Later,” he rasps to Moran, and follows him out of the building.

-“How’s it going?” Bond asks, as Q taps away. “So…”

Q shrugs. “I can’t find much trace, which is unusual,” he says slowly, mind still caught more in his computer than in Bond’s movements. “He really has learnt well, I have to give him credit where due.”

“Seriously?” Bond echoes, more than a little bit amused. “You can’t find him?”

“You don’t have to sound quite so happy about it,” Q snipes, with the vaguest suggestion of a smile. “I did teach the idiot myself. I would have hoped he be able to make sure he disappeared and could never be found. So don’t look quite so smug.”

Bond smiles, presses a kiss to the top of his head, and moves on; he has other business to keep track of, he has to hold the fort while Q is busy keeping both of them alive, he has to protect them from external catastrophes.

“Ah ha,” Q says lightly. “Well now. Isn’t that interesting. It seems that Jim has attracted attention. That makes my life so much easier.”

“Dare I ask?”

At that moment, Q’s phone rings; Bond tosses it over. “Yes? Oh good. No, of course not Bond, this is domestic and minor, isn’t Miller active and available? Fine, fine, whatever.”

Bond rolls his eyes; he’s officially being deployed for whatever is going on, and so grabs his jacket and his gun and waits for instructions. Q cradles the phone between ear and shoulder whilst typing, twisting a head around to nod, singularly, at Bond; Bond’s own phone buzzes, and he takes it out, unsurprised to see his unfolding mission brief while Q’s still talking.

“… I know I did but that’s hardly the point,” Q snaps, “that doesn’t mean it’s my responsibility whenever he shows up…”

Bond reads the screen. Sighting of Sebastian Moran, a few streets away, and apparently there’s a whole building on fire.

Sounds like Jim.

Q hangs up.

“Why don’t you want me going?” Bond asks cursorily. “If it’s Jim?”

Q snorts loudly. “He’ll be long gone with no trace. This will be routine for him, he probably got in trouble and set the hotel on fire just to make sure. No, no; I’m going to see if I can trace where he went afterwards, but I’m not optimistic, it’ll take me days - chasing shadows. But go, make an appearance, why not. You see a single police car, you bail on my authority. Oh, and we need milk, celery, pasta… you know what, I’ll message you.”
“Please do, I’ll never remember,” Bond snorts, heading out the door. “Back in a bit.”

“Bagels!”

“Message me,” Bond calls, and shuts the door, dimly aware that he’s unable to stop smiling.

Chapter End Notes

WELL. What d'you all think?? It's fun to have a fast-paced and slightly bonkers one. Hope you enjoyed <3 Jen.
Chapter 36

Jim and Moran are on the move.

Their singular hostage spilled his guts without hesitation, which made for a quick - but very boring - interrogation.

After Moran’s behaviour, Jim was desperate for a decent session with a screaming captive. He wanted to go with severed limbs and sliced-out tongue and pierced eyeballs, and wound up with pathetic weeping and Moran urging them to leave Jim, you have your information, let’s go and so he stabs the man in the throat with a screwdriver and leaves him to slowly gurgle out death.

It takes Jim about half an hour in absolute silence before his nerve snaps.

Moran has been expecting it. He continues driving, keeping to smaller roads; motorways have too many cameras, too many ways for Q to trace them, if he wants to work at it. They’ll need to change cars soon.

“We need to have a chat, darlin’,” Jim murmurs, sounding anything but fond, and his accent is inexplicable. “How. Fecking. Dare you.”

Moran doesn’t look over, keeps driving. “You’re not a teenager, you can’t pull that off,” he says, blithely unaware that he is not merely playing with fire, he has just poured petrol over the fire and introduced it to kindling.

Jim snarls, a throttled sound, and yanks the handbrake sharply upwards without hesitation or pause while the car is still heading forward at a more than reasonable speed.

It is very fortunate that Moran is such a good driver.

Moran barely manages to skid off the side of the road in time to avoid a pile-up, the car spinning in a tight circle with a ghastly noise, crunching and shrieking and grinding, Moran manoeuvring the steering wheel, avoiding the car flipping entirely by a hair’s breadth and coming to a skidding halt.

The airbags inflate as an odd afterthought, and Jim holds a knife to Moran’s throat, gargling out something alarmingly like a sob while Moran is still trying to establish which way is up.

“What the fuck?!” Moran manages in the aftershock, spitting in the confined space while Jim tries very, very, very hard not to kill him.

Jim’s body shudders with desperate breaths, hand shaking out of measure, the blade shivering as Jim tries to pull himself back from the edge, tries to stop the spasming that throbs in his body and threatens to careen him into the screaming, the screaming he doesn’t go in for any more, not again.
Moran all but sighs with weary frustration as he easily disarms Jim, (he’s a professional, for god’s sake) and holds the knife to the other man’s throat instead. “Explain,” he says coldly, as the car smokes around them, the smell of burned rubber and brakes stifling, choking.

The thing Moran does not expect is for Jim to throw himself forward in what appears to be a violent suicide attempt.

(it is. It is impulsive, but it is.)

Moran barely moves in time to avoid killing him outright.

The blade glances off his jawbone, and there is an explosion of blood.

Instantly, Moran is in motion: there are rudimentary medical supplies in the car, but not enough. Mercifully, a car skidding off the road will not have gone unnoticed: undoubtedly, there are emergency services wending their way already.

First things first is stemming the bleeding. Moran pulls off his jacket and balls it up, holding it to Jim’s split-open face, seeing a glint of white where it hit bone and fucking terrified that he’s caught an artery because shit knows he cannot deal with that on his own.

Jim himself is eerily still. No screaming or thrashing. Everything - fight, life, soul - seems to have gone out of him.

He seems already dead.

“Jim, talk to me,” Moran orders, unable to take pressure off the injury, feeling Jim’s pulse; quick but constant, strong, alive. “Jim.”

There is nothing. Jim’s body is malleable, soft, lolling in his seat and eyes staring blankly into empty space. Moran has no clue what to do with himself as blood leaks into the black-blue-navy of the jacket and Jim just will not react, blinks languidly, unfocused.

“Jim. Respond.”

Nothing.

Moran undoes his seatbelt, extricates Jim from the car - slashing the airbag en route - and follows him out, recovery position, still keeping the pulse in check and trying to establish why in the name of fuck Jim is behaving like a cooling corpse.

Sirens are audible (thank god they’re still just about in London, responses are quick) and Jim is alive and that has to be enough, and Moran knows precisely what he has to do even though Jim will, quite probably, murder him for it when he’s compus mentis enough to understand what he’s done.

Moran picks up the phone, and calls Mycroft.

-

Q visits Eurus for the first time since losing his legs.

“Hi,” he says softly to her, as he wheels in. “Sorry it’s been a while, got a bit… waylaid.”

Eurus’s head snaps to him and - for the slightest fragment of a second - she breathes, in such a way as to interrupt her usual, uncomplicated air. It is everything Q needs to know that she is still in the building, even when everybody else seems to think Eurus is all but a vegetable, Q knows she’s in
there and alive and thriving.

Q wheels himself forward, into the three-foot perimeter, reaches out a hand to press against the glass. “I missed you,” he says softly, smiling, before his expression shifts slightly. “I need your help.”

Eurus drifts - and that’s the only word for it, she seems to move without walking, without steps, just meandering in a wind that doesn’t exist - to the glass, indistinct smile in the corners of her mouth.

Q doesn’t expect much.

All the same, her hand lifts - excruciatingly slowly - to press against Q’s, an inch of bulletproof glass and an eternity between them.

Eurus’s lips move, and while no sound comes out, it is a step of such enormity Q cannot help but be left breathless.

always
-

In Jim’s absence, Moran takes the metaphorical wheel, and deals with everything that he must.

Mycroft - because of course, it is Mycroft - comes when called. Despite never having expected a phone call from Moran to ever happen, it has, and Mycroft shows up within minutes of their arrival at the nearest hospital and demands to know exactly what is going on.

Moran is not stupid.

However, compared to Mycroft Holmes, he isn’t merely outdone. He isn’t eclipsed.

In this instance, Moran is so extraordinarily, ridiculously, comically outclassed there are no words to even vaguely cover it. Mycroft is stratospheres above and beyond Moran.

And yet, this is what Jim has always prepared him for. Somehow, Jim knew this would happen.

(Moran hasn’t ruled out that Jim is doing all of this as a fucked-up test, and he behaves as he knows he should)

“So. How did this happen?”

Moran raises an eyebrow, and gestures at Jim. “Attempted to crash the car, attempted to kill me,” he summarises simply, “and then… he just… shit, well. I was holding a knife to his throat, he tried to kill himself.”


Moran smiles vaguely. “You’ve met Jim, right?”

“He’s suicidal now?” Mycroft asks, with patent disbelief, as though Moran is totally new to this game and, indeed, new to Jim. “For god’s sake, Sebastian.”

Nobody calls him Sebastian. It oddly grounds him, gives everything context.

This is Mycroft Holmes. This is somebody who has tried to destroy everything Jim stands for, on multiple occasions, and who Moran knows will see through him but god knows, he is desperately
unlikely to see the truth because it’ll scare him far too much.

“This is Jim,” Moran replies, blandly. “He does things on an instinct. A whim. Usually I don’t get it, I don’t pretend to... this one makes more sense, weirdly. I get it.”

“You do?” Mycroft asks, with feigned politeness. “Do go on?”

Moran laughs vaguely, gently. “He was angry, hurt,” Moran replies, succinct and careful. “He didn’t know what to do, so he took the option he thought made sense at the time. Mr Holmes, you must understand...”

“Mycroft.”

Moran looks up at him, blinks. “Excuse me?”

Mycroft raises an eyebrow, disconcerted, curious. “Come on now. At this point, it’s absurd to call me Mycroft. Surely we have both witnessed enough at the mercy of our requisite weaknesses to merit first-name terms?”

It is laughable. “Mr Holmes,” Moran says pointedly, “I don’t know what to do, and I am assuming you do?”

Mycroft lets out a strange sound, something like a cackle. “Now now, Sebastian,” (and why, why is he doing this?) “tell me the truth. James Moriarty is not a man to impulsively kill himself, not on a whim. He’s too calculated for that. Too intelligent.”

(Moran cannot believe how stupid the man is, for somebody who is supposed to be clever)

“No, Mr Holmes,” Moran says quietly, “he isn’t.”

-

Eurus dances in her motion, drawing and tapping and communicating in an infinitude of ways not confined to the auditory; Q listens, taps back in his own way, talks and echoes and makes sure he knows, understands the various bits and pieces she’s throwing his way.

It makes sense, in an odd and disjointed fashion. It takes time, mistakes. Eurus smiles and her expression shifts by minute degrees, which is all Q has to go on, but it is more than enough because she is his sister and because he is prepared to listen.

He could listen forever, if she let him.

Instead, he rolls with whatever she offers, whatever she is prepared to offer, and it is more than enough.

-

Jim lies catatonic as Mycroft lectures, and Moran finds it hilarious.

He wonders, distantly, if Jim is influencing him just a little too much, if that is why he finds it fucking hysterical that Mycroft Holmes, one of the most dangerous men in the world, is trying to lecture him about the nature of suicidality and Jim Moriarty when he patently doesn’t know what on earth he is talking about.

Moran does what he is best at, and remains utterly impassive. Takes the verbal slinging and ignores it entirely.
“... and you of all people should know that these things are contrivances,” Mycroft attempts to end, while Moran daydreams about sex, wonders whether Jim will mind if he goes on the hunt for an underage whore because it’s been a while and clearly, Jim isn’t going to be in any state to do anything sensible in the immediate future.

Plus Moran is fucking *livid* at Jim, and plans to do something about it.

“Sorry, what was that?” he asks, voice lazy and cold.

Mycroft, satisfyingly, looks affronted in the extreme. “I was attempting to get through to you,” he replies, trying to make himself sound collected and in control, vaguely aware he is not, and extremely aware that - other than John Watson - Moran is the lowest-intellect person to manage such an honour.

“You seem to be missing the point, Mr Holmes,” Moran tells him, while Jim’s monitors beep, consistent and tender. “Jim is non-responsive, and there is no medical reason. Q is not currently an ally for reasons I cannot disclose. Can you give us help, or not?”

Mycroft is faced with a very binary choice.

Which is good, Mycroft is good at binaries.

They stand in an uneasy face-off. Without Mycroft’s help, Q will find them in the space of hours, at most; Jim needs to be looked after, needs professional help in some way or form and Moran isn’t above asking for help from anybody who’ll offer it.

Mycroft exhales slowly, carefully, through his nose. “Are you intending to tell me why Q is not an ally?”

“No,” Moran tells him coldly, calmly.

And so Mycroft considers as best he can with the information in front of him. “Sebastian…”

“... Moran,” Moran corrects, unapologetic, but not unkindly.

He twitches the smallest of smiles, a quirk of something in the corner of his mouth. “Moran,” Mycroft therefore nods, with a newfound degree of respect, of care. “I will give you a month.”

Moran raises an eyebrow a fraction of a degree upwards. “A month?”

“I trust that will be sufficient?”

It is more than sufficient. It is insane and disproportionate. It is an extension above and beyond anything Moran expected, or indeed had considered possible.

Jim’s monitors beep.

In the context, Moran cannot risk a look, not a single glance in Jim’s direction; he looked earlier, has tattooed the man’s body into his retinas and needs only blink to know what he looked like, looks like:

Staring at the ceiling, eyes glassy, blank, irises ink black, pupils dilated inside them as though drugged, mouth slightly slack, almost dribbling, saliva collecting in the corners of his cracked lips, crisp white bandages coating where six stitches along the jawline have patched his face back together.
Scans and tests and reflexes tested, and Jim should have responded to some of them, any of them, but hasn’t and didn’t and isn’t and won’t, no matter how hard they try, even with neurologists and psychologists and physicians and whatever the hell else.

Jim is always Moran’s weakness, which is why he cannot - will not - look.

“Yes, Mr Holmes,” he says instead, letting himself be lulled by the beeping. “That will be sufficient.”

Q says goodbye with a tenderness and adoration that curves around Eurus’s body and makes Q hope he is enough, to keep her tethered, to keep her breathing, even when her life is going to be spent mostly alone, he hopes and prays that he and Sherlock and Mycroft (and Mycroft visits, even if he’ll never admit it) and their parents (who now go fortnightly, monthly at the very outside) will be enough.

“Jim’s okay,” he says, as something of an afterthought, realising he never told her; Eurus being Eurus, she moves all of a millimetre, and he knows Eurus knew even when he never said. Q says it all the same, because he knows it matters. “Does he ever visit?”

The vaguest of quirked eyebrows, barely a shift, barely a breath.

Of course he does. Jim visits, he comes regularly. Not as regularly as some others, but it’s Jim; he breezes in when he likes, breezes out just as easily, comes and plays with his sister-from-another-mister, the only woman he has ever had the slightest ounce of respect for.

(and no, The Woman doesn’t count, not to Jim)

(and no, his mother doesn’t count, not to Jim)

“How often?”

Eurus weaves her head from one side to the other, and Q reads what he must: intermittent, but welcome when he does. Chats to her. Plays on his little piccolo (Jim can have music wherever he goes) and serenades her in his own particular way, trilling strains of Rossini and Bach and folk songs and old rock songs and strange rearrangements of more recent pop songs that Eurus would never have known by virtue of being in solitary confinement when they were popular.

Jim raps, from time to time. Given that he’s a) Irish and b) can’t rap for shit, it’s pretty comical overall.

Q can understand every echo of her, from beginning to end, and he misses her conversation. He misses the strange flatness of her voice, the lack of affect, the odd unevenness that characterised every conversation they had: they were never active, never engaged. Q, Eurus. Unlike their brothers, they were emptiness incarnate, and never felt the need to decorate it for some strange greater good.

She was the first person who sounded like him.

“He may not come back for a while.”

Eurus releases a soft, disconcerting sound; it is like a whisper, a whimper, and she misses him. She misses him just a tidy degree of how much Q misses him, and it aches in Q like it should ache in everybody else.

Oh, Jim.
Oh, *Eurus*.

She is so innocent, even when she is not; she seeps wrongness, the instability and inconceivable weirdness that lurks at the edge of a conscience and tries, edges, into every facet and moves it, changes it, manoeuvres every breath into something wrought and wrong and lovely.

Eurus is nothing and everything, and Q just wishes he could have done more. Could do more. Can do more. Maybe he can understand and learn to understand and appreciate, learn, precisely what is happening in her mind and what he can do with her.

Maybe there’s nothing. Maybe she is beyond his help.

For now, Q just lives for the day he’ll hear her speak again, and trails out of her cell with a lingering sense of heavy, cloying sadness.

Chapter End Notes

This went in a completely unexpected direction; but then, what can you expect from these mad humans?

If you can, please do comment and generally wave in my direction, I absolutely adore hearing your words and they brighten my life at the most unexpected of moments. Jen.
Chapter 37

Mycroft does precisely as promised.

Despite it seeming halfway impossible, he makes the pair of them disappear. Completely non-responsive Jim and a very tired, very old-feeling Moran are given a safe house and care team and all the rest of it and given time to settle.

The most important thing is trying to make Jim respond. Tests are fairly comprehensive and nobody has the faintest idea, still; Mycroft is bringing in specialists of his own, flown in from around the world, and Moran knows the man is risking everything.

It is quite exciting, actually, to find Mycroft Holmes siding - whether he intends it or not - with Jim Moriarty.

Two weeks pass.

“Any change?” Mycroft asks blandly, walking in, umbrella audibly clicking, even on carpet.

There is nothing. Jim doesn’t so much as twitch.

Moran doesn’t understand why Mycroft is visiting, why he is doing this, why he has even the slightest bit of care; Jim is not his problem, has never been his problem. Q was. Q, who he let vanish for two years and let be tortured and loves but cannot, Mycroft has never shown nearly enough care for Q.

Jim, on the other hand: Mycroft is here. Stays here.


Mycroft looks a little surprised. “You believe that?”

“He got pissed off and didn’t know how to cope,” Moran theorises aloud, “and so he clocked out completely. Once he’s got his head back out of his arse he’ll be back to normal. You wait for it.”

All of this has reached the point of feeling rather passé to Moran. The moment he found out it had no medical reason, he stopped being concerned; psychologically, Jim has enough control as he intends to have at a given moment. As and when he wants to get himself out of this, he will do so.

Meanwhile, Moran has been out whore-hunting, and enjoying it tremendously. Three so far, which is enough of a hit to keep him sailing across another day or two. Moran doesn’t always kill them, but did the end one whom he deemed a talk-risk; the other two were heroin addicts with too much angst and too little credibility.

(the point’s a little moot; the DNA associated with Moran on all computing systems is incorrect, so even if they went and tattled, it shouldn’t lead back to Moran in any or form)

Professional crime is such an under-appreciated art.

Mycroft looks tired, Moran notes to himself.

It makes him think, treacherously, of the obvious: Jim does, too. In a way that is more than just lack of sleep. Mycroft has the exhaustion that starts to seep into body and bone when age creeps up behind you, the same type that Moran knows is slowing him down and increasingly making him
redundant. Jim is starting to have the same shadows of it, and it scares Moran, just a little.

In Jim’s absence, Moran is having to consider many things, including - and not limited to - whether it would be better, in the end, to just go. Rather than wait for Jim to replace him. Take matters into his own hands and replace himself before Jim can object.

There are plenty of suitable candidates who could take Moran’s place with Moriarty Inc. It would be difficult, very difficult, but not impossible. Maybe it’s worth starting training now, while Jim’s out of the equation.

And then, when the new person is ready, dispatch himself and leave Jim to move on. Bullet through the temple, simple and clean.

And Moran would, he really would, if it weren’t for the fact that he doesn’t want to leave Jim alone. Ever. He is trapped in the unending catch-22 of wanting to die before Jim grows tired of him, but similarly never wanting to leave Jim alone, never again.

Jim feels loneliness so acutely, and he is so breakable, can be shattered by a thought.

Moran flatters himself that Jim needs him.

(and has no real idea how true that is)

Mycroft clears his throat. Moran does not need to come back to attention; he was already there, but simply had nothing to add. Mycroft makes the mistake of thinking Moran is stupid.

“Why are you here, Mr Holmes?” Moran asks, and deliberately lets a trace of emotion into his voice; it’s something he has learned from Jim, how to manipulate otherwise blank questions into something more wrought and more vulnerable.

And that’s the splendid thing about vulnerability: it is almost always reciprocated, especially by humans who do not specialise in being human. Mycroft is not foolish enough to sound vulnerable, no, but he might be disarmed just about enough to tell something approaching the truth.

“I’m keeping an eye on him,” Mycroft replies, as honestly as he is able to be.

Jim doesn’t have anybody else, not beyond Moran. Q and Sherlock, even if they never wanted to admit it, have always had their brother and their parents and lovers and their (occasional) friends.

There is something about Jim that fires the same protective, parental instinct he has with regards to his siblings. Jim is too old for all these games by now, far too old; he paints it away with hair dye and botox, but Moran can see it, and god knows Mycroft can see it too.

Mycroft isn’t even trying to stave off age. Keeps good care of himself, of course, but doesn’t pretend he is anything other than what he is.

It helps that, when unconscious, Jim looks just a shadow like Q.

In any case: Moran knows, and Mycroft knows.

Sentimentality infects them both.

It takes Q not-very-long to go from ‘impressed’ to ‘outright suspicious’.
Even with Jim’s notable skills, this is exceptional. Not a single lead. Not a single vague inclination, radio silence on all possible fronts, every scout and every embedded lead Q has tried.

To be fair, he isn’t plunging everything he has into it. Work has been busy, and (yes) there’s a part of him that doesn’t want to kill Jim right now, and there’s an ever bigger part that hopes (knows) Jim will make a mistake regardless and appear out on his radar as he did two weeks ago.

But ever since then, there’s been nothing. And that’s despite the Russian secret service being reasonably keen on killing him. Q also knows, with a fair degree of certainty, that Jim hasn’t been keeping appointments or making any new ones; he has completely dropped off the edge of the map and if it weren’t for Q, various parts of their empire would be struggling.

Which means that something has happened. Because fights and arguments and hate and angst notwithstanding, their empire has been built for decades and that is, will always be, their priority.

“... so aren’t you using Eurus’s plan to flush him out?” Bond asks pleasantly, pouring a cup of coffee with one hand and eating a home-made croissant with the other (yes, Bond bakes, and indeed bakes patisserie from time to time, a strange speciality from missions in France once or twice too often).

Q shrugs, steals another croissant (Bond always makes dozens, Q is on his fourth) and bites into it, no jam or butter required, swallowing it down with an oversized gulp of disgustingly strong tea. “I’m considering it.”

Eurus made some suggestions. One of them involves terrorism. The other involves talking honestly about his feelings. Q knows which is more likely.

Thing is, the terrorism option will take a lot of organising and a lot of death. Getting Jim out in the open is about jealousy, and it needs to be big: the idea that a big terrorist attack could happen on British soil without Jim’s say-so would be so insulting, so outright absurd, that it would lead him to act erratically and thus emerge.

And Q can do it, he can certainly work out how, and Eurus has helped. At least a few dozen dead, couple of major cities kneecapped for between twelve and twenty-four hours apiece, several billion pounds worth of necessary repairs and all blamed on somebody else (and best part, Q can even make it Not His Problem by ensuring it’s internally generated rather than international; MI5 can look after it).

He would.

But if something’s happened to Jim, it’s completely pointless. Lots of people dead for no real purpose. Q baulks a little at that.

“... and Jim being so efficiently… gone… is strange,” Q completes, in his cursory explanation for Bond’s benefit. “I can’t shake the feeling that something has gone really wrong. Injured, dead. He wouldn’t just let things go like this without a fight.”

Bond nods faintly. “So what do you want to do?”

“Up the investigation,” Q says, as though it’s the most obvious thing in the world (which, to Q, it probably is). “And I’m going to send out some feelers, see if he actually is dead.”

To his credit, Bond doesn’t blink. “How likely?”

“Oh, very unlikely, but if he find out I think he’s dead he’ll misstep anyway, so there’s no point in not,” Q explains, and - bless him, the little psychopath - he’s brightening with every word. “It’ll
make him drop his guard. Then we’ll get him. Prick.”

Bond laughs lightly. “You’re enjoying yourself.”

Q glances up, and his eyes are bright and sparkling, and he smiles in a way that still makes Bond feel like something is shifting under him.

“Like nothing you’d believe.”

Q and Sherlock meet up for coffee and alcohol, non-respectively; Sherlock is under strict orders to remain sober from absolutely everything, and yes, that includes alcohol.

Thus, Q is cradling brandy (despite technically not being permitted alcohol either, courtesy of painkillers, but he is ignoring that edict wholesale) while Sherlock sips tea lazily. “I don’t know why you like alcohol.”

“I don’t know why you like coke,” Q parries unkindly, without a heartbeat of hesitation, ignoring the vague flinch, because Sherlock totally merited that one. “How are you?”

Sherlock shrugs wonkily. “As well as you would imagine.”

The dark circles have lessened, the palpable exhaustion faded. Showers have been had, a shave, dressing himself and generally making something approaching an effort. There’s a distance to go - mostly to do with weight, given that Sherlock is presently wraith-like - but this happens every time.

“But truly,” Q asks again, a little more gently this time, so little no other would be able to detect it; indeed, to passers-by, he sounds all but cruel. “Is any of it actually getting through?”

Sherlock debates lying. Q can see it.

That is all that’s needed; Q sighs slightly, and Sherlock’s expression is distantly apologetic, and of course it isn’t, of course Sherlock will always have his drugs and his dependency and the constellations of weaknesses and flaws that make him the person he is, he wouldn’t be Sherlock without it.

They sit in perfectly companionable silence for a few minutes, just enjoying being in one another’s presence in the unhurried, unpressured way they seem to be managing these days.

Eventually, though, Q is kind enough to prompt whatever it is that provoked the meeting in the first place; evidently something Sherlock finds challenging, awkward to bring up, or he would have done it on the phone or started talking already: “Spit it out.”

“Our mother has been diagnosed with cancer. Less than six months as a rough prognosis.”

Q understands Sherlock’s reluctance: despite Sherlock being variably close to their parents, Q is not in the slightest. Q regrets and resents and truly, the news of an imminent demise is fairly welcome, although he isn’t cruel enough to say that outright to Sherlock.

In fact, Q has no clue whatsoever quite what to say.

“Just thought you should know,” Sherlock tells him, and Q nods mutely, unsure what to do with some of the odder, less familiar emotions that seem to be encroaching. “She’s asked to see you. If you’ll come.”
Q shakes his head, still not trusting himself to speak. It’s been a long time since he willingly spent
time anywhere near his parents, and he has quite enough to handle right now without adding a
reunion to his list.

Physical therapy is going well. Q is now probably one of the world’s foremost experts on prosthetics.
One is being custom-made as they speak and waits for Q to be able to physically handle it.

It’s nice to be outside, in the open air. Yes, Bond is sat a few tables away from them (they’re in a
quiet pub, one of Q’s favourites, back home in London and returning to something resembling
normal) but he isn’t in hospital, or the flat, or MI6. It’s odd, how Q never cared about going outside
until the option was forcibly removed from him.

“I know Mycroft will get everybody he can involved,” Sherlock is continuing, while Q flounders
somewhere in his own brain and tries to concentrate, “so it shouldn’t be protracted or painful, but…”

And yes, it’s still ridiculously early days. Discharged from hospital, barely, and still has check-ins
and therapy and consultants every hour of the goddamn day, most of which are mercifully being held
in the MI6 buildings anyway but it still means the vast majority of Q’s life is being taken up with
things he does not enjoy.

“… daddy is coping remarkably well…”

Avoided the worst of post-septic shock and is trying to return to work, because he loves it and it
reminds him why he does the things he does, even though he can only type for a couple of hours at a
time and sleeps for the rest when he isn’t being poked and prodded by everybody who’s ever
passingly waved a medical certificate.

“… treatment of…”

Q cannot think, his mind is reeling.

This is all quite a lot to handle. And his legs hurt. And he has missed brandy. And it makes him think
of Jim.

(everything makes him think of Jim)

“… thank you for telling me,” Q interrupts, and hopes that will suffice in terms of shutting down the
conversation.

Thank you every god, Sherlock understands, and stops talking.

Neither know how to fill the silence. Sherlock finds it uncomfortable, Q does not. It was forever
thus.

“Erm…”

Q doesn’t bother looking up, just waves vaguely at the spare chair, inviting the newcomer to sit
whilst studying Sherlock and wishing, for one of very few times in his life, that he had his siblings’
deductive capacities.

“… I didn’t invite him,” Sherlock says redundantly.

Q blinks. “No. I did.”

John Watson is doing an excellent approximation of a dying fish, flailing for air. “You’re…”
“Just sit?” Q suggests, a little more kindly, mainly because it looks like John might have a mild heart attack if not. “Sherlock will get you a drink.”

Sherlock, who would probably rather eat live scorpions, looks as shocked as John does at this prospect. “But…”

“… he…”

“Riveting though it is to listen to the pair of you fail to make it through a sentence, could we just get on with it?” Q asks rhetorically, gesturing once again to the chair whilst John switches Rosie from one hip to the other with admirable dexterity; she’s getting quite big now, more so than Q had anticipated.

Time passes so quickly, sometimes.

John doesn’t quite suit parenthood. Encumbered with an empty pushchair and bag of supplies and small child and all the rest has left him looking not quite as peaceful as Q knows he can be, when he’s under stress, in a war zone, when lives are in the balance. For all he tries, he isn’t quite right like this.

But even the simple fact of being in Sherlock’s proximity is making him shift, just a little, those subtle alterations that mark him for who and what he is.

(meanwhile, at the other table, Bond raises an eyebrow; Q needs only look at him, and he withdraws, content that there are no problems to be addressed)

“Sherlock?” Q prompts.

Sherlock is still looking rather kneecapped, but - somewhat shockingly - does in fact get up, and go towards the bar, while John puts Rosie in her chair and sits in his and looks over Q with a very, very strange expression.

“… how are you?” John asks, after a moment; Q can tell there is professional interest mixed in with the genuine sympathy. After all, they had been kidnapped together. And then John had attended the second kidnapping with Sherlock.

Q smiles faintly. “Well, I’m an amputee now, which makes the broken leg seem like a fond and distant memory,” he says, with a biting edge of sarcasm that John takes wholeheartedly in his stride. “But overall? Better than I have any right to be at this stage.”

“Bit surprised to see you… out,” John nods, with a slightly pointed look at the brandy, which Q duly ignores but appreciates all the same.

“I refused to be kept in much longer,” Q tells him. “Bit stir crazy. It has been weeks.”

John nods, although it is (unsurprisingly) a touch strained. “All the same.”

“All the same,” Q concedes.

Sherlock has finally managed to attract attention and is paying, and Q takes this as his cue to address John about the aspects he’s been summoned for; oddly enough, John was not high on Q’s list for a social call, not after a kidnap where he very much wanted to murder the man.

For the record, John Watson has many excellent qualities.
Q only finds him unbelievably annoying. Even when being polite and courteous (because he matters to Sherlock) it is difficult to not find him just indescribably annoying. Moral and steadfast and sickeningly nice, it drives Q quietly insane.

And so, to business, so Q can go to his next appointment and be told, again, that he is working too much and should be resting more.

“I’m assuming Sherlock has told you the essentials?” Q asks, unwilling to put the man (and himself) through more angst than is absolutely necessary.

John shakes his head slightly. “I know you work for the government, and you’re called Q, and there’s no surname or anything else,” John tells him carefully, “and I… assume… given Sherlock’s reactions, and yours actually… you’re related. To the Holmeses.”

Q is surprised. Sherlock hasn’t told John the obvious.

“Fourth sibling.”

John makes a subtle noise but his expression doesn’t change all that much; he’s apparently rather used, now, to random Holmeses popping out of various dark corners. “Sibling?”

“Youngest brother,” Q nods.

“Are there are more?”

Sherlock slides into his chair with a horizontal thump, putting a pint in front of John and a coke in front of himself and a brandy in front of Q. “I sincerely hope not.”

“Ditto,” Q agrees. “Quite enough of us to contend with. What else have you gleaned, or indeed been told?”

John shoots a somewhat nervous look at Sherlock, who shrugs elaborately; he’ll be griping for days about the indignity of being forced to get the drinks, Q can see it coming.

But then, Q doesn’t have to live with him (unlike John), so it doesn’t matter much to him.

“Not much,” John says, and even Q’s lack of deductive capacity can see that he isn’t lying. “Sherlock more or less banned the subject, apparently it would be dangerous for me to know?”

“I’d like to know more than I know,” Sherlock adds, in a very audible non-undertone.

Q doesn’t spare him the withering glance he merits, and focuses his attention solely on John. “Q. Quartermaster for MI6. You’ve signed the OSA?”

“OSA?”

“Official secrets act,” Q supplements, and waits for John’s answering nod. “Good. Then I am at liberty to tell you more or less nothing, barring that you do not know me. You do not know I am related to this idiot. You do not know what has happened to me. You do not know my job, my background. You do not know my partner. You know nothing.”

John, intriguingly, smiles a very little. “I can manage that. I usually know nothing.”

Q doesn’t doubt that for a moment. He also doesn’t doubt that not-knowing is the bane of John Watson’s existence. Q constitutes the most classified thing he’s ever had to encounter.
“Why are you telling me this?” John asks.

It’s a good question. Most of this would have been covered in the meeting John must have had with MI6, where they detailed the terms of the OSA and what it meant in practise.

Sherlock grows a fraction stiller, from his previous bored disinterest and passive-aggression: he is also interested in the answer.

“I am a part of Sherlock’s life,” Q says eventually. “And while I have been keeping an intelligent distance, that is no longer tenable; you are also going to be a perpetual part of Sherlock’s life, obviously, and if we’ve already crossed the bridge of you knowing of my existence, it seems prudent to not pretend otherwise.”

If John finds this unlikely, or inadequate, he covers it well. “Makes sense. Moriarty?”

“Under observation and of tactical use to the UK intelligence services,” Q assures him, hoping that will suffice to cover the matter, and it does. Unlike Sherlock - whose scepticism rolls off him - John is willing to take matters as presented until proven otherwise.

After all, why else would anybody willingly side with James Moriarty?

Rosie is whining. Q isn’t paying the slightest attention, but Sherlock seems to fall into his role as godfather and does an admirable job of trying to distract and generally placate bored toddler while John and Q have what Q fervently hopes is their last major conversation.

“Is there anything else I should know?” John asks.

Q thinks.

“No,” he says, after a moment. “But don’t worry, Johnny-boy. I’ll tell you if there is.”

John’s reaction is perfect. No flinch nor gasp, nothing so obvious; that stillness again though, the abrupt shift to battle stations that rings through his body and makes him on the verge of action, so close, a reflexive desire. Nobody before or since has called him that name, and the last thing John enjoys is being reminded of being strapped to semtex in a pool in the middle of the night.

“Don’t call me that,” John tells him, after a moment, and it isn’t really a question (and Q respects him for that, actually, it’s remarkably daring). “It’s John.”

Q lets the moment settle for a second or so, before nodding his acquiescence. “John,” he agrees calmly. “A pleasure.”

A darted glance in Bond’s direction, and the man wends his way over, appearing at Q’s side with admirable speed. “Hello John,” Bond says warmly to John, who looks a little bit taken aback at the sheer friendliness of it. “Sherlock. You’re looking better.”

Sherlock, who (bizarrely) manages to look more at home than John does with a child batting at him; a touch out of his depth, but he palpably adores Rosie and lets that guide his actions.

“Amazing what detox can do,” he says drily. “Q…”

“I’ll be in touch,” Q interrupts, before Sherlock can do anything annoying like be sentimental or nice. “Goodbye, both.”

And with that, Bond wheels him out, leaving the two somewhat startled men to their own devices,
while Rosie - with the kind of timing only two-year-olds can manage - starts to bawl.
Chapter 38

There is still no suggestion of Jim anywhere.

Q decides this is his cue to take action, and so he does, in a project he’s calling The Alphabet Bombings. It has a degree of malicious creativity that Jim is unlikely to ascribe to Q, and so hopefully will draw him out of hiding and back into play once again.

A small independent terrorist cell will be taking credit in the first instance, but given the scope, Q wants to keep this under his own observation: this will not only have him fired, but hung, drawn and quartered, if they catch him.

It’s by the far the most dangerous thing Q has ever organised, and that’s going some.


The papers go absolutely ballistic the moment they realise, unsurprisingly: this takes organisation and cruelty and imagination on a hitherto unknown scale, and each attack is killing at least two (the Edinburgh one manages eleven), the degree of the attack varies but the one thing that seems consistent is that it’s in alphabetical order.

It’s insane, sadistic. It’s so very, very Jim that Q can’t help but hope.

But Folkestone comes and goes, and there’s still nothing.

And Q is now getting worried.

- Moran watches events unfold with entirely justified alarm: this is Jim-esque, but Jim remains comatose of what seems, ostensibly, his own volition.

“... which means there’s a group in the UK carrying out elaborate and creative terrorism without going through you, and if that isn’t enough to make you want to get a fucking grip and wake up…”

And Jim does.

Quite seriously. Moran speaks, and Jim opens his eyes, sits up, and starts to divest himself of medical equipment as though nothing in particular has happened or is happening.

“... Jim?”

"Yes darlin’?” Jim replies innocently. “Still alive, I see. How disappointing. You were sayin’?”

“Domestic terrorism on a national scale.”

The grin lights up Jim’s face, although his eyes are unpleasantly cold. “Sounds like fun. Lots of fun. I think I have work to do. Laptop. And where’s staff when you need ‘em, much though I’d love to yank a catheter out all by myself…”

Moran obligingly buzzes the nurse who’s been assigned to keep an eye on them, and cannot quite believe how Jim can possibly be behaving like nothing has happened, like he hasn’t been bedridden for weeks and nonresponsive.
“You’re going to need to explain this one,” Moran warns.

Jim just looks at him, flat, scarily inflexionless. “Why? We’re done with it now, hmm?”

Moran could punch him. Sincerely debates doing it, in fact, even though that would be slightly unfair to do to somebody who’s going to be fatigued as all hell and have some muscular atrophy from immobility for an extended period of time.

“It’s been weeks, and I’ve had to organise protection from $Q$ while you play silly buggers, so yes, you have to tell me what you thought you were playing at,” Moran reiterates, stronger now and quite distinctly pissed off.

“Yes, how have you managed that?” Jim asks, cannula confidently pulled out of his wrist and now probing gently at his own face, intrigued by what he managed to do to himself. “I’m impressed, Sebby.”

“No, stop it,” Moran insists, “my questions first. I merit that, Jim, you fucking owe me. Why?”

Jim finally looks at him properly, and there is something really, very wrong with it. More than a flatness or deadness or the infinitude of other creepy expressions Jim is capable of pulling on a daily basis, but something more honest and unkind than Moran knows how to deal with.

“I don’t know,” Jim says, and there is appalling honesty in it. “I couldn’t… I overloaded. Pssht. Everything went… white. We were in the car. I wanted to kill you, I really did, and then… I don’t quite remember the exact details.”

“You tried to kill yourself.”

Jim looks quietly surprised. “Did I?” he asks, echoes, curious more than shocked or upset. “How silly of me.”

“Don’t minimise this,” Moran asks, without as much bite as he should probably have; he just can’t quite be angry, there’s something disconcerting about Jim’s candour that’s knocking him off balance. “You did. That’s how you got hurt. I managed to avoid you slitting your own throat.”

Jim is quiet for a moment.

A nurse arrives. Neither Jim nor Moran speaks while she goes through the motions, checks him more, seems alarmed at how animated and conscious and responsive he is after the absolute silence of preceding days and weeks but she is professional and good at her job, takes it in her stride and leaves to inform a doctor.

After she leaves, Jim makes a small humming sound under his breath. “How long?”

“Three and a half weeks,” Moran replies. “Could you have woken up whenever you wanted?”

Jim considers the question for a moment. “Yes and no,” he says, voice pensive. “If I’d tried, probably. I just didn’t want to try.”

The honesty is now getting very, very disturbing. Not to mention that Jim isn’t doing any of his normal laughing or mocking or smirking or melodic bouncing that would underpin anything too serious; he is darkly sincere and it makes Moran unbelievably uncomfortable.

“Why not?”
“Why would I?” Jim replies, almost conversationally. “It seemed pointless.”

“Does it still?” Moran asks, deep into no man’s land and appallingly aware of it.

“Yes.”

“I called Mycroft.”

The look Jim fixes him with is indescribable: betrayed, just a little, but mostly shocked, and amused, and horrified, and with such all-encompassing hatred it makes Moran’s breath catch and that’s an achievement, he never shows his fear, he never shows his hands his cards but Mycroft, it had to be Mycroft, the adult in this beautiful disaster, Moran had to call daddy to take care of things.

“It was that, or you’d be dead,” Moran warns, before Jim can say a word.

(Jim is a long way from being able to voice the maelstrom of crap currently going through his head at the speed of light, but Moran doesn’t know that, he is just seeing a very quiet Jim without the slightest hint of laughter and assumes he is being a twat for the fun of it. Which would be very like him, after all).

They stay in perfect silence while Jim tries to digest the information and fails utterly.

Five minutes pass, then ten.

The doctor comes in, which forms a distraction; Jim doesn’t talk, so Moran does it for him, fill in that Jim’s current silence is not catatonia but simply him processing information, and while this is slower than usual it is within parameters and really, the primary crisis has now passed. Unbelievable as that may seem.

No, now they are working with a betrayal and a petulant Jim, both of which Moran is accustomed to and has no worries about coping with; this is within parameters, and at least Jim is talking, or can talk. That is what matters, the paralysis has gone and Jim is alive.

Jim is alive, but feels dead.

Jim might be dead, but nobody’s told him yet.

Jim might never have been alive.

Which is why, of course, the man starts screaming at the top of his lungs, very abruptly, high-pitched and piercing and painful and, quite frankly, very irritating. Moran is very bored by this point of Jim’s antics and has no more interest in any of it, not any longer. He is done.

And so he, unwittingly, morphs into a strange strangled version of Q in refusing to entertain it.

Jim screams. Moran continues to read the book he’s been leafing through - he’s well-versed in classics, contemporary and historical, but has avoided Plath for reasons of morbidity and Jim - so is trying to wade his way through The Bell Jar and cannot help but muse on the irony.

Because of course, Jim - like any petulant five-year-old - takes to being ignored by screaming at an even higher pitch and volume.

Doctors converge on the room at an alarming rate, which at least shows they are vaguely interested in the status of their patient. Moran is faced with a) trying to convince them that Jim is fine or b) locking them out; he goes for the latter, and sits back down in his chair feeling excruciatingly old.
Jim starts lobbing anything that isn’t nailed down. Moran ducks, dodges, and gives up on the book (except for using it as a shield which, to be fair, is necessary when the lightbulb from Jim’s bedside nearly shatters on top of him).

The entire situation is patently absurd, but Moran rolls with it through lack of a better option and little interest in trying to make this situation make sense; it won’t. Regardless of how hard he tries, it won’t. Jim is past that point.

Now all that remains is to wait it out.

“Fuck you Sebastian, you bastard.”

Full name; Moran can tell he is in deep shit.

The problem being, he just can’t bring himself to care unduly.

“I’m not talking to you until you calm down.”

It’s like a toddler with a tantrum, and Moran is trying very hard to wait it out; but Jim’s anger seems to be growing, not diminishing, and Moran has nobody watching (and certainly nobody who will comment) and so he stands, moves to Jim, and basically just punches him in the face. To say it is a slap would be very much understating the situation.

Blood explodes, naturally. The nose goes, the cartilage sliding and crackling beautifully; it will heal nicely enough, it isn’t quite hard enough for a full-blown shatter, but it’s enough to be distracting and enough to stall Jim’s attention-seeking shrieks almost instantly.

Instead, the man blinks in confusion for a moment, boiling hot blood seeping from his nose.

The silence is nauseatingly loud.

“Jim?”

“Seb?” Jim asks, sounding very confused and younger than he did a moment ago, more like the boy Moran first met.

Moran takes it all in his stride, because he must. “Jim. Do you know where you are?”

“Fuck off, of course I do,” Jim snaps, sounding increasingly like his normal self, but still somehow lacking; a little bit anaemic and airy somehow, just off. “You fucking punched me.”

“Slapped you. No fist involved, technically.”

Jim snorts; in doing so, blood spurts liberally, spattering his hands. Jim looks at it with academic interest but without much surprise or concern; it’s only blood, at the end of the day, and unless there are undue quantities neither party are likely to care enormously.

(there are a number of loud knocks on the door, voices, but both Jim and Moran ignore them)

Jim meanders back to the conversation at hand. “I call it a punch. Felt like a punch. Fuck you.”

Moran is utterly unperturbed and for once, not just remaining thus because he’s scared of being hurt; he is aware that his life hinges on knife edges more precarious than even Jim these days, and frankly, he is more scared of Q than of Jim.

Just.
“Jim. You can’t keep running away.”

Jim’s eviscerating gaze tries to flay him alive and fails utterly. “Watch me.”

Moran shrugs a very slight amount, enough that Jim can see it but not enough that it will be disrespectful. “You’re not going to. I’m keeping you in here for as long as it takes. I’m not having this shit any more, Jim, I’m really not.”

It is painfully obvious that Jim does not know how to compute this change, the alteration; when they met, Moran was a taciturn and silent assassin and occasional rapist/murderer, but basically a bit of a rogue who was honestly more than a little bit scared shitless of Jim and did as he was told, more or less. He had morals, once. Not many, but some.

Now, he loves Jim far too much, and it has transformed him body, blood and soul.

“You can’t keep me here, and I won’t fucking do a fucking thing I don’t want to, Sebby,” Jim spits, all acid and transparency and the swearing just comes across as laughably hollow. “You had to fucking call Mycroft. Mycroft Holmes.”

“Well yes, unless you know any other Mycrofts,” Moran parries, dust dry. “Why did you try to kill yourself?”


“Mycroft? Surely that’s obvious?”

“You know how I…” Jim stops abruptly, as though mortified to be caught very nearly confessing to feeling anything at all. “Fuck you, Sebastian. Fuck you.”

“Stop swearing, it doesn’t suit you,” Moran tells him, a little bit primly, and Jim once again looks hilariously offended. “And ‘fancied it’ won’t cut it, Jim. Try harder.”

If the situation weren’t a matter of potential life and limb, Moran would find it a lot more fun to see Jim so wrongfooted; instead, he feels an odd sense of pity, one he clamps down on very hard because Jim can and will use it as a sign of weakness if he shows any of it.

The silence once again stretches out, an unspeakable distance between them.

“... I can’t live forever,” Jim murmurs, so soft Moran could almost miss it if he tries hard enough. “I’m dying, Sebby. Why prolong the inevitable?”

Moran breathes, feeling his heartbeat thrum in his throat. “What do you mean, you’re dying?”

“We’re all dyin’, aren’t we?” Jim replies, accent encroaching around the edges, the betrayal of truth, and his eyes are unfocused and misty. “I can’t be without him. I thought I could. It’s different now, we’re different, he’s different. See? I broke you. Broke him. Broke me. Broke. I can’t breathe.”

And Jim’s scream this time is an internal thing, a broken and awful sound of somebody in more pain than can be adequately comprehended, not demanding attention but trying to make his mind translate out into his body before it eats him alive, before he dies there and then with nothing to tether him to reality.

Jim should know better, but he doesn’t and can’t, and it kills him, consumes him from the inside out to live as he does, and Moran has never realised how much pain it causes Jim just to live. Just to exist.
The noise is heart-rending, but Moran cannot bow to it, not yet. “Jim. Talk to me. Right now. You tried to kill yourself. Are you going to do it again?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I don’t know, I can’t… Seb, Sebby I can’t breathe.”

This is new and familiar all at once, the desperate childishness with the breathtaking level of manipulation Jim is capable of executing. This is both contrived and not all at once, and Moran can only address the problems as they come.

Oh, and Jim is still bleeding. Fairly copiously.

“Yes you can. Answer the question.”

There is a long not-silence; Jim is keening softly, body vibrating violently. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, so quietly Moran could almost pretend it didn’t happen (and will, later, for Jim’s benefit).

Moran doesn’t press the point.

“Mycroft was the only person who was in a position to help,” Moran explains in a clear and businesslike voice, while Jim sobs very softly to himself, not bothering to augment nor hide. “I asked him just for temporary asylum. Q has not been involved.”

Jim’s response to Q’s name hits Moran like a stab in the heart: he actively contracts, with a regret so fervent and visible it doesn’t suit him, Jim doesn’t do regret, certainly doesn’t do this type of visible heartache.

Now, it does occur to Moran that all of this is a very intelligently designed manipulation. It’s very possible. Moran knows enough to know he isn’t that bright, and if Jim is doing all of this for dramatic effect, he’ll probably be forever none the wiser.

However, it’s Jim. And so on the offchance that he’s telling the truth, Moran chooses to believe it.

“Mycroft will use this against me,” Jim notes, quietly and carefully, trying to control himself. “This is weakness.”

“Yes,” Moran agrees; Jim shoots him a look of pure murder, more in character, more himself, and it is lethal and dangerous and strangely comforting in being so. “Well come on, Jim. You’ve needed medical supervision for weeks. You tried to kill yourself then went catatonic on me. Yes, of course this is weakness. You’re better than this kind of shit. I thought you’d outgrown it.”

Jim is suddenly still, swallowing the tears down where they’ll never touch him again. “Outgrown?” he echoes, “interesting. Very interesting. Mycroft has been visiting?”

“Yes,” Moran nods, while Jim devours his own vulnerability and uses it to fuel the cosy, trilling insanity Moran is more accustomed to. “From time to time.”

Weirdly, Moran isn’t inclined to fully betray Mycroft. He could tell Jim everything - that Mycroft visited every couple of days, asked for updates, was invested and seemed to take active care and interest - but doesn’t, and wonders what that says about the parallels between himself and the eldest Holmes.

(probably a lot; they are contemporaries, over a decade older than Q and Jim, and have a disgusting amount in common for two people in utterly different worlds)

“We need to move out,” Moran reminds him, with a touch more kindness; just a little, just enough to lull him. “I don’t like being at somebody else’s mercy, especially when we still have so many people trying very hard to kill you.”

“There are always people trying to kill me,” Jim drawls happily. “That’s life, Seb.”

Moran merely raises an eyebrow. “There’s intent, and then there’s assaulting what should have been a safe house. Mycroft doesn’t believe it was Q, for what it’s worth, although I’d trust your judgement more on…”

“… it wasn’t,” Jim interrupts, before Moran can finish the sentence. “Not his style. I’m certain.”

Moran is silent. He doesn’t audibly ask the question, but after last time, Jim hears it all the same.

“You doubted me,” he therefore says, and his gaze is laser sharp; even with the pink and swollen contours of the rims of his eyes, the brown beneath it is ice cold and precise.

It takes a moment to find the correct words, to carefully navigate the worst cruelty he’s committed against Jim. “Yes. I did. I’m human. You fucked up, and yes, it’s made me doubt some of your judgement.”

“Never,” Jim says, with full deliberation and absolutely no hyperbole, “do that to me again. Whatever else happens, you will never, never doubt me like that again.”

The rest lies unsaid: Jim has proved he is better than his worst moments. That while yes, he made a massive error, he has made an infinite number of utterly inspired decisions and has very, very rarely been known to cock matters up. He has earned Moran’s respect, and his deference.

And so Moran takes it as he must: on the chin, and nods once.

It is all they need.

Jim abruptly smiles like the sun, and the previous histrionics are gone, leaving Moran with an uncomfortable sense of having been completely taken for a ride but with no true way of verifying his suspicions, he just goes with it, and doesn’t know. He just doesn’t know whether Jim is lying or not; but then, he never does.

Instead, he walks to Jim’s side. Kisses him. Tastes the blood that is all over the younger man’s face.

This is what they have, and will always have, and this will more than suffice.

Jim smiles against him, and Moran forgives him everything.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay everybody, hope this makes up for it - and HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY! Jen.

Q’s hit Manchester when Jim finally responds.

From out of nowhere, the probes stab all in unison, every scout and every aspect of Jim’s curiosity living out in desperately trying to find the human that is stage-managing this incredible piece of human cruelty.

Despite MI5, MI6, MI7 and several other departments all desperately trying to work out what is going on, it takes Jim less than four days to attribute it entirely to Q.

Q will eventually take this as the compliment it is supposed to be.

Unfortunately, he is still fairly intent on hurting - possibly outright murdering - Jim. Which makes all of this somewhat difficult to navigate.

Jim isn’t going to get in touch, not obviously. He assumes (correctly) that Q can always find him in some way, can always contact, even if he cannot find his physical form to exact revenge; Q has ownership of the technical world, and Jim waits for the messages to ping into his metaphorical inbox.

Good lord, he misses Q, though. And the whole Alphabet Bombings is making him miss him even more; Q is developing, changing, and also very transparently drawing him out of hiding. Jim almost wants to obey, just because Q is being so tantalisingly different.

(if Q realised just how quickly Jim had clocked that Q was behind the bombings, he would be not only complimented, but ashamed; Q genuinely thought it would take him far longer, if at all. Q is surprising, but not that surprising)

Q, meanwhile, is just waiting for signs of Jim’s life.

Then.

Finally.

“He’s back,” Q crows, in a voice that echoes a million Jims, enough to make Bond glance up in palpable alarm; Q grins broadly, manically. “Jim. He’s back.”

Bond raises an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Just fringes, but the activity is undeniable,” Q says, with tremendous satisfaction, scanning through page after page of information with delirious joy. “Little bastard thought he could escape notice. Ha.”

A small laugh from Bond. “You swear more around Jim,” he points out, with a smile of his own, delighted - for reasons he can’t quite explain - that Jim is still definitely alive. It had seemed plausible
that he wasn’t, for the last few weeks at least.

Bond had needed to consider what would happen to Q, without Jim, and that was a frightening concept: Q can’t be without Jim. They need each other, inextricable parts of a single organism. Even when they loathe one another, even in the current situation where Q and Jim would merrily murder each other on sight, they are balanced and equal and necessary.

“He’s not ‘around’,” Q points out pedantically, “but - I get your point. What can I say, he brings that out of me. He’s a twat. He merits swearing. Anyway, point being, he’s alive.”

Bond smiles slightly, vaguely. “You were worried.”

It isn’t quite a question, but Q wants to ask about it, argue around it; he can’t, but he wants to all the same. “I wasn’t… well I didn’t ever think he was dead. Not truly.”

(yes, he did, he feared it, but Bond isn’t cruel enough to press the point)

“And now he’s alive?” Bond queries gently, lightly.

Q shoots him a glance that falls just short of being grateful. “Now he’s alive. And I don’t know what to do with him. The little git is hardly going to advertise his time and place. I’ll find him, though, now he’s back.”

Bond nods absentmindedly. “I wonder what he was doing,” he voices aloud, still trying to span through ideas of what could have taken place, what could have compelled Jim to vanish so effectively, whether it was a hospitalisation or something. Whether he may be back, but incapacitated.

In a way, that would be the best option. If Jim is already in trouble, Bond is fairly sure that Q won’t push it further. He wants vengeance, but he doesn’t want to lose Jim completely. Sort of. It’s complicated.

Q tries and tries to make his brain refocus, clarify, and all he can hear is Sherlock drawling about grease on the lens and all the rest of it.

Speaking of siblings, there is a knock at Q’s door, definite and crisp: Mycroft. Mycroft, who has been visiting from time to time, even though Q makes no secret of the fact that he just doesn’t trust the man an inch.

But something has changed, in the aftermath of Q’s legs going. Q has more patience, and Mycroft has a gentler insistence than usual: rather than needling away at Q, sharp and angular, he’s simply present, eroding Q’s hatred like water over time. It’s only incremental, but all the more extraordinary for being so.

(Q’s shin twinges in remembrance, even in absentia, and the loathing blocks his throat and throttles him from the inside)

“Good afternoon, Q,” Mycroft says lightly, cleaning his immaculate shoes cursorily on the mat and walking into Q and Bond’s living room. “How are you?”

There is something odd about him. He seems happy. A type of happy that comes from personal, not professional interest; Mycroft takes professional successes as transient and, usually, unimportant. Trying to inspire genuine happiness in Mycroft is an all but impossible task.

“What’s he done?” Q asks, ignoring Mycroft’s question for one of his own. “You look…”
Mycroft schools his expression into something more plausible, and it is this that tells Q something strange is going on: Mycroft doesn’t need to hide, he doesn’t lie so transparently about something as theoretically innocuous as emotion. There is something wrong, something strange.

“Mycroft?” he therefore asks, voice cold and dangerous.

(Bond mentally scans through where the nearest guns and explosives are stashed, because Q looks to be in that sort of mood)

An arched, supercilious expression creeps over Mycroft’s face, and it is almost, just enough to placate a lesser man. It would probably have worked on Sherlock, even.

Not Q. Q isn’t having fucking any of it.

Now, it should be mentioned that Q is a very highly trained secret service operative. Serious physical disability notwithstanding - and yes, there’s a long way to go on that front - he is a formidable human being, one who survived the training courses and indeed suggested amendments, can shoot in a straight line with more accuracy than most snipers with broken fingers and exhaustion lacing every fibre of him, and as such, he could decimate Mycroft in less than ten seconds and barely break a sweat.

But as it happens, Q doesn’t need to, because Bond does it for him.

Mycroft is slammed against the wall with Bond’s hand on his throat. “Start talking.” Bond suggests lightly, apparently unperturbed by Mycroft’s immediate blustering: Mycroft is senior to him, and Bond has only ever shown him due deference before, albeit with the usual manner Bond shows to anybody senior (which, naturally, is less respectful and more mocking).

But with Q in a wheelchair and Bond feeling disgustingly helpless, he jumps at the opportunity to do something practical, and throttling Mycroft definitely ranks as one of the more amusing options.

“Double-oh seven,” Mycroft manages, and the use of Bond’s serial number is lost on nobody, “unhand me. Now.”

“... retired,” Bond reminds him, disturbingly cheerful.

“Yes, try not to pull rank you don’t have,” Q adds, trying not to betray just how much fun he finds all this. “Now. What aren’t you telling me?”

Mycroft tries for a condescending laugh, and instead lets out a pitiful wheeze.

“Bond, he does actually need to be able to talk,” Q points out, with a smile of his own; Bond loosens his grip incrementally, and Mycroft gulps in air. “So?”

Q doesn’t need to bother with threats. Mycroft is pinned to the wall by a double-oh agent.

“So what?” Mycroft rasps. “I have nothing to tell you, now get off”

Oh, the man doesn’t know how to cope with physical anything. If Q were trying to talk him into action, they would be there for a very long time; as it is, Q imagines it will not take long for Mycroft to fold. He doesn’t know how to cope with the physical, he’s spent a lifetime being exclusively cerebral. Pain hurts.

(and Q knows that better than anybody)
“Bond.”

Bond is admirable: he doesn’t so much as blink before wrenching Mycroft forward, and slamming his head into the wall.

Mycroft’s eyes widen with shock, darken with pain. His hands finally seem to catch up to the rest of him and try to bat Bond off; Bond sighs wearily and languidly pins said hands in a humiliatingly easy gesture, and Mycroft is clearly out of his depth.

“Mycroft.”

There is a very long pause, punctuated only by Mycroft’s laboured breathing. “Moriarty.”

“What about him?”

“You know he has been off-radar?” Mycroft manages, somehow managing to sound languid despite the whole, you know, throttling thing that’s still going on. “He was unwell.”

“Unwell how? And also Bond, seriously, killing him would be a pleasure for me but probably not so clever in the long term.”

Bond releases him another fraction, and Mycroft incrementally relaxes, just a little, just enough. “He was catatonic.”

“Explain, and don’t miss anything out.”

It is almost a little embarrassing, how quickly and easily Mycroft accedes to Q’s demands; but then, Mycroft never pretended his loyalties were to anybody but his family - and whether Q likes it or not, they are still related, and Mycroft holds true to that with every fibre of his being.

Mycroft explains the whole situation.

Q takes in a deep breath, lets it out slowly.

“So, you conspired with Moran to ensure I didn’t find, and kill, Jim?” Q confirms, carefully.

Mycroft takes an intelligent moment to consider his next words, with the dim awareness that Q is volatile, and Bond is probably going to prevent his death but will not stand in the way of maiming. “I knew nothing of the details of your feud,” he says carefully. “But in essence, yes.”

The fact of Mycroft being honest is enough for Q to grant a modicum of mercy.

“Let him go.”

Bond does just that, without any hesitation, and Q adores him for that. Mycroft spends a fair bit of time blustering and apparently ‘recovering’ from that particular joy, but eventually returns his attention to Q.

“Don’t kill him.”

Q raises a careful eyebrow, dimly aware that he has the choice to destroy all of this in a matter of microseconds if he so chooses. “Why not?”

Mycroft cannot seem to help but smile, very slightly. “What on earth would be the point?” he asks, parries, throwing the idea back at Q like a deadly weapon. “Jim is an annoyance, but he is also an occupation for you, and a lover. You love him.”
“Bond?”

Bond doesn’t move, because he knows (curiously) he isn’t expected to; Bond doesn’t follow every one of Q’s orders without question, because he isn’t Moran, he is James Bond. He knows that Mycroft is absolutely right, and he refuses to punish the man for it.

Q’s expression turns ugly, but he doesn’t continue speaking. Mycroft, instead, attempts to speak further. “I will not give you his location.”

A flash of incandescent fury sparks, electric, in Q’s eyes. “You fucking will, Mycroft.”

Mycrof, infuriatingly, smiles. “What would be the point in that? He, or Moran, will kill me.”

Q smiles without the slightest suggestion of humour. “What the fuck makes you think I won’t?”

A patronising eyebrow raise. “You and I both know better.”

“Where is he.”

“No.”

This time, Bond does do what Q wants, and punches Mycroft in the stomach. The man folds, still pinned to the wall but now wheezing violently, feet scrambling for purchase on the floor.

“Where can I find Jim Moriarty?”

Silence.

Bond looks to Q for confirmation. Q nods. Bond turns to Mycroft. “I will be dislocating your shoulder next. Start talking.”

Mycrof manages to splutter out: “That will interfere with my work and I will take action against you.”

Q’s humourless smile remains in place. “My work is to ensure that national and domestic terrorists are being monitored, so I’m fairly sure I’d have a good case to destroy your entire life on the back of this.”

Mycrof is flailing like a beached whale.

“Last chance, Mycroft,” Bond warns him companionably.

And, to nobody’s surprise whatsoever, Mycroft burbles out an address. A safehouse outside London which would have been more than able to accommodate Jim and any number of staff while he was convalescing.

Mycrof breathes irregularly. “Why are you two doing this?”

“We had a falling out,” Q says blandly. “We’re working it out. But that’s above your paygrade, Mycroft, so get the fuck out of here before I change my mind. Jim has crossed a line in asking for your help.”

“He didn’t. Moran did.”

Q snorts slightly. “That’s not the point; Sebastian should have known better. In a way, this makes it all a lot easier. He has justified his own removal.”
“You’re not seriously suggesting eliminating Moran?” Mycroft asks, nothing short of horrified. “He’s an immensely useful asset, and…”

“Not your concern, Mycroft.”

“When you invited me into your little conglomerate, you ensured that it will always be my concern,” Mycroft contradicts, quite correctly. “And as an associate…”

“… employee…”

“… I am wholeheartedly objecting to this,” he completes, trying to be dignified and failing somewhat. “Q, you know better. Aren’t there bigger problems? The Alphabet Bombings, for example. Newcastle and Norwich are both practically on lockdown, why not turn your attention in that direction?”

Q blinks at Mycroft. “That’s an internal MI5 issue. Your issue, in fact. Have you heard anything on potential culpability?”

Mycroft smiles faintly. “Ah. So it is you.”

“What?”

Mycroft is just too clever. Far too clever. And Q is an exemplary liar, but Mycroft knows him too well and can see straight through him, especially on something so transparent.

Realising this, Q decides to not bother protesting innocence pointlessly. “Fine. I intended to lure Jim out. Which worked, I might add.”

“Yes; your work woke James Moriarty up from his catatonia.”

There’s something odd in how Mycroft’s speaking, an arrhythmia, but Q cannot quite work out what or why. Perhaps slightly too deliberate phrasing, or an misplaced intonation that seems primed.

But Q cannot work out what it is, and so makes one of the biggest mistakes of his life: he writes it off, ignores it.

Mycroft leaves shortly thereafter.

“So,” Bond says into the quiet, “are we packing up to go after him?”

Q is shaking his head before Bond finishes the sentence. “He’ll have already packed up and run. But he’ll be traceable now he’s active. And then we’ll make our move. He has no resources and every secret service in the world after him; it’s about time I caught up.”

Bond moves closer, gently massaging Q’s shoulders, careful and loving in that way Bond has. “Q, think about what he said. Killing Sebastian wouldn’t make any of this better.”

“I know,” Q agrees.

Bond pauses briefly. “Sorry, what?”

“I know it won’t help,” Q acknowledges, with a sadness, a tiredness audible in his voice. “Killing Seb would be deeply unhelpful, in fact. It would make things worse. I’m just not sure I care.”

Bond takes a few steps so he can see Q’s face, so he is in the younger man’s line of sight. “Q, you don’t have to keep doing this. You can stop. You know Jim couldn’t have prevented this.”
“Of course he couldn’t have,” Q snaps back, intensely irritated and so tired, so tired of chasing and fighting when all he actually wants is to have Jim home, to find out what happened to him and make sure it never, ever happens again.

Because Q knows Jim so well. Q knows that, no matter what Q does to Jim, it will pale into insignificance against the self-punishment Jim is currently exerting. Suicidal and desperate and depressed and lost, all of it is Jim responding to the knowledge that he truly failed concerning somebody he loves.

Taking Sebastian would be an almost token gesture. It would be petty, in a way. Ultimately pointless.

Q therefore makes a decision, one he didn’t imagine - a week, two weeks, three weeks ago - that he could have done.

The dialling tone rings out.

Jim’s voice makes Q’s entire being relax and tense at once, a blossoming feeling of rightness, of some uncatchable knowledge that comes with the return of something missing. “Q?”

He sounds so young, so tentative.

Q considers any number of responses, anything complicated, laced with warnings and conditions and understandings, and decides that none of them are even slightly necessary.

Instead, Q - just for once - says nothing more or less than what he feels:

“Come home, Jim.”

The world clicks into place, and everything is once again calm.

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A knock on Q’s front door.

Q wheels himself with remarkable dexterity, unlatches it, and admits the very tentative and exceptionally careful, fragile form of Jim Moriarty.

He looks like hell. Desperately thin, a narrow but luridly red scar across his jawbone, whole body wasted and trembling and sallow, weak, a shell of a proud human being, in casual clothes that are oversized and poorly made, probably Primark: in short, the antithesis of the man Q is accustomed to.

“What the flaming fuck happened to you?” Q therefore asks, not bothering to hide his shock.

Jim all but collapses, straight onto his knees, head falling to rest in Q’s lap.

He doesn’t speak because he doesn’t need to. Q hesitates a vague moment, but then starts to gently stroke through Jim’s hair with his long fingers, and they wordlessly, inexpertly, communicate everything through nothing.

“I wouldn’t have killed him,” Q says quietly. “Not really.”

Jim laughs very softly, a delicate sound, which says all it needs to: of course Q would have. Of course he would. Q is not rational when desperate, he never has been.

Q lifts Jim’s face up with spidery touches, lifting his chin with the crook of a finger, and studies the
new scar: he traces along it, the space between his brows twitching with an almost-contraction of worry.

The question lingers between them, Q’s curiosity, Jim’s act of desperation, how much of it was impulse and how much was genuine, how badly he wanted out.

Jim’s smile is so faint Q could almost dream it: yes, it was an attempted suicide, but that was a while ago now. Jim’s suicide attempts are always impulsive and disastrous things. Boiling himself in a bathtub. Semtex in a swimming pool. Slit throat in a crashed car. Jim doesn’t know how to live with his mind, and so he sometimes tries to give himself the ultimate out.

“Oh, Jim,” Q murmurs, and kisses him; their lips are both dry, scraping, twin wastelands. “Never again, Jim. Never again.”

A tear on Jim’s cheeks and his body is a comma, curled into itself, and Q may be the one in a wheelchair but Jim is the one who is a single heartbeat from being shattered beyond repair.

Jim’s lips part and he pulls in a breath against Q, heart still beating, lungs still working, whole body feebly clinging to the world through Q, through his impossible and beautiful constancy.

A verbal apology would be utterly superfluous, and so Jim doesn’t try for one. There are no words that begin to cover his regret. There are no words to cover everything he nearly lost, just when he’d gained it.

After Ireland - after Jim’s breakdown, that shift, that world axis bending and breaking - they had found something so different. They had become more than either knew they’d ever be able to have, and Jim had come perilously destroying when it had barely started.

Jim is crying, impossibly softly.

It feels so strange, so wrong. This isn’t just sentiment, this is something deeper and more pervasive. This is the devotion of two people faced with the loss of their other halves.

Both love their partners, yes. Jim loves Sebastian, Q loves James, and those relationships have taken on ever more importance as they’ve grown into adults. Theirs are romantic relationships, domestic, forever after relationships.

Q and Jim, though, they have something entirely different. More and less, all at once.

Which is why Q doesn’t push Jim away, doesn’t chastise him for his ridiculousness. Kisses his tears, relishes the taste and hopes he never needs to repeat this exercise, because next time, one or both will die.

And so Q’s voice is the only thing either can hear never again, never again and they remain bound, interwoven, together.
Chapter 40

All things considered, Q should have known better.

Mycroft has never been somebody to trust. All things being equal, past present and future equally assessed and considered, Q should have known considerably better than to trust Mycroft.

But he did.

And now, his misplaced trust is likely to kill him.

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Jim is the one to find out, of course.

They managed to keep it hidden from Q, which is testament to how careful they’re being and just how precise, they know exactly who and what they’re dealing with and know to not push in the wrong places.

But Jim, they didn’t think of him - and especially on internal MI5 issues, which is technically outside Q’s purview, Jim has contacts spanning all the way back to when he was Max Denbigh.

Not to mention that there’s only so much information anybody can comb through; the various MI departments are unwittingly supplying Moriarty Inc with a veritable wealth of information, and there are so many double-agents embedded it would be slightly embarrassing for the British government if anybody ever clocked it.

It is those contacts that get in touch with Jim - off their own bat, Jim is very impressed with them for that - and inform him that Q is the focus of an internal investigation regarding Moriarty and the Alphabet Bombings.

“Darling, we have a problem.”

“What now?” Q returns, more than a little bit impatient; he is at his main desk and drowning in paperwork, has three screens open at once, typing on his favourite homemade holographic keypad with his beloved laptop sat to one side running a programme of its own. “Can it wait?”

“Not unless you fancy being arrested and executed in the name of Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” Jim replies cheerfully, and isn’t even slightly kidding.

Unsurprisingly, this is sufficient to get Q’s full attention. “Excuse me?”

“They know it was you. The Alphabet Bombings. They’re debating what precisely to do with you, but we don’t have long.”

Q is rendered fully and entirely speechless. Bond is frozen. Moran has the lethal calm that precedes action, and Jim looks delighted. An amusing little cross-section of responses.

“Well shit,” Moran mutters drily, after a long moment.

Bond looks at Q, still and careful; his whole body is tense, ready for whatever action is dictated next, dimly aware that their lives are about to be upended. “What do you want to do?”

Q takes a moment, considering, before letting out a lengthy sigh. “I’d imagine,” he says slowly,
wearily, “I’ll have to go on the run. Which will be tedious for all concerned but avoids a custodial sentence. I assume we have the requisites?”

The question is entirely perfunctory: of course they do. Jim, Moran, Bond and Q have all been aware of their precarious situations for a very long time, and part of that awareness is preparation for if the worst should happen.

The worst has finally happened.

And so, Q makes the call: “Everybody? Off we go.”

Motion is instant. Moran and Bond go for the munition stacks while Q packs up the computer equipment and Jim does all the domestic packing. They know where they are going and how they will get there. Sort of. It’s kind of a work in progress depending on the situation, but Moran and Bond know that between them, Jim and Q will work it out.

“Eta?” Bond asks, as he fills a black carry-all with various items, from grenades to handguns, emptying out cabinets to leave no trace.

Q is engrossed in a handheld, one of his own design, and has easily tapped into the internal investigation now that he knows to look for it. “None,” he replies, with a bland modicum of surprise. “As Jim said, they’re deliberating. They’re planning on dispatching you and Moran, and bringing Jim in.”

Moran glances over, in the middle of chucking a bandolier of ammunition in Jim’s direction. “Dispatching in the lethal sense?”

“Naturally.”

Moran and Bond both quirk into grim smirks. “Optimistic.”

“It’ll be a large procedure when they do, which means paperwork,” Q acknowledges, wheeling over to his second workstation and ramming papers into a briefcase; the handheld buzzes, and he looks over to it briefly before continuing with what he was doing. “They know they’ll need to move fast, though. So I’d estimate two to three hours maximum, and that’s generous. I’m hacking them now.”

Moran slings some bags over the back of Q’s wheelchair, while Jim packs up their DVD collection, and continues moving. “How?”

There is an uncomfortable beat of silence, where Q and Jim exchange unevenly weighted glances; it lasts barely the span of a heartbeat, but they both know, and the truth of it is painful enough to kill on contact but neither can allow that.

Not yet.

“Mycroft,” Q therefore says, without quiet, without weight; he simply speaks the name as though nothing is amiss, as though this was expected.

Perhaps it was. Moran has long-since learnt that Q and Jim have ideas, notions, predictions that are outside his sphere and honestly, that’s fine, he doesn’t really mind any more.

“He’s been planning this for some time,” Q continues, remarkably calm for somebody who has just been utterly and completely betrayed by his own sibling. “Well, something of this nature. It was just a matter of time.”
Moran is the one to broach the question, after the silence has become uncomfortable enough to throw caution to the wind: “how does he know?”

Q does not pause - there is too much to do, they have so little time - but his mind works as quickly as it is able, and after a moment: “He asked, if you recall?” he directs to Bond, who nods once, leaving Moran with a large batch of explosives while he helps Q with the heavier computing equipment. “I strongly suspect he recorded it. Phrased the question so there could be no ambiguity and passed it along to the necessary personnel.”

“You actually told him?” Moran echoes, with a shadow of disbelief.

Q’s glare is excoriating. “Unless you’ve forgotten, lying to Mycroft is rather difficult; in any case, he already knew, long since suspected. My admittance was merely confirmation.”

“And hard evidence,” Jim calls from the bathroom, a little unkindly; but they will have time for that later, they can discuss blame and fault and issues of that nature at another time. “Still, big brother is pulling out the big guns.”

“I don’t think he fully comprehends the impact,” Q muses, showing a delicacy of touch as work instruments and magnifiers go into pre-ordained little cases. “They’ll undoubtedly execute the pair of you, and potentially me, and potentially even Jim if they can’t get enough good information out of him.”

“He’s very naive,” Jim adds in a stage whisper as he emerges from the bathroom with four sets of toothbrushes (since, despite not living together, they crash at one another’s homes with such regularity that it made sense to have the toiletries).

Moran blinks a little at that. “But it’s Mycroft.”

“Mycroft, who never sees anything beyond the bureaucracy,” Q explains, a little patronisingly, and his wheelchair looks frankly hilarious now, decked out with enough kit to level several buildings should he so choose. “He doesn’t care to see beyond the parts he is directly involved with, and certainly never gets his hands dirty enough to admit it.”

“He’s killed people, though.”

Bond smiles wryly, shooting Moran a look as he tugs Q’s mug from a cupboard and hands it to Q for safekeeping. “Did you know there was an active hit on you for two years? After you defected?”

Moran looks over with a small, but still confused, smile. “No. Good to hear, though.”

“MI6 wanted you out of the way. Quite badly, actually; double-oh six was assigned to your case, but we got intel you were dead.”

Jim waves brightly, head popping out of the spare bedroom. “Hello. Thank me later. Sebby, do you have our spare kit?”

“Drop point,” he replies easily, strapping a grenade belt around his own waist, eerily reminiscent of the last safe house he and Jim escaped from. “So Mycroft doesn’t realise?”

“Doesn’t realise the scope,” Q corrects. “Big difference. He’s killed people, by proxy if not directly. He doesn’t choose to realise the rest. Certainly not as it pertains to me, and this situation.”

“I thought more of him,” Moran comments idly.
Q shrugs, grabs the prosthetics he’s been working on; he’s already started using them, from time to time, along with physical therapy which is going to be a bitch to access when on the run, but hey ho, such is life. “I’m going to kill him. This time, I’m genuinely going to have to kill him.”

“Don’t be over-hasty,” Jim tsks, “there are more interesting things than death we can do for him.”

Q shoots him a black look, less than impressed at being stalled in his homicidal instincts. “Name it.”

“Take away what matters to him most,” Jim suggests politely, “then destroy every aspect of the life he currently leads, then you can kill him, if you still want to.”

A minute smile from Q, and Jim knows his idea has been planted, will now percolate beautifully over the coming days.

“Moran?”

“Nearly there,” he replies, checking over Bond with a not-particularly-subtle glance and receiving a similar one in response; the two of them have an agreement that neither is superior to the other, they both approach their bizarre collective as equals. “You?”

“Done.”

There is however, if you squint, a hierarchy. Q outranks Jim outranks Bond outranks Moran.

But only if you squint. And nobody’s admitting a damn thing.

“Are we ready to move out?”

Exactly on cue, there is a sharp knock on the door.

All four are instantaneously silent, bar Jim, who softly breathes “not Mycroft” and is stalled from further speech by Q’s hand, white and eloquent, held up.

Several long seconds pass. Q wheels himself, slowly and carefully, out of the immediate line of the door. Bond and Moran pull out handguns. Jim smiles dangerously and doesn’t move, not even an inch.

Another knock on the door. Hammering, in fact. There are very few people who would hammer in such a way on Q’s door. Fewer still who would survive the infraction.

“Q. Q, open up.”

Sherlock.

“Oh, that bastard,” Q mutters to himself, only audible because of the otherwise deathly silence in the room.

Jim laughs, still very quietly. Q motions him and Moran into the bedroom and stay there until I call for you, usual protocols and lets Bond go to the door, Bond still with his handgun, more than prepared for this to be a very elaborate ruse (which is not outside the realms of possibility).

Bond opens the door, and points a gun directly into Sherlock’s face.

“No need for that,” the man gripes, and strolls into Q’s flat as though he owns the place. John Watson follows, looking a touch apologetic about doing so, at least. “Q. You’re alive. Good.”
“Why wouldn’t I be?” Q replies, feigning confusion; he has a very good idea of what is going on here, but a few more sentences from Sherlock will confirm matters, and then they’ll be rolling.

John stands in the main room, looking sheepish. “Sorry about all this, no stopping him when he gets like this,” he says to Q, who raises an eyebrow.

Sherlock looks around, swishes his coat around a bit, clearly assessing the situation and noticing fairly quickly that there’s somebody else in the reasonably immediate vicinity; his voice takes on a vague cloud of confusion, and he looks again, eyes darting towards the bedroom door. “Who’s here?”

“Why are you here, first of all?”

“And you’re… packed,” Sherlock continues, an understatement and a half given how many bags - most containing something incendiary - are strapped to Q’s wheelchair and variably dotted around the room. “Where are you going?”

“Sherlock,” Q repeats, with more intensity, letting a shadow of anger colour his voice in a way Sherlock will inevitably respond to. “Why are you here?”

Sherlock looks over him superciliously. “Mycroft…”

And with that, the bedroom door opens, and Moran fires two darts at Sherlock and John respectively. They don’t even have time to look surprised - much less work out where it came from - before falling neatly unconscious in little puddles of limbs.

“Cheers,” Q says happily, looking over the unconscious figure of his brother and his brother’s not-boyfriend. “Okay. Now we need to get these two into the car before the cavalry arrives.”

Moran blinks, holstering the dart-gun that Jim had handed to him without any explanation whatsoever, the orders he had easily obeyed as the good soldier he is. “Is somebody going to explain what’s going on here?”

“In a minute,” Jim chastises, tsking at Moran in a way that’s utterly patronising, and Moran doesn’t even blink. “Priorities. You two, take one each, let’s get them into the van.”

Bond blinks at him, visibly making calculations in his head. “We can’t take both, not if you want us covering the exit properly.”

“You’re gonna have to,” Jim parries, “we’re only going to the van, and Q…”

“… T-minus two hours, twenty-six,” he says instantly, back on his handheld and tapping like a man possessed. “Wait…”

Sherlock’s phone rings in his pocket, and Q hisses in annoyance:

“… make that T-minus forty-nine, that was Mycroft’s way of establishing whether Sherlock is safe. This is going to be close, gentlemen, let’s get moving. No bickering. Take one each and let’s get the fuck into the van.”

It is testimony to his stress that Q is swearing quite so much, but then, Mycroft has been a twat: he (correctly) predicted that Q would catch onto the fact he was being investigated, then sent Sherlock as a distraction. In case of this precise scenario - Sherlock and John being incapacitated - Mycroft had a faster team ready to extract Q and Jim.
“Q?”

“Still on track,” he replies flatly, now starting to look more than a little bit concerned; they’re cutting it a lot finer than Q would like. “Forty-two minutes.”

And with that, Q wheels himself to the door, waits for Bond to have Sherlock over his shoulder - it has to twinge the shoulder like hell, but he doesn’t so much as grunt - to open the door. Jim follows afterwards, and Moran takes up the rear, with John on his back. Q is the only one minus a gun, but he’s the one rigging the whole flat to explode shortly after they leave, so he doesn’t need to.

They make it to the van without incident, shockingly enough. They only have to go down one corridor and out front - Q and Bond’s flat is on the ground floor for accessibility purposes - and don’t appear to attract attention, at least nothing to be concerned about.

John and Sherlock are cuffed to either side of the interior van wall, Q wheeled into his space between them; he’ll also be monitoring them medically to ensure there are no unexpected surprises. Bond drives. Moran is by the passenger side window to shoot anything that takes his fancy. Jim is in the middle seat and mildly disgruntled about this fact.

“Bond?”

Bond doesn’t bother answering Q’s unspoken question, instead getting the car in gear and pulling away. Q waits several minutes, the van’s occupants in perfect silence, before tapping in a final few keystrokes.

Behind them, the whole apartment building goes up in a plume of fire; Jim is the only one who watches, staring at the wing mirror with unashamed glee, giggling like an excitable child.

Q doesn’t know how to feel. He doesn’t make a habit of sticking to certain locations, to getting attached, but he does. He really does. Q is a homing creature, at his core, and his home means something to him, much as he’ll always rail and protest to the absolute contrary.

“Bit sad, isn’t it?” Jim says aloud, very quietly, an acknowledgement for Q’s ears alone. “Don’t worry, sweetpea. We’ll find a new home.”

Q doesn’t acknowledge him, because he wasn’t expected to, and instead carries out blood tests in the back of the van. Sherlock is clear of everything other than Q’s sleep dart concoction, and John’s shows mildly elevated cholesterol but nothing of interest.

He is in the middle of adding some further sedative to John’s bloodstream when Sherlock’s garbled, almost incoherent voice sounds from behind him.

“... Q?”

Of course, Sherlock has managed to wake up before time, but that’s par for the course. “Hello,” Q therefore says lightly, busy preparing another syringe. “How are you feeling?”

“What’s going…”

“Steady driving,” Q calls to the front, and waits until they’ve slowed down to a reasonable crawl before sliding the syringe into Sherlock’s arm. “I’m drugging you. See you later. Sleep well.”

Sherlock looks mildly startled, then the drugs hit, and he is dead to the world. And probably hacked off about it, but Q doesn’t care tremendously about it. The important thing is that he didn’t manage to clock Watson (hopefully) so that’s all gone reasonably well.
“Have you got started?” Jim asks, looking around at Q, who is elbow-deep in his laptop and concentrating intently.

Q glances up, with an unfathomable expression that pains Jim to see. “What do you think?”

“Starting with him looking after me, I’m guessing?”

“Oh yes,” Q confirms, his voice more cheerful than it ought to be for the circumstances. “And then some. Any tapes, anything I can use?”

“Sebby?”

“What?”

Q and Jim both sigh; Moran and Bond are just so slow sometimes, they forget sometimes how much.

“Any footage of Mycroft’s personal involvement with Jim? It would be a help in destroying his professional career.”

Seb blinks. Checks the wingmirror for the fourteenth time. “Yes. I imagine I have information that’s helpful, and some hard data too. Mycroft was very… odd, around Jim.”

This is not wholly news, but Bond finds it very strange, and neither Jim nor Q realises just how strange Mycroft had been. The visits, the look in his eyes, the funny pain and the awful not-quite-vulnerability of it.

“Go on?”

“I can show you. I had bugs in the rooms, not Mycroft’s - yours originally, Q, of course.”

Q smirks; of course they were his. Everything technologically that Moran and Jim owns is, in some way, Q’s.

“Sounds like a plan,” Jim purrs.

A comfortable silence falls over them. Q plots how to destroy Mycroft, Jim hums showtunes, Sherlock and John snore.

“Where are we going?” Bond asks companionably, after a little while; he’s been driving with the sole directive of escaping any tails, they’ll be changing vehicles soon, and there are three safe houses in drivable distance but somehow, Bond suspects none of them are the target.

Between them, Q, Bond, Moran and Jim have fourteen safe houses across the UK. Several are Q-proof. Several are Jim-proof. A handful more are practically human-being-proof. They all have their merits.

Q and Jim exchange glances. The former smiles in a way Jim understands, and Jim turns back to face the road, eyes electric.

“Buckle up,” Jim says instead, with no small degree of relish. “We’re going to Sherrinford.”
Any thoughts and comments would be wonderful.

For Lex, as always.

Jen.

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