Slow Dancing In A Burning Room
by feelslikefire

Summary

What followed was the most bizarre courtship Q had ever—well, heard of, certainly. He didn’t have much to compare it to, but Moneypenny confirmed that normal people didn’t flirt like this. Not that he was normal. Not that any of them were.

Or: Q has a past, a cat, and a dangerous new boyfriend. Two of these things keep him up nights, the other pees in a box.

Notes

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THANK YOU SO MUCH, BABY, ALL THE SCONES ARE FOR YOU.

Now with a gorgeous cover done by the lovely & talented Jo! You can find more of her fabulous artwork here. THANK YOU MY DARLING, IT'S PERFECT!
Contrary to gossip about MI6 (such as it was), Q was not the youngest quartermaster in the history of the SIS.

He was 24 when he was recruited to Q branch, and promoted to his current position during the period when 007 was missing presumed dead, shortly after Q’s 26th birthday. Q’s record was beaten by the quartermaster who served during most of World War II, but in his mind, that man—that boy, really, all of 21 when he assumed the role—shouldn’t count: Ronald Hampshire was promoted out of necessity, plain and simple. When his father (the previous quartermaster) was killed during the Blitz, Ron was the person who knew most about his father’s inventions, both extant and in progress, so naturally Ron found himself as the new Q in his country’s time of need, and by all accounts served admirably. The current Q was better, of course. Being promoted in his youth for his merit (and despite the not-inconsiderable strikes against him) as opposed to out of necessity would prove that to
The real reason so many people focused on Q’s perceived youth was because he looked like a bloody child, like he shouldn’t yet be out of short trousers: floppy hair, thick glasses, skinny as a rail, boyish face, the occasional flare of spots (as Bond so helpfully pointed out). He was certainly more than capable of dressing himself—he wasn’t totally oblivious, he’d studied art and its history at Cambridge in between his main pursuits of computer science and engineering—but he had a rather eccentric personal style that did little to help defuse the appearance of youthful ineptitude. But any of his coworkers who made the mistake of discounting his ability because of his youth did so only the once, and often to their significant regret.

The first thing Q did upon his promotion was to single-handedly spearhead the effort to consolidate the R&D and IT sections of Q Branch, formerly autonomous of each other but now stepping on each other’s toes as often as not when it came to addressing the security and technology needs of their agents. As luck would have it, he succeeded in finally merging the two just in time for the explosion inside MI6 and the relocation to London’s nether-regions, and what with Silva running around causing pure havoc and M’s consequent death, Q had little enough time for a 00 agent who happened to specialize in resurrection. Save for their brief but admittedly memorable partnership in the middle of what was later dubbed Operation: Skyfall, Q saw next to nothing of 007 at all during the first four months of his tenure as Quartermaster.

All of this meant that when Bond did finally reappear, Q was blindsided by his massive, immediate, and utterly infuriating crush on him.

Being smitten with a grade-A git who also happened to be a famous womanizer and a dangerous killer rated pretty high on the “Bad Ideas” list, and since he bloody well wasn’t going to act on it, he did the stupidest possible thing he could think of and took it out on Bond. He took every opportunity to harass 007 that came his way, ragging him incessantly about his age (which wasn’t actually that old), his sexual conquests (that one was just as bad as advertised), and his admittedly obnoxious tendency of returning Q’s tech in considerably worse condition than it was sent off in… when Bond returned the tech at all, that is. Was it really that sodding difficult to not throw weapons worth more than what Q made in a year overboard at the drop of a hat?

Bond gave as good as he got, naturally. Not that there was any dearth of jail-bait jokes in Q’s life, but Bond had a particular knack for making Q feel as though he were actually five again and at his father’s knee, being told he was stupid for worrying about mummy’s worsening cough, that he was too young to understand. He wasn’t the first, of course. Q sometimes felt as though he’d spent his entire life being told by other people that he was too young: too young to understand, too young to cope, too young to deal with situations that were inevitably dumped on his shoulders by the very people who told him he had no right to be there.

Well, he was fucking here now. And here he would stay, until they pried his laptop from his stiff fingers and carried his body out on a slab.

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“Fifty meters down the hallway, Bond, you’ll make a left turn,” Q said tersely. His fingers flew over his keyboard, watchful eyes glued to the screen above him as doors flew open ahead of a sprinting 007 and slammed shut in the faces of several of his pursuers. “Door to the landing pad, there’s a helicopter there waiting for you.”

“Has it got coffee?”

“Do I look like a bloody Pret-A-Manger to you? I trust you can pilot it.” Q exhaled, his gaze flicking
down to his laptop screen to quickly work through the helicopter’s computer systems, and then the engine revved to life. Q could hear the thum-thum-thum of the blades over Bond’s intercom as Bond ran across the launch pad at the top of the fifty-story building he was trapped in.

Until the dot that said “BOND” abruptly stopped moving a scant few meters from the helicopter, and seconds later Q heard a tinny CRACK through the headset. “What the fuck was that?” he snapped. Q could see Tanner giving him the eyebrow from where he stood at the edge of Q’s desk, but he ignored it.

“Improvising,” Bond said curtly. “I was out of bullets.”

“Did you just throw the Beretta I gave you at Le Diable?” demanded Q incredulously. He watched the little red dot on his screen move towards and then cover the helicopter, and he could hear the roar of the engine in his ears as Bond threw open the throttle and maneuvered the chopper off the landing pad.

“You shouldn’t be so attached to material things, quartermaster,” said Bond into his ear. “By the way, devils apparently can’t fly.” Q wanted to reach through the airwaves and smack the smirk he knew would be there right off Bond’s face.

“You’re lucky it’s not all I’m attached to,” he muttered, and jabbed at the controls with rather more force than necessary. It was tough to know whether to be impressed or furious. He settled on ‘both.’

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“What the bloody hell did you do to my mobile?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Q blandly. He did not look up from his screen; he already knew what the thunderclouds on Bond’s face would look like, having summoned the same expression just the week before when he’d rigged the security alarms in Bond’s building to go off at 3 in the morning and not turn off for love or money.

Bond threw the modified Android phone onto the desk next to Q. Q glanced down at it, and then up at the agent who hulked over him from less than a foot away. “Fix it,” said Bond, his voice as cold as the ice Q had nearly slipped on coming into work this morning. Q reached over and tapped through the unlock code on Bond’s mobile, and as he did a pop song by Britain’s most currently loathed boy-band blared to kitschy life. Q smiled, wide and daft.

“I don’t think I see the problem,” he said innocently. “I thought you loved that song.”

“So help me, Q, if you don’t fix my mobile—”

“Just throw it out like you do all your other expensive electronics,” Q cut in, and fixed his eyes on his computer screen again. “I’m busy.”

There was a pause, not unlike a hound deciding whether or not to bite the spiny hedgehog in front of it, and then Q heard Bond stalking away again, the door sliding shut behind him with a smug finality. Q smiled to himself, thin-lipped, and returned to his work.

Self-righteous bastard. Old dogs and new tricks, his arse.

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As it turned out, Bond was a fast learner, despite the constant cracks Q made about Bond’s increasing senility. His return-rate on devices went up, however microscopically, and his working
relationship with Q warmed to a degree less likely to have them both dying of hypothermia.

He did have lapses, though. Some worse than others. And while Q took his job and responsibilities seriously, he was not above making a point. When one of Bond’s missions destroyed a city block’s worth of buildings and the prototype of a compact self-repairing generator that would have powered half of London for a year along with it, the sprinkler system in Bond’s building mysteriously short-circuited in an extremely localized area. Q took a perverse satisfaction in exactly how high that laundry bill was (since of course he looked it up), to say nothing of the ruined furniture.

But instead of becoming increasingly more furious, Bond seemed—amused. Or rather, he actually started to pay attention. He started appearing in Q Branch on his days off, days when he had no reason at all to be there; before long Q was seeing more of him than almost all the rest of the 00’s combined. Q couldn’t for the life of him think why.

Of course, when 007 was looming over you like some kind of dapper gargoyle while you were trying to code, thinking was harder. Or rather, thinking of things that didn’t involve James Bond naked and splayed out on Q’s desk was harder.

Still, all things considered, Q was settling in nicely at his new position. The spotty teenager comments had dropped off considerably, his team of programmers and techs were honestly brilliant, the field agents and 00 agents in particular were learning not to mistrust all technology as signs of their impending replacement, and he was thrilled to be working in close proximity with Eve again. They’d first met back when they were both new to MI6, Q having blithely made a fool out of some idiot who was trying to get Eve’s number off her, and Q had missed her while she was off being a field agent. She had confided in him a month or two ago that she felt as out-of-sorts at her new position as Q did in his, surrounded by men ten and twenty years older than them when she was used to being out in the field, but against all odds, she was flourishing in her new position. And he was—well. Much better off now than he’d ever dreamed.

Now if only he could get 007 to start showing some regard for the priceless equipment Q put in his hands, or even just some indication that he wasn’t actually trying to get himself killed every mission he went out on.

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"Good work on the Moaveni job," said Moneypenny to him, three months to the day after Silva had nearly brought London down around their ears. Albert Moaveni had infected half of Europe with a computer virus that rewrote security systems into vicious killing protocols; HAL-2012 was responsible for the deaths of at least 300 people across Europe and for sowing general chaos and terror. Moaveni was as brilliant as he was sadistic. Unfortunately for Moaveni, Q was more brilliant and Bond more lethal.

"Yes, well, someone needs to tell Bond that it isn’t necessary to see how many lacerations and broken bones one can acquire in the course of pursuing a target," Q said irritably.

"Why don't you tell him yourself?" said a voice from behind him, and Q's heart sank as he watched Moneypenny smirk her way out of the room. Q took a deep breath and turned around to face Bond, who was leaning against the wall in that damnably casual way that he had.

"Mostly because you don't listen," Q said.

Bond shrugged. "I'll ask politely for the next target I chase to not run quite so fast," he said coolly, and Q's stomach clenched. Bond pushed off the wall, prowling across the room to him, and just when Q's heart beat was starting to approach marathon-runner levels, Bond stopped and held out his
"Oh look, a piece of..." Q trailed off, blinking down at the unfamiliar thumb drive. He'd fully expected some shard of the expensive pen-shaped pocket computer he'd sent Bond with, able to plug into and hack nearly any computer with a USB port due to self-polymorphic algorithms Q had loaded it with—"Cleaner and quieter than a bomb," Q had told him—but that was in Bond's other now-outstretched hand, still perfectly intact. "What is this?" he asked, caught flat-footed.

The ghost of a smile passed over Bond's face. "It's a present," he said. "I figured you ought to have a look through Moaveni's programs. It wouldn't all fit on your computer so I stole one of his thumb drives."

Q couldn't quite disguise how flustered he was as he plucked the computer and thumb drive from Bond's hand, turning them over greedily, as if he could read their contents with his own two eyes. "Yes," he said. "Well. That's."

"You're welcome," said Bond, clearly amused. Q cleared his throat and glanced up at his agent.

"I don't suppose that gun I sent you with is still intact," Q ventured, and Bond's eyebrows went up. "Well. One out of two. Better than your usual rate."

"I aim to please," said Bond, his face unreadable. Q was still groping for something intelligent to say when he noticed the blooming red-brown splotch on Bond's trouser, just above his right knee. "Have you not been to medical yet?" he demanded, and Bond said nothing, merely smiled a little wider. "You came here first? What on earth were you thinking?"

"Suppose I wasn't," said Bond, and Q could have thrown his laptop at that smirking face.

"Go have that looked at or you won't catch a green light in this town until your next birthday," snapped Q. Bond raised both his hands in apparent surrender, but his smirk didn't budge an inch even as he backed towards the office door. Q watched him go. As soon as the door shut, he let out a huge breath he hadn't known he'd been holding, leaning against the table as he came over all shaky, the way he did sometimes when he'd forgotten a meal or two. "Fucking git," Q muttered, looking at the two devices in his hands. As if he could be curried with gifts and favors. As if Bond cared.

…Still. Bond had gone to all the trouble to bring the data to him; the least he could do was have a look through it. Q walked over to his desk and pointedly disconnected his computer from MI6’s internal servers, going so far as to unplug the network cable from the back of his machine. He then set the program he’d been working on to auto-compile before plugging first the pen-drive and then the thumb-drive into the data ports of his laptop, then sank slowly into his chair, all his attention already given to the code scrawling across the screen as his computer unzipped the little hard drives’ contents.

It wasn’t until his mobile beeped at him four hours later, informing him he had not one but four text messages that he’d missed while totally absorbed in prying open his (competitor’s) target’s files, that he stopped to consider, not for the first time, how disquietingly good at electronics 007 could be. How the hell had Bond even managed to download the files for him in the first place? Moaveni wasn’t exactly an amateur.

Q let out a breath, glancing down at his phone as he tried to shake off how affecting that thought was. One message from Mallory (from M, he corrected himself), two from Moneypenny, and one from Bond. The first two were work-related and therefore redundant, since he’d addressed both their requests earlier in the day and then sent his newest intern to deal with the paperwork; the third was
Moneypenny telling him he ought to come out and meet her for a pint down the pub around Leicester Square that she liked; and the last, most recent one, the one from Bond, made Q’s hair stand up on end as though an actual hand had touched him.

*Your furnace was out. I fixed it,* it said. Q bit his lip so hard he tasted copper, and reached out for his laptop, resolutely saving the work he’d done so far before picking up his mobile to text back.

*Do say hello to Jonathan for me, it’s been quite awhile since I’ve sent a visitor his way.* Q grinned to himself as he sat back in his chair, before abruptly realizing that when Bond discovered Q’s game, he’d no doubt be coming straight to HQ. He got hastily to his feet, grabbing up his laptop and the two hard drives and a few other pieces of work he’d need to bring home tonight, stuffing the lot of it into his messenger bag and then diving under his desk to retrieve his scarf from where it had hidden itself earlier in the day. The mobile went off while he was under the desk, and he cracked his skull on the underside in his haste to get up and answer.

“Hello, Q,” said a deep, pleasant voice at the other end—Jonathan Stanton, one of Q’s old friends who occasionally did a spot of work for MI6 and who’d volunteered to help man Q’s decoy flats. In the background, Q could hear an odd grunting noise, like someone straining against a huge, beefy arm. “This gentleman seemed to think he was going to find you here. What should I do with him?”

“Oh, well, there are so many ways to answer that question,” said Q gleefully, the ache in his cranium forgotten, unable to resist picturing Bond faced against Jonathan’s hulking weight. A wrestler and bodyguard in the life he’d had before MI6, Jonathan was well over six feet tall and built like the proverbial brick wall, and he’d positively jumped at the chance to inflict some sanctioned damage on people snooping where they didn’t belong. No doubt he had Bond in a choke-hold at this very moment; he often used this flat as a work-out studio, which was why Bond had had the luck to catch him at home. “But he’s one of ours, just overstepping his boundaries a bit. No need to be too rough with him.”

“You know him, then? Q, you little heart-breaker.” Q heard a muffled cough at the other end as Jonathan released Bond, and bit his lip to keep from laughing outright. “And here I thought you might actually have enough on your plate to keep your hands full.”

“You know I can’t resist making trouble, Jon,” said Q, straining his ears to catch any more sounds Bond might make at the other end of the line, but there was nothing. Q wondered if Bond had already left, or if he was hanging about in hopes of… well, hell if he knew.

“I know it very well,” rumbled Jonathan, and Q could hear the man’s grin. “This poor sod apparently hasn’t caught on yet, though.”

“You’re a gem,” Q told him. “Give my best to Adrienne and Vanessa.” He rung off, stuffing his mobile deep into his messenger bag and making for the door—then paused, and turned back to his desk. He flipped to a clean page of paper on the notepad at the corner of his desk, and scribbled down a short message, knowing who would come here and find it in the next 30 minutes at the very outside. Bond would track him down sooner or later; might as well make it fun for both of them.

Q ripped the sheet off the notepad and folded it over and in on itself, nimble fingers still remembering the little origami figures from when he was a boy who wasn’t yet allowed to touch expensive electronics. He left the crane in the centre of the desk and all but skipped out of the room. Time to go see Moneypants about that drink.

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“Quentin!” exclaimed Moneypenny, as Q sidled up to her in the press of people by the pub counter
thirty minutes later, thirty minutes in which Q had half-expected to find Bond’s heavy hand falling on the back of his neck at any moment. “You came! You might have texted; here I was thinking you were working late at the office again.”

“I was, but I got interrupted,” said Q. “*Must* we use that dreadful name? Can’t you just—”

“You of all people know the rules,” chided Moneypenny cheerfully. “Come on, dove, I’ll buy you a drink. What’ll it be?”

“Just a Strongbow, please. Thanks, Moneypants.” Q leaned against the bar counter and peered around, fighting the urge to bounce on his heels. The adrenaline and glee he’d gotten from pulling that stunt on Bond had got him high, and now it was all he could do not to fidget like a child who’s had too many sweets. Moneypenny arched a perfectly-plucked eyebrow at him, but Q avoided meeting her eyes until they’d made it back to their corner table. Moneypenny’s friend from accounts was there, a curvaceous redhead named Vicky who had the foulest mouth of anyone Q had ever met and could cheerfully drink most of the field agents under the table. The woman had a brilliant mind; she was wasted on something as boring as book-keeping, really. Then again, she was the only other department head in MI6 who was as young as Q, so perhaps their bosses did know what they were doing.

“Quentin, darling,” Vicky purred, scooting over to make room for him as Q and Moneypenny worked their way around the back of the booth. “To what do we owe this honor?”

“A certain double-oh agent thought it’d be brilliant to try to find my flat,” said Q, as casually as he could manage. Moneypenny’s eyebrows shot up towards her hairline, and Vicky’s hand flew to her mouth. “Tragically, he was disappointed in his search.”

“No,” breathed Moneypenny, and Q had to marvel at how positively gleeful she sounded. “That git—”

“Bond?” demanded Vicky. “It was Bond, wasn’t it.”

“Of course it was, no one else is enough of a sodding moron as to try to break into Quentin’s flat,” said Moneypenny, and both women bent closer, eyes wide as saucers. “Which one was it? Was it Adrienne’s? Tell me it was Adrienne’s.”

“Jonathan’s,” said Q, grinning hugely, and Moneypenny threw back her head, actually cackling. Q mentally gave himself 50 points; it wasn’t anyone who could startle that laugh out of Moneypenny. Vicky looked a little worried and perhaps also a touch confused; few people knew about Q’s decoy flats. “Is Bond alright? Also why was there someone in your flat?” she asked. “I mean—”

“Bond is fine, Jonathan called me straight away,” Q reassured her, taking a sip of his cider. “And they weren’t in my actual flat. I have several, ah, decoy flats, you know, for security. Anyway, Bond can handle himself. I would have been more worried for Jonathan, actually, but it turned out alright.”

“Oh, that calls for a toast,” said Moneypenny, and the three of them raised their pint glasses, clinking them together and knocking back a few swallows. “You realize he’s just going to sulk about it now, don’t you? Because he’s actually an infant.”

“I should hope he doesn’t, he’s enough of a pain in my arse already,” said Q. “Actually, if he’s as stubborn as I think he is, we may see him here in a few minutes.” To his bemusement, Moneypenny and Vicky exchanged a glance at this statement, before both women looked over at him expectantly. “What?”
“You’re sweet on him,” said Moneypenny, and Q choked on his cider. “Admit it.”

“I’m—you’re mad,” Q sputtered, still coughing. He grabbed up a napkin and swiped at his chest, where a few spots of cider had landed on his jumper. “What are you on about? I’m not—”

“You just invited the man who goes through your technology like it’s toilet paper, costs MI6 more money than all the other agents combined, and attempted to locate and then break into your flat, to join us for a drink,” pointed out Vicky.

Damn, thought Q. She would know a thing like that, wouldn’t she. “I didn’t exactly invite him,” he said after a moment, because Moneypenny was giving him the same look she gave M when he was being a git. “I left him a hint.”

“A hint,” repeated Moneypenny. “And what exactly does that mean?”

“I left him a piece of paper with a message on it,” said Q, flushing a bit now as Moneypenny and Vicky watched him with the same knowing expression on both of their faces. “It said—’Put your money where your mouth is and you’ll find yourself a drink.’“

Vicky glanced at Moneypenny. “He’s not going to get that, though. Is he?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” said Moneypenny thoughtfully. “He’ll guess you’re talking about me, but that doesn’t mean he’ll be able to figure out where we are…”

“He’ll get it,” said Q, almost defiantly. He couldn’t help but note the irony that despite how contemptuous he was at their first meeting, he was now the one betting, as it were, that 007 was smart enough to play along.

“He’ll get it,” he told Bond silently. Did that mean he was rooting for Bond to do something illegal or at the very least, wildly inappropriate? Maybe. Maybe he didn’t care.

“Ten quid says he won’t,” said Vicky, grinning now. It was the same smile she wore whenever some new MI6 agent was stupid enough to doubt the accuracy of her numbers. Q narrowed his eyes.

“You’re on,” he said, and Vicky wiggled her eyebrows at him as she took another drink. Next to him, Moneypenny inhaled sharply, her eyes tracking past Vicky.

“You’re out ten quid,” said a new voice from their right, and Q sat up straight, feeling an electric shock go down his spine at the sight of 007 standing at the edge of their table, arctic eyes fixed on Q. Vicky swore, and dug in her trousers for her wallet, but Q was suddenly not paying attention to anyone but Bond.

“You got here quick,” he observed, scooting out from around the table.

“I took a cab,” said Bond, smiling that faint smile he had, dry as vermouth. Q felt his stomach give a familiar flutter, as though he’d just eaten a butterfly, and wondered how much of his conversation with Vicky and Moneypenny Bond had heard.

“How’d you find us?” Moneypenny demanded. Bond tsk’d at her, shaking his head.

“Really, Moneypenny,” he said, and Q could have kicked him for how condescending he sounded. “I can’t be giving away all my professional secrets, can I?” Moneypenny rolled her eyes.

“I believe I owe you a drink,” said Q, and Bond inclined his head. “Either of you girls ready for another round?” Moneypenny and Vicky shook their heads, and Q moved off with Bond towards the counter again. Q couldn’t help but notice that Bond was standing unnecessarily close to him,
even for how crowded the pub was. What Moneypenny saw in this place, Q would never know; as close to the Leicester Square tube stop as it was, it was invariably jam-packed, and a good half the crowd was always tourists, the accents flying fast and thick.

“You owe me a lot more than a drink,” Bond murmured in Q’s ear as they waited at the counter for the bartender to come over. Bond’s voice was low and gravelly, his breath hot on Q’s neck, and Q’s skin tightened, the hair standing on end in base lust. Fuck, fuck, buggering shitting fuck.

“It’s not as though I asked you to drop off a pint of milk at my flat, is it,” pointed out Q, leaning over the bar. He was proud of how calm he sounded. Then he felt a hand settle at the small of his back, sneaking under his jacket, and that light touch was enough to make him nearly crawl over the counter face-first into the ice bin on the other side.

He couldn’t believe this was happening. Bond was flirting with him—well, for values of “flirting” that skated dangerously close to foreplay, anyway. Q felt giddy, electric at being vindicated but also terrified at how transparent his feelings apparently were, and he reminded himself viciously that Bond flirted as instinctively as most humans breathed, that just because Moneypenny had called him out didn’t mean Bond knew or guessed at anything.

“What’ll it be?” asked the bartender. Q yanked the chain back on his reeling mind and steeled himself, willing himself to not pay all his attention to the hand still resting against his lumbar, and the thumb that was rubbing gently against his skin through his shirt.

“A Strongbow, please, and whatever he’s having,” said Q.

“Grey Goose dirty martini,” said Bond. “Up, two olives.”

“And people call me posh,” said Q, glancing at Bond.

Bond’s lip curled, his eyes flicking down to Q’s jumper and tie before coming back up to his face. “There’s no such thing as the wrong time for good taste,” he said mildly, and tucked his hand back into his suit pocket. Q fought off the wave of disappointment with a small smirk.

“Did you really fix the furnace at the flat?” he asked. Bond’s expression didn’t change, but something in the heavy lines around his eyes seemed to lighten. “I’m only asking so I know whether to send a thank-you note.”

Bond snorted. “I should’ve guessed it wasn’t really yours from how easy it was to locate,” he murmured. Q shot Bond the most withering glare in his arsenal, which seemed to only amuse the man. Fucking Bond.

“And I should have known that a man who thought nothing of casually crashing M’s private residence and personal interfaces would find our top security protocols ‘easy,’” Q said. “It’ll be a good test of our security measures to see if they can stop you. Since regulations clearly don’t.” He left money on the counter for the bartender and stepped away before Bond could respond, holding Bond’s drink out of reach as they headed back to the table. Bond looked at him the way one might look at a child that thinks he’s being clever by hiding Daddy’s keys behind his back, but followed Q back to their table anyway, waiting until Q had set their drinks down and worked his way back around to sit next to Moneypenny and Vicky. Bond slid in next to him, slouch casual and arm draped easily across the back of the booth as though he owned this pub and everything (everyone) in it.

“Well, aren’t you just the cat that ate the canary,” commented Moneypenny, eyebrow cocked. Q was preparing to kick her under the table, watching for a stray comment with the part of his brain that wasn’t totally preoccupied with the heat through their trousers of Bond’s thigh against his. Each of
Bond’s legs was like a young tree trunk, all corded muscle wrapped in thousand-Euro silk suit.

“That’s not all I’ve eaten,” Bond observed, eyes wide, devil-may-care. He picked up his martini and sipped it, waggling both eyebrows at her lewdly. Moneypenny snorted, and Q hid his smile in his cider, wondering if someone like 007 could actually sit around at a pub and make small talk.

It turned out he could.

Turned out it was even fun.

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If Q had had to guess what four members of the Britain’s most intelligent and dangerous government branch would talk about over drinks at a pub, he might have guessed equal parts shop and trash-talking. As it turned out, he wasn’t far wrong.

And it wasn’t the fact that Moneypenny had almost as many hair-raising stories as Bond to tell about field-work that shocked him (though he guessed Bond had far more than he simply wasn’t telling), and it wasn’t the fact that Vicky could tell such filthy jokes with a straight face that Q was reduced to sputtering into his drink. Finding himself doing sleight-of-hand for his coworkers was a bit of a surprise, but it was worth it for the look on their faces when Q plucked Vicky’s mobile seemingly right out of Moneypenny’s cleavage. And of course Vicky ruined what poise Q had left by insisting on buying the next two rounds, Dark and Stormys for the whole table, and it wasn’t until he’d already drank two that Q found out how fucking alcoholic they were, and by then it was much too late.

No, what caught and held him were the moments when Bond threw his head back and laughed, a real laugh, all the cracks and imperfections and scars on his weathered face made perfect and right for a few breathless seconds. Q knew Bond’s history; he knew the seven levels of Hell Bond had dragged and been dragged through, and it blew his mind that anyone could return with their humanity intact, and yet.

And yet.

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Q stumbled onto the street three hours later, loose-limbed and warm, flushed through his face and throat all the way down to his loosened collar, tie hanging at half-mast. Moneypenny pushed out the door after him, laughing into his ear and slinging her arm around his shoulders, leaving messy kisses across his temple and into his hairline. “Moneypaaants,” he protested, and oh, he was pissed, worse than he’d been in years.

“Watch you don’t break Quentin,” said Bond from behind them, and it was hard to judge when he was this wankered but Q thought he sounded amused.

“You’re one to talk; you break everything you touch, from what you’ve told us,” said Vicky, bringing up the rear. Q turned in time to see her clap Bond on the shoulder; she had a few inches on him in those heels. Bond smirked.

“I work as hard as I play,” he said coolly.

“I feel sorry for your lovers if you leave them in anything approaching the condition of the Walther PPK you brought me home last time,” Q said. Bond’s eyes focused on him, burning like gas lamps in his head. The heat there was enough to burn Q to a cinder if he strayed too close.
“Oooh, touchy, touchy.” Moneypenny grinned, her smile as wicked as the hand that squeezed Q’s hip. Q leaned into her automatically, remembering vaguely their one abortive venture into more-than-friends territory, two years gone now. Water under the bridge.

“Right,” Vicky declared. “You lot be good, I’m heading home.”

“I’ll catch a cab with you,” decided Moneypenny. She disentangled herself from Q to force a hug on Bond, who accepted it bemusedly, and then Vicky swept Q up in another hug, eliciting a squawk of protest as she ruffled his already hopeless hair before walking off arm-in-arm with Moneypenny, leaving Q standing on the pavement with Bond.

“Are you alright to get home?” Bond asked. He was suddenly in Q’s personal space, much closer than he had any right to be. His eyes were so fucking blue.

“If you think you’re going to discover the location of my flat by oh-so-helpfully escorting me home, you have another think coming,” Q said. It came out a bit breathless, and spoken right at Bond’s crooked (twice-broken) nose. Bond smiled, and this close Q found himself staring in fascination at the lines around his eyes, the harshness of his cheekbones.

“What’s to stop me from just following you home?” The question was very quiet. Bond was watching him and Q couldn’t place the expression, was too drunk to parse that softness of voice, the language in Bond’s gaze. He straightened, determined not to be intimidated by the proximity of the deadliest man on earth, and Bond’s hand shot out to catch Q’s elbow as Q swayed on his feet.

“What are you, a lost puppy?” Bond was perilously close, his soft exhale brushing Q’s cheek. “Try it sometime,” Q said. “See what happens.”

“I think I will,” murmured Bond. Q tilted his face up, and Bond leaned in and pressed his mouth to Q’s. His kiss tasted like rum and ginger beer; Q thought he could catch the faintly bitter aftertaste of his own folly. The heat of his mouth was incredible. Q leaned in, curling fingers of both hands in Bond’s scissor-sharp lapels, half-expecting to slice his hands open. “For tonight, though—” Bond spoke into Q’s mouth, between kisses, hand wandering down from Q’s elbow to his hip, “perhaps you ought to … mm. Come home with me.”

Q leaned back, breaking the kiss with a slow, shaky breath. His face felt hot; he wasn’t sure if it was Bond or the alcohol. Not much difference, really. “But how will you get into your flat if you don’t even have your keys?” he asked softly. Bond’s eyebrows knotted, and then popped up into his hairline as Q held up his hand, from which dangled Bond’s keys.

“When did you—” he demanded, and Q tutted.

“Ah ah ah. Don’t go accusing me of things I’m too drunk to possibly have done.” Q stepped back and tossed Bond his keys; Bond caught them without so much as glancing at them. “Bond…. “

“James,” said Bond, and gave a very small smile.

“James,” repeated Q, the word warm on his tongue. “If you want to find my flat—or you want me in your flat—you are going to have to very much try harder.” There it was, an open invitation where Q should be turning Bond away, but he’d always liked to play with fire, hadn’t he.

“I will endeavor not to disappoint you,” said Bond. His voice was dark, sweet smoke. Q wanted to rip off that suit and lick every inch of him. He lifted his head.

“See that you do,” he said, and zipping up his coat, he turned and walked towards the tube station two blocks down. He fancied he could feel the weight of Bond’s eyes following him, but when he
reached the end of the block and risked a glance back over his shoulder, Bond was gone.

* * * * *
Breathless

Chapter Summary

Exploring the inherent pleasure of a well-made puzzle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What followed was the most bizarre courtship Q had ever—well, heard of, certainly. He didn’t have much to compare it to, but Moneypenny confirmed that normal people didn’t flirt like this. Not that he was normal. Not that any of them were.

* * * * *

Q managed to keep himself awake for a full hour after he arrived home, half-expecting to see Bond at his front door despite all the precautions he’d taken en route home to evade him, only to pass out cold before making it to bed, sprawled on his couch by his work-table. He woke around 3 am to a warm weight on his chest, blinking stupidly as a small white cat mauowed in his face.

“Oh, you’ve come back, have you,” he croaked out. Carly responded by licking one of his glasses lenses. Carly was technically a stray, but after Q had installed the cat-door for her (most expensive cat door in England, since it opened only to her vocal signature) she’d taken to staying at his flat as often as not, even submitting to being taken to the vet for a full work-up. He’d gotten a collar for her the last time he saw her, but it appeared to be missing. “Got hungry, I expect.” He sat up with a grunt, and she jumped lightly down to the floor, white puff of a tail twitching as she headed towards the kitchen. Q groaned and hauled himself off the couch, shuffling tiredly after her. It was only after he’d finished spooning some wet cat food into a dish for her that he thought to check whether anyone had gotten into his flat.

A quick walk-through of his home yielded nothing; security camera videos came up equally dry. Q drank down two glasses of water and an aspirin and called it a night, and didn’t even bother shoving Carly away when she came and curled up under the covers with him, purring like a little engine. It wasn’t as if he was expecting Bond to break in and mug him, after all. And he’d have plenty of time to hate himself come morning.

* * * * *

As it happened, Q had very little time for self-recrimination the next morning. His mobile rang at 6:34 am with an urgent message from M telling him he was needed at HQ as soon as possible, as some absolute git had managed to download a (thankfully less dangerous) version of the HAL-2012 virus onto MI6’s servers. Q cursed a blue streak that sent Carly bolting for her cat-door, insulting every one of his jumped-up script monkey idiots who might have done this, with some barbs for his wretched coworkers who’d blessed him with this hangover thrown in for spice. He showered in record time and shoved a muffin in his face before bolting for the nearest tube station, clattering down the rickety iron steps from his block of flats and nearly killing a gran out for an early-morning walk with her corgi in his haste. He was at the labyrinthine crypt that was still substituting for HQ by 7:15, and was eyeball-deep in code for the entirety of his morning, save for the few brave souls who stopped by in order to bring him tea or to get updates for Mallory.
He finally managed to contain the damage around 1 pm. Q sat back, swiping an arm over his face with a low growl of annoyance. He’d had so much he’d planned to work on this morning, no less than three works-in-progress he needed to coordinate in order to reach his agents in the field on time, and here he was, a full half-day behind at best due to having spent his morning on damage control, and that was only if the virus hadn’t totally bollocksed up any of the projects he had in the works, he was going to bloody murder Carter when he got his hands on the idiot—

“Don’t lose your head,” said an all-too-cheerful voice from his right: Moneypenny, standing by looking unfairly posh in her blue frock and heels. “I brought you lunch, compliments of M. Congrats on all your hard work taming the beast.”

“I don’t want lunch, I want the person who did this drug out into the street and shot,” said Q peevishly, but he reached over and snagged the box from Wagamama she was holding out anyway.

“Carter swears up and down he didn’t download anything and he has no idea how the virus got in,” said Moneypenny, leaning against the desk as Q ripped open the box and attacked his noodles. “Records show he didn’t log into his computer this morning until after you did, and he left work well before you last night. It’s a great mystery.”

“The only mystery is why he was ever hired in the first place,” muttered Q. “What’s that folder you’ve got? Are you here to brief me on the next mission I am to outfit 007 for?”

“So long as ‘outfitting’ is all you’re planning on doing to Bond,” observed Moneypenny, and Q choked on his soba noodles, shooting Moneypenny a glare that could have set half of Q Branch on fire.

“Moneypants,” he said warningly, around a mouthful of food. Moneypenny smirked at him. “There is nothing going on, alright? Nothing squared. Nothing to the nth power.”

“Alright, alright!” Moneypenny raised her hands in surrender, but she didn’t stop smirking. “All I know is that’s the first time I’ve seen Bond out consorting with us peasants since I’ve started working here. And he was sitting awfully close to you.”

“Rubbish,” said Q. “That’s the real reason you volunteered to bring me lunch, isn’t it. So you could try to pry some gossip out of me.” Moneypenny winked at him, and Q sighed. “Leave the folder on the desk, please, and I’ll see what I can dig up for our resident psychopath to take with him.” Moneypenny deposited the manila envelope on Q’s desk and flicked him a cheerful two-finger salute before turning on a heel and marching back towards M’s offices. Q exhaled heavily, hunching over his bowl of yakisoba with the air of the much put-upon.

You’d have thought that being in computer programming would be one of the quieter career paths one could choose, but apparently, you’d be wrong. At this rate Q was actually going to have to relocate his office to the arse-end of Scotland just to get any fucking work done.

* * * * *

It was another week before Q saw Bond again. Working off-site at weapons testing facilities had its occasional perks, and truth be told Q needed the space. After the virus debacle passed, he found himself replaying his and Bond’s kiss in front of the pub over and over in his head, like one of those bloody GIFs with cats his interns so adored. It was enough to drive him to distraction, and distraction from his huge workload was the very last thing Q needed. So he lost himself gratefully in the minutiae of his job, willing himself to not think beyond the firing range with his armsmaster, observing the kickback of a new compact handgun or measuring the amount of force expended in a bomb-blast. There were few things more satisfying than watching an explosive the size of an apple
take out the equivalent of four titanium-reinforced iron walls.

Never let it be said that Q didn’t love his work. He might not be the one to pull the trigger, but not all the waters of Arabia could wash the blood of Her Majesty’s enemies from his hands. Not that he even wanted to.

He lost himself in handguns and heavy artillery, wrapped himself around miniature poison pens and remote-operated smart bombs. Q spent whole days without thinking of Bond, and if he dreamed of piercing blue eyes and heavy, callused hands at night, well, that was nobody’s business.

* * * * *

Q was just beginning to think he might have a hold on this unreasonable crush when he returned to HQ seven days later, but that particular illusion cracked and blew away in the wind like a thoroughly vaporized building husk the minute he laid eyes on 007. Bond leaned against the wall of Q’s private workstation in a lethally sharp suit, his arms crossed across his broad chest, his gaze fixed unblinkingly on Q. It was fucking unnerving.

“Hello, Q,” said Bond. “What’ve you got for me today?” He sounded almost bored. Q was glad he’d been spared the gene that turned him red at the drop of a hat. He would hate to come over all hot and splotchy like his dad used to when his fury got the better of him, looking like he would burn you if you touched him.

Q was always one of those for whom the world would end in ice.

“Well if it’s that tedious for you, Mr. Bond, there’s no need to bother,” Q said calmly. “I’m sure one of the other agents would love this Jaguar convertible that comes when you call it.”

Bond cocked his head, his expression barely changing. “And here I thought I’d run the budget into the ground so badly that you’d barely be able to afford a squirt-gun for me,” he said, but now at least he sounded like he was paying attention.

“Yes, well.” Q pursed his lips at his computer screen, then reached for the slim black case sitting on his desk, flicking the silver clasps open and pulling out a deceptively simple-looking remote control, approximately the size and weight of a compact mp3 player. “If all goes as planned in this mission, you are going to find yourself a singularly unpopular person in a very remote location, and removing you expeditiously benefits everyone. So.” He glanced at Bond. “Don’t get used to it. Break this and I’ll send you with thumb tacks for the rest of the year.”

The glint in Bond’s eye was unmistakable. “Thank you, dearest Q,” he said. “I promise to take the very best care of our Jag.”

Q grimaced. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

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As it turned out, the Jaguar not only GPS-located the transponder Q had given Bond, but it also navigated using an aggressively upgraded version of Google maps, and came equipped with a pair of modified M134 mini-machine guns armed with 7.62 NATO cartridges that blasted everything blocking the way to its owner to smithereens; then there was the further arsenal of projectiles, miniature flame-throwers, and other weaponry at the driver’s command once he or she was actually behind the wheel. And that was all in addition to the fact that the car Q had modded was one of the new F-type V8 S convertibles that could go from 0-60 mph in 4.2 seconds that wouldn’t even be commercially available until mid-2013. Bond was in a transport of glee.
“You know, Bond could easily have stolen a car from the Yakuza complex and gotten out on his own,” pointed out Tanner. As was becoming the norm for the more spectacular of Bond’s missions, Q had drawn an audience, situated as he currently was in the center of Q Branch’s main workspace in order to most effectively use the wall projector screen and its various surrounding surfaces to coordinate 007’s mission. Tanner was at his left elbow, and unless Q was very wrong, M and Moneypenny had wandered in at some point and were watching from somewhere in the back right of the room.

“Well of course he could have, he’s quite effective at breaking, perhaps even at entering,” said Q. He tapped out a line of code, sending a message to the waiting private jet at the edge of Yakuza airspace. “But I’m testing a personal theory of mine that happens to dovetail nicely with better achieving our mission objectives.” He adjusted his head-piece, wincing slightly at the crump of combustible material going up in glorious flames at the other end. “007, was it really necessary to implode that armory?”

“Of course,” said the smug voice in Q’s ear—well everyone’s ear, now that Q was playing him on speaker. “Robbing Yakuza of weaponry is hardly a bad thing. And your Jag does the job so effectively.”

“That it does,” said Q comfortably. “Tanner, if you’re going to make that face, could you at least stand out of my line of sight, you’re going to put me off my lunch.”

Tanner cleared his throat. “Is it really necessary to encourage that kind of destructiveness?” he asked after a moment.

“All work and no play makes Bond a dull boy,” said Q. “And we do so appreciate an agent who loves his work.”

“Q, I’m blushing,” said Bond, and Q’s stomach twisted into a shape worthy of H.R. Geiger. Out of the corner of his eye, Q could see Tanner shaking his head.

* * * * *

The box was on his desk when he came back from lunch the next day. Bond was at his desk, too, sitting against one edge.

Q stopped in the doorway, Scrabble mug of Earl Grey in his hand, blinking at the unfamiliar object. “Please tell me that doesn’t have a piece of someone’s hand in it or somesuch equally gruesome memento of your trip to Nihon,” he said.

Bond smiled faintly. “It’s a present,” he said. “And no, there’s no body parts inside.”

Q crossed the room, setting his mug down on the desk and picking up the mystery object instead, finding himself speechless for several seconds. It was actually three boxes, seemingly glued together at one corner each, made of delicately-carved dark cherry wood, with pastoral paintings of Japanese rural life on several of the sides. It was beautiful. “What is this?” he asked. “You didn’t find this at the Yakuza compound.”

“No,” murmured Bond. “I got it before then.” Q glanced over at Bond and abruptly lost whatever he’d been planning to say next, arrested by the look in Bond’s eyes.

“Arigatou gozaimasu,” said Q finally. “May I ask the occasion?”

“All work and no play makes the quartermaster a dull boy,” said Bond. “Open it.” He straightened, pushing off the desk and reaching out to rest a hand on Q’s shoulder, giving him a soft squeeze. “I
brought you back your Jaguar, by the way.”

“Yes, I saw that,” said Q faintly. Even the warmth of Bond’s hand was not enough to distract him, and he did not notice when it fell away. He was already turning the box over and over in his hands, pressing against a panel here and noting with delight that it did not immediately give way. “You brought me a puzzle-box? …Bond?” Q looked up again, but Bond was already gone.

* * * * *

Realistically speaking, on any given day Q could work 12 hours straight without even a break for lunch and still never catch up, so it was rare for him to justify taking time off. All the same, he couldn’t resist leaving work early that day, dispensing only with the necessary from 007’s mission to Japan before heading back to his flat (and taking one of his six usual roundabout methods of getting there). To his great joy, it took Q almost four hours to get the wooden puzzle-box open. He quickly discovered that the three smaller boxes had to be opened in a specific pattern, their panels manipulated in exactly the right order or else you would be locked out. Q hummed to himself as he worked, absent-mindedly petting Carly and losing himself in the same space he went to when he coded or got extensive time alone in his workshop with a new piece of equipment. It was almost a physical blow when the last panel finally slid open (38 correct movements in a row) and a piece of paper fell out.

He leaned over, retrieving the folded scrap of paper from the floor before Carly could make off with it, unfolding it and scanning the message written there. Color flooded his face now that he was alone, now that he could let himself be flustered by James Bond’s neat handwriting and cavalier presumption. He glanced at his watch, and scrambled to his feet so quickly that Carly let fly a disapproving yowl and fled under the coffee table. He had to go, he had to hurry or he would be late —but he couldn’t go in his bloody pyjamas, he had to change first, fucking hell he’d have to cab it or he wouldn’t make it in time—

Five minutes later, Q threw himself into the back of the cab, huffing out the address to the driver, his hand still in the pocket of his suit coat. He tugged out the little scrap of paper and re-read its message, his face burning.

_Bella Italiano, 1930 hours. See you there. -James_

* * * * *

Bella Italiano was done in classic Roman styling, with lots of draping white tapestries and marble pillars and sweeping ceiling glass. Q found Bond near the back of the restaurant, in one of the booths that offered a commanding view of the rest of the room. Bond reclined slightly in the seat, a snifter with a finger of some amber liquor on the table in front of him, wearing yet another of his impeccable suits. He was in full-on black tie, a dinner jacket with silk lapels, a pleated white shirt, and mother-of-pearl studs with matching cuff links; a black silk waistcoat peeked out just above where the table disappeared Bond’s midsection. Q’s gut twisted at the sight of him, how painfully attractive he was, as quintessentially 007 as Q had ever seen him.

Q slowed as he crossed the monolithic room, feeling suddenly massively under-dressed and under-qualified for the engagement ahead of him; his 3-button grey suit over a white shirt and paisley tie looked excellent on him, actually, but it was the suit he wore to important meetings and formal functions, as he had nothing in his arsenal for ‘dinner and conversation with James fucking Bond at 5-star restaurant.’ He was seriously considering bolting for the door when Bond saw him. Bond straightened in the booth, a light coming into his face, and Q found himself crossing the last few meters and sinking into his seat, drawn irresistibly by the magnetism of that gaze.
He’d have better luck resisting gravity.

“Sorry I’m late,” said Q, since *Take me now* and *Say you’re having me for dinner* were both unacceptable on a number of levels and he was better than that. Mostly. “Traffic was murder.” He wasn’t going to apologize for being under-dressed. It wasn’t as though Bond had given him much warning.

“Fashionably late,” said Bond. James. James, Q decided. Bond was for work, and whatever this was, it was decidedly not work. “I expected as much. You found my note.” He was smiling again, watching Q steadily, as if he was the most captivating thing in the room, as if no one else was in the room at all. Q was finding it hard to breathe.

“I did,” said Q, unable to keep from smiling back. “The box is excellent. Perhaps not as complex as the hard drives you brought me back from Moaveni’s computers, but just as rewarding, in its way.”

“Good.” James leaned forward, lacing his fingers together on the table top, and Q tried not to notice the way the cut of James’ suit accented his broad shoulders, the tracery of scars that licked up his neck (that he wanted to follow with his fingers, with his tongue). “Would you like a drink? “

“Are you going to try to get me drunk? James, for shame.”

“Nothing of the sort. I just want you to enjoy yourself. You get away from the office so rarely. At least I get out and see the world.”

“I like my work,” noted Q, “and it’s a good thing I do, or else I’d have gone half-mad within a week of starting and then you would have finished the job.” James, Q decided, was going to an awful lot of trouble for a roll in the hay. He didn’t know what to make of it, and after a few moments of mentally grappling with it, decided to put it away again.

“Mmm.” James paused for a moment as their server materialized out of the aether, lingering long enough to take their drink and appetizer order before vanishing (Q had no head for wine and would eat probably anything put in front of him, but if James wanted to show off, Q was more than happy to let him), and then James pinned Q with another one of his megawatt stares. “I need something to call you outside of work,” he said.

“Just not ‘Quentin,’ please,” said Q. “The intensity of my loathing for that name burns hotter than the surface of the sun.”

James snorted, but his smile was undiminished. He seemed to think for a moment. “How about Elliot?” he said, the way a chess-master would say check.

Q stared at him, the blood draining from his face. “How did you—”

“You told me to try harder,” James pointed out. “Which, by the way, is harder than I had to try to get Mawdsley’s file, so congratulations on that.”

“Wouldn’t want to disappoint you,” said Q faintly. He reached out for his glass of wine, a pinot gris the color of straw that supposedly had floral notes and a crisp head to it; it might as well have been water for all that Q tasted it. “So now I suppose you know all about Elliot Marsh.”

“Not nearly as much as I was hoping to learn,” admitted James, and Q smiled into his wine in vindication. “Just that he has the same national insurance number and birthday as you.”

“Yes, well. That was sloppy of me, but I admit I wasn’t working very hard.” Q considered. No one but Moneypenny knew about Elliot Marsh, or what Elliot did with his time, but the urge to show off...
a little was very strong. Especially with James watching him from across the table with that
pluripotent smile hovering around his lips, that said the night could yet go anywhere. Q cleared his
throat. “Very well. Have you a piece of paper?”

James raised his eyebrows, and then reached inside his jacket, pulling out a business card and sliding
it across the table to Q. Q brought out a pen from his jacket pocket and scribbled a string of digits
onto it, before pushing the card back across the table to James, who took it and glanced at it before
giving Q a questioning look.

“A week from Saturday,” said Q. “That’s all I’m giving you. Find me and I’ll show you Elliot.”

James lifted his head, a belligerent edge to the angle of his jaw. He tucked the card back into his
jacket pocket as he studied Q. “I leave for another mission day after tomorrow,” he pointed out.

“Then you had best make sure you finish it quickly, because I’m not sure when Elliot will be around
next,” Q said primly, and James gave him a wolfish grin that made all the hair on Q’s body curl and
his balls draw up, as though he’d been stripped naked there in the middle of the restaurant.

“Making me work for it, are you,” James murmured, and Q

mm-hrmmed into his drink.

* * * * *

The rest of their dinner broke over him like the ocean, washing the outside world away. Q
remembered thinking that, at the time, everything tasted amazing, like the angels themselves were
hiding in the kitchen preparing their food and drink, but if he’d been quizzed on it later he wouldn’t
have been able to name a single thing they ate. What stuck in his mind, instead, was the delightful
discovery of exactly how charming James Bond could be when the full force of his regard was
turned on you—and how terrifyingly smart he was. The fucking bastard. It made sense; 007
wouldn’t be nearly as effective a killing machine if it weren’t for how agile and cunning he was, as
deadly and swift as a venomous snake.

Their conversation ranged far and wide, from the mundane to the sublime; sure, it was hot that James
could recognize Rumi, but when the first bite of tiramisu melted in his mouth and Q shut his eyes in
bliss, only to hear James murmur, “Oh sweet mystery of life, at last I’ve found you,” Q could have
leapt over the table and kissed him right there in front of God and everyone, because Keats was for
lovers but Mel Brooks had his heart. He’d seen pieces of this sweet and painful lightness the other
night at the pub, but the sharpened weapon of James’ mind hadn’t been pointed directly at him, then,
and he could admit to himself now that he was too drunk at the pub to properly appreciate the man in
front of him.

They didn’t talk about work, at least not directly. Doing what they did, it was hard to cultivate much
of a life outside of MI6, but their words filled up the minutes filled up the hours and Q was drunk,
and not on wine. He didn’t even see James pay for the check but suddenly James was standing, had
come around to Q’s side and was offering him a hand out of his chair.

“I’m not that gone, James,” said Q, and stood pointedly under his own power. “As delightful as this
evening has been, you are not so powerful an intoxicant that I have lost my head.”

“Clearly I need to work harder, then,” said James into the space between them, his voice very quiet.
Q bit his lip, swallowing the catty reply before it could fall out of his mouth, and followed James
through the crowded restaurant back to the lobby. He gazed past James’ shoulder to the grey city
outside; it had started to snow while they ate dinner, and he half-wished he’d grabbed his peacoat on
the way out the door.
“So.” James had turned around, was watching him from just inches away. He smelled of cognac and some nameless, expensive aftershave. “Do I pass muster, quartermaster? Will you reconsider my offer from before?”

For several seconds, Q could only stare at him. It hit him then that his boyish crush on 007 had metastasized into utter infatuation, and for all his intellect and webs and clever games, the promises he’d made himself, he’d still wound up in the same spot he’d hoped to avoid. “You can be very persuasive when you want to be,” he said at last, and James smiled, deep and drowning as the sea.

* * * * *

They went to James’ flat.

They walked to James’ flat, actually, which was a stupid idea considering how the temperature had plummeted during dinner. Every cab was jammed, and James seemed perfectly willing to take the tube, but moments away from descending the steps Q decided that he couldn’t deny himself for even twenty minutes longer, cold be damned, so he grabbed James by the lapels of his dinner jacket and yanked him onward past the entrance to the underground. He felt James stumble behind him, heard a bemused what are you doing, Q, but he ignored it till they’d fast-marched to the end of the block and Q had dragged James into the shadow of a statue of Oliver Cromwell, digging his fingers under Bond’s waistcoat as he pulled Bond against him. This close Q could now see it was actually dark blue, not black, but he hardly gave a damn in that moment.

“That waistcoat cost more than your month’s salary,” murmured James, leaning in.

“Oh, now you start caring about the cost of things,” hissed Q, and dragged James down to kiss him, hard. James’ hand came up, caught Q’s shoulder and squeezed, and then James was crowding him against the brick wall, the uneven mortar catching Q’s coat and hiking it up his back as James pinned him, Q moaning into his mouth. Cold bit at his lower back but Q couldn’t give a damn past the press of James’ sturdy chest against his.

A bomb was going off inside his head, a fire was burning through his stomach. Q slid his mouth along James’ full lips, sucking at the bottom of his pout, eliciting a grunt. James’ hand came up to Q’s hair, fingernails scraping against Q’s scalp as he got a good hand-full and pulled, sharp enough to make Q’s eyes water. “I am going to wreck you,” James breathed, and Q’s cock jumped in his trousers.

“You should’ve picked a restaurant closer to your bloody flat,” Q ground out between kisses. He let out a whine that he’d deny to his dying breath when James pulled back and grinned at him, eyes bright. “Hello, less smirking, more kissing!”

“Excuse me, who was the one who managed to walk us straight past the tube stop? What would you like me to do, carry you back?”

“That’d be a nice start,” snapped Q. He couldn’t seem to help himself; he wanted James so bad it was like he’d lost control of his ability to not be a total pea-brained arsehole. Manners were the first thing overboard, apparently. “Isn’t that what you do?” James laughed, pulling back and letting Q up from his crouch against the wall, tugging Q to his newly-unsteady feet.

Walking home was an exercise in frustration. They’d make it a block, two at most, and then they’d come across a dark patch of sidewalk and James would drag Q off to kiss him breathless against a brick wall or under a shivering leafless tree, and if James somehow managed to rein himself in it was Q doing the dragging. It took ages to get to the walk-up that housed James’ flat, at once posh and painfully uninteresting, as the newer high-end places tended towards. Q’s nose was stinging from the
cold, his mouth was already kiss-chapped and swollen, and both their coats had a fine dusting of white snow. Q imagined his hair wasn’t any better off.

They got in the first lift that came with a very properly-dressed older woman, her hair the color of blue cotton candy and her glasses thick enough to qualify as binoculars. “Hello, James,” she said amiably as the doors slid shut. “Who is your young man here? Nice to see you finally bringing someone round, I was beginning to think I’d have to stage an intervention.”

Q coughed into his hand, eyes wide. “Ah, Margaret,” James said, abruptly awkward, and Q wished he could record this, to cherish for ever and ever; he didn’t know 00s came with an “embarrassed” setting. “This is, ah, we aren’t—”

“Oh, my mistake,” said Margaret blandly. “Still, good to see you have some company over, you spend too much time alone.” She laced long, spindly fingers together and smiled; Q fought the urge to exchange glances with James, diligently staring at the floor display above the facade of buttons on the wall.

The lift slowed, pinging as the door opened, and James and Q waited politely for Margaret to exit first, James holding the door of the lift open for her. “Careful of that waistcoat when you get him alone, dear,” said Margaret, turning to smile dazzlingly at Q as she pulled out a pair of keys from her purse and fitted them to her lock. “I gave him it as a house-warming gift, it was my husband’s. Wouldn’t do for it to get all dirtied up. It looks quite nice on him though, doesn’t it? Brings out his eyes. Well, enjoy yourselves!” She gave them a little wave with one of her bird-like hands, and vanished into her apartment.

Q whirled on James, eyes bulging in their sockets, but before he could say a word James had grabbed him by the arm and was hustling him down the hall and into the flat three doors down. “You—’More expensive than a month’s pay!’” Laughter bubbled up in his throat as James man-handled him through the doorway and shut the door behind them with more force than strictly necessary. “Oh my god, you wanker, you didn’t tell me you had a girlfriend! How can I compete with Grandma Moses?” Q sank weak-kneed against the wall, head thumping against plaster as he dissolved into actual fucking giggles like he was at uni again and drunk off his arse on sparkling wine.

“Stop laughing at me, you cheeky fucking tart.” James loomed in front Q, grinning at him as he slid hands up under Q’s suit coat, digging his shirt out of his trousers, fingers finding bare skin like heat-seeking missiles. Q sighed and arched into the touch, reaching up to undo the dapper bow-tie at James' neck, which he now saw was a midnight blue to match the waistcoat.

“It really does bring out your eyes,” he said lightly, and James rolled his eyes. He couldn’t banish his smile, though, and Q couldn’t resist, leaning in to kiss at the corner of that dangerous mouth, tangling his arms in them. “Slow down a little, you’re an animal, I’m—busy here—”

“Mmm, I hope you’re not expecting sympathy.”

Q dropped his arms, letting his suit coat fall to the floor, and then James was tugging Q’s button-down and undershirt over his head both at once. “Glasses! Glasses, hello—” His glasses lifted abruptly from his nose, and Q found himself blinking at the now-fuzzy form of James Bond right in front of him.

“Might want to set them aside for a bit,” James observed. “Wouldn’t want them to get dirtied up.” Q’s gut clenched as desire spiked right in the pit of his stomach, even as he reached to take his glasses back from James. There should be a tax on sounding like that, he thought stupidly.
“If you will remember from my file, which I know for a fact you have read—” Q neatly retrieved his glasses and replaced them on his face, James’ quizzical expression coming back into focus, “I am all but blind without my glasses. So if you don’t want this to be far more hilarious than strictly necessary…”

James just smiled, and leaned in to kiss him again by way of assent. Q was only dimly aware of their journey to the bedroom, too busy being distracted by James’ mouth and wandering hands, and by the various pieces of clothing they shed en route, like the trail of bread crumbs left by a perverted Hansel & Gretel. Then he was naked and James was naked and James was laying him out on the king-size bed, sliding hands up Q’s arms to catch each of his wrists and pin them against the sheets.

“Well hello there,” James said, pausing for a moment, bent over Q. He was giving his attention to the bright splashes of ink that adorned Q’s bicep and shoulder, his half-sleeve of tattoos visible to James now for… probably the first time, Q realized. He hadn’t been thinking about it; he was sort of busy with staring at the glory that was James’ torso. “This is a nice surprise.”

“Yes, I got them just to impress you, obviously,” said Q, and lifted his hips impatiently, his erection bobbing lewdly over his stomach by way of greeting. “Are we going to classify them right now, or are you going to get down here?” James’ eyes darkened, and he leaned forward to press the length of his body against Q’s with a low groan that vibrated against the hollow of Q’s throat. Q could feel James’ stiff cock sliding against his belly, and he shuddered, arching up against the hands that still pinned him to the bed, tipping his head back in supplication.

James took the invitation immediately, releasing one of Q’s thin wrists to catch him by the hair instead, tugging Q’s head back yet further to elongate the arch of his white neck; Q felt not unlike a small rabbit about to have its throat torn out. James exhaled hot air against his skin, brushing his lips over Q’s trembling Adam’s apple, and Q moaned, grabbing blindly for one of James’ shoulders. His glasses were attempting a backwards slide off his face, but Q wasn’t yet ready to give up what might well be his only chance to see James Bond naked. He'd sooner take a year of migraines than miss that sight.

The heat of him was unreal. Q twisted his other wrist in James’ grip, wriggling it free so that he could wrap his other arm around the furnace on top of him. James mouthed wetly against Q's throat up to the spot under his ear, scraping teeth teasingly light over Q's skin. Q moaned encouragingly, gathering great palmfuls of the muscles of James' back. The man's deltoids were a national treasure, he thought dizzily.

Q wriggled his legs slightly out from under James, planting his feet on the bed to get some leverage and rolling his hips suggestively up against the blunt weapon of James' pelvis, biting his lip as the catch and rub of their erections against each other sent a jolt of pleasure through his stomach. James made a noise in his throat and bit down on Q's neck, and Q hissed, twitching in sharp and immediate response.

James pulled back at that, peering down at him with a smirk that Q could see even through the lenses sitting askew on his face. "liked that, did you," he murmured. Q blinked up at him, glassy-eyed.

"What do you want, a fucking medal?" he demanded. "Do it again."

"Bossy." James ducked his head again and sank teeth into Q's throat on the opposite side, and Q moaned, digging fingernails into James' back deep enough that later he would find marks, little half-moon crescents. His noises seemed to energize James, who started biting all up and down his throat, stopping here and there to suck and lick a mark into Q's skin until Q was squirming and panting against James' weight.
"Fuck, James." His cock ached, beads of pre-ejaculate leaking from the tip, leaving a sticky trail along James' taut stomach. Q twisted his arm until he could grab the hand that wasn't still in his hair, pulling it up to his face. He lick flat-tongued up the first blunt finger before sucking it messily into his mouth. James stilled, face against Q's chest, and let out a noise low and full of gravel that made Q's stomach twist with lust.

Q hummed around the digit in his mouth, letting his eyes shut again as he set up a rhythm, sucking on James' finger like he so wanted to his cock, cheeks hollowing as he soaked it in spit, laving it with his tongue. James groaned, and the hand in Q's hair tightened, yanking hard enough to make Q's eyes water and his cock jerk. A second finger pushed into his mouth, and Q moaned as James pressed the pads of both fingers against the back of Q's tongue, close to gagging for it.

"I had no idea you were so filthy, Q," James breathed, right in his ear. Q whined in the back of his throat; he'd never had that particular dark edge in James' voice directed at him before, hot like the touch of his skin was hot. Q sucked down those two fingers into his mouth as deep as he could take them, rolling his hips up against James again, one arm lashed around James' study shoulders, wanting more, now.

Evidently James did, too, because he pulled his fingers out of Q's mouth and pushed himself up on the bed over Q, grinding down against him, matching the rhythm of his hips. Their cocks slid together, already slick with pre-come and the sweat pooling in the hollow grooves of Q's hip. Q moaned, grabbing for James' side, fingers sliding against flat planes of muscle, laced here and there with fine ridges he knew were scar tissue.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, you sodding bastard, fuck--" Q wasn't going to last much longer. His breath rattled in his throat, his heart pounded like a freight train, his balls drawn up tight as he fucked up against James, craning his neck for a messy crash of lips and teeth as James tried to kiss him, moaning open-mouthed against the corner of Q's lips.

Q shoved a hand down between them, catching James' thick length against his arched fingers and rolling his hips up against it, rubbing their cocks together in the curve of his hand. James let out a stuttering groan against his temple, and out of the corner of his eye Q watched the muscles of his arms bunching under his skin as James rocked down against him, thrusting into Q's hand.

"James," Q panted, voice high, fractured from need, "I'm--fuck I'm going to--" James went down onto one elbow, lowering himself enough to press his face to Q's throat again as he caught the back of Q's neck in the other hand, and then he bit down hard on the side of Q's throat. Q gasped, coming hard and fast, shuddering through it as he emptied himself out.

James kept rocking down against him, and Q retained enough presence of mind to keep his hand where it was, to grab James by the shoulder and pull him closer. James' thrusts went jerky and rough, grunting against Q's neck, and then Q felt him shudder to a halt, felt the heat of his seed spilling across Q's stomach, and then Q felt James sagged against him and went still.

Q let himself drift for a moment, basking in the post-coital glow. His hand rested on the back of James' shoulder; James face stayed where it was, tucked into the crook of Q’s neck. He was going to have to wear a scarf tomorrow, Q thought distractedly. Or a neck-brace. Bastard.

James mumbled something into his neck. “Pardon? I don’t speak tree-sloth, James.”

James snorted and lifted his head. “You’re thinking too loudly.”

Q rolled his eyes, but it was hard to manage the proper level of disdain when he felt this blasted. “I’ll have you know——” he began, and then stopped as a hand came up and plucked his glasses from his
face. The world in front of his eyes was suddenly unfocused. And dark.

“Taking my glasses off isn’t going to make me stop,” he pointed out after a moment.

James smiled against his neck. “It was worth a shot,” he murmured, barely audible.

Q wrinkled his nose, and kissed the nearest part of James that was handy, which happened to be his (extremely sweaty) temple. “Git.”

“Trollop.”

“Relic.”

“Brat,” James said, and bit down gently on Q’s neck. Q made a noise in his throat, and wrapped both arms around James’ shoulders, and shut his eyes. “I am going to, you know,” James said lazily, after a few more moments of quiet breathing.

“What, take a remedial language course?”

“Classify all your tattoos.” Q blinked. He lifted a hand, stroking his fingers lightly through James’ sweaty hair. “They look good on you,” James murmured.

“Oh,” was all Q could think of to say, and James chuckled against his neck before dropping another kiss under Q’s ear.

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Chapter End Notes

Bond's Jaguar F-type. The basis for Q's puzzle-box. Bond's dinner outfit. Q's dinner outfit.
“Q, did you get mugged by a pack of lampreys on your way to work this morning?”

Q glowered into the glow of his computer screen. Obnoxiously, it did nothing to stop Moneypenny leaning over the desk at him with that self-satisfied look on her face. Even more obnoxiously, her expression did nothing to diminish how pretty she was in her orange frock. Q wondered if there were some clause in the field agent manual that dictated all top-level field agents had to be unfairly attractive in order to qualify to work for MI6.

“I’ve got a condition,” he announced primly.

“Well-fucked-itis?”

“Sod off. Philistine.” Q’s fingers flew across the keyboard, determined not to look away from his screen. “Did you actually have something you needed to ask me?”

“No, just more paperwork for you to fill out.” Moneypenny dropped a fat stack of envelopes onto his desk with more glee than was really warranted. Q glanced at them and pursed his lips.

“How kind of you,” he said.

“We live to serve, dearest boffin,” she said, and left to go remind M who was really in charge of Her Majesty’s Secret Service.

It was going to be that kind of day.

* * * * *

“Q, what the hell happened to your neck?”

Q turned in his chair, folding his arms across his narrow chest and leveling a stare at Tanner, who was standing by the door with clipboards in his arms and a nervous expression on his face. “What the bloody hell do you think happened, Tanner?”

“Moneypenny said you’ve got a condition, so I was worried...” Q stared. Tanner shifted from one foot to the other, and cleared his throat.
“She said what.” Q was going to throttle every single person in MI6 who wasn’t his immediate subordinate. Someone had to keep the servers running after he was executed for treason.

“I might have misunderstood her,” Tanner said hurriedly. “Only it’s just, your neck—”

“Doesn’t anyone have anything better to do in this ruddy office than come and have a look at the quartermaster’s neck?” demanded Q. “I went on a date last night, alright? Good fucking God, Bill Tanner. Christ help you if you had to identify a bomb before you called someone to come defuse it for you, we’d be scraping you off the walls.”

“Oh, is that all they are.” Tanner actually looked relieved. Q couldn’t decide if he was more insulted that the idea of him going on a date was so unlikely that Tanner actually had to come up with alternative theories, or touched because M’s Chief of Staff came personally to investigate when he thought Q might be injured somehow.

“Yes. That’s what they are. Now either give me those clipboards you have tucked under your arm there, as I expect they’re my requisition forms for new parts, or get out of my office, because some of us have actual work to do.”

“You’re half-right.” Tanner finally crossed the room, passing the first of two clipboards over to Q. “These are your requisition forms. These, though, are loss itemization forms.”

Q stared at the second clipboard as though Tanner had said he’d sprayed it with bubonic plague aerosol before bringing it in. “Why the fuck am I filling out more of those, again? I just sent off a huge stack to Vicky two days ago, and that was bad enough, the other 00s are taking after Bond more and more.”

“You’re at least a month behind, I’m afraid. The new reports from the Yakuza mission have just come in.”

“He actually brought back the car, though,” Q pointed out. “Which is a minor miracle. Alright, fine, just leave them there, I wasn’t planning on sleeping tonight anyway.” Tanner added his forms to the stack Moneypenny had left earlier, and then excused himself, perhaps sensing the Guy Fawkesian mutiny Q was contemplating. Q glared stonily at the pile of paperwork, so large it now verged on obscene, as though the force of his regard could light it on fire. He fucking hated paperwork.

James Bond might have fingers that were deadly weapons and a cock that was the actual 8th wonder of the world, but that wouldn’t save him from the ocean of grief Q was going to pour on him the next time he saw the bastard.

* * * * *

Turned out, he didn’t need to.

“Q,” said Bond’s voice from behind him, moments after he heard the door to his work room slide open and shut. Q opened his mouth to tell Bond to get bent, but something about the tone of his voice gave him pause, and he sat up and actually turned around—

To see Bond standing in the door looking like he’d been mugged by a fucking kraken en route to MI6. He was covered from head to toe in splatters of black, viscous ink, and though it looked like he’d made a valiant effort to scrub the worst of it from his face and hands, splotches of it still stained his skin, and there was absolutely no saving that suit. Which was a pity; Savile Row always looked so good on Bond.

But Bond’s expression was calm. Expectant, even. Q wondered if it was the same expression he
wore right before he strangled the life out of someone. He straightened in his chair, and took a sip of tea before setting his mug down on the desk. “I see you found another of my decoy flats,” he said. “Was Adrienne home, or did you just set off her home security system?”

“There was no one home,” said Bond. “Which is probably for the best.”

“Shame,” said Q. “She’s lovely, really. She owns that bakery down on Cheltenham—the one with the scones Tanner loves so much? Talented woman.”

“She owns a bakery,” Bond repeated. He crossed the room slowly, until he stood in front of Q, gazing down on him with those blue eyes made all the more piercing for the gunk that now stained his handsome face. He looked like something that had crawled out of the bottom of the sea. “Are you absolutely out of your bloody mind?”

“I’m sorry, which of us has ‘breaking and entering’ as a personal hobby? Just because others have put up with it doesn’t mean I’m obliged to.”

“That is not fair, and you know it,” said Bond accusingly.

Q smiled then, unable to resist, and it only grew bigger as Bond glared at him. “I shan’t apologize for being good at my job, or expecting you to keep up,” Q informed him. “But if you ask very nicely I probably have a solvent around here somewhere that will get the stain out of your skin. Your suit is a lost cause, I’m afraid.”

“Mmm.” Bond studied him for a few moments, then clasped his hands in front of him in a curiously school-boyish gesture, fixing a smile with entirely too many teeth onto his face. “Dearest Q, won’t you please be kind enough to get this ruddy ink off my face.”

“Eergh. Don’t smile like that, it looks like you’re about to unhinge your jaw and swallow something whole.” Q stood up, leaning close to inspect the ink that blackened the strong line of Bond’s jaw. He dragged a finger through it, trying not to think about how many times he’d kissed this face last night, and then brought the finger to his nose to sniff. “Mm. Right, that’s what I thought.” Bond raised an eyebrow at him; it was one of the only spots in his face still unmarred by ink. “It’s the same ink used in the anti-theft packets that they keep in money at the big banks. It’s meant to be extremely difficult to get out, as I’m sure you’ve found.”

“Q, are you going to fix this for me or not.”

“Well, since you asked so very nicely...” Q turned around and bent over his desk, scanning the surface and pausing for a moment to rummage through his mental checklist before he went unerringly for the lowest drawer of his desk. He came up with a slim tube that looked like paint one might find in an art-supply store, and turned around to hand it to Bond. “Here, use this. You won’t need that much, it’s extremely strong. Mind that you shower thoroughly when you’re done; you don’t want that sitting on your skin longer than you have to.”

“Thank you.” Bond took the tube with the solvent in it and tucked it into his suit pocket, then glanced back up at Q. “Was there anything you wanted to send me with on my mission tomorrow, while you have me here?”

Q pursed his lips. A plug up your arse so you’ll be thinking of me the entire time was not really an appropriate response, and even if they’d been somewhere entirely secure he’d rather choke to death on his own tongue than admit how besotted he was with the man in front of him. “Not yet,” was what he said, instead. “There’s a few last-minute changes that need to be addressed. Besides.” He smiled, beatific as Saint Francis. “I wouldn’t want to deprive myself of your shining presence
Bond stared at him. “You’re a nasty little bugger when you let your power go to your head, Q,” he said, but Q could spot the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Get out of my office, you’re turning me senile just standing there,” said Q. Bond gave him that obnoxious mini-salute he had and vanished, and Q was left alone in his lab debating the merits of just having himself chemically castrated so he could focus on his work without this blasted distraction.

He had to hand it to Bond, though; he was in a much better mood now.

* * * * *

Q was so busy with work the next few days that he barely even had time to eat and sleep, let alone miss Bond. The mission Q had sent 007 on was a rare type for them; Bond usually preferred to work alone, but this mission required at least 3 operatives, and Q’s job was to supply all of them and to keep their way clear. On the third day, his agents passed into deep cover, and Q found himself sitting at his work-station by mid-afternoon, staring in increasing annoyance at the pile of emails in his inbox, emails that his subordinates should have been able to handle without issue. He was going to have to wring a few necks; this level of passing the buck was unacceptable. He scowled at his screen as he opened up a new email and started adding recipients, he was going to—

“You’ve got that tic in your eye again,” said Moneypenny from behind his left shoulder. Q jumped, and his second-favorite mug went flying, spilling the dregs of his Earl Grey over half his desk before shattering against the bare cement floor, pieces flying everywhere.

There was a long pause. “That’s three mugs you owe me now, Moneypants,” said Q at length.

“And that’s why you’d never make it as a field agent,” said Moneypenny, and patted him on the shoulder. “Come on, you’re going to get homicidal if I leave you here much longer, take a break and come out with me and Tanner.”

“I really can’t, you know I have an actual mountain of work that needs doing—”

“You don’t really want us reviewing candidates for the new building without you, do you?” Moneypenny crossed her arms and looked at him, eyebrows cocked. Q sighed and rubbed at his face, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

“No, I bloody well don’t. You’ll pick something from back when Victoria was still shagging Albert round half of London—”

“Q!”

“And then I’ll be stuck trying to cross-wire our systems with bits of copper left over from William the Conqueror.”

“Q, MI6 is not that antiquated. We can’t all be brilliant little upstarts like you, darling. That’s why M wants you there.”

It was Q’s turn to arch an eyebrow. “Oh, will M actually be there?”

“Yes, of course not. That’s what I’ll be there for.”

“You’re really wasted as a secretary, you know that, right?” Q stood up, casting about for something to mop up the spill with, finally unearthing some paper napkins from one of his desk drawers. “I’ll
never understand why you decided not to stay on as a field agent, you were rabid about it for so long --"

“Well if I were just a secretary I’d be inclined to agree with you,” Moneypenny said in a low voice. Q looked at her sharply, and she smirked.

“Have you been holding out on me?” he demanded. She batted her eyelashes at him. “Moneypants.”

“Later,” she said, and reached over to squeeze his shoulder. Q glowered at her for a few moments, but when all Moneypenny did was crouch next to him to help him clean up the broken mug and spill tea, he gave it up as a bad job. You couldn’t get secrets from Moneypants with a prybar if she didn’t feel like talking; it was something they had in common.

Probably one of the reasons they were such good friends, honestly.

* * * * *

They met Tanner at a tucked-away noodle shop a few blocks away, setting up in one of the private rooms and covering their table with folders and plates of sushi and rolls, and then the tablets came out. (Q provided all the department heads with tablets out of his own budget. It was worth it to him for the sake of cutting down at least some of his paperwork load. Some day everything would be on tablets, if he had a say in it, but in the meantime, it was an uphill battle.) They went through at least fifteen different building options before they came across a possibility that Q didn’t immediately pick apart as being useless.

“Well,” he said after a moment, flipping through the blueprints of the huge, sturdy warehouse, “it has some potential, I suppose.” Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Tanner and Moneypenny exchanging a gleeful grin, and he purses his lips. “Don’t think that you’re going to win me over on your favourite simply because you had the sense to bring it out only after some obviously inferior candidates. It’s earned an in-person inspection, that’s all.”

“Excellent,” said Tanner, and flicked through something on his phone. Q looked up in mild alarm.

“Excuse me, what just happened?”

“Tomorrow at nine am sharp looks good,” Tanner said to Moneypenny. “Think you can drag M along? I want to get this pushed through as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Moneypenny.

Q sputtered. “I am sitting right here, do I have to crash all of your devices before you answer me?”

“We’re going to go look at the building tomorrow morning, before your agents resurface and there’s no prying you away from your station for Heaven or Hell,” said Tanner cheerfully. “I’ll reschedule your staff meeting. Moneypenny and I will pick you up. Just tell us where.”

Q gave a much put-upon sigh and hunched over his tablet, flicking irritably through its pages of data. “Fine,” he said. “Pick me up from A Piece of Cake, then. I’ll be there at half eight.” He did not bother to ask why he couldn’t just meet Tanner and Moneypenny at the site via the underground; if M was going to be there, there’d be a bloody entourage, and while he did not have to like it, he did in fact have to put up with it.

“Brilliant,” said Tanner. Q rolled his eyes.

“If only everyone were so easy to please,” he muttered, and Moneypenny kicked him under the
Bond disappeared from their trackers later that afternoon.

It wasn’t that unexpected. All the 00s were prone to going dark from time to time, and Bond more so than the rest of the lot put together. It was perfectly fucking normal. Nothing at all to be worried about.

Q was calm. He was. But when he came back from a trip to the loo, he found a brand new mug on his desk filled with steaming tea, which would have been suspicious if he didn’t work in an office filled with snoops. And at seven pm, Moneypenny appeared at the corner of his desk, her coat draped over her arm and a no-nonsense expression on her face. “Come on, we’re going,” she said brusquely.

“I have to find 007,” Q said, not looking up.

“No you bloody well don’t. You have to come get dinner with your best mate, or she’s going to tell everyone in the office exactly who gave you those bite marks on your neck a few days ago.”

Q’s stomach took a sickening lurch, and he turned slowly in his chair, leveling a glare at Moneypenny chilly enough to ice over every surface in the room. “You wouldn’t dare—you don’t even know what you’re talking about—”

Moneypenny picked up his scarf from where Q had tossed it at a chair that morning, and wrapped it around his neck. “Bring the laptop with you if you have to, but we’re going, now, and we’re picking up curries from the takeaway near my flat. Come on, boffin.”

Q gritted his teeth. He’d had every intention of staying at the office until Bond’s red dot had reappeared somewhere, whether via CCTV or GPS or someone’s bloody mobile phone photo posted on fucking Facebook, but at the mention of curry his stomach gave an audible growl. Moneypenny arched a perfectly-manicured brow at him. Q sighed, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “All right. Let me just…” He closed his laptop and stuffed it in his bag, and cast one last glance at the display still glowing faintly on his far wall, before letting Moneypenny shepherd him out.

Moneypenny spilled her guts first. Q was so delighted that he forgot, for a few minutes, to be worried about a certain missing 00 agent.

“You’re WHAT,” he sputtered, spilling a bit of tea in his glee (Q never drank when he was tracking field agents on a mission). “Oh my god that has to be seventeen kinds of illegal, why didn’t you tell me sooner—”

“I had to all but beg M just to be allowed to tell you at all!” Moneypenny chucked him in the shoulder with her fist. (Just lightly, though. Moneypenny could take Q in a fight, easily, and they both knew it.)

“So, you’re, what, M’s Right Hand now? What does that mean?”

Moneypenny rolled her eyes. “You’re a prat, Q, really. I don’t specifically have a title. But I have a higher security clearance than anyone in MI6 except obviously M, and I do what needs doing for him.” Q huffed. “Yes, darling, higher than yours, though we all know what a joke that is.”
“Does he send you into the field?” Q demanded.

Moneypenny shrugged. “Might be, if it comes to that. He hasn’t yet, though.”

“‘It’s True, I Actually Run MI6: The Eve Moneypenny Story,’” said Q, and Moneypenny laughed. “That’s brilliant.” Q leaned back against the couch, staring at the TV screen where an early episode of Black Books was playing. “What do you make of him, now you’ve had a few months to see? I mean.” Q glanced at Moneypenny. “Compared to herself.”

Moneypenny let out a slow breath through her nostrils. “Well, there’s no way to compare the two, really,” she said after a moment. There was a slight catch in her voice; Q reached over and took one of her hands. “But—I think in some ways he doesn’t seem as demanding as she was, or as hard as he needs to be, but it’s just an act. Or, it’s just his personality. But really I think he’s more manipulative than she was, and more willing to make you like him if it gets you to get the job done.”

“He gave both of us a second chance,” Q pointed out. He did not often like thinking about the week where he was absolutely sure he’d be sacked, in the wake of Silva’s destruction, but M had kept him on, and everyone had been too busy with the business of getting on with life to say much about it to him. And yes, manipulative was the right word. Mawdsley had never given a damn about whether anyone liked her. It was one of the things Q missed most about her, and mistrusted most about the new M; someone in M’s position needed to be able to get the job done, and to hell with being a nice person. Q might well have sacked himself, if he’d been in M’s shoes.

“I asked him about that, actually,” said Moneypenny. “He gave us a second chance because he thought it’d make us smarter about fucking up in the future.”

“And because now we owe him,” Q said slowly. “Bastard.” Moneypenny nodded.

“He wasn’t keen on me telling you about my actual position,” Moneypenny said after a moment. “He didn’t even want Tanner to know. But…” She sighed. “He’s good, actually. He really is. And he trusts me, and I trust you, so, here I am.” She smiled at Q, and Q suddenly felt like the world’s biggest arse, though he wasn’t actually hiding anything from Moneypenny that he hadn’t already been hiding the entire time he’d known her.

Well, one thing. “About that,” Q said, clearing his throat. “The, ah. I should have trusted you. About this. Thing.”

“You DID sleep with him!”

“Just the once!” Q whined. “Come off it, hasn’t half of MI6 slept with Bond at some point?”

“That’s not the point,” Moneypenny said, and dug an elbow into Q’s rib, making him yelp. “I told you not to sleep with him because you’ve had a crush the size of the Gherkin on him since he came back from the dead, and he leaves a trail of destruction behind him a mile wide.”

“That’s coming on a bit strong,” said Q defensively. “He’s not actually any worse than the other 00s, is he?” Oh god, she was right, she was dead right. Moneypenny gave him a significant look, and Q groaned, rubbing at his face.

“It’s true, it’s not entirely his fault,” said Moneypenny after a moment. “But Q, you have to know how hopeless this is. You’ve read his file.” Q did not respond immediately. “Q?” Moneypenny stared at him. “Q. Come on. You have read his file. Tell me.”

“The man’s got a right to his privacy,” said Q, sounding sullen now even to his own ears. “I read enough, alright?”
“How much is enough?” Q hunched his shoulders, staring resolutely at Dylan Moran flailing about on the screen. “Q, darling, please, this isn’t—” She sighed, and out of the corner of his eyes Q could see her pinch the bridge of her nose in frustration. “James Bond is a good man,” she said after a moment. “But he can’t give you what you deserve, even if he felt that way about you. Which I’m not sure he still knows how to do.”

Q didn’t respond. He was still staring at the screen, but what he was seeing instead was the paragraph in Bond’s file that had actually made him shut the page and go do something else: the details of Bond’s first mission as a 00 agent. It was just a few lines, detailing that Bond had been tortured and nearly died during a mission involving an operative named Vesper Lynd; that he’d tendered a resignation letter dated shortly before the date of Lynd’s obituary; and that Bond had returned to active duty a short while after. It was enough. It was more than he’d wanted to know.

Q knew all about those kinds of mistakes. He didn’t like sharing them with the rest of the world, either.

“I’m going to put on something different,” said Moneypenny after a few more long moments. She started to get up, but Q grabbed for her, pulling her in for a tight hug, and they sat there on the couch like that for a few minutes, not speaking. There wasn’t anything left to say.

* * * * *

It was lucky that Q asked to be picked up at Adrienne’s bakeshop, because Tanner was almost 40 minutes late to collect him.

He arrived at A Piece of Cake at 8:25 am and was immediately attacked by Vanessa, Adrienne and Jonathan’s precocious pig-tailed daughter. Vanessa was all of four, and very fond of Q; the feeling was entirely mutual. Jonathan was watching the shop today (Q wondered if Adrienne was at the decoy flat, cleaning up Bond’s mess) and forced an entire box of scones on Q, who honestly didn’t try very hard to deflect them. Q spent a few minutes sipping his tea, surreptitiously watching Vanessa boss her father around and hiding his grin behind his takeaway cup. Jonathan might be terrifyingly huge (and ginger, good god, Q always forgot exactly how red the man’s hair was), but he was a kitten where Vanessa was concerned. At quarter to 9, halfway through a cinnamon scone, he got out his mobile, opening a text to Moneypenny. Problems?

The text came back immediately, and Q choked on his next bite as he read it: Someone broke into my flat last night after we left.

Q coughed for a few moments, eyes watering, and just as he was madly thumbing a response, a new message appeared. I’m fine, I went to Vicky’s after I got you in a cab. More when I see you. xx

“Everything alright?” Q looked up at Jonathan, who was looming over him in concern.

“Uh… I think so. Nothing major is wrong, I don’t think.” Q adjusted his glasses, frowning, and then opened his mobile, flipping through the apps, trying fruitlessly to find one that would help him find out what the bloody hell was going on. He was all but twitching in his seat by the time the familiar black car finally pulled up outside the shop, and Tanner emerged from the driver’s side, Q dropped one last kiss on Vanessa’s head and then darted outside before Tanner even made the door.

“I’ve got scones,” he said, cutting Tanner off and thrusting the box of scones at him by way of distraction. “Where’s Moneypenny?”

“She’s with M,” Tanner said. “She’s fine, Q, calm down, alright? I’m going to get a coffee, I’ll be right out. Get in the car.” Q most definitely did not huff and throw himself into the car in a fit of
pique, but a small-minded person might have described it thusly. And he most certainly did not
glower out the window until Tanner returned.

“What happened?” Q said, before Tanner had even got the key back in the ignition.

“Are you five, now? Don’t you start too.” Tanner started the car, guiding it into traffic without
looking at Q. “Eve is fine. Someone broke into her flat, and we don’t know who it was, but they
didn’t take anything, just knocked things about a bit.”

Q stared at Tanner, trying to brow-beat him into giving him more information by force of his glare.
He failed spectacularly. “What the fuck were they doing in her flat?” he demanded, when no more
information was forthcoming. Tanner was merging lanes or else Q might actually have smacked him
for his nonchalance.

“Q,” Tanner said patiently, “I just told you, we don’t know. Eve thinks they might have been
looking for something, but she’s sure nothing’s missing and everyone’s fine. Be realistic; what do
you actually think would have happened if someone had broken in while you and Eve were home?”

Q pursed his lips and crossed his arms over his chest. “Moneypenny would’ve broken all their faces
and I would have had you all at the flat in under five minutes,” he said impatiently. “And then I
would have ruined their credit ratings and posted their mug shots on every digital billboard in
London, because I’m a spiteful git, that’s not the point, Tanner, the point is—”

“The point is that no one is hurt, and we don’t have any more information yet, and we are meeting M
and Eve at the warehouse for inspection, because your time is precious and I’m not wasting a free
morning.” Tanner finally looked over at Q, eyebrows raised. “Does that about cover it?”

Q shut up. He also sulked the entire rest of the drive.

* * * * *

His day never really recovered after that.

He got no answers when they arrived at the warehouse, though he was assuaged somewhat by
seeing Moneypenny with his own eyes. Investigating the viability of the warehouse as a new HQ
was put on hold for five minutes as the scones Q brought were immediately inhaled; Q never ceased
to be amused by the idea (however ridiculous) that the old M had only been so keen on striking a
deal with Q because she’d been getting Adrienne’s magnificent baking in the bargain.

They walked the whole length of the warehouse, from the roof to the basement. They lingered
extensively only in a few rooms, referring frequently to the tablet Q had brought with him with the
notes on the structure in it. Q stuck close by Moneypenny the entire time, and she had to notice the
way he kept bumping her shoulder with his, but she only smiled and said nothing. Tanner could tell
Q that Moneypenny was fine and not to worry all he wanted, but Q was all too aware how easily
that might not have been the case.

“Have you caught wind of 007 at all since he went off the radar?”

Q turned, more flustered at the question than he wanted to admit. M was looking at him expectantly,
hands in his pockets; he’d finally lost the sling two weeks ago, and was now in fine form for popping
up unexpectedly to see what his staff were up to. “No, he hasn’t resurfaced yet,” Q admitted. It
galled him to be unable to track down Bond despite all of his technological might, but there was no
point in lying.

“Mmm. Well, keep us posted.” M reached out, resting a hand on Q’s shoulder for a moment before
turning to follow Tanner into the next room, leaving Q feeling vaguely rattled. It made sense for M to ask his obsessive quartermaster if any of Q’s toys had found their missing agent—if anyone would be able to do it, it’d be Q—but it still made Q feel like M knew or guessed more of Q’s mind than Q was comfortable with.

He wondered briefly how much of Q’s full file Gareth Mallory was actually privy to, and decided he didn’t want to think about it today. His dance card was too full as it was.

By the time Q returned to HQ at noon, agents 004 and 002 had both emerged from deep cover to check in at their appointed locations and were awaiting further instructions. 007 was nowhere to be found. Naturally. Q consoled himself with the fact that if Bond had actually died, he would no doubt have gone out in some spectacularly unforgettable fashion with lots of explosions and a death toll surpassing some common plagues. In the meantime, Q had paperwork to fill out and programs to code and the hard drives Bond had brought him to finish cracking, and he was not so fucking pathetic as to be unable to concentrate on his work just because of one damnably handsome field agent.

Besides, it had only been one day. Surely Bond wouldn’t stay dark for long.

* * * *

Ten days had passed since 007 went dark. In that time, Q hadn’t had so much as a flash of him on any of his cameras, GPS, or radio, no matter what programs he broke into or how flagrantly inappropriate the places that he looked.

In terms of Bond’s personal history, ten days was nothing. Tanner was unconcerned; Moneypenny was more annoyed than anything else, but Q guessed that was because M was being a git and not related to Bond at all. 004 and 002 reported no contact with 007, but when the compound of the crime ring they’d been sent to infiltrate went up in flames on day eight, MI6 called them home, and officially put 007 on MIA status. It didn’t mean much, considering the number of times he’d gone on and off that status.

Q was—fine. Bond did not owe him anything; Q had given him a list of numbers by way of invitation, that was all. There would always be more to do at work than he had time for, and on the nights when Moneypenny did not drag him over to her flat to hang out, Q would go home and strap on his trainers and run until shards of glass lodged themselves in his lungs and the stitch in his side crippled him to a fast walk. He slept like a sack of bricks, and most mornings woke with a tiny white cat curled against his neck (Carly had apparently decided that winter made it too hard to deal with being an outdoor cat, and had taken up permanent residence in Q’s flat).

He did not dream. Which was probably for the best. And though he woke several times in the middle of the night at half-heard noises, there was never anyone at the window.

* * * * *
Taking Flight

Chapter Summary

Sometimes the only thing left to do was give up. Especially when it wasn't a fight he really wanted to win.

Chapter Notes

The alternate summary for this chapter is "suit porn, art porn, apartment porn, and actual porn." Also, for anyone who missed it, do check out the gorgeous cover art for this fic, located at the beginning of Chapter 1.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Can I buy you a drink?”

Q blinked, glancing at the man who’d suddenly appeared at his elbow. Or maybe he’d been there a few minutes and Q simply hadn’t noticed him. “Er,” he said intelligently, and glanced automatically towards the entrance to the gallery, as he had a half-dozen times or so in the past hour. As in each of those previous times, no one was there. No one Q wanted to see, anyway.

The man at his elbow smiled. “Someone keeping you waiting?” he asked. He was a nice-looking man, Q thought to himself, with a rugby player’s build but a face that softened him, green eyes over a clean-cut smile he was leveling at Q right now.

“Yeah, actually,” Q said slowly. He straightened, pushing the swell of hurt away for a moment. “Sure, go on, I’ll have a drink.”

“Brilliant,” said the man, and stuck out his hand. “I’m Steven, by the way. What’re you having?”

“Elliot,” said Q, shaking the hand. “And I’ll have a cider, please.”

“Right,” said Steven, and turned to lean over the bar, now standing considerably closer to Q than he had before. Q couldn’t help the stab of satisfaction at the obvious flirtation. He’d gone to all the trouble to dress up for tonight, after all, wearing one of the few fancy-dress outfits he owned: thick-and-thin navy pinstripe suit with narrow lapels, stovepipe trousers, a paisley tie, and improbably-turquoise shoes pressed on him by an absolutely-correct salesperson. He might not fill out the shirt and suit coat the way Bond could, but Q wasn’t oblivious to the stares he was getting, either.

If Bond wasn’t going to be here to appreciate him, someone else might as well.

“Thanks,” Q said, summoning a smile as Steven turned back to him with a cider held out, the ice clinking softly in its glass as Q took it. He scooted down the bar a bit with Steven to make room for another cluster of people moving in to order drinks, but balked as Steven headed for a booth towards the back of the room. “Let’s stay here a moment,” he said, feeling the smile on his face slide from real to merely polite. “So, what brought you here? A fan of art?”
“Oh, a bit, I suppose.” Steven grinned, bright and easy, scooting in close again. “I’ve never seen art like this before though, it’s fascinating. I came here with my mate because he’s into new art, you know, very avant-garde, but I didn’t actually expect to like the work as much as I do.” Steven paused, his eyes tracking past Q’s face to something over his shoulder.

“Excuse me,” said a voice in Q’s ear, the voice, dark and rich and dangerously polite. “I do hope I’m not interrupting.”

Steven’s eyes flickered back to Q, and whatever he saw there made him smile, raising his glass. “Your friend turned up after all,” he said. “Cheers, Elliot.” Q watched him turn away and slip into the growing crowd, and then he turned around, staring up into James’ face, feeling like someone had turned the volume in the room all the way down. James looked perfect, like he’d stepped out of the pages of an expensive menswear ad, clad in a charcoal-grey pinstripe suit with a perfect centimeter of snowy white cuff showing, and a white-and-black regimental-striped tie. A white pocket square and a silver watch (that Q recognized as MI6-issue) completed his look. If he still had bruises from his mysterious 10-day vanishing act, they weren’t visible.

Now he knew what an addict trying to get clean felt like. He’d gone almost two weeks without a hit, just to have it all swirl down the drain.

“You’re late,” he said. James’ mouth quirked slightly. On someone else, it would have been a smile.

“Your directions left something to be desired,” said James. “And I was a bit short on time.”

“Have you even checked back in with M?” Q demanded.

“That can wait,” James said. “This couldn’t.”

Q bit the inside of his cheek, hard. If he stopped to contemplate that at all, he’d come untethered right here. “Yes, well. Tell me how you found it. Did you actually sort out the numbers I gave you or did you find some other thread I forgot to tie up?”

James did smile then, coming past Q to lean over the bar and catch the bartender’s eye. “Some of both,” he said. “I could tell it was a Fibonacci sequence, but not much else. I didn’t remember the spiral aspect of it until I was in deep cover and killing time in a mosque. Then I had a job sorting out where on the spiral you would be, the scale, which end of London was north and whatnot.”

“I half-expected you to track me down on Google,” Q said mildly. He was trying his best to hide his glee, but from the look James gave him at the comment Q could tell that he wasn’t fooling anyone.

“I did try that,” James said. “Not that it did any good. There’s almost as many Elliot Marshes as there are John Smiths.” He paused to order his drink, and Q took a sip of his cider, fighting twin urges to drag James into a dark corner of the gallery to snog him stupid and to run out into the street and hail the first cab home to hide from how desperately pleased he was to see James here. James finally turned around again, martini in hand, and Q pushed off the bar with him as they headed into the actual gallery. “I have to ask, though; how did you happen to pick a gallery that would be on a bloody Fibonacci spiral off the geographic center of London? You can’t tell me you came up with that on the spot in Bella Italiano.”

Q grinned, flushing a little bit. “I came up with that way beforehand,” he admitted. “You saw the theme of the gallery showing.”

“Mmm. Math in Art.” James was watching him, pacing along side him like some kind of feral jungle cat. Q felt James’ hand settle at the small of his back, and sternly reminded himself that tenting one’s
trousers in public was frowned upon.

“Well, yes. So I persuaded the organizer of the event that it would be, ah… fitting to pick a gallery
that had a location that matched the theme of the show. Form suited to function and all that.”

“You persuaded him? And why would he listen to you? As I’m quite sure he doesn’t know what you really do.”

Q smiled, and avoided James’ questioning look, drawing even with one of the paintings on the wall. James stopped beside him, and out of the corner of his eye saw James glance from Q up to the painting and back. “I’m one of the exhibitors,” he said quietly, and gestured with the hand holding his drink at the wood frame on the wall.

The painting was abstract, all reds and oranges and golds, licking around each other in concentric circles like the epicenter of an inferno. The edges and center melted away to impossibly fine detail, but if you looked close, you found the pattern repeating itself over and over again, replication upon replication. In the bottom right-hand corner, writ very small, were the initials E.M.

“You painted this,” James said slowly. “You paint?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Q said. “It’s a flame fractal. Fractals are impossible to do by hand, or close enough to be phenomenally difficult. But I built a machine to lay down the paint for me.” He hesitated, and then dropped his eyes, staring at the floor, face hot. “It’s math, James. I write the equations describing the picture I want… this is the product.”

James was silent. Q kept staring at the ground, gone hot all over, itching inside his fine suit and wishing he had a gauge for where on the scale from “idiotic” to “gold-medal in failure” this particular idea of his was. Here, let me show you my incredibly geeky hobby right when you’ve come back from risking your life--oh, you have to go wash your hair? I understand completely…

“Does anyone else know?” James asked finally. Q looked up before he could think not to, and found James staring at him.

“Just Moneypants.” Q reached up to push his glasses up his nose, trying hard to stay stoic.

“You’re fucking brilliant, did you know that?” Before Q could even begin processing that, James had leaned over and was kissing him, momentarily liquefying what remained of Q’s ability to think straight. Q allowed himself to lean into the kiss for several seconds, because he only had so much willpower, and then he pulled back, punch-drunk and lighter than air.

“It’s about time you cottoned on to that,” he said, and James snorted and squeezed his hip under his suit-jacket.

* * * * *

It was the first (and possibly only) time Q had ever been in the same room as James Bond and found himself the one receiving the most attention of the two of them. A red-letter day, as those went.

They floated from room to room, admiring the art on display and pausing to stop and chat when people came up to talk to Q about his work. Some people were simply admirers, while others were fellow exhibitors, and more than once Q got drawn into discussions about fractal mathematics, obscure arguments about null sets and expression of nowhere differentiables that made most normal people’s eyes glaze over. But if James was bored, he was doing a stand-up job of not showing it. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, rewarding Q with a small smile and a raised eyebrow every time Q glanced at him.
Of course, it helped that Q had to politely turn down more than one offer of can I buy you a drink? And while James wasn’t quite brazen enough to try to parade Q around on his arm, Q was keenly aware of the hand that never floated far from the small of his back. At one point it got so distracting that Q had to excuse himself, slipping away to the loo to lock himself in a stall and have a quick, lip-bitingly dirty wank, because the exhibition didn’t end for another few hours and Q wasn’t going to keep walking around with an increasingly noticeable bulge in his trousers, god dammit.

He emerged a few minutes later, feeling at once embarrassed and more clear-headed. James chose that moment to appear at his elbow out of nowhere, murmuring into his ear, “You know, I could have helped you with that.”

Q shivered, turning to glare at James from just inches away, finding it at best only moderately effective. James smirked at him. “You’re talking nonsense,” Q said frostily.

“Mmm. I’m sure.” James kissed the corner of Q’s mouth, like the passing press of a hot ember. “I’m also sure you’ll just have to make it up to me later.”

“Self-righteous prick,” Q muttered. He was dead, he was so dead, if he survived the night then Moneypenny would destroy him with the force of her wrath tomorrow morning.

“Too right.”

They spent another hour at the gallery before Q started making polite excuses to the other artists at the show, who had been talking about going out to a nearby pub and wanted Q and his “date” to come along. Q debated the merits of it for all of ten seconds, and then decided that tormenting himself for another hour or two was only going to delay the inevitable, not change it. James followed him out the front door, their breath puffing into blue smoke in the night air.

“So, you’re still MIA,” Q said, soft enough to keep from carrying beyond James. He turned and started walking down the street, and James fell into step beside him, ice and grit crunching under their dress shoes. “As such, I wouldn’t put it past someone at HQ to have a bead on your flat.” He caught the significant look James cast him, and grinned. “Is there a reason you’re looking at me like that?”

“Oh, none at all,” James said, lip curling. “I’m sure the head of Q Branch has zero to do with surveillance on my flat.” Q laughed, and found himself slowing, then stopping altogether, tipping his head back to look skyward, eyes tracking the thin sliver of the moon. He wasn’t sure if it was the two drinks he’d had at the gallery or the growing awareness of how neatly he’d backed himself into a corner, but he was suddenly overcome with a sense of—

Freefall.

Maybe this was inevitable. Maybe he should just stop trying to avoid the crash. Or at least accept the fact that he was no longer capable of walking away, since he could no longer fool even himself on that account.

“Q?” Q shut his eyes, and then opened them, looking over at James. “Still with me?”

“Mmm.” Q smiled, and leaned in to return James’ kiss from earlier, just barely brushing his lips across James’ mouth. “I think we ought to hail a cab.”

James’ eyebrow went up, sliding an arm around Q’s waist. “And take it where?”

“We can’t go to your flat, so we’ll go to mine. No ink explosions, I promise.” Q leaned into James, felt the solidity of him, his unshakable reality pulling Q in like a magnet. “You’re going down the
Do you always take three cab rides home?” James asked. He sounded unfairly composed, considering how hard he’d just been snogging Q in the back of the most recent cab.

“If I cab it, then yes,” said Q. He shoved his wallet back into his trousers, fumbling with his glasses. “Usually I just mix it up on the tube, though.”

“That must get obnoxious,” observed James. He wasn’t looking at Q, he was staring up at the honestly embarrassing building that housed Q’s flat. “You can’t tell me you can’t afford something better than this, Q.”

Q only smiled, walking smoothly past James and heading around the back of the building, leading James up the rickety iron staircase to a heavy metal door. He got his security card out of his wallet and beeped them inside to the hallway. “Come on, James,” he said reprovingly, as he led them to an elevator at the end of the hall. “You really ought to know me better by now.”

They got off at the eighth floor, stopping at a door identical in all ways to its mates along the hall. James watched silently as Q waved his card over another electric panel and then fit his key in the lock, fiddling the door open and letting James inside. He smiled to himself as he let James go ahead of him, glancing around the unobtrusive flat, taking in the hardwood floors and the modern art prints on the walls, the sterile kitchen.

“Is this another decoy flat?” he asked finally, turning to Q with a faint frown.

“Almost,” said Q. He brushed past James, going to the tiny kitchen nook. He leaned down slightly in front of the sink, opening the cupboard underneath and feeling around until he found the small depression, pressing hard with the pad of his finger until it gave an audible beep, accepting his fingerprint. James’ head turned as one of the small art prints swung off the wall to reveal a smooth metal keypad. Q’s fingers moved lightly over the numbers, stepping back as a light above the keypad flashed green before Q swung the art print closed again and turned to the opposite wall.

Q had to give James credit: the agent didn’t even bat an eyelash as the fridge glided smoothly away from the wall, the piece of floor it was affixed to swiveling out of the way as a panel on the wall behind it slid open, revealing a staircase. Q went first, making sure James was following closely and pausing halfway up the stairs to press the wall-panel that slid the wall and fridge back into place behind them.

“I’m guessing the code changes frequently,” James said, following Q into the foyer at the top of the stairs.

“Every twelve hours,” said Q. “There’s an algorithm, it’s all very complicated.” He paused in the middle of the foyer, and gestured with his hand, a wide arc that indicated the whole of his honestly bloody fantastic flat. “So, here we are.”

James was staring, taking in the high windows, the length of the hallway. “You little shit,” he said incredulously. “You’ve got this entire floor to yourself?” Q grinned as James turned around, sweeping him into a rib-crushing embrace and kissing him so hard that he went light-headed for a few moments before James finally let him up for air.

“I had it converted,” Q managed, which was the understatement of the year. “I faked a vermin infestation to get everyone out of the building for a week.” He pulled away from James long enough
to collect himself a little before leading James down the hallway. Q took the circuitous route, unable to resist showing off a bit. They passed a large, tastefully-modern kitchen done in wood and dark marbled stone with gleaming metal appliances; past a bathroom done in more wood and stone with a huge shower with foamed glass doors and a separate, massive bath, complete with two marble sinks and a pile of reading material in a basket next to the toilet; past a cozy reading room with built-in bookshelves (all full) and overstuffed chairs, newspapers and magazines spilling from the coffee table to the floor; stopping finally at a room that was very obviously an art studio. Blank canvas stretched across wood frames were stacked against one wall, with a variety of art hung all around the room, some Q’s and some by other artists, almost all of them abstract. A massive, complicated machine that mostly resembled an automated printing-press with an attached monitor and keyboard took up most of the space in the center of the room, stained here and there with acrylic paint.

“Now is the part where you explain how this came about on a governmental salary,” said James. He was staring around, taking everything in; Q couldn’t help but note that his eyes lingered on several of the fractal paintings Q had done.

“It didn’t, really,” Q said. “I came into a sum of money when my father died a few years ago; I simply sat on it till I had the opportunity and means to…” He trailed off, balking at what he’d been going to say, and James looked at him sharply. “To make a home I actually wanted,” he finished. To make a home where I would be safe, he did not say; perhaps he should have, but some habits were too heavily ingrained to be overcome so easily. Not when the lessons that instilled them were so harsh.

“Q…”

“Let’s not,” Q said quickly. He turned back to James, pushing the thought resolutely away as he hooked two fingers around James’ tie and tugged him close, letting James catch him by the hips again, feeling the weight of that steady regard up close. “I don’t want to talk about my father. And I don’t want to hear about your time in Mozambique, either, although I don’t think it would have killed you to give me a hint that you were alive before showing up at my gallery showing.”

James smirked. “Didn’t mean to worry you,” he murmured, and Q dug his knuckles into James’ ribs, making him squirm. He leaned in to kiss Q, and Q stilled, the ache in his chest too sweet and longed-for to deny. “I could have accomplished things the long way and stayed on schedule, but I would have missed tonight. So I did things the short way.”

“Are you using me to justify taking unnecessary risks with Her Majesty’s property again?” Q slipped both his arms around James’ neck, sliding the fingers of one hand through James short-cropped hair. James made a noise in his throat, and to Q’s shock and everlasting delight, James crouched slightly and hoisted Q against him in one move, sliding an arm under Q’s arse as Q let out an undignified squeak. Q wrapped both legs around James’ waist, clutching at his shoulders. “What are you doing.”

“Bedroom,” said James shortly, and Q exhaled.

“Last room at the end of the hall,” he said shakily, and when James tilted his face up Q obliged him, kissing his lips, his crooked nose, the strong lines of his jaw, his cheekbones. He would never admit it, but he was glad to not have to rely on his own legs, which had gone traitorously weak in the knees.

The lights came up of their own accord as James carried him into the room. Q’s bed—king-sized and pushed into a corner—was still an unmade mess of blankets and pillows, because why bother making it when no one ever saw it but him. It was flanked on one side by more built-in bookshelves, which had a little nook cut out with a small lamp and a place for a mug or plate. The wall behind it was wood paneling on which was mounted a huge Pollock print that Q had paid dearly for, one of
his few mementos from before he worked at MI6. Against the other wall was the massive wooden
desk that housed Q’s home workstation, multiple monitors and keyboards all connected to one sleek
tower computer that clocked in a top processing speed faster than anything the aerospace industry
could dream of. And against the remaining wall was set a huge flat-screen television, from which a
number of cables and cords snaked out, connected to various games and entertainment systems. In
front of the TV was a couch, and on the couch were strewn various articles of clothing. The whole
room was done in various shades of wood and a muted moss green, save for the ceiling, which was
white, and the floor, which was hardwood and covered in a thick area rug, shag in rich hunter.

“I think I should be offended that your flat is nicer than mine,” said James, muffled into Q’s neck,
and Q laughed, was still laughing as he tumbled onto the bed, letting his arms fall back over his head
as he sprawled out on the mattress.

“How dare I have nice things.” Q peered up at James, who was bent over him, watching him with a
hot, appreciative glint in his eyes. Q smiled and James reached out, cupped Q’s face in his hand.

“You deserve nothing but nice things,” James said very quietly, and kissed Q before he could
formulate a response. “Mmm. Speaking of nice things… this suit was a pleasant surprise.”

Q arched an eyebrow. “More pleasant than the suit from dinner at Bella Italiano?” he asked,
smirking. “I do actually know how to dress myself. Hard to believe, I know.”

“That seems to be your M.O.,” said James agreeably, his fingers already loosening Q’s tie. “I did
wonder if you were out to test my self-control when I showed up to find you dressed like this,
though.”

“Because it’s all about you, 007.” Q had never learned how to take a compliment gracefully, and as
far gone as he now was for James he took refuge in stupidity.

“James,” came the breath against his neck, and Q shuddered, clutching at James’ thick arms. He
shoved his hands under James’ own finely-tailored suit and pushed it back, trying to get it off his
shoulders, and for a moment there was a lot of fumbling and Q was certain several hundred quid’s
worth of fine clothes were going to need mending. Then Q pulled back, grabbing James’ hands with
his own and squeezing them.

“James,” he said, and swallowed hard. “Let me. Please.” James stilled, watching Q with an
unreadable expression on his face. He let Q sit up and reach for James’ tie, undoing the stern four-in-
hand knot and pulling; the tie came slithering out of James’ collar to puddle in Q’s lap. He dropped it
and then pushed James’ suit-coat off his arms, before undoing each individual button on his shirt, and
James would have to be blind to miss the way Q’s hands trembled.

He didn’t trust himself to speak. So he kept his mouth shut, and he peeled James’ clothes off him
until this dangerous weapon of a man was shirtless in his bed, trousers undone and shoes kicked over
the edge, presenting about as mouth-watering a picture as Q could possibly imagine. James arched an
eyebrow at him. “I’m not going to break, Q,” he murmured, and this close his voice was deep
enough to drown in, twisting something in Q’s stomach.

“Yes, well, you’re careless with everything else I send you with; it should come as no surprise to me
you’re just as careless with yourself,” said Q, because he couldn’t stop himself, really. James’ other
eyebrow went up, and he reached out, caught Q’s jaw in his hand.

“Do I need fixing, quartermaster?” James’ voice had a husky note in it that Q hadn’t heard before,
almost like he was asking something else altogether.
Q’s face burned. “You will once I’m done with you,” he said hotly, and shoved at James’ chest, pushing him down onto his back on the bed as he climbed on top. James growled, pawing greedily up Q’s sides to yank his shirt out of his trousers, and Q moaned as he straddled James’ hips and ground down against James’ erection through their trousers.

“Careful,” said James hoarsely. He was gripping Q’s hips hard enough to bruise. “Dangerous weapon. You don’t want to set it off.” Q let out a bark of laughter; in the moment of distraction James flipped him over, and then James was done holding back.

Over the next few hours, Q reaffirmed a few previous observations and discovered a number of other things—for science, of course:

James Bond had earned his reputation as a lover enough times over to qualify for some kind of world record, and while he’d weaponized all parts of his body, Q felt that his aptitude for kissing was one that was not praised highly enough, because it took real work to be able to melt someone into a puddle without even touching anything south of one’s collarbone;

James really liked Q’s tattoos, making Q turn over and over so he could examine each of them with enough attention to make Q want to squirm, because although he wasn’t the least bit body-conscious (he took care of himself, alright, just not to the extent of a 00 agent), several of the tattoos had very personal stories that Q still wasn’t ready to share, but at least James asked no questions Q didn’t want to answer;

James had not forgotten that Q loved to be bitten, and was not above a little experimentation in pursuit of finding out exactly how much Q got off on it, to the point of holding him down and leaving bite-marks over every inch of Q’s body until Q was babbling and shaking and rutting into the sheets;

James was bad at laying back and receiving any sort of attention himself, but when Q finally threatened to taser him if he didn’t hold still, it earned him a laugh and the chance to explore the temple of muscle and sharp angles that was James’ body, scars and all, which led smoothly to his next discovery;

James could curse in no less than eleven languages, but defaulted back to the stumbling sussurus of English when on his stomach while Q licked him open, spit dribbling down his chin as he worked tongue and fingers into James’ arse, James’ hips propped up on a pillow for a better angle and to allow Q’s hand under James’ pelvis to slowly, maddeningly stroke James’ fat and leaking cock until James came with a shuddering groan into Q’s hand, all his muscles clenching against Q’s face and fingers;

James Bond was a vengeful shit when he wanted to be, and quick too, surprising Q in the bathroom after he went to gargle and brush his teeth, a situation that ended with Q sobbing into his arm on the bathroom rug while James sucked him through two bone-shattering orgasms, the second worse (and better) than the first for how oversensitive Q’s cock was, until Q was limp and wrung-out as a wet noodle, his face a mess of sweat and tears;

James was well-built enough to resort to physically moving other people entirely too often, and Q had been taken by surprise the first time but was not about to be bridal-carried to his bedroom twice in one night, so when James started to scoop him up off the floor, Q batted him away like an irritable kitten until James relented and gave him a hand up instead, and they both managed to get back to Q’s bed under their own power, if just barely, at least in Q’s case.

“Going to need to change the sheets,” said James lazily. He had apparently regained enough brainpower to arrange Q against him and drag a comforter up over them.
“Thanks for that brilliant observation.” Q was mumbling, his face mashed against James’ chest (pectoral, his scrambled brain supplied), his glasses having been lost in the bathroom when James assaulted him like some kind of sex-powered SCUD missile. “You’re welcome to have a go at it if you like.”

“Oh, are you tired? Which of us is the relic, again?” James made a noise as Q jammed his thumb against James’ floating rib, or tried to; his aim was off, for some reason. James caught his hand and squeezed it gently before releasing it, then moved to stroke his fingers through Q’s sweat-sticky hair.

“Shut it,” said Q. “Don’t make me gag you. I have one somewhere.” The hand in his hair paused for a moment before resuming, nails scratching lazily at Q’s scalp.

“Maybe later.”

“If you’re lucky,” said Q, and then James said something else but Q was dozing off. His last thought before slipping away was that he really ought to have mentioned to James sooner that the entire apartment was on camera.

* * * * *

Turned out that James didn’t care much about the cameras.

It also turned out that 00s were used to functioning on less sleep than normal humans, especially if something more interesting presented itself.

So much for going in on Sunday to catch up on the work he was behind on.

* * * * *

“Q.”

Q rolled onto his back, blinking sleepily at the ceiling. “Ngh,” he said intelligently, and then realized that someone had said his name, followed in short order by the realizations that the someone was James and that his voice sounded strange. Q turned his head, squinting valiantly to make something out through his myopia and the fog of sleep, and then started laughing.

“Q, if you don’t get this cat off my face, I am going to teach it how to fly.” Carly purred, the tip of her fluffy white tail twitching back and forth, the rest of her curled contentedly up on her new perch.

“Just sit up! She’s a cat, for fuck’s sake.”

“A cat with her paw on my eye, Q so help me God—”

“Alright, alright!” Q sat up, still chuckling, and reached out for Carly, who gave a put-out yowl when Q picked her up but still let him cradle her against his chest like an infant, her steady purring giving the lie to her protest at being moved. James sat up, propping his chin in one hand as he gave Q and Carly a surly look.

“Oh, right, now you’re grumpy at a rude awakening, that’s rich,” said Q, scratching Carly behind the ears. The purring increased, tail twitching back and forth like a little flag. James rolled his eyes, but Q thought he detected a faint smile anyway.

“What’s her name?”

“Carly. I haven’t the faintest idea how old she is, she just started showing up one day and asking for
hand-outs.” James reached out and stroked the backs of his fingers along Carly’s head and neck, and she purred louder, arching happily against Q’s chest. Q grinned.

“Mm. She seems quite taken with you for a stray.” Out of the corner of his eye, Q could see James’ gaze flick back up to his face. Q shrugged.

“It’s because I give her nice things and don’t ask too many questions.” James smiled, ever so slightly, and Q caught his breath as the hand in Carly’s fur slipped down to press against Q’s stomach instead. “James, please, there are children present.”

“Don’t you start,” rumbled James, and Carly let out a plaintive yowl as she was abruptly deposited on the floor, but no one was paying her any attention.

* * * * *

It turned out that Carly, like most cats, disliked being ignored. It also turned out that she was not averse to inserting herself into situations where she was not particularly wanted.

After the fifth time, Q managed to catch her and shut her in the hallway, and then marched back to the bed to wipe that smirk off James’ face.

* * * * *

As far as Q’s list of things he’d done that weren’t strictly By The Books, monopolizing an MIA 00 agent for an entire 36 hours instead of directing him to report in for debriefing was still several slots from the top, but it definitely ranked as one of the most fun. They did next to nothing but eat and fuck, eventually winding up on the couch, James in a pair of Q’s pyjama bottoms that showed off his obliques to unfair advantage, Q in a variation of the same plus a jumper with his legs draped across James’ lap.

“This is what you do in your free time,” said James. He sounded unconvinced. His hand not holding a controller was doing a slow lap up and down Q’s thigh, fingers light through the fabric of Q’s pyjamas.

“A man has only got time for so many cerebral or time-consuming hobbies, James,” said Q lazily. “Besides, I would have thought Halo was right up your alley. We can go and run a few miles if you prefer.” James snorted, fingers curling under the meat of Q’s thigh and squeezing.

“I’ll stick to other kinds of calisthenics, thanks.”

“Right after I kick your arse,” said Q, as the game finished loading. Five minutes later Q was squawking and kicking in a mad attempt to remove himself from the cheater who’d just shoved a pillow in his face at a critical moment, emerging just in time to watch Master Chief vanish in an explosion of shrapnel.

“YOU ARE A FUCKING BASTARD—”

“I’ve got carte blanche, Q,” said James, neatly deflecting an elbow to the stomach. “Whatever means necessary.”

“I will end you,” said Q, and kicked James in the hip until he went to the other end of the couch for the rematch.

It was so easy not to think past today, not to pry or ask questions or wonder what would be coming tomorrow, or the following week. Q—knew, realistically, that James Bond did not do relationships,
that Moneypenny was right about what a bad idea this fixation was, but the truth was that Q had not brought anyone back to his flat (except Moneypenny) for years. It wasn’t safe, for so many reasons. His own track record in this area would have been reason enough to avoid this entanglement, to say nothing of James’, but Q still couldn’t seem to stop himself, and James did not seem inclined to either leave or talk about anything of substance.

He wondered how long it’d be before Moneypenny got wise to what he’d done. Three days, he guessed, give or take.

* * * * *

Technically, it was five days. But three of those days, Moneypenny was out of town on a personal mission from M, and so Q felt that she was due full credit for sorting him in 48 hours. It was made all the more impressive for the fact that by the time she came back, most of Q’s obvious bite marks had faded into obscurity beneath his turtleneck.

Well, most of the initial ones. The next set James gave him were in more discreet locations.

“You’re a moron,” she announced, appearing by his desk with yet another stack of clipboards. Q exhaled through his nose, gesturing for her to add the new forms to the ever-growing pile at the end of his desk. James Bond was going to drown him in paperwork.

“I’m aware of that,” he said, and paused to finish the line of code on the screen in front of him. It took him a few moments to realize that Moneypenny was still standing by, and he glanced up at her with a frown. Don’t you have something better to be doing was on his lips, but it died when he saw the tightness in her jaw, and the way she was actually glaring at him. “Moneypants—”

“Don’t,” she said curtly. “Just—” Moneypenny took a deep breath, and then, in a low, tight voice, she continued: “It’s none of my damn business who you’re shagging, and I don’t know what the hell happened that’s had you holding the whole world at arm’s length for years, but of all the people to finally let in, why does it have to be—him. When he’s just going to hurt you because he’s too hurt himself to do otherwise.”

Q stared. All the blood had drained from his brain, leaving him dumbstruck and vaguely ill. It must have shown in his face, because some of the tightness left Moneypenny’s shoulders as she looked back at him. “I let _you_ in,” Q said, allowing a bit of injury to creep in. She sighed.

“A bit,” she muttered.

“More than a bit. You were the first person to meet Elliot.”

Moneypenny arched an eyebrow. “The first?” Q cleared his throat. “Did you show him?”

“He was clever enough to get some of it on his own,” Q allowed. “But… yes, I did.”

Moneypenny’s eyes narrowed. “And what did he say?” The threat was back, but at least it was no longer directed at Q.

“He was surprised. But appreciative.” Q hesitated, before adding quietly, “I wasn’t sorry to have introduced him.”

Moneypenny considered this for a few moments before finally nodding, and Q realized how much this must have bothered her, that she couldn’t save the conversation until after work. “Good,” she said, and rubbed at her temple. “Christ, what do I do with the two of you.”
“Take us out for drinks and get us both wankered for blackmail material,” suggested Q, and she laughed.

“I’m already lousy with blackmail on both of you, I hardly need more,” she shot back. “And get those forms done quick as you can; Vicky’s clawing at the walls to have the mission accounts sorted.”

“Piss off,” Q said, and Moneypenny smirked, turning on a heel and sauntering out of his office. Q picked up his tea and took a sip, taking a few moments to just breathe before shoving the conversation as far from his mind as he could. He could have a meltdown about the guilty parties later.

* * * * *

Chapter End Notes

Bond's gallery outfit, Q's gallery outfit. The inspiration for Q's flame fractals come from here.
An Ill Wind Blows

Chapter Summary

He doesn't sleep much; first the reasons are good, and then they are decidedly not.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“'You work too late.'"

Q jumped, spilling the dregs of his takeaway hot cocoa all down the front of his jumper. He rounded on the source of the voice, contemplating chucking the empty container at James in vengeance, but James was already coming down the fire escape towards him and would probably just dodge it anyway, the bastard.

He would just be waiting at Q’s building, wouldn’t he. Second time this week. The first time he’d followed Q home, and then taken a shortcut to get to the flat just ahead of him. “How long have you been waiting here?” Q demanded.

“Two and a half hours.” James hopped lightly down from the grating, looking at once bored and so attractive it made Q’s teeth hurt. “I would have let myself in, but you’ve made it quite clear that you aren’t fond of unexpected visitors and I didn’t want to startle your neighbors.”

Q pursed his lips, elbowing James out of the way, hating him for a few precious moments for how giddy and stupid he instantly made Q feel, just by appearing here, unexpected and unlooked-for. “Well you are going to scare them if you keep on like this,” he said irritably, flashing his card over the sensor and pulling the door open, James following behind. “I’ll make you a bloody card of your own, so next time you can just go inside.”

James followed him into the lift, gluing himself to Q’s back once the doors shut on them, smiling against the back of Q’s neck with the faintest brush of his lips on skin as he slid an arm around Q’s waist. “That’d be excellent,” he murmured into Q’s ear. “Sorry about your jumper, by the way.”

“Lies,” said Q flatly, but he leaned into James anyway.

* * * * *

He’d promised himself he’d worry about the fallout later, but “later” never seemed to come. Q’s life, already full even before “Behind Blue Eyes” became his personal theme song, now overflowed.

Q should have known that something so good could only be the calm before the storm. To be totally fair, though, James Bond was one hell of a distraction.

Nothing at work had changed; it wasn’t as if terrorists and drug cartels had stopped with the blackmail and the explosions and the sex trafficking rings. Q had no shortage of projects that were perpetually getting backed up or needing straightening out. Then there were the technical inventions and patents pending coming out of Q Branch, all of which needed to be vetted by Q personally before he’d put them in the hands of their agents, to say nothing of the devices Q himself was in charge of producing or perfecting. A thousand different requests for tech and system upgrades and
intelligence came through Q Branch on a daily basis. If it weren’t for his extremely capable seconds-in-command, Tessa and Mark, there would have been no way Q would’ve been able to manage all the things that landed on his desk and still find time to step in as voice in the ear of the three most active 00 agents when the situation called for it. And on top of all his usual duties, planning for the new HQ building was full speed ahead now that all the department heads had signed off on the warehouse, and a day didn’t go by without someone (usually Tanner) stopping in to run some detail or other by Q before installation.

(There was one particularly weird conversation with Tanner that happened about two weeks after Bond came back from Mozambique; Q was never sure that they were talking about anything but equipment at all, only Tanner sort of stopped in the middle of what he was saying, and when Q looked up to see if perhaps he’d had an aneurysm or something he found Tanner staring past him at the wall.

“Tanner,” Q began, and Tanner refocused his gaze on Q.

“Sorry,” he said, and gave Q a small smile. “I just wanted to remind you that there are certain—assets of Her Majesty’s Secret Service that you ought to be particularly careful with, as they’re more brittle than you may realize.”

“Pardon me, what exactly are you talking about?” demanded Q. “Did you hit your head on the way in to work today?”

“Oh, probably,” said Tanner mildly. “Anyway, these forms by the week’s end, if you please.” He gave Q another one of those vague smiles, and left him in his office reminding himself that Bill Tanner the cheerfully clueless Chief of Staff was just a pretense for Bill Tanner the shady, clever bastard.)

Bond (Bond or 007 at headquarters, Q was very strict with himself on this) was just the same at work, as well. Despite marginal improvement, he still had an atrociously low ratio of equipment returned intact versus what he was initially sent with, and sometimes it was enough to drive Q up the wall, threatening loudly to send Bond with everything from water pistols to nail clippers on his missions for minding Q’s things so poorly. But—and perhaps this was Q’s imagination, his wishful thinking—he thought Bond was showing more care with himself on missions these days.

Well. He was coming home banged-up and bloody with less frequency, at least, but his interrogation methods had not changed much. Q would have had to actually be dead to not feel any jealousy each time Bond slipped into bed with yet another dangerous, lonely creature, but he found it rather like stubbing his toe in the dark: painful enough in the moment to make his eyes water, but gone by the time the morning came, with no lasting injury to dwell on.

Because while work hadn’t changed, Q was spending significantly less of his time off alone. He made a point to see Moneypenny at least one or two times a week, just as they had been doing for years, and while there was a short period where she’d been living at a hotel while the break-in to her flat was investigated, now she was all settled in a new place and Q did his best to help make it feel like home. While it was rare for Adrienne and Jonathan to have free time (4-year-olds had that effect on people), Q still at least came in to visit with them once a week, at the bake shop if not at their flat. But often as not, Q would just come home to his own flat to find James already there waiting for him.

(It was the things that James did while he waited that really blew Q’s mind. Q had come in, once, and the entire flat had smelled of garlic and onions and fucking basil, and Q had been so flabbergasted he’d just marched straight into the kitchen and stared at the sight of James “Danger is my middle name” Bond at his stove in trousers and a t-shirt sauteing vegetables in a saucepan like on
some sodding cooking show. He’d just stood there in the door gawping like a moron until James had leveled a full-scale eyebrow at him and asked where he kept the thyme. Q still hadn’t decided if James Bond cooking for him was more or less weird than James Bond being hilariously competitive at XBox, or James Bond apparently having a soft spot for Dostoevsky.)

James had the homing instinct of a deranged carrier pigeon, and while at one point Q would have been disturbed to be involved with someone who could seemingly apparate at will to wherever Q happened to be, now he simply found it convenient. It was possible he was developing Stockholm Syndrome: a reaction to the crazed psychopath he couldn’t seem to get away from. That theory fell apart every time Q got James alone and climbed him like a tree, though, so perhaps it’d be best if he stopped entertaining it. James had more than proven his ability to respect Q’s boundaries, after all.

They went to James’ flat sometimes, too. Q was more pleased than he’d like to admit to catch Margaret in the hallway again, mostly because she lit up when she saw Q with James; the third such time they ran into her, she made a point to tell James how he’d keep this one if he knew what was good for him. Q thought he would never get sick of teasing James about his sassy matchmaking neighbor, but on that particular occasion he didn’t get much of a chance; everything he’d planned to say vanished into thin air when he got to James’ room and saw a familiar painting hanging on the wall.

“When the fuck did you get that?” Q demanded when he could find words again.

“I bought it the night you had your gallery showing. While you were in the lav.” James slid arms around Q’s neck, nibbling lightly under Q’s ear. “I’ve been meaning to ask if you take commissions.”

“You just need to accept the fact that you are never getting that exploding pen and move on with life,” said Q loftily, and got the unique pleasure of hearing James snort with laughter against his neck, right before he yanked Q’s shirt out of his trousers and thinking got hard.

There was no conversation about What This Is (and nor would there be, if Q had any say in it) but if Q didn’t know better, hadn’t convinced himself that there was no way this could be what he wanted, he would have said they were dating. And okay, it was true that they spent most nights that James wasn’t away on a mission at each other’s flats, and it was true that James now routinely brought him—presents, really, was the only word for it, presents like the first puzzle-box he’d got for Q. All of them ended up in Q’s flat, as precious to him now as the man who brought them to him in the first place.

Q had to break it off. He had to. He just… couldn’t find any believable reason to do it, and he couldn’t tell James the real one. There was no way this was going to end but badly, and that was why Q had to walk away.

If only it weren’t so bloody hard.

* * * * *

“Tell me about your tattoos,” James said.

Q glanced up at him from the Leonard Mlodinow book he was reading; there did exist some popular science books that weren’t so watered-down as to be insulting, and this was one of them. He and James were enjoying a quiet night in, James having just come back from another mission, this time to India. “Well James,” he said, rolling onto his side, “generally the first thing the tattoo artist does is make you sign a form alleging that you are not under the influence of any intoxicating substances—”
James cuffed his shoulder. “Knock it off,” he said, smiling slightly, and Q relented, returning his smile. “It looks like all one piece; did you get them all at once?”

Q shook his head. “No, but I wanted it to look that way. I had several of them in mind when I first got started, but I had to look around for awhile before I found an artist whose style I liked. I brought in some sketches and print-outs and we sorted out a general design, and then I’ve just… added to it several times since then. Erika’s excellent about adding new parts and making it all look of a piece.”

“Mm.” James ran his hand along Q’s bicep, rubbing his thumb over the stylized computer keyboard, then following the arc of the calaveras sugar-skull. “Do they mean anything? Or are you one of those young people who just likes how tattoos look?”

“You make us sound like an alien species,” Q said, elbowing James in his stomach for his cheek. It was utterly ineffective, of course; he might as well have jammed his elbow against a brick wall for all that James seemed to feel it, but then Q hadn’t been intending any damage anyway. “It’s both. Yes, they all have meaning, but I wanted a particular aesthetic, too.”

“I recognize what most of them are,” said James. “Or, what the image is, anyway.” He glanced up at Q. “Is the sugar skull for someone in particular?”

Q shut his book, setting it aside so he could twist his head around and look at the same pieces of skin James was examining. “I got it when my dad died, yeah.” He rotated his arm, turning out his triceps to peer at the design better, the colors as familiar to him now as the birthmark on the back of his thigh. “Last living member of my family.”

“Sorry to hear that,” murmured James. Q said nothing; it was something they had in common, and while losing his father had been hard, their relationship had always been strained. Papa had never quite forgiven him for disappearing for the better part of a year and a half on what was supposed to be just a 5-week trip to the States.

Carly chose this moment to butt her head against Q’s elbow, meowing plaintively before curling up against the S-curve of Q’s spine. James glanced at her and snorted before returning to studying Q’s arm, gently lifting and turning to better examine the landscape of Q’s personal art gallery. “The computer is self-explanatory… what about this? An ankh?”

“Yes. The crux ansata, symbol of eternal life,” said Q. “I was in need of a little life after death at the time.”

James raised an eyebrow, but when Q offered no more, he pressed no further. He returned his attention to Q’s arm, running his thumb over the simplified fractal pattern that swept over the muscle just above the back of Q’s elbow. “I bet your tattoo artist had a hell of a time with this pattern,” he observed, and Q smiled. “What about the plague doctor mask?”

Q paused, trying to assemble his thoughts into order. “That one’s difficult,” he said after a moment. “My mother was a nurse; she died of complications from pneumonia when I was five. But… I actually got that tattoo when I was hired on at MI6.” Q hesitated, dropping his eyes as he tried to explain this piece of personal history without straying into the maudlin. “I liked to think that I was doing the same sort of work she was,” he said finally. “It’s not pretty and it can be grim, and there’s a lot of death, but it’s important work and I’m proud to be the one doing it.”

James said nothing to this, just watched him with that clear, steady gaze. He gave Q a very small smile, the one that Q saw most infrequently, that he thought only a handful of people in the world ever saw, and it was that much more precious because of it. “What about this equation, here?” he asked after a bit, returning his gaze to the tapestry of color. “I don’t recognize it.”
It was Q’s turn to smile. “That’s not a surprise, as it’s from my uni physics classes,” he said. “It’s a Schrödinger equation used in quantum mechanics. It’s a partial differential equation that describes how the quantum state of some physical system changes with time. This one in particular is the general form, it…” Both of James’ eyebrows had gone up now, and Q left off before he could detour into a more complicated explanation, but he was stung by a sudden urge to justify this particular choice, this expression of self. “Some people think poetry or music are the only valid ways to express universal truth,” he said, his voice pensive. “But if you want the simplest, most elegant expression of existence, you’ll find nothing better than a maths equation. Everything changes with time.”

James stared. The corner of his mouth twisted ever so slightly, and then he leaned down and kissed Q, cupping his face in both hands as he literally took Q’s breath away, kissing him until Q was dizzy. “I think you may have missed your calling, my dear,” James murmured, still nuzzling Q’s cheek.

“Bollocks,” said Q, trying and failing not to sound like he’d just had the wind knocked out of him. “Besides, I like blowing things up.” He shut his eyes, gone dizzy all over again at the sound of James’ rich laughter in his ears, worth more than a thousand hours of ink or code or art.

* * * * *

Almost six weeks had passed since the night of Q’s gallery show when Q got the call.

A mobile rang at some ungodly hour of the morning, and both he and James fumbled at the side of the bed, answering almost simultaneously. “Hello,” said James beside him, and then grunted as he realized his mistake.

“What the hell is it,” said Q. James slung an arm over Q’s stomach again, and Q curled against him, wondering which of them had left the window cracked; it was bloody cold in his room and for no good reason.

“Sorry to wake you.” Adrienne sounded entirely too normal and chipper for—two in the morning, Q thought, squinting at the clock by the bed. “But I thought you ought to know that that agent of yours has broken into another one of your flats, the one on Downing Street.”

Q blinked a few times. Frowned. “What are you on about?” he demanded, feeling stupid and not liking it. “He can’t have.”

“It’s not that much of a surprise, is it? He found two of the other ones. I’m surprised it took him this long, really. He must be quite sweet on you.” Adrienne, because she was a sick woman, had reacted with delight upon discovering that the agent who’d broken into Q’s flats had asked him out to dinner, something Q had let slip only because he was bad at lying point-blank when he wasn’t expecting it and he could think of nothing else to say when asked so why is one of MI6’s field agents breaking into the quartermaster’s flat anyway?

“He’s not—he can’t possibly have broken into the Downing street flat. Check the feed, did anyone show up on the cameras?” Beside him, Q felt James go still, and then James’ head came up, the force of that regard leveled on him full-bore.

“I did; there’s a blank period when the cameras went offline, he must’ve cut the wires. Bit more subtle than the last two attempts he made. Why are you so sure it isn’t him?”

“Because he’s here with me,” said Q. The silence on the other end of the phone was suddenly very loud. It seeped into his bedroom, dripping in like cold water, and Q sat up, a stone settling into the pit of his stomach.
“Right,” said Adrienne after a few moments too long. “Do you want to come over and have a look at it?”

“I will,” said Q, looking at James, who was now sitting up in bed beside him and staring at him, hard. “But not right now. I’ll have someone by to pick it up tomorrow. Thanks for letting me know, Adrienne.”

“Take care of yourself, Ghost,” she said, and rung off.

“Someone broke into one of your flats,” said James, reaching up to take the mobile from Q and setting it aside. Q exhaled through his nose.

“Yes, well, that’s why I have the decoy flats to start with,” he said, unable to keep some irritation from creeping into his voice. “Because it had occurred to me that I might be a target.”

He glanced at James, trying to ignore the way the draft from the window was now creeping across his shoulders like spectral fingers, but his poker face wasn’t as good as his agent’s, and James brought a hand to Q’s face, cupping his cheek. “What is it?” asked James, softly. “You’re scared.”

Dammit. There were definitely downsides to James being so sharp. “I think I’ve a right to be a bit shook up over a phone call like that, thanks very much,” said Q, which was true enough.

“Mmm. Would it have anything to do with the fact that Eve’s flat was broken into a month or so ago?”

“I don’t know. We never did find out what the hell they were looking for at her flat, did we?” Q sighed, giving in and slumping against James, who wrapped both arms around him, resting his cheek against the top of Q’s head. “There are a few possibilities I can think of, and I don’t like any of them, but short of one of my interns having a fucking dreadful sense of humor, I don’t think I’m going to find an answer that I’m going to like.”

“It’ll be fine.” James smoothed a large hand along Q’s spine, his thumb rubbing gently at the ridge of vertebrae. One day Q would stop being surprised by how tender James could be; right now he just sighed, turning his face against James’ clavicle, feeling the slightly rough tracery of old scars against his cheekbone. “If I couldn’t find your actual flat, no bloody amateur is going to manage.”

“You’d have found it sooner or later,” Q murmured. “Had plenty of opportunities to follow me home.”

Q felt James shrug. “You told me not to,” he said. His deep voice sounded amused.

“Oh, because you’re always so keen on following the rules,” said Q.

“Some situations matter more than others,” said James quietly, and Q bit his lip, the tightness in his throat making it hard to think what to say. So he said nothing, just cupped James’ neck in one hand and kissed his throat, and tried to ignore the weight in his chest that whispered that something was wrong.

* * * *

Predictably, work the next day was so batshit insane that Q didn’t get time to look at the video and meta-data Adrienne sent over till late afternoon. Equally predictably, Q’s plate was extra full due to 007’s impending departure; he was being sent on another mission in two days, and it looked to be a fairly long-term one, infiltrating a terrorist cell in Bolivia.
Q was no more going to send Bond unprepared or under-equipped than he would leave his own flat without trousers on, so he sent the tape along to Tessa with strict orders to not show it to anyone until after she’d run her assessment by Q. Then he set himself to the task of finishing reviewing Bond’s weapons and recording devices. There was a pen with a hidden cartridge of deadly poison that Q had hoped to have finished before Bond got sent off again—it wasn’t as flashy as many of the things Bond liked to work with, but it would get the job done, if Q could manage to better safeguard its carrier from accidentally poisoning him- or herself. Sadly it wasn’t yet ready for commission, and so Bond would have to settle for his by-now standard issue palm-ID’d Walther, radio, and various other items of espionage.

“Anything on the recording Adrienne sent over?” Moneypenny peered at Q’s screen, arms crossed over her chest. She didn’t even have the excuse of clipboards or paperwork to bring him this time, but really, she didn’t need an excuse; no motive or perpetrator for the break-in to her old flat had yet been discovered, and it was a hell of a fishy coincidence for Q’s flat to be broken into so soon after, decoy or no.

“Nothing, according to Tessa.” Q pursed his lips, saving and minimizing the program he’d just had open as he pulled open the email Tessa had sent along with her findings. “The only reason we knew there was a break-in at all was because a silent alarm went off when they opened the front door without one of our encoded keys. But whoever it was had gone by the time security arrived.”

“Did they take anything?”

“Nothing there to take. You’ve seen my fake flats, nothing of substance in any of them. There’s just some furniture and some basic amenities to make it look like someone lives there.” Q flicked through the images, glaring irritably at the few seconds of footage that repeated themselves over and over, and the timestamp that skipped from 0134 hours to 0153 hours like a blinking eye.

“Well, that’s obnoxious.”

“Tell me about it.” Q sighed and glanced up at Moneypenny. “There’s been a team through it to search for prints, but no one’s sent me back any word yet.”

“Same as my flat. Professional, that.” Q nodded, wishing that there’d been another conclusion for him to come to aside from that one. His discomfort was not made any better by Moneypenny reaching out to rest a hand on his shoulder and adding, quietly, “If the same person got into your flat as mine, darling, I’d have to say that it’s probably you they’re looking for.”

Q said nothing. But if he he took an extra twenty minutes to get home that night via a combination of cabs and the Underground, he felt he could not much be blamed.

* * * * *

To exactly no one’s surprise, James Bond was an effective distraction when he wanted to be. And since tonight was his last night with Q for the immediate future, he had a vested interest in commanding all of Q’s attention, which Q was only too happy to give to him.

Q did not open his computer at all that night. He thought about very little except James’ eyes, and his mouth, and other parts less mentionable in polite company but no less worthy of his praise. But the thing Q was most grateful for that night was the deep, exhausted sleep James gave him, undisturbed by bad dreams or rumors.

It would be his last night of good sleep for several weeks.
It wasn’t until Bond was several hours gone on his plane ride to Bolivia that Q got around to doing some more serious investigation. He went home to do it, hacking into MI6’s servers remotely from the safety of his bedroom. Technically, he wasn’t supposed to access work systems from home, but as far as he knew no one else was even aware that he did it, and as it wasn’t as though he was dropping in viruses or trojans, he saw no harm.

Q hadn’t done digging quite like this in awhile; most of the intelligence-gathering for their agents was done by other people, though of course he was more than competent at finding what he was looking for. It was just that it’d been years since he’d had much occasion for it.

The truth was, despite what he’d told James, Q did not have many people who even knew enough about his existence to target him. There was a reason the head of Q Branch was simply called Q, the same reason Mallory was simply M now. And Q had hidden himself about as well as it was possible to hide, short of removing himself to a deserted island somewhere; his birth name had been officially declared dead by the British government several years ago, and almost no paper trail existed of his current legal identity, one William Monk who had multiple decoy flats listed under his name in MI6’s secure servers. His actual residence was listed as rented to a fictional corporation by the name of Domestic Gains & Holdings, LTD.

It took him several minutes to get access to the current roster of the maximum-security prison in France that he was looking for, and then Q sat staring at his screen as two separate searches of the list brought back the same null return. Not found, the little window informed him.

“Bollocks,” he said aloud. He broadened his search, scanning impatiently through files, trying to quell the growing nausea in his stomach. This time he set the program to search for all files within the past 6 months, and ten seconds or so later several hits popped up.

Markham, David; Markham, Janessa. An external transfer, signed off by the warden. The previous files were all run-of-the-mill entries, detailing inmate activities, health records and the like. Q blanched as the continuing search popped up several photos, hastily killing the program before it could return more results. He sat there for several seconds, his eyes averted, before taking a deep breath and forcing himself to look at the faces on the screen.

The first was of a man, early thirties, with streaks of grey in his close-cropped light brown hair; shorter than Q remembered, and lacking the facial hair he’d often sported. There were harder lines around his eyes now than the last time Q had seen him, but the strength in his features remained, the dimple at the corner of his mouth, the true brown eyes. David Markham wasn’t smiling in the photo, but Q had seen it so many times that he had no problem remembering the way his face had crinkled when he laughed, his slow Texan drawl that dripped with humor. He did not look like he’d had much occasion to laugh recently.

The second photo was similar to the first, a woman staring straight at the camera, the intensity in her gaze a little unnerving. Prison had not dulled Janessa’s attractiveness, but it had made her expression harder, and Q suffered a pang at the tightness in her full lips, and at the scar across her elegant nose, the asymmetry reminding him obliquely of James’. But her blue eyes were as clear as ever, her blonde hair pulled back from her face in an unforgiving ponytail.

Q took a long, slow breath, jumping a little as Carly leaped up onto the bed next to him. “Fucking hell,” he muttered to himself, scooping up his purring cat to cradle her against his chest. The feel of her calmed him a little, and he flicked the photos away, paging through the other results instead. He pulled open the transfer form again, checked the date.
Just over five months ago. Right after a certain former MI6 agent had been ripping a trail of destruction across London. Right when Q’s hands were too full to even think of checking on something like this… not that he would have, probably. Q swallowed.

It had been five years, after all. Why should he have thought to check on them after so long? They were in prison.

…weren’t they?

Q suddenly felt cold in a way that had nothing to do with open windows or the snow outside on the ground. He went back to his original search screen, and set it to run a nation-wide search of France’s prisons for those two names. The search had a lot more items to scroll through, and thus took several minutes longer, several minutes of Q staring uneasily at the two photos in the corner of his screen and petting his oblivious cat.

Not found, the search came back finally. Q’s mouth went dry, and then he sighed, broadening his search to include the whole of Europe.

It was going to be a long evening.

* * * * *

When Q came in the next day looking like he’d been backed over repeatedly by a mail truck, Moneypenny gave him a long, questioning look to which he did not respond. He had work to do. Specifically, he would have at most 48 hours before Bond went into deep cover, and there were a number of goals he had to help Bond achieve before that happened.

They couldn’t talk about personal matters over their comms channels, of course. Which didn’t stop Q from staying on the line with 007 whenever opportunity permitted it, even when not strictly necessary for his assignment. And it wasn’t like Q could stop Bond from signing off on the other end, but 007 seemed as disinclined as Q to break the connection. He lingered longer on the line than he might have otherwise, checked in more regularly than normal.

It was unnecessary, but Q found himself obscurely grateful for it. He’d have socked Bond in the jaw had he so much as implied that Q was unable to cope with the security situation on his own, but it was nice to at least know that 007 was thinking about him. They talked about nothing in particular: the weather in Bolivia; the idiotic book Bond had read on the plane ride over; the new installation that would be on at the Tate Modern in a few weeks. It absolutely rated as one of the most boring conversations Q had ever had.

That did not stop him from feeling stupidly abandoned when Bond finally signed off, though, or from allowing Moneypenny to persuade him to stay the night at her new apartment.

* * * * *

A week passed. The meta-data and physical evidence from Q’s decoy flat yielded absolutely nothing, which was made all the worse when another of Q’s flats was broken into four days after Bond left for Bolivia. The break-in was exactly the same as the previous two: nothing taken, no physical evidence, and no video recording of the intruders. “Nothing” was also what Q had turned up on his two missing convicts, and the maddening lack of any concrete leads was just serving to amplify Q’s increasing paranoia.

Several times, he was close to breaking down and calling a private meeting with Moneypenny to confide in her, but every time he held himself back. The damnable thing was that he simply had no
reason to think that Janessa and David’s escape from prison (if they had, in fact, escaped, and had
not been invisibly extradited to somewhere back in the US, a possibility Q had not yet ruled out) was
connected to the break-ins of his and Moneypenny’s flats. They certainly had motivation, but so did
plenty of other people Q had helped to destroy or discredit during his work with MI6, even if they
only knew of him in a general way. If someone had gotten ahold of sensitive information from their
servers (Q could not help but think of the virus outbreak a few months back that had dragged him
from his bed), then any one of a great number of dangerous people could be hunting for Q. He
simply needed more information.

And no matter how scared Q was, he just couldn’t bring himself to drag all of his skeletons out of the
closet to taint his new life unless he absolutely had to. He and Adrienne and Jonathan had worked so
bloody hard to start over; he couldn’t bring it all crashing down for nothing.

So he worked overtime, and monitored his agents, and coded until his eyes wanted to shrivel up and
roll out of his head. He ran new searches every night for new information, and he ran himself more
literally into the ground at MI6’s indoor gyms until he could barely stagger to the showers. And he
waited.

* * * * *

Q worked late that night.

He worked late often, true, but today was more necessity than Q’s terrifying work ethic or even his
dread of being home alone with his own thoughts. Between the paperwork piling up related to their
upcoming transition and the forms Tanner had brought by around 4 pm, it was almost nine before he
finally dragged himself away from his work station. He would have stayed later, in fact, were it not
for the text he’d gotten shortly after Moneypenny came by to force some dinner on him.

The message was short and to the point, from an unlisted number: *Agrippina and Fezzik need a
seance. 2130 @ the old stand by.* M would throw a fit if he knew, probably, but Q was the head of
Q Branch for a reason and didn’t have any spare fucks to give today. Not after the week and a half
he’d had.

Q walked briskly out of the compound, taking the most unobtrusive exit from MI6’s no-longer-that-
temporary location. He hailed a cab, then sent it along without getting into it. He did this twice more,
before finally getting into the next one that happened along, and he took that across hell’s half-acre
and back before getting out, paying the driver, and hailing yet another cab. This one he took to the
Charing Cross Road tube stop, and then got out and walked eight blocks to a run-down hole-in-the-
wall that had no right to call itself a pub and yet insisted on operating anyway.

He wormed his way through the crowd to the back end of the pub, and broke into a grin at the sight
of Jonathan’s bulk squashed into the booth next to Adrienne’s smaller, curvier form. “Well aren’t
you two a sight for sore eyes, out for a drink with no four-year-old attached,” he said, and slid into
the booth to submit to a round of hugs and a kiss on the cheek.

“Only because you’ve been staring at computer screens all day,” said Jonathan—Fezzik—once he
was done crushing Q’s ribs into putty. He was dressed to the nines tonight, an old-fashioned
pinstriped suit that wouldn’t have looked out of place in an American gangster film. Q had no doubt
it would make him look even taller than he was when Jonathan was standing instead of hunched
over a too-small table.

“Hello, my sweet boffin,” said Adrienne, smiling. Adrienne was Agrippina, of course; the poisoner.
Her hair was dark as her eyes, and twisted up in an elaborate up-do tonight. She reminded Q of old
Botticelli paintings, with ample curves and soft olive skin, and Q never failed to be delighted by the
bright sleeve of tattoos that snaked up her arm to cascade over her shoulder to her back. She was one of the reasons he’d wanted some of his own in the first place. “Sorry for the short notice, but I’m afraid it’s quite urgent.”

“I was afraid of that, if you had to call a seance to do it.” Q had been Ghost, back when their pseuds had been their whole lives instead of just clever plays on words. He’d picked the name when he was, what, 15, and then been stuck with it, because by the time Janessa and David came along he had a reputation attached to it. As a rule, Ghost had never been involved unless he absolutely had to be; Janessa and David had preferred to keep him away from the action. Of course, where they’d actually liked to keep him was just as dangerous in its own way.

Funny, really. Janessa and David had had their own pseuds, Nefertiti and Ramses, but Q never thought of them by those names. They were only ever Janessa and David.

Adrienne and Jonathan exchanged a look. Q raised an eyebrow, doing his best to squash the panic that immediately welled in his chest. “Go on, out with it, no point in all the cloak and dagger otherwise, is there.”

Adrienne sighed. “Terry told me a tall thin man with a limp came into the shop today with a tattoo of a spider in its web on the back of his right hand.” Terry was one of Adrienne’s employees. He was also not privy to Adrienne’s history, which made that bit of intel so much worse.

Q stared at Adrienne, feeling all the blood run out of his face. “Oh god,” he said, and swallowed thickly. He realized abruptly that he hadn’t ordered a drink, but then Jonathan was pushing a pint of cider at him and Q picked it up to sip at it, not even tasting it. It helped ease the tightness in his throat, though, and he swallowed past the knot, trying to think. “Was he after anything? What did Terry say?”

“Terry said no. Just that he dawdled for awhile with a coffee and took a box of scones with him when he left. Didn’t ask any questions.”

Q nodded, exhaling slowly. “Right,” he said heavily. “Well. I think that settles it, then.”

Jonathan raised an eyebrow. “Just because that old creeper has made an appearance doesn’t mean—”

“No, it’s worse than that,” Q cut in. “They’re off the radar. I can’t find Nefertiti or Ramses in any prison that has a functional computer, I can’t even find a fucking mention of them that’s more recent than five months ago.”

The three of them sat there for a few moments, and then Jonathan raised his drink, tossing the rest of it back in one go. “Right,” he said. “Time for a back up plan.”

“No,” said Q flatly. “No back-up plan. We’re not doing this alone. No don’t even start,” he snapped, as Adrienne opened her mouth to protest. “You have a four-year-old, and we’re out of practice, and there’s no point in working for MI6 and not asking them for help when we need it. They’re too dangerous and you know it.”

Jonathan glowered at him for a few moments. Adrienne reached over and laid her hand across the top of his, and he deflated, sighing and leaning back in the booth. “Alright,” said Adrienne, and Q nodded, glad that they weren’t going to argue with him on this.

“It’s not safe for you to stay at your place tonight,” he continued. “If they know where your bake shop is, I’m sure they know where your flat is. I’ll get ahold of Moneypenny and we’ll get you sorted somewhere safe.”
“I’ve just left Vanessa with Johanna,” said Adrienne, referring to one of the nannies MI6 (well, Q) had vetted for her. “Should we go home, or—”

Q hesitated, and then sighed. “I don’t know,” he said, dragging a hand distractedly through his hair. “If you’ve an escort, then yes. Let me just ring up Moneypenny.”

The phone call was short and to the point; Q asked for a security team to be sent to Charing Cross Road tube station, with the assignment of escorting Adrienne and Jonathan to pick up their daughter and return to their flat before being taken to a safe house. Moneypenny would be coming herself to collect Q, and Q was more grateful than he had the words to express that she did not ask him why over the phone.

This was a conversation he was going to have to have in person. He figured there was less of a chance of her walking out on him than there was of her hanging up.

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Adrienne and Jonathan refused to get in the car with their security team until Moneypenny’s sleek silver Mercedes had pulled up next to the curb and they’d watched Q climb inside. He shut the door, buckling the belt across his waist and slumping in the seat, avoiding Moneypenny’s gaze. She put the car in gear and slipped back out into traffic, and for perhaps forty-five seconds neither of them said anything. Finally, Q could take it no longer.


Moneypenny snorted. “Good god, Q,” she said, not taking her eyes off the road, “did someone die?”

“What? No—what—”

“You never call me Eve.” She sounded calm, and totally unconcerned. “Of course, you don’t often call me at quarter to ten asking me to send a security team to your location, either. I’m guessing this is a conversation that needs to be had in private?”

“You could say that,” said Q, trying not to sound like he was facing a firing squad and failing.

“Is it about those break-ins?”

“…Yes.”

“Ah, so you’re actually going to tell me what’s had you looking like you’re scared of your own shadow for the past week and a half.” Q swallowed, gripping the tops of his thighs very tightly. Moneypenny glanced over at him, eyebrows going up. “Q. Breathe. Believe it or not, I have some idea of what you’re going to tell me, so you can stop looking as though you expect me to take your head off at the neck.”

“I very much doubt that,” said Q shortly.

“Oh, no? I suppose I’ll just tell M to not wait up for us, then.”

Q stared. “What?” he managed, after a few moments. “Wait, are we going to M’s, why are we going to M’s?”

“Is this a conversation you want to have more than once?” Moneypenny glanced at him again before returning her eyes to the road.
Q dropped his gaze to his lap. “I hadn’t honestly thought that much past telling you and asking what you thought I should do next,” he admitted. “But no, I don’t. I don’t want anyone to hear this except you. And M, because I suppose he has to.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Moneypenny, and reached over to squeeze Q’s knee. “Don’t worry, darling. We’ve got you.”

Q said nothing, but after a moment he covered his hand with hers and squeezed back.

* * * * *

Chapter End Notes

Adrienne Stanton, Jonathan Stanton, looking particularly ostentatious and possibly with worse facial hair than he normally does. Janessa Markham, David Markham. As played by Adrienne Armstrong, Sheamus, Tricia Helfer, and Ryan Bingham, respectively.
They say it gets worse before it gets better; what "they" didn't mention is how bad "worse" can be.

They did not go to M’s office, or to his flat; instead they met at one of MI6’s upper-level safe-houses, to which only the highest-ranked agents and employees had access. Q wondered vaguely what it must be like to have a life where meeting to discuss a private matter wasn’t like an angry game of British Bulldog where you got shot at if you did it wrong and no one’s told you the rules. Most of the time he loved his job, but there was little he wouldn’t give right now to not have to jump through eight security measures and a flaming hula hoop just to have a piss.

M was waiting for them when they arrived, looking utterly unsurprised at the clandestine meeting. He was still wearing the same pinstripe suit and waistcoat he had on at work that day, his tie not even undone; Q suspected he had not stopped working at all. “Q, Moneypenny.” He nodded at them both as they entered the room, gesturing at the seats across from him. Q glanced over and noticed that Moneypenny now had out a Beretta (an M190 Special Force model that he’d just recently modified himself, actually) and was resting it across her lap, which wasn’t disconcerting at all. Where the fuck had she even hidden it in that frock of hers?

“So,” said M. “Out with it, quartermaster. Let’s not beat around the bush.”

Q took a deep breath. “Sir, you’ve read my file.”

“I have,” said M easily. “The official and the unofficial one, both.” M’s fingers curled lightly against his desk-top, his gaze on Q never wavering.

“Right,” said Q. Of course he would have. There was no way Mawdsley would have destroyed that file, would she, and Gareth Mallory was nothing if not thorough. Q straightened, forcing himself to be calm, to remain in control. He could do this. “Janessa and David Markham are missing, sir. I can’t find them in any prison manifesto in any country in the EU or the United States. And today a man was spotted in Adrienne Stanton’s bakeshop that matched the description of one of the Markhams’ old gang.”

M frowned. “I thought you gave them all up in your immunity agreement for yourself and the Stantons,” he said.

“In your what?” Moneypenny was looking at Q now, but went quiet again when M glanced at her.
“I did,” said Q flatly. “I gave M—uh, your predecessor—every file and code and bit of intel I had on our group and our contacts. But Eric Temple slipped the trap your agents laid for the rest of the gang, somehow, and evaded capture. Last I had heard, he was in Malaysia somewhere.”

“But you say he’s been spotted in London,” said M. “Are you sure it was him? Have you ID’d him yourself?”

Q winced. “No, not personally, yet,” he said reluctantly. “I’m having the CCTV from Adrienne’s bakeshop sent over to examine, but coupled with the unidentified break-ins of my and Moneypenny’s flats, and considering my past, I thought it prudent to assume the worst.”

M said nothing for a moment, his frown deepening. He drummed his fingers on the table, and then seemed to come to a decision. “That was the right choice,” he said. “Thank you for validating my faith in you by bringing this to me instead of trying to handle it by yourself, quartermaster.” M turned his attention to Eve, who was sitting like a sharp, eager weapon in the seat next to Q, her eyes bright. “Agent Moneypenny. Nothing we have discussed, or are about to discuss, is to leave this room. If you believe one of our staff must be involved, you are to clear it with me first.”

“Understood, sir,” she said.

“It was before your time, but you may still recall hearing about the activities of a criminal group known as the Machine, operating world-wide roughly five to six years ago,” said M.

“Vaguely,” said Moneypenny. “People talked about them sort of the way one does about conspiracy theory groups, though. I got the impression they were mostly rumor.”

“That was because they were incredibly difficult to find anything concrete about,” said M. Q stayed quiet, morbidly curious to hear what someone like Gareth Mallory would have to say about the group of people Q once thought of as his family. “There were six members: Agrippina, Fezzik, Nefertiti, Ramses, Ghost, and the Recluse. Adrienne and Jonathan Stanton were Agrippina and Fezzik, respectively.” M glanced at Q, raising an eyebrow in invitation.

Q exhaled. “I was Ghost,” he said, turning and looking at Moneypenny. He wondered if she’d get the joke; it didn’t seem as funny, five years down the line. “The man Adrienne thought came into her bakeshop today was the Recluse, real name Eric Temple. Named for the venomous spider. Incredibly dangerous sociopath.”

“What about Nefertiti and Ramses? These people are after Q?” If Moneypenny was fazed by any of this, she certainly wasn’t showing it. Q felt a sudden wash of desperate affection for her, her humor and her loyalty and her whip-smart, lethal competence.

“It seems that way,” said M. He glanced at Q again before continuing. “Nefertiti and Ramses were the pseudonyms for Janessa and David Markham. Along with Temple, they were wanted in over forty countries on multiple counts of extortion, murder, torture, and various other sins. We have no way of knowing how much longer it would have taken to apprehend them, but my predecessor’s email account was hacked by a young man who identified himself as a British national who was working inside the gang, name of Simon Dubois. In exchange for immunity and protection for himself and two others, he offered precise details of the Machine’s location, movements, personal accounts, criminal contacts, and plans, and for agreeing to aid law enforcement in the apprehension of the Markhams and Eric Temple, at great personal risk to himself.”

M paused; Moneypenny glanced over sharply at Q. He looked from face to face. “What?”

“Q,” said Moneypenny, after several long moments, “you’re shaking.”
“That’s hardly relevant,” snapped Q. Moneypenny’s expression did not change, and she kept her gaze steady; after a few moments it was Q who looked away, glaring at a spot on the floor adjacent to Mallory’s desk.

Out of the corner of his eye, Q saw M lean back slightly, enough to rest his elbows on the desk and steeple his fingers together. “The details and findings of MI6’s investigation into Simon Dubois’ personal activities are not relevant to the matter at hand,” he said. “However, I will note that Mawdsley herself oversaw the process, and that MI6 has an ironclad stipulation against the hiring of individuals who have been charged with an indictable offense.”

“Understood, sir.”

Q said nothing. What M had not said hung in the air: “not charged with” was not the same as “not guilty of.” He wasn’t going to try to defend himself to Moneypenny in front of M, and he wasn’t yet prepared to contemplate how this conversation was going to go with James. There was no real way to avoid it, now.

“Q, I realize that your real flat has not yet actually been broken into,” M continued, “but I still think it’s not safe for you to stay there, at least until we’ve identified and neutralized the source of their info.” Q nodded and then forced himself to look up, trying to school his features into something less sullen.

“The Stantons have already been moved to a safe house,” said Moneypenny.

“Excellent work, Agent Moneypenny,” said M. “See to it that they receive a security detail. Standard procedure for targeted personnel.” The tightness in Q’s chest eased a little; he’d been worried he’d have to argue for full protection, since Adrienne and Jonathan were not technically MI6 employees, but apparently it was not an issue. “I want you to escort Q to his flat to retrieve anything of a sensitive nature before he goes to ground. We will be utilizing all the resources at our command to locate the people stalking you. Q, this is of the utmost importance: absolutely no one is to be made aware of your location once you arrive there. I will arrange for a cover story to explain your absence, but no one save myself, Moneypenny, and Tanner will know your true location or circumstances. You are not to initiate contact with anyone for any reason.”

Q bristled. “But sir,” he began, “what about the agents in the field, I have to—”

“Bond can be made informed of your location upon his return, once he’s been debriefed, if you wish.”

Q froze, and then shot a dirty look at Moneypenny without thinking. “I didn’t say anything,” said Moneypenny.

“She didn’t need to, as I have eyes,” said M. Q wondered if there was an app for making the ground open up beneath you to swallow you whole.

“Uh,” said Q. “Right. Does Tanner already know about the circumstances, or—”

“He’s aware of some, not all,” said M. “Nothing about this changes anything, Q. I expect you to work on what projects you can while in deep cover, and I expect you to return to your full duties as quartermaster as soon as this threat has been neutralized.” He raised both his eyebrows at Q, a faint smile on his face belying the reproof in his words. “Are we done here?”

“Yes, sir,” said Q, because the urge to either vomit or to start babbling his thanks would simply not do. He stood up, Moneypenny rising a fraction of a second later.
“Good. I expect regular reports from both of you. Now go, and be careful.”

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison, and then Q let Moneypenny walk him to the door.

* * * * *

The drive home was a new flavor of awkward that Q had not experienced before. It was clear that Moneypenny wanted to ask more about the information she’d just been made privy to, but Q had spent so many years burying it inside himself that he’d lost the words to tell her about it. He’d never been so grateful to pull up to the building with his flat in it.

Carly came running out to meet them as soon as he let himself and Moneypenny up the hidden entranceway, maowing and twining around Q’s feet in her best attempt to trip him or con him into picking her up, whichever came first. Q couldn’t resist, crouching to scoop her up and burying his face in her soft white fur. She wriggled in his arms, purring like a miniature engine, and Q drew in an audible breath, sharp like a piece of glass in his lungs.

He felt a touch at his shoulder; Moneypenny’s hand was light, giving him a brief squeeze. “Shouldn’t be too hard to get a CCTV feed to your safe-house from here,” she said. “Then you can watch me stop by and feed your cat and seduce her into coming home with me.”

Q smiled. “I expect you won’t have to try very hard, she’s a traitorous brat,” he said. His voice sounded thin even to his own ears.

“Come on, boffin,” said Moneypenny, gently. “It’s not getting any less late.”

Q let out a short laugh, one devoid entirely of humor. “It’s already much too late,” he said. But he let Moneypenny slip her arm around his waist anyway, leaning mutely into her as they headed down the hall to his bedroom.

* * * * *

The next few days were some of the worst Q had experienced in years. More than the fear of knowing he was being stalked, he hated being powerless and stuck above all other things. The last time he’d gone through anything like this was before he’d worked for MI6, when he’d been on probation of a sorts, doing work on a contracting basis for MI6 but not technically allowed to access any secure files.

It had been a test, of course. While the investigation into the extent of his criminal activities had indeed exonerated him of any violent crimes—that and the fact that M had seen right through him to the scared, abandoned child he’d felt like at the time—MI6 had still not been keen to take him on. But that had left them with the sticky predicament of trying to decide exactly what they should do with him: this boy, this shell-shocked, desperate, brilliant young man, too dangerous to be allowed to go off-radar but questionable enough to not yet be brought into the fold.

M had hit upon the perfect solution, naturally. Be good, she’d said. She’d known what he’d wanted (stability) and what he needed (direction), and she’d dangled the carrot right in front of him. Three years and you’ll be working for Q Branch with the most cutting-edge department in the country. Prove yourself.

Three years! Oh, he’d been so upset. He’d thought her cruel, ridiculous, completely out-of-touch. She’d been utterly unmoved by his protests and so scathingly dismissive that he’d wilted on the spot under her rebuke, like a puppy swatted on its nose.

Don’t be an idiot, Simon, she’d said. Did you really think we’d simply leave you to your own devices
during that time? I said ‘be good,’ not ‘wither away into a useless husk.’

The contract work they’d send along to him had been—engaging, and all-consuming while he was working on it. He’d thrived on it, had most especially loved the emails he got from his liaison at Q Branch when he’d send back a finished project days or weeks ahead of schedule. But the flip side of contract work was that you worked 80 hours a week for weeks on end, only to find yourself with nothing at all to do between projects. Q had coped by acquiring hobbies like some people did trading cards: running, video games, fractal art, app programming and other things. And he’d been good.

(Well, for a value of ‘good,’ anyway. Hacking into secure system just to see if he could was as second-nature to Q as breathing, but he damaged nothing and left no marks, and if the occasional email turned up in Q Branch’s inboxes alerting them to security flaws in their systems, he never actually caught any flak for it, so he counted it as a win.)

Now Q had both more and fewer resources at his disposal. He couldn’t leave the flat he was in, but he’d brought enough projects with him to theoretically keep himself occupied (the poison pen, a contact lens prototype with a miniature recording device, and several coding projects that he trusted with no one else, plus a promise from Moneypenny to bring him more should it come to that). But while M had forbidden Q from communicating with anyone not on their approved list and from drawing attention to himself, that left a wide range of other activities open to Q.

Which was why he was sitting curled up under a blanket in this unfamiliar bed with a headset on, listening to the blithering idiots that were in charge during his absence guide 007 over encrypted comms.

“I’m headed down the hallway. No sign of the bomb.” Bond was in ill humor. He hadn’t said much to Mark after coming online, ever the consummate professional (not to mention there were more pressing matters than inquiring about a missing quartermaster while running from the spray of gunfire), but even accounting for Q’s heightened sensitivity, Bond was uncommunicative.

“Very well,” said Mark, his voice clearer over the line than Bond’s far distant one. “Turn left at the end of the hallway, and—” Q jumped as gunfire crackled in his ears, like popcorn on a stove.

“A little help here,” hissed Bond, and Q had to jam his fist into his mouth to keep from entering the command that would let him override Mark’s access to Bond’s ear-piece, the display of Bond’s location already live on Q’s screen. Every fibre of his being sang with the need to take over from the fools who had no idea how to handle the extremely sensitive task of guiding a field agent that depended on you to keep him alive dear God he was going to infect every one of their computers with the nastiest virus he could come up with.

“Working on it,” said Mark shakily. Moments later, klaxons at Bond’s end came shrieking through the line, and Q winced, jamming his finger on the down-volume button to try to cut the screech of electronic feedback.

“What the fuck are you doing over there? Have you got your fingers in your arse or what? Put Q on for God’s sake!”

“He’s not here, he’s been sent off, I don’t know where the bloody hell he is—”

“Well you’d better go and find out before you get me killed,” said Bond darkly. Q put his face in his hands.

“—there, alright, back down the hallway, Bond, the maintenance lift is open for you now. We’ve found the bomb, it’s on the eighth floor.” Mark sounded more in control now, which was the only
thing stopping Q from flinging all his expensive electronics out the window of the fourth floor flat and drowning himself in the toilet.

If this was what his life was going to be like till Janessa and David surfaced, it would almost be worth it to advertise his location on a billboard at Leicester Square just to end the pain.

* * * * *

Bond completed his mission objectives and then, as usual, he disappeared off the grid. It’d be close to a day before he was back on British soil, presuming he followed his most recent M.O. and came straight home, but despite the intimacy that had been building between them over the past month and a half, Q honestly had no idea what to expect. This was the first time he’d had to work through anything like this with a significant other in—ever, basically.

He spent most of the day disassembling and tinkering with the innards of the poison pen prototype, the sack of ink that would one day be replaced with poison sealed in a sandwich baggie on the counter, when his mobile vibrated against the coffee table he’d left it sitting on. Q set the pen-tube in his lap and stretched, trying to reach the mobile without moving, flopping onto his back and swiping his finger across the screen to unlock it.

It was a text from Moneypenny. Do us a favor and direct 007 to come in for debriefing when he tries to get a hold of you. Q wrinkled his nose, and turned the mobile horizontal to type out a quick message back.

Because I have such an excellent track record of getting 007 to do what he doesn’t want to. That’s why he always returns my equipment intact.

The response came in under thirty seconds. M wants to clear him on your situation himself before sending him to you. I have to say I agree with him.

Q rubbed at his face, frustration sticking in his throat like a bit of bone. I’ll do my best, he sent back, and then chucked the mobile in the direction of the couch in a fit of pique.

Predictably, he never even got the chance.

Q was doing a sort of Dali-esque drip off the couch, his legs on the cushions, back on the floor, tablet braced vertically against his thighs as he worked, when the alarm popped up on his screen warning him of unauthorized entrance to his wing of the building. He double-tapped, pulling up the CCTV feed, and felt some small amount of the tension drain from his chest when he saw the familiar figure moving through the halls to his door. Q’s fingers danced across the screen, disabling the alert and resetting the alarm before setting the tablet aside and rolling over to hands and knees. He was still climbing to his feet when he heard the front door open and slam shut.

“Q?” Bond’s voice was tight.

“In here.” Q stood, his heart crawling into his throat as Bond came stalking through the doorway wrapped in thunderclouds. “James—”

“You little bastard,” James growled, and god the man was quick. Q found himself with a hand in his hair, James’ other arm lashed around Q’s waist, Q pressed bodily against James’ chest.

“Have you even bothered to change clothes or shower, there’s this thing called personal hygiene—”

“Shut. Up.” There was something in James’ voice that was ruining Q’s ability to think, a dangerous waver that made Q’s brain go skittering sideways in panic. So he shut up, and then slid both arms
around James’ waist in kind, slipping under his decidedly-dirty suit coat.

“I thought at first you were dead,” said James after a moment. To Q’s gratitude, he sounded more like himself. “When that little tosser second of yours came on the line and not you.”

“Come on James, give me some credit,” said Q peevishly. He shut his eyes for a moment, distracted by the stubble scraping against his cheek, James’ nose still buried in Q’s hair. “How did you even find me?”

“I used that computer pen you gave me to get the GPS history of Eve’s phone from the past week.”

“You are a menace,” said Q after a moment, his breath hitching as James nosed lower along his neck, biting just under his ear, making Q gasp.

“I wouldn’t have needed to if you had fucking told me where you were,” growled James. The hand in Q’s hair tightened, pulling his skull back to expose more of Q’s throat, and Q shuddered, going limp and pliable in James’ hands, despite the swell of indignation at that statement.

“When exactly was I going to tell you?” demanded Q. “Over the comms line when anyone could hear? ‘By the way I’m in—ngh, fuck—I’m in hiding, be a good man and don’t tell anyone! Kisses, Q!’” James bit down hard on Q’s throat, and Q moaned, clutching at James’ back through his expensive silk shirt.

“What, a text was so difficult? As if I don’t know how simple that is for you.” Q flushed, shoving uselessly at James, who was backing him towards the couch, his big hands everywhere, making Q crazy.

“I’ll have you know that M ordered me not to communicate with anyone not personally cleared by him,” Q snapped. He shoved both hands against James’ shoulders, forcibly bracing himself, injecting some space between them.

James glared at him, his eyes like twin chips of ice in his face. His lip curled. “Right. Got to make sure to be M’s good little boy,” he bit out. Q stared at him, cheeks burning, his eyes stinging suspiciously, and then he slapped James hard across the face, shoving away from him.

“You fuck right off,” he snapped, hating his own voice in his ears. He sounded shaken, too stung to explain away easily.

“Q,” said James behind him.

“Just don’t. I can’t, you have no—no bloody idea—” Q stiffened as James came up behind him, but the hands on his hips were gentler now, cautious. Q took a long, shaky breath.

“Tell me.” Q bit the inside of his cheek till he tasted copper.

“You’d better,” murmured James. Q was still trying to think of an answer when James turned Q’s chin to face him and kissed him hard enough to banish everything else for a few precious moments. James took advantage of his weakness, and Q spent the next thirty-odd minutes having no thoughts beyond gratitude for James’ unmatched skill at taking Q apart.

By mutual assent, they lay in bed for quite some time afterward, neither saying anything. Q was half-
tucked underneath James’ body, James having crawled on top of him once he’d disposed of the condom, as possessive as Q had yet seen him. One of James’ hand stroked slowly up and down Q’s arm, their legs tangled underneath the sheets. The bed wasn’t as nice as Q’s own, but the addition of James in it made it considerably more tolerable.

“I’m sorry you only had Mark to see you through your fight at the hotel,” Q murmured finally. “It wasn’t my idea.”

“Mmm.” James pushed a lock of Q’s messy hair out of his face, and smiled faintly. “You’re tough to match.”

“It’s why I’m quartermaster,” Q observed, and then sighed. He could still see the spot where he’d slapped James across his face, and he reached up to slide his fingertips over the edge of the mark, the guilt like splinters in his lungs. “…We found out who’s been breaking into my flats.”

James’ hand on his arm stilled, though his expression did not change. Q fought the flip-flop of his stomach, and pressed on, keeping his voice calm. “Have you ever heard of a gang called the Machine?”

James raised an eyebrow. “I thought they’d been taken down,” he said. “It’s been a good five years, hasn’t it?”

“Mostly correct.” Q took a slow, measured breath. “Their leaders were Janessa and David Markham, a married couple from the States. As far as we’ve been able to tell, they’ve escaped from a maximum-security prison in France and are operating in London.”

“Why would Ramses and Nefertiti be looking for you, Q?” James cradled a hand against the side of Q’s face, watching him with a small frown.

“Because I was the one who put them in prison.” Q exhaled. “And I was part of their gang, before I turned them in.”

James stared at him. Q watched mutely, helplessly noting the way James’ nostrils flared, his pupils dilating. “You what,” he said after a few moments.

“Adrienne and Jonathan were in the gang too,” Q said. Now that he’d finally unstoppered himself, he was finding it hard to not just blurt everything out, all the details of the life he’d tried so hard to drown coming welling to the surface like a monster out of a nightmare. “We—”

“They were wanted for murder in over thirty countries,” said James. His voice had a terrible weight to it. “Q.”

“I didn’t know that!” Q clenched his hands into fists, dropping his eyes. “I didn’t know, I had no fucking idea how—how bad they were.”

“How the hell could you not have known?” demanded James. Q sat up, shoving James off him and hunching over his knees, but James refused to be put off, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder next to him.

“They hid it from me, alright?” Q shuddered. “I never went on any of their little… expeditions, their adventures, they wouldn’t let me. They made me stay home with Aggie—Agrippina. Her name was Carolyn then, if you can believe it.” Q swallowed thickly.

Beside him, James said nothing. The silence stretched out, every second making Q feel more like he might vomit. He suddenly couldn’t stand the fact that he was sitting here naked. “How could you have been so bloody stupid?” James asked finally, and the reproof in his voice burned like ice.
“The same reason you were so ready to believe Vesper would never betray you,” Q snapped, and James stiffened beside him.

“Don’t you ever talk about her,” James hissed. “And that is not remotely the same, she was—”

“She was just as much a fool for the people she loved as I was, and it cost her her life,” Q bit out, shoving away from James off the bed and going for a pair of boxer-briefs.

“You were shagging them? Which one?” Q stumbled as he got dressed, nearly tipping over in his haste to clothe himself, and did not answer. “Both of them? Answer me!”

“Yes! Fine! Both of them!” Q stalked to the suitcase open on the floor on the far side of the room, nearly shaking with the adrenaline flooding his system. “I was 20, I was just out of uni and on holiday in the States, I met them in New York City and was completely over the moon, do you want more details?”

“Yes!” shouted James, coming off the bed now too. “I want more details! Or maybe just any details, what the hell, Q, when were you planning on telling me this?”

Q barked out a laugh, yanking a shirt over his head. “Oh, I don’t know, how about the twelfth of never?” He turned around and found James looming in his space, backing him against the wall.

“Why not?” James said. His voice was dangerous, low and hard, like Q had heard in his ears during so many missions.

“Why? Because I knew you’d react like this?” Q’s voice shook, and he tried to push James away, but this time James wasn’t having it. He caught Q around the wrists, pinning him against the wall, his eyes blazing in his face. “Let go of me!”

“You thought it was a better course of action to keep the fact that you had a murderous pair of criminals as exes from me, people who’d come looking for you if they ever got the chance? People who would try to kill you?” James gritted his teeth. He seemed totally unaware of the fact that he was still naked, or perhaps he just didn’t care. A vein in his forehead stood out, and this close up there was no mistaking the hurt in his face, the expression Q had been desperately trying to not look at. God fucking damn him straight to hell.

“What should I have said? When should I have told you? No one knew, okay, not Moneypenny, not Tanner, no one but Mawdsley, I don’t even know if Mallory knows and it’s not like we had a chat about it until this came up.” Again Q tried to yank his wrists out of James’ hands, and this time James let him, though he just shifted his hands to either side of Q’s head against the wall, effectively pinning him in place.

“I thought you trusted me,” James bit out. Oh god, that hurt. Q squeezed his eyes shut against the burn of tears. He would not cry. He would not fucking cry.

“I do trust you, James, that’s the fucking problem, isn’t it.” Q ducked under James’ arm, feeling light-headed, like he was going to be sick. “You’re—you’re the lion in winter, you will always, always do the right thing, no matter the cost, and I was shagging Bonnie and Clyde round half the Northern Hemisphere. I can’t compete.”

“You should have told me.”

Q stooped, picking up James’ shirt from where it lay discarded on the floor. “The list of things I should have done could fill a book, 007,” he said tightly. He held out the shirt. “As would yours. At the top of it currently is returning to headquarters for debriefing from your latest mission.”
James stared at him for a few moments, looking as though Q had slapped him again. Then he nodded, and all the emotion there just moments before drained away, leaving nothing behind but the cold eyes of a trained killer. “Understood, quartermaster,” he said tonelessly.

He picked up his clothes from the floor and left without another word exchanged. Q did not see him out. He waited for five minutes, and then reset the alarm. Then Q went into his kitchen and got down the bottle of whiskey from the top shelf, and retreated to his room.

He didn’t bother with a glass.

* * * * *

Moneypenny found Q a few hours later, nearly passed out in a tub of quickly-cooling water, the half-empty whiskey bottle on the floor next to the tub. It was well that it was only Moneypenny who’d come into the flat, because Q would have made an easy target for anyone who wished him harm.

They’d be hard-pressed to wish him more harm than he wished on himself, though.

“You pathetic arsehole,” said Moneypenny, and Q bleated a half-formed protest before realizing he must have said that last thought aloud. She crouched next to the tub, resting a towel against the edge and attempting to get her arm around his shoulders. “Come on, up you get, you’re turning into a prune on top of trying to pickle yourself.”

“Nooooo,” whined Q, but offered no actual resistance. He leaned heavily against her, shaking as he tried to balance himself, and he let her sit him on the closed toilet wrapped in a towel while she left the room for a minute. She returned shortly with pyjamas, by which point Q had started to slowly tip off the side of the toilet, face mashed against the bathroom tile. Q thought she muttered something about him being lucky she was such a good friend, and proceeded to somehow pour him into his pajamas without Q toppling over and cracking his head against the floor like the idiot he was.

He must have blacked out then, because he didn’t remember the stumble down the hall to the bedroom that must have happened, but when he woke up he was curled on his side in bed, and Moneypenny was in the chair opposite. She looked up as he stirred.

“Oh, you’re alive,” she said. “That’s brilliant. Good job on not having to get your stomach pumped.”

“Ohgod,” he slurred. “Leave me alone to die.”

“Fat chance,” she said. “Do you need to be sick?”

Q thought about it for a moment, then nodded fractionally. Moneypenny rose and vanished down the hallway before returning with a bucket she’d gotten from god knew where. She helped Q to sit up, and rubbed his shoulders as he retched, holding his hair back out of his face. Afterward, she appeared like some kind of hangover fairy with a glass of water and some aspirin, and a wet rag for his face.

“Pretty sure this isn’t in your job description,” Q said finally, when he no longer felt like he was in imminent danger of turning himself inside-out. His head throbbed as though someone had taken a jackhammer to his skull and his mouth felt as desiccated as a field of cotton balls, but death by Famous Grouse appeared to be off the table, at least for now. “How long was I out for?”

“There’s a lot I do for you that isn’t in my job description, darling,” said Moneypenny. “Babysitting the quartermaster is way above my pay-grade.” She curled up in the chair across from him again, watching Q steadily. “And you were out a few hours. Long enough for Tanner to send me a few updates on 007.”
Q groaned. “Oh god,” he said despairingly. “Is that why you came over when you did? What happened?”

“Mmm.” Moneypenny raised her eyebrows. “He came in for debriefing and asked to take his regular psych and med evals as soon as he left M’s office. He apparently asked Tanner how soon he could be deployed on a new mission.” Q put his face in his hands. “I figured it’d be good to come check on you. That was fucking moronic of you, by the way, getting in the bath like that, you might have drowned.”

“If only,” said Q darkly, and then rubbed at his face, feeling the faint urge to vomit yet again. He was grateful that Moneypenny did not ask why Q hadn’t sent Bond along to headquarters to be debriefed before talking to the man himself. Some things just weren’t doable.

“The fuck happened with you two? I have to say I’m surprised he took the news that badly, lord knows that man is no saint. I thought better of him.”

It was a mark of how bad he felt that Q could barely be grateful that even after knowing what she did about him, Moneypenny was still on his side. “No, it’s me, I’ve cocked it all up, Moneypants,” he said dully. Beside him, he felt the bed dip as Moneypenny sat down next to him, and then her fingertips were in his hair, lightly scratching his scalp. It was such a small, tender gesture that Q had to swallow a few times to clear the lump in his throat. “There’s something I need to tell you,” he said, not looking up.

“Go on then, boffin.”

Q took a deep breath and steeled himself. “Janessa and David Markham are my ex-girlfriend and ex-boyfriend,” he blurted.

The hand in his hair stilled, and for a few terrible moments Q wondered if he was going to lose himself the other most precious person in his life after all. But then Moneypenny slid her arm around his shoulders and tucked him against her side. “Q,” she breathed.

“They had me completely fooled,” Q said blearily. “I was so mad for them. I thought they were perfect. And they were so good to me. I had no idea the kinds of things they were doing. I—” He gestured vaguely, at the wall, at the frosted window, at his lovesick younger self. “Did you know that David insisted that we give a quarter of everything we stole to charity? Like fucking Robin Hood. I’d hack into some orphanage’s accounts to deposit money, or we’d send a check from an anonymous bank account in Switzerland to sodding Doctors Without Borders. I’ve no idea if that was something they really meant, or if it was just to keep the wool over my eyes.”

“What happened?” asked Moneypenny. God, she was a saint; his breath must reek right now of sick and stale whiskey, but she had him nestled against her like he might drown if she let him go.

Q sighed. “Adrienne got pregnant. She told me while David and Janessa were on one of their ‘missions’ for a day or two. She made me promise not to tell them. She and Jonathan wanted out, and she was so scared and I just couldn’t understand why. …So I started spying on Janessa and David.”

“That can’t have gone well,” Moneypenny murmured.

Q shook his head. He said nothing, still staring at a spot on the carpet. “I was so upset and scared; I didn’t want them to know what I’d found. Then, I… we had a fight. It was just about some job they wanted to do, but I supposed I wanted to see if they would listen to me at all,” he said after another moment. He could feel Moneypenny’s eyes on him. “They made me very sorry that I said anything.”
“Was that when you contacted M?” Q nodded. He shut his eyes. The aspirin was starting to work; his head still felt like an ironsmith’s forge, but perhaps one that wasn’t currently in use.

“I never told her any of this, you know,” said Q eventually. “She just—knew. She could tell. Maybe I was terribly obvious, I don’t know. But it isn’t in any official record anywhere.” He let some injury creep into his voice. “I did everything she asked of me. I went to a psychiatrist, I didn’t date anyone for two years, I took all the work they sent me. I was good.”

Moneypenny squeezed his shoulder. “I know, sweetheart,” she said softly. “You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t.”

Q nodded, though he wasn’t sure if he believed it anymore. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever believed it. “They sent me a letter, you know,” he said abruptly. “About… God. A year after they were arrested. Right after they went to prison.” He took in a deep breath, then let it out very slowly, suffering another wave of nausea at the memory. “I still don’t know how they got the address I was living at. It—they promised me they’d find me. They said I would never be safe and they would find me, no matter how long it took.” Q’s voice shook at the end of his sentence, and he had to take another moment to compose himself.

“Was that when MI6 had you declared dead?” asked Moneypenny shrewdly. Q nodded. “I did wonder. Since I’ve seen your papers, ‘William.’”

“Yes. Well. I wasn’t really going to argue with them on that one. Adrienne and Jonathan had their identities changed then, too.” Q shook his head, pushing away the memory of his horror at getting something like that in the post. “…Anyway. James took it badly. He asked me how I could be so stupid for not seeing through them, I insulted Vesper, and it went downhill from there.”

“I still think it’s a bit much for him to be so hard on you about it,” said Moneypenny, and to Q’s never-ending gratitude she sounded pretty pissed off. “You turned the people you loved in to the authorities and saw them sent to jail, I’d call that pretty fucking morally upright.”

“Might wash a bit better if I hadn’t been fucking them both for a year first,” said Q wearily. “But he’s angry I didn’t tell him sooner. Angry I kept it from him till, you know, crazy exes showing up in my decoy flats. And your flat as well, by the way.” He rubbed at his face with the palm of his hand. “I threw him out. I don’t—know what to do.” Q’s voice shook, and he put his face in his hands for a moment. Moneypenny rubbed his shoulder, thumbing gently at the curve of his clavicle.

“Well,” she said after a beat, “for starters, you could come down off the cross, as we could use the wood.”

Q snorted despite himself. “Ah,” he said, “I see why M keeps you around. It’s your brilliant insights.”

“Almost as clever as you, I daresay,” she said dryly. “But for now, you should drink some more water, and let me make you something awful and covered in cheese, if you think you can keep it down.”

Q turned his head, peering at her hopefully. “Something with bacon?” he asked, and Moneypenny smiled and tweaked his nose.

“I’ll make you the whole pack if you like,” she said, and Q hugged her tightly.

“Best secretary in all of London.”

“Watch it, brat, or I’ll drown you in the tub myself.”
Q strongly suspected that Moneypenny put a phone call in to M while he was drowsing on the couch with the last half-hour of Shaun of the Dead, because that was her job, after all. But it didn’t stop her from dragging him to bed when he was finally done, or from crawling in with him despite his weak and flustered protests.

“Don’t flatter yourself, darling,” she said, and Q laughed and curled up against her and surprised himself by dropping off to sleep almost immediately.

Moneypenny stayed through breakfast the next morning, gently delivering the news that 007 had already left the country again (apparently still reeking of whiskey but functional enough to be sent off). She didn’t leave before extracting a promise from Q not to torture himself by spying on Bond the entire time he was gone. “You’ll be able to ambush him soon enough, I’m sure,” she said. “Not that I expect him to be capable of staying away from you for long. He’s all but scent-marked your desk in Q Branch.”

“Excuse you, we were more subtle than that—”

“Were you! News to me.”

“And while it’s appreciated, blowing smoke up my arse is not actually necessary, Moneypants.”

“Mmmm.” She smiled, and kissed him on the cheek. “Stay out of trouble, darling. And no more of that whiskey, alright?” Q rolled his eyes but saw her to the door anyway, only slumping against the wood once she was well and truly gone. Wouldn’t do to let down the side, after all.

Of the two promises he made to Moneypenny, Q kept one and broke the other. The one he kept was the promise not to drink; he took the whiskey to the kitchen and poured out every last drop. The one he broke was the promise not to listen to 007’s mission to France, but at least he had the foresight to wait till after he’d poured all the whiskey down the sink.

Bereft of the chance to run till his lungs were ready to burst, denied access to the computer programs that let him make art, unable to focus enough on coding to get through any projects, Q took to counting.

In his first three days in France, James Bond slept with five different women. One was a blonde, three were brunette, and the last was raven-haired. Six was the number of people James shot in the same time period: four men, two women. Two of the dead women happened to overlap with the women James had slept with. The algebra gave him no comfort, though on another day it might have.

Three was also the number of pieces of Q Branch equipment James took with him. He broke one within twelve hours, lost another in the first forty-eight, and broke an assailant’s jaw with the last near dawn on day three.

Six was the number of presents James had brought back for Q from his missions. Two perfect Chinese finger-traps, one Japanese puzzle-box, one delicate, golden Rube Goldberg machine that Q had all but melted with delight over, and two maddeningly intricate Rubik’s cubes.

One was the number of Q’s paintings sitting in James’ flat. One was also the number of paintings that Q had done at James’ request, though it was still unfinished. Thirty-six was the number of times they’d fucked, in various locations, not all of them each other’s flats; fourteen was the number of
times they’d shagged and interrupted themselves laughing at something dumb (often the cat), once to
the point of tears on Q’s part; and twice was the number of times that they had done something Q
only thought people did in those insipid romance novels—he wouldn’t call it making love, because
he hated that phrase, but there was nothing else to call it, either.

Seventy-six was the number of hours into James Bond’s mission at which Q powered down his
computer program and took off his head set. During that time period, Q’s name was mentioned
exactly once:

“007, I do ask that you be more careful with your equipment.” Mark was trying for cavalier, but he
wasn’t particularly successful. “The quartermaster will be quite cross with you.”

Bond’s voice was cool. Not angry, just completely uninterested. “Not my problem,” he said.

* * * * *
The thing to remember is that it can always, always get worse.

So the working title for this chapter was "Shit Sucks But What Can You Do."

Also, to all my readers, please note that this chapter & the one that follows it are the reasons that this fic has the "Canon-Typical Violence" tag. There are several visceral moments within, so proceed with some caution. My beta & I judged that there was nothing worse than what you saw in "Skyfall" and nothing as bad as "Casino Royale," however. Thanks again for reading.

Technically, it was his own fault for being an idiot.

He should never have brought the damn thing with him, but if there was one thing for which Q could be relied upon, it was his stubbornness. The poison pen was one of his pet projects, and he wasn’t about to let it languish in production hell during his absence when he could be working on it. He’d requisitioned it out of works-in-progress storage right before he’d left to go meet Adrienne and Jonathan at the pub, and it wasn’t as if he would be stopping in to take it back until after his own personal skeletons had gone back into their fucking closet.

Which was how Q came to be sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor of the safe-house flat, reassembling the prototype, screwing the body of the pen back into place, when he bumped the nodule at the end of the pen and poked himself in the meat of his palm, squirting some ink on himself in the process. Or at least, he thought it was ink for the first twenty seconds, until the place where he’d pricked himself started burning like someone had poured citrus juice into it.

“Fuck,” he hissed, dropping the pen on the ground and glaring at his hand. The ink looked strange, he thought, rather viscous, less like ink and more like—

Q took a deep breath, fighting the initial and violent urge to fly into a panic. He got to his feet, going for his mobile and brought up his favorites, fast-dialing Adrienne. He forced himself to walk calmly to the sink as he listened to it ring, scrubbing the black from his hand, whimpering at the pain.

“Hello, darling,” Adrienne said cheerfully, picking up on the second ring. “How are y—”

“Where are you?” Q cut in, his voice tight. “Tell me you’ve still got your anti-venins at the bake-shop.”

“I’m—wait, what? Yes, of course, I’d never throw them out. Q, what’s wrong?”

“I think I’ve just got myself with a bit of that synthetic snake venom you advised us on a few months
back, someone left actual fucking poison in one of my prototypes instead of the ink we’re supposed to use for testing, how long have I got? Can you meet me?” There was silence on the other end for several moments. Q hissed, heading now to the front hall, grabbing up his boots and jamming his feet into first one and then the other. “Adie, come on, don’t freeze up on me.”

“If you only got a tiny dose, twenty minutes max before unconsciousness, thirty till death,” Adrienne said after a moment. “I’ll head over now. Can you get a cab? I can be there in ten, I’m not far.”

“I’m out the door,” Q said, grabbing for his wallet as he rang off and shoved the mobile in his pocket. It took every ounce of self-control he had to not run hell-for-leather down the hallway as he pulled his parka on, but the first rule of dealing with deadly poisons that every member of Q Branch learned was that you must not panic if you accidentally poison yourself; you’ll only spread the toxin faster through your system if you elevate your heart rate. He paused at the head of the stairs, scrolling through his apps for the one he needed, the one he’d installed on the mobile of every high-ranking MI6 officer, the one that commandeered the closest taxi for emergency governmental purposes.

It worked like a charm: there was a cabbie pulling up to the edge of the curb by the time Q came down the front steps and crawled into the back seat. M could scream about abuse of resources later.

“Cheltenham Lane, A Piece of Cake,” he snapped. “Break every traffic law you have to, you won’t be fined or penalized, MI6 business, go.” Q fumbled open his wallet to flash his ID, the one the cabbie had to be shown when you used the emergency code, and then he nearly pitched into the foot-well as the cabbie tore off into traffic, not even bothering to wait till Q had fastened his belt.

Q sank back against the seat, peering down at his hand. The little cut in his palm was rapidly turning ugly, tissue puckering up, edges reddened and puffy like infection was settling in. His whole forearm had started to hurt, and Q belatedly raised the hand in question above his head, grabbing the handle above the door. Keep the extremity elevated, slow the venom’s spread in the circulatory system, Adrienne’s calm, professional voice said in his memory. She’d run the toxins workshop they’d have a few years back, near the start of his actual career at Q Branch.

Fourteen minutes had passed by the time they got to the bake-shop. Q was breathing hard, little flares of burning pain springing up all over his body; he was finding it harder and harder to get enough oxygen as his respiratory system shut down. There was a sour tang in the back of his throat, the tell-tale flavor of cells dying. He shoved two hundred fifty quid at the driver with a strained “Thanks,” and stumbled out the cab door, making for the entrance to the bake-shop, which was still unlocked. Adrienne came running out of the back room, a hypodermic needle in her hand.

“Do it,” gasped Q, struggling out of his parka. She grabbed his wrist and shoved his jumper sleeve up his arm, turning his hand palm-up, and jabbed the needle into his arm just above his elbow. Q cried out, jerking a little, but she held him fast, pushing down on the depressor till the syringe was empty, and then she removed it and set it aside, grabbing for Q before he fell over.

“How’d you know which one to use?” Q asked after a few minutes, when he got the use of his throat back. His voice sounded weak in his own ears, and his hand still ached, but the prickly burning was gone, and the feeling of not being able to get enough air had subsided. They were sitting on the floor behind the counter, Q sprawled on the floor, Adrienne sitting hip-to-hip with him.

“There’s only one that got all the way through processing, as far as I know,” said Adrienne. She sounded kind of shaky herself. Q reflected that she had never really liked seeing more action than making everyone dinner, even back when they were both technically criminals. “Based on cobra venom.”

“Ah. Well. I guess I didn’t need to bring the pen, then.” Q smiled ruefully at Adrienne as she gave
him a look. “The cap’s on it, alright, I just didn’t want to play Russian Roulette with which anti-
venin to use.” He submitted quietly to her examining the cut on his hand, but patted the lump created
by the pen in his inside trouser-pocket with his other hand all the same, just to make sure the damn
thing hadn’t moved.

“Yes, well, let’s go and wash this out again and put some ointment on it, all the same. Make sure you
go in to medical as soon as you can, there might be lingering effects, but it doesn’t look as if you got
a full dose, which is damn lucky.”

Q groaning as she hauled him to his feet, going light-headed at all the blood rushing to his brain, and
allowed himself to be led to the back, leaning against one of the tables in the kitchen with his parka
draped over one arm as Adrienne rummaged through drawers in search of some ointment. “No,
lucky is the fact that you got a Ph.D in toxicology before you decided your true love was baking.”

“Chemistry and baking are two sides of the same coin, darling.” Adrienne smiled at him, and then
froze, looking past Q to the small windows that looked into the main cafe area. “Q,” she said,
lowering her voice to barely above a whisper, “you didn’t tell anyone else to meet you here, did
you?”

“Didn’t have time,” murmured Q. A chill went through him, a spike of adrenaline banishing his
laziness. He resisted the urge to look through the little window back into the bake-shop, afraid of
who he’d see. “They must’ve had a watch on the bake-shop. The door out through the freezer still
usable?”

Adrienne nodded. When she and Jonathan had first been renovating this location for use, Q had been
insistent upon extra exit doors, because some habits die hard. And also, because sometimes old
ghosts come back. Q took Adrienne’s hand, and they padded quietly along the side of the room,
opening the door to the walk-in freezer and slipping inside, pulling it shut behind them. Moments
later he could hear muffled voices through the freezer door behind them, and he bit his lip, taking
two seconds to punch a code on his mobile in lieu of watching as Adrienne unlocked the exit door.
The difference in temperature between the freezer and outside was negligible, and Q spared a
moment to be glad it at least wasn’t raining as he struggled his parka back on. Adrienne hastily
locked the door behind them with her key before looking at Q with a question in her eyes.

“Run,” he said. “You remember the drill.”

“Are you sure? You’re still ill, I don’t want to leave you—”

“Piss off,” he said, and shoved her. “You have a four-year-old, and it’s me they’re after anyway. Go!
I’ve just sent an alert, HQ will be tracking our mobiles, go!” Adrienne cursed at him and then turned
and darted down the alley, heading for the street at the opposite end. Q did not wait to see her
disappear at the other end, already turning and breaking into a run towards the long line of
Cheltenham Lane. Q burst onto the street and darted a glance in each direction before dashing across,
throwing stealth to the wind.

He’d lose them in the Underground, providing he could get to the station first. It was mid-afternoon
on a weekday, and plenty of people were out on the streets, which gave Q an advantage. The
burning in his lungs came back with a vengeance, but he ignored it, hustling past a slow-moving
group of tourists in ugly sweatshirts as he pelted down the sidewalk towards the familiar signpost for
the tube—

—only to nearly trip over his own two feet as he got close enough to see the “STATION CLOSED
FOR MAINTENANCE” sign posted on the neon marker at the top of the stairs, and Q glanced
frantically over his shoulder, trying to gauge if he had time to use the emergency cab code again,
already fumbling for his mobile. All he could see was people walking calmly down the road, several of whom were pointedly not looking at the nutter haring past them like some kind of misguided Olympic sprinter.

That was when he saw the first man, loping down Cheltenham towards him with mean intent written on his face, and Q bolted again before he had time to make eye contact, shoving his mobile back into his coat pocket. He was feeling very ill now, his limbs protesting the lack of oxygen from not-yet-recovered lungs, but he forced himself to run up the next side street he came to, lined with parked cars and rubbish bins stood out by the road. He had made it half a block before realizing it was a bad turn to make; there were fewer people down this road, and he no longer knew exactly where he was, but at least his phone was still tracking him. His chest burned, his pulse thundered in his ears, his heart felt like it was going to beat out of his ribs; Q cast a glance back down the road behind him, but he couldn’t see anyone following him. He tripped and nearly fell in his distraction, and he stumbled to a halt, bent double for a moment as a spasm lanced up his side, crippling him momentarily with the pain.

Q hissed, forcing himself upright again after a few seconds, casting another nervous glance around. Still no one. Maybe he’d lost them.

A hand fell on his shoulder. Q tried to turn, but a heavy cloth was suddenly being pressed against his nose and mouth, and he was choking, he was gasping for air, there was a sharp chemical tang in his nose, and then his vision went black.

* * * * *

“You’re an idiot,” said a voice. The voice was male, nasal, baritone; whoever it was had a thick Bristol accent and sounded absolutely livid. “You must have given him enough to kill a whale, he shouldn’t have been out for this long—”

“Piss off!” The second voice was surly. “I gave him half the normal dose, just like David said, ain’t my fault he’s such a fuckin’ lightweight.”

Q must have made a noise then, because abruptly both voices cut off. “Here, he’s coming round, get the bin,” said the first voice, and then Q found himself being propped up, which sent off a cascade of awful from his skull all the way down his spinal cord to every one of his protesting innards.

“Uuuggghhh,” he slurred. The surface he was on seemed to pitch and yaw under him, his limbs trembling with the stress of being upright.

“Shit, I think he’s gonna be sick again. Quick, pass the bloody—”

Q opened his eyes then, and found himself peering murkily at what looked to be a grimy dish bin set across his lap and a man crouched in front of him. “About bloody time you woke up,” said Voice #1, which apparently belonged to the man on the floor next to him. Q swallowed, and then the wave of nausea hit him again, and he bent over the bin, shuddering through several seconds of dry heaves that brought up little more than sickly bile-yellow spit. It looked about as lovely as it felt, judging from the expression of the man beside him.

“Fuck,” Q forced out after a moment. “What the fuck did you use on me?” He swallowed thickly.

“Chloroform,” said Voice #2, the man standing on Q’s other side, who bent down and passed him a rag to wipe his mouth with. “Bit old-fashioned but it does the trick. Here, drink some water.” He thrust a glass at Q, and Q blinked at it for a moment before taking it, somehow managing to drink more of the water than he spilled on himself. “We was wonderin’ when you were gonna wake up;
the boss has been gettin’ impatient.”

“How long was I out for?” Thug #1 (having graduated from a disembodied voice) took the empty glass from him and stood up, apparently not feeling that Q was much of a threat to anyone at that exact moment. Sadly, Q had to agree with him. He could now say with authority that near-death by synthetic snake venom felt less vile than he did right now. He slumped against the surface behind him (the wall, he presumed) and shakily accepted the pair of glasses held out to him by returning Thug #1.

“Few hours,” said Thug #2. Q managed to get his glasses on, then looked up at him, taking in how stocky both men were, the buzz cuts and thick arms and nondescript clothes that said “hired muscle.” Even if he wasn’t a few too-quick movements away from another round of heaves, he was so outranked physically that it was outright laughable at this point. “You think you can stand up?”

“I wouldn’t advise it,” Q said after a moment. “I think we’ve all seen about as much of my insides as we want to for today.”

Thugs 1 and 2 exchanged a glance, #2’s with a lip-curl of disgust for extra flavor. No doubt they were measuring the chances of moving him without him vomiting all over them again, and Q smiled faintly. Whatever orders they’d been given about him from David and Janessa, it apparently did not encourage them to do much past acquiring him and keeping him in one piece.

“Look, you can—” Q gestured vaguely, one hand still holding the bin in his lap, “handcuff me or ziptie me or whatever you want, I’m sure there’s something, but if it’s all the same to you I’ll just sit here and hold this bin in case things turn sour again.”

“Yeah, no,” said Thug #1, apparently coming to a decision. “Blake, get the cuffs an’ the laptop and bring ‘em over here, he can watch from where he’s sitting right now.”

Q stayed put, watching Blake bring a serviceable-looking machine and a depressingly sturdy-looking pair of handcuffs over. Blake set the machine on the ground, and then Q allowed himself to be bent forward, his wrists crossed at the small of his back and cuffed together before he sat back up again. He did not test the cuffs, or resist their hands at all, giving his attention to literally everything but his restraints; he wanted no indication that he would fight them, or that he posed any kind of threat.

Now that he was no longer actively ill, he was noticing other things, too, like how shabby-looking the room was, and how chilly he was, and the fact that he could hear something he thought might be the sea or might be car traffic through thin walls. He wondered where the hell they’d taken him. If they had any sense at all, they’d have already gotten rid of his mobile, but without knowing exactly how long he’d been unconscious or where he was, it was difficult to gauge when an impending rescue might arrive.

“May I ask what I’m watching?” All things told, they were being fairly conscientious of him, no kicking or threats or abuse thus far. Realistically speaking, though, Q knew it was because of how terrifying Janessa and David were. The more important question was where those two were right now, and when they would be getting here.

Blake didn’t answer; he was bent over the laptop, concentrating on whatever was on-screen. Thug #1, whose name Q still didn’t know, had his mobile out now. “He’s awake,” he said after a moment to whoever was on the line. “Right. No, he seems alright—yes, he’s talking…. Right.” He turned to Q, holding out the mobile. Q stared at it for a moment as though it was a spider instead of a mobile, and then craned his head, nestling the mobile against his shoulder.

“Hello,” he said.
“Hello, Simon,” said Janessa, into his ear. Her voice was warm and sweet like honey, her American accent slightly thickened by her years in France. “It’s been so long.” Q’s stomach twisted painfully, and he shrank a little against the wall, feeling his spine press into the plaster, the cuffs cutting into his wrists. Thug #1 watched him, his face unreadable.

“It has,” he said, because he had to say something and weeping uncontrollably seemed like a bad bet. “I admit I was surprised to wake up and not see you here. Wherever ‘here’ is.”

Janessa laughed. “Oh, don’t worry, baby, we’ll be there soon. We’ll have plenty of time to catch up. But I have a little something I want you to watch before our reunion. David and I have been keeping busy getting this ready for you.”

Blake glanced up, turning the laptop around so that the screen faced Q. It was open on a Youtube page, and while the screen was black, Q could hear sound coming out of the speakers. It took him a few seconds to make out the person talking, but as soon as he did it was all he could do not to drop the mobile into the bin still in his lap. Behind his back, his careful, millimeter-fine twisting of his hands froze.

“I’m heading in now, the door’s unlocked,” said Bond, his voice staticky but easily identifiable.

Q took a breath, the air dragging painfully through his lungs. “Yes, it’s your boyfriend, Commander Bond, live from his new mission in Calais,” said Janessa. Q had forgotten how cheerful she sounded when she was planning something particularly vindictive. There was a lot of things he’d blocked out. “Everything came together so beautifully after we found you outside Carolyn’s bakery. She gave us the slip for now, but it’s only temporary, I promise.” She paused, covering the speaker for a moment, saying something unintelligible to someone at her end before continuing. “I was afraid you wouldn’t be awake in time to enjoy this, but luckily you pulled through. Did you know that even Q Branch employees aren’t immune to blackmail? It’s amazing what a person will promise to do when you threaten their family. Even treason isn’t off the table.”

Q’s heart sank as he listened to Mark’s tight responses. “Is this necessary?” he asked, already guessing what the answer would be but unable to not at least try to talk Janessa out of this.

“You didn’t learn your lesson the first time, boy,” said Janessa, her voice dangerously soft. “We have to make sure it sticks this time.”

“Please, Janessa—”

“Shut up,” she snapped, and Q winced. “As if you have any right to ask me for anything after what you did to us. This is the least of what you deserve.”

“What are you going to do?” Q let his voice shake, dropped his eyes, shoulders hunching, looking and sounding every bit as sick and helpless as one could hope. His hands were almost at the right angle; now he just needed a good moment to make the final trick. Blake got up and went into the next room to do God knew what, while Thug #1 stayed where he was, crouched next to Q.

“Well, your gentleman is too dangerous to mess with face-to-face, from what we’ve seen, so we figured we’d do things the good old way and just blow him straight to hell. He obliged us by finishing his previous mission in record time as soon as he heard that you’d disappeared, which let us lead him right where we want him to go.” Q could hear other voices from Janessa’s end again, one of them David’s, he thought, trying to not let himself get distracted at how quickly James had come looking for Q. They must be at Mark’s family’s house, or Mark would never go along with them for any amount of money.
Q choked on a small sob, tears pricking in his eyes as he deliberately dislocated his left thumb. “Please don’t make me listen to this,” he said raggedly. “You already have me where you want me, please—”

“Should’ve thought of this before you turned us in to Interpol, baby,” said Janessa sweetly, and Q moaned.

There was muffled noises on the other end of the line, like the mobile was changing hands. “Hey there darlin’,” said David after a moment. His voice was gentle, and Q shut his eyes, his lips trembling.

“David,” he said. “David, p-please, please don’t kill him—”

“Oh, come on now, you should know better than to ask me for that. It sure is nice to hear you remember how to beg, though.” Q bit his lip, hard, easing his hand out of the cuff and trying not to jostle the mobile against his shoulder.

“It’ll be quick?” he asked after a moment.

“Uh-huh. He won’t even realize. Soon as it’s done, we’ll come straight there to get you, and then we can take aaaall the time we need to catch up.” Q sucked in another painful breath, letting David hear the hitch in his voice as he forced his thumb back into joint, knowing exactly what they wanted from him. “Ah-ah, crying won’t help, sweetheart. You gotta listen to the whole thing. You’ve been real bad, and you gotta pay your dues.”

“You won’t hurt Mark’s family?” The pain was making Q feel ill again, the urge to give in and panic and cry for real very strong, but he just needed to stall for a little bit longer.

“No, sweetheart, we won’t. If everyone plays nice and does what they’re supposed to, no one else has to die today. Except 007, that is.”

Q swallowed. “I…” He shuddered. “Okay,” he said weakly, and then he did start to cry, wet, broken noises that translated very well over the phone. David clucked softly at him.

“Don’t worry, it won’t be much longer now. But Jaybird and I have some things to finish setting up, so we’re gonna go now. Be good, sweetheart, we’ll see you soon.”

“Okay,” whispered Q again, and then flicked his eyes to Thug #1, nodding minutely. The live feed on the computer was still playing, and Thug #1 reached out to take the mobile from Q, who still lay slumped against the wall, tears leaking down his face.

“Right,” said Thug #1, pocketing the mobile, and then Q grabbed the bin across his lap and hurled it in the man’s face, vomit and all. “FHH—!!”

Q scrambled to his feet in the few precious seconds that stunt bought him, jamming his boot-covered foot into the man’s crotch as he screamed, and then kicked him in the head when he went down like a sack of bricks. “OY!” shouted Blake from the next room, and Q dove for the empty chair and hurled it at the doorway as Blake appeared. On a normal day when he wasn’t sick from poison and chloroform, he might still have had trouble, but fear and adrenaline were wonderful drugs, and Blake went crashing to the floor like his partner had.

Q stood there for a moment, breathing hard, the sounds of Mark and 007 on the live stream behind him unbroken. He straightened, tugging distractedly at the cuffs that still dangled from his right wrist, eyes watering profusely at the agony in his left hand. Janessa had been the one to teach him that trick; she’d thought getting out of cuffs was a useful skill to have, along with some basic sleight-of-
hand. He’d never been any good at the pickpocketing, but she’d been right about the other bit coming in handy. He was very glad, now, that she’d insisted on supervising him the first two times he did it, and that he’d chosen to learn to do it on his non-dominant hand.

If he knew he had more time, he’d search around to find something to tie both men up with, but there was no telling how long before the bomb Janessa and David had planted went off, if Janessa had been speaking literally and a bomb was what they were intending. Q turned around, grabbing up the laptop and setting it on the small table against the wall, his brain going in a million directions at once.

He had to warn Bond, had to get him out. But if Janessa and David found out that Q was free, they might set whatever trap they’d rigged immediately and then take it out on Mark’s family to boot. Q hissed under his breath, leaving the live stream with Mark and Bond open in one tab and opening another to let him hack into the earpiece Mark was most likely to be using. It took all of thirty seconds before he was in. Q bent close, raising his voice, hoping the computer’s microphone was functional.

“Mark, it’s Q, don’t give yourself away, just sneeze twice if you hear this,” he said. There was a few seconds’ pause in his feed, and then Mark sneezed audibly, twice in a row. “Brilliant. Okay, listen, I know what the Markhams are doing, I know they have your family, I am going to save them, just stall for time, alright? Don’t get 007 killed. But don’t give yourself away. Sneeze once more if you understand.”

“Oh lord, my allergies are killing me today,” said Mark, and then sneezed again, loudly.

“Try not to die on me,” said Bond, and Q smiled thinly.

Next order of business. He went to Thug #1’s unconscious-or-dead body and dug the handcuff keys and his mobile out of the man’s pocket, and dialed Moneypenny’s number from memory, praying she’d answer the unknown number as he fiddled the remaining cuff off his wrist and chucked it into a corner.

She answered, but not till the fourth ring. “Hello,” she said, and Q nearly cried again from how good it was to hear her voice.

“Don’t react,” he said instead. “It’s me. I’m fine, but we have no time, the Markhams are holding Mark’s family hostage to force him to lead Bond into a trap. Send a stealth team to the house to rescue them so I can extract Bond without the Markhams retaliating.”

“Understood,” said Moneypenny. “It’s fine, I’m in a secure location. Two seconds.” Q waited on the line as Moneypenny covered the phone and said something to someone before coming back.

“They’re on their way. Where the hell are you?”

“I haven’t the faintest fucking idea,” said Q, already back at the computer, working to hack into the CCTV at Bond’s location, “as the two men I knocked unconscious weren’t exactly forthcoming, but hold on a second and I’ll have a location for you… there.” He tapped a few buttons, staring in mild surprise. “Farmhouse ninety minutes outside of London, south and east on the M20. Hold on. GPS location sent to your mobile, now.”

“I have a team headed there now to extract you,” said Moneypenny evenly after a ten-second pause, and Q let out a long breath. “Do me a favor and don’t die before they can get there.”

“Working on it,” said Q. “I’ll call you back, I have to find that bomb and—fuck. Found it.”

“What?” asked Moneypenny sharply. “Bomb? Don’t hang up, stay with me, Q.”
“At Bond’s location,” said Q. “I told you, it’s a trap.”

“How—”

“I don’t fucking know, alright, hold ON—” He set the phone down, jabbing the “speakerphone” button to free up his hands. The bomb was a small metal affair, sat neatly on a chair in the middle of the table in the room it was hidden in, on the very top floor of the hotel. It was on a timer, so far as Q could tell, and he muttered to himself at this laptop’s slow processor as he increased the zoom on the camera and had to wait several seconds for the new view to load. The picture re-focused again, and Q swore. Ten minutes was all he had. “Time to get some escape routes going,” he muttered, fingers flying across the keyboard. “Tell me when Mark’s family is safe; I’ve got to have enough time to get Bond out and I can’t do that till the Markhams have been neutralized.”

“They’re going as fast as they can,” said Moneypenny tensely. “Can’t you hack into Bond’s earpiece remotely?”

“Of course I fucking can, but I don’t want him to give himself away,” said Q. He licked his dry lips, realizing abruptly that it had been hours and hours since he last ate. Now was not the time to get woozy, God dammit. He flipped through camera feeds, searching for anything that might be used to get 007 out of the death-trap of a hotel he was in. He found an old fire escape on the eastern wall that looked doable, if a bit rickety. Q narrowed his eyes, then opened a new tab to find the hotel’s security systems and open a few windows.

The minutes crawled by, Q watching tensely; it was another five minutes before Moneypenny exhaled and said, “They’re in, they’re safe. Get Bond out now.”

“Done,” said Q, and ended the call. He entered the last line of code on screen to drop him into Bond’s ear. “007, abort your mission, you’re being led into a trap.”

“Q?” On-screen, Bond started minutely and glanced down the hall, frowning, though the gun in his hands (that he’d stolen from someone in security at the foot of the hotel) never wavered. “What are you doing on the line, they said you’d been taken! Where the hell are you? I’m—”

“James, for the love of God, there is a bomb in the hotel you are in, it is going to go off in four minutes, now shut the hell up and do what I tell you, I’m not listening to you die today!”

He didn’t know how many people might be listening in from headquarters, and at this point he no longer cared. Q was at the absolute limit of fucks he had to give, and nothing else mattered right now except getting 007 to safety.

“Tell me what to do,” said Bond.

“Go to the room at the end of the hall, the door is unlocked.” Q tapped out the code to kill all the security on Bond’s floor, simultaneously turning on the fire alarm; hopefully anyone still in the building deserved what they got, but Q was doing his best with what he had. “Now out the window and down the fire escape.”

“There are people outside who were shooting at me, you know,” said Bond, but to Q’s everlasting gratitude he did as ordered anyway, moving out the window faster and more gracefully than Q thought possible.

“Not anymore, there aren’t,” said Q. “They’ve all run for cover, since they know there’s a bomb about to go off. There’s a car in the lot at the foot of the hotel, I’ve unlocked it already but I can’t jump-start it on this piece of shit machine I’m using, can you hot-wire it?”
“How big of a bomb are we talking about here?” demanded Bond.

“I don’t fucking know, I’ve only been awake for twenty minutes and I spent five of those throwing up,” said Q, more shakily than he wanted to. Bond didn’t answer; he was too busy running flat-out across the parking lot, and Q glanced at his other feed, his stomach twisting as the timer on the bomb counted down. Bond was out of his camera sight now, and Q felt the gorge rising in his throat as he watched the timer on the bomb go down. Forty seconds. Thirty-nine. Thirty-five…

The sound of an engine revving filled his ears, and he exhaled sharply as the car he’d directed Bond to peeled across the parking lot, passing in and just as quickly out of his last remaining camera feed. “Oh thank God,” he breathed, and slumped against the table, coming shaky and sick all over. “Oh thank God.”

“Talk to me, Q,” said Bond. “Where are you? Are you hurt? Tell me where you are, I’m coming.”

“I’m in some shithole farmhouse ninety minutes outside London, but the two men who brought me here are unconscious, and Moneypenny’s got a crew on its way to me,” Q said. He killed the windows that looked in on the hotel; on another day, he might have watched the explosion, for curiosity’s sake, but today it was too close to home. He still heard the muffled boom as it came through Bond’s ear-piece, though, and he shuddered at how loud it was. He forced himself to take a deep breath, shutting his eyes, savoring the sound of Bond’s voice in his ears. “Please say you’re coming home now,” he said, before he could stop himself.

“I am,” said Bond. “And you’d better be waiting for me in medical.”

“God, yes.”

“Are the Markhams apprehended?”

“I don’t actually know,” said Q. “They were at Mark’s family’s house. They were blackmailing him to set you up.”

“Jesus.” A pause. “I’m still angry at you.”

“Well, I’m still angry at you, so there,” said Q. He smiled despite himself. “James…”

“Yes, Q?” Q knew Bond well enough now to know a smile when he heard it.

“I—”

A thick forearm snaked around his throat, and Q choked, hands coming up too late to beat at the arm pinning him. “Q?” demanded Bond from the feed. “Q!”

Q kicked helplessly, his knee catching the table, his breath gurgling in his throat. His attacker staggered backwards with him, the arm pressing harder against his trachea, and Q was being forced to the ground, a knee in the small of his back. Bond kept shouting his name, and Q couldn’t answer, couldn’t get a breath, and then a bag came over his head and everything went dark.
Diving Bell

Chapter Summary

The only way out is through.

Chapter Notes

Just one more chapter to go after this one. Thanks to everyone who has been reading & commenting, it's deeply appreciated; thanks also to everyone who reads and says nothing, I love you as well!

I got a GORGEOUS piece of fanart by freddielyoning on tumblr, which you can find here. THANK YOU SO MUCH, MY DEAR!! I will be making a master post on LJ once all the chapters are up, with all the art associated with this fic, as well as a playlist, which I will make available for anyone interested.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Q was getting extremely sick of waking up nauseated. Three times in a week was three times too many.

He kept his eyes shut for a few moments, not trusting himself to even be able to sit up unassisted. There was a hand in his hair, he realized, and something around his throat, like some kind of choker. He was flat on his back, but he wasn’t on the floor; a couch, felt like. A couch, and…

“I think he’s awake,” said Janessa’s voice above him. “Open your eyes, boy. Look at me.”

“Give him his glasses,” said David’s voice from nearby, and then a hand was under Q’s shoulders, helping him to sit up slightly. He opened his eyes, blinking as someone slid his glasses onto his face, and then he was staring at the faces of the two people he once would have moved heaven and earth for.

He was right, as it turned out; he was laying a couch, with his head and shoulders in Janessa’s lap. He was shirtless, for some reason, and already chilly despite the warmth of Janessa’s thighs against his shoulders. David was crouched next to the couch, studying him with bright eyes, and Janessa still had her hand curled in his hair, looking down at him with an elegantly arched eyebrow. They were both in street clothes, jeans and sweaters, and looked much the same as when Q had last seen them in person.

Be patient. Don’t antagonize your kidnappers. Be aware. You will be rescued. The quartermaster of MI6 was not an asset to be lightly thrown aside. But Q had no idea how long he’d been unconscious this time, or where he was, since presumably it was a new location. There was no sign of Blake, though, for which Q was thankful; throwing a chair at someone didn’t exactly ingratiate you to them. He’d guessed it was Blake who surprised him at the farmhouse, since Thug #1 had appeared thoroughly down for the count and also Q had smashed his face in with his boot. Then it occurred to him that he didn’t actually know what had happened to the Recluse, either, and had to suppress a
“You grew your hair out again,” Q said, eyes lingering on David’s salt-and-pepper brown hair.

David smirked. “I did,” he said. “Yours has gotten awfully long, too.”

“I like it,” said Janessa, and yanked on Q’s hair, hard enough to make his eyes water. Q made a pained noise in his throat, and Janessa smiled at him, slow and wicked. “And your tattoos. Those are new.” She leaned over him, stroking her fingers lightly along his right arm, tracing his biceps with interest.

“I told you to be good, sweetheart,” said David, softly. He got up from his crouch, lifting Q’s legs and sliding onto the couch next to his wife, settling Q’s legs back across his lap, stroking a proprietary hand up Q’s thigh to his stomach, splaying his fingers there and pressing down lightly. “But you didn’t listen, and your secret agent man got away, and now we’re going to have to punish you even worse than we were.”

Q shivered. His hands weren’t bound, for a nice change, but he was exhausted, wrung-out. And while the urge to be sick was gone, he still felt like he wanted to drink about a gallon of water and then sleep for a week. “At least I deserve it,” he said after a moment. “James Bond has a great deal of blood on his hands, but he shouldn’t be your target.”

“We don’t like people touching our things,” said Janessa, her words making his stomach clench. “And his reputation for being a trouble-maker precedes him. Not the kind of thing we can ignore.”

“We should have realized you would make trouble if we weren’t there ourselves to keep an eye on you, though,” said David. “That was our mistake. Shouldn’t have underestimated our boy.” He leaned his shoulder against Janessa’s, so that Q was draped now across their laps, sitting up and leaning against the arm of the couch, his arse on the couch between Janessa’s thighs. They’d used to love to hold him like this, draped across or between them like a beloved dog or cat, a hand in his hair, petting him until he fell asleep.

At the thought of pets, Q’s hand came up to this throat, and he started a bit at the feel of leather and steel under his hand. “Oh, do you like it?” asked Janessa, grinning widely. “I thought it’d help you remember your place.”

“A collar. I see,” said Q, biting his lip. “And I’m shirtless because…?”

“I wasn’t aware we needed permission for that,” David said darkly. The hand stroking along his thigh tightened its grip, nails digging in through Q’s trousers, and Q went quiet, watching David until the violence behind his eyes had passed.

“What are you going to do with me?” asked Q after a few more moments. Both David and Janessa seemed content to just sit with him, which was starting to make Q nervous. Maybe that was the idea.

“You have a long, long way to go before you get there.”

“Right now, though, I think you owe us some answers.” David raised his eyebrows at Q, who sighed, and put his face in his hands, rubbing at his temples.

“Yes, that’s entirely fair,” Q said resignedly. He swallowed, dropping his hands to his lap and staring at them, gathering his thoughts. He’d pictured this conversation so many times, what he’d say when
confronted with how could you do this?

That was when he felt it. When he sagged against the couch, the slightest nudge against the inside of his hip—the poison pen was still in his fucking pants, forgotten until just now. Q took a deep breath and let it out slow, balking at even the idea of using it, but he had to act normal. “First of all, did you know that Ad—that Carolyn was pregnant?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Q saw David and Janessa exchange a glance. “We knew she’d had a baby since we went in, but not how old the girl was,” said Janessa.

“‘Yes, well. She found out Jonathan—uh, Christopher—had got her pregnant while you were doing that heist in Milan, and she confessed to me, and she was so frightened of you finding out and I—’” Q took a deep breath, reminding himself to stay calm, to not let his voice shake so, “—I couldn’t understand why. She begged me not to tell you.” Q chewed his lip. “So I started spying on you.”

“I’m surprised it took you that long,” said David, and Q looked up at him, startled. David shrugged. “You’re smart. I knew you were going to cotton on sooner or later, but I admit I’d hoped it was gonna be later.”

“I trusted you,” said Q, clenching his hands, “when you said that I had nothing to worry about, it never even occurred to me to spy on you, I just thought you wanted alone time! As a couple! Or, fuck, I don’t know—”

“But you did check,” said Janessa. “What was it, baby? What’d you find out?”

Q groaned. “Everything,” he said helplessly. “The—the FBI agent you tortured, that ship’s crew that you had poisoned in their sleep, why would you do that—you killed so many people, and once I found one thing I couldn’t stop, it was like a train wreck.” He gritted his teeth. “I wanted so badly for it to not be true. But it wasn’t just the one incident, it was…”

“We should’ve kept a closer eye on you,” mused David. “I remember thinkin’ you seemed really off, when we came back, but I just thought you were sick. And then you picked that fight with us…” He trailed off, watching Q with an intensity that made Q’s stomach lurch from what it promised.

“I still can’t believe you turned on us,” said Janessa, and there, that was what he’d been dreading all this time, the accusation in her voice. Betrayal. “You sent us to hell, Simon, do you know what it was like?”

“What else could I have done?” cried Q. “I’m sorry that I have a fucking moral compass! And you’d never have let me go, you’d never have just let me walk away, even if that was something I could do, and I promised Agrippina and Fezzik I’d help them get out because they were scared too! We were so scared of you, I didn’t know what t-to do—”

“We loved you,” said David, and now he leaned forward, grabbing Q by the throat, his fingers digging in above the collar, making Q gasp. “I would’ve taken a bullet for you. I would have done anything for you.” He pressed his thumb into the soft tissue beneath Q’s jaw, drawing out a whimper. “But you were right to be scared, sweetheart.”

The hand in Q’s hair tightened, hard enough to make his eyes water, Janessa’s lips against his ear. “So. You called in the cavalry, gave us up so you could go free, as if you weren’t in our bed every night for a year begging us just to touch you, and now you think you’re so fuckin’ fancy ‘cause you work for the Secret Service and you have a special agent for a boyfriend.” She exhaled against his skin, her breath hot and dangerous. “But none of that matters now, baby, ‘cause we’re gonna get you right with God again.”
Q swallowed, shutting his eyes, gone cold all over with fear and the urge to shove them both away. He was trying so hard to not provoke them, but he didn’t think he could keep still if they tried to fuck him, couldn’t go that far. As if cue, David leaned in and kissed his jaw, beard scratching along Q’s chin, and Q let out a stifled whimper as David’s mouth moved up to Q’s, exhaling against Q’s lips. “Gotta make you remember who you belong to, Simon,” he murmured, and then he was kissing Q, rough and possessive.

It was now or never. Q shuddered, and in the moment of mutual distraction he dipped his hand into his pants, curling his fingers around the pen in its hidden inner pocket, nudging it out into his palm and closing his hand around it. *Please don’t make me do this,* he thought, and then cried out as David bit his mouth, hard enough to draw blood. He sagged as David pulled away, and there was no need to fake the way he was shaking now, or how ragged his breathing was. Q watched David lift a hand, casually wiping the blood from his mouth the way a man would wipe off whipped cream or a bit of mustard, swiping his thumb along his lower lip and smiling brilliantly at Q.

*I can’t believe I loved you as much as I did.* Had they really always been like this? He still found it hard to believe.

Something moved at the edge of the room; a man appeared in the door, and it was all Q could do not to vault himself over the back of the couch as he recognized their killer-for-hire Eric Temple. He was in a cheap black suit, a Parabellum Luger Mauser pistol in his shoulder holster peeking out from under the suit coat; he’d have at least three more weapons hidden on his person, by Q’s lowest estimate. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said, nearly toneless. He smiled faintly at Q, and Q’s skin crawled. “Thought you should know that an MI6 vehicle has turned up on radar about three miles out. Just one agent.”

“Take care of it,” said David impatiently.

Temple cleared his throat. “It’s Eve Moneypenny,” he said. Q took a sharp breath.

David looked over at Temple then, before looking back at Q. “Your girlfriend’s turned up to save you,” he said, sounding amused. “It’s just her?”

Temple shrugged. “No sign of Bond,” he said, and Q felt his heart sink; why hadn’t Moneypenny brought more reinforcements?

“Take care of it,” David said again, and Temple nodded, vanishing through the doorway.

“Recluse is the one who got you back for us,” Janessa said conversationally. She hooked her chin over Q’s shoulder, sliding both arms around his waist. “I’m actually pretty impressed, babydoll; Jared was no slouch.”

“Is he dead, then?” Q heard the question asked and realized belatedly that it was his own voice saying it. His mind was outside, straining to hear sounds of gunfire or shouts, desperately worried for Moneypenny.

“Uh huh.” David reached up and wiped some blood from Q’s mouth. “Blake’s alright, though. Pretty mad at you, but he knows better than to touch. You did the thumb-trick with the cuffs?” Q nodded; as if in response to being mentioned, his hand started to throb, a dull ache that Q knew would be with him for at least a week. “Good boy,” said David approvingly. His eyes slid past Q’s face, casting a questioning glance at Janessa. “Should we wait, do you think?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Q saw Janessa make a face. “I’m sick of waiting,” she said, and yeah, she was definitely pouting.
David grinned, and the malice in it made Q’s stomach turn over in fear. “I know, sweetheart. Me too. Okay,” he said, “Get him down on the floor.” He sat back and slid out from under Q’s legs. “Time to give you some new marks to go with all that pretty ink, Simon.”

“What—” Q tried too late to scramble to his feet, but Janessa was quicker, shoving him off her lap to crash in a tangle of limbs to the floor, planting her knee into his chest as he tried to sit up. “What are you doing,” he said wildly, oh god, oh god what were they going to do, “J-Janessa, what—”

“Shut up,” she said, and suddenly she was pulling out a knife from inside her shirt, her blonde hair falling in her face as she bent over him. “David, get some towels, honey, the blood is gonna go everywhere and I need to be able to see what I’m doing.”

“No, no, no no no no no,” Q was babbling, there was a knife at his throat and he couldn’t move, couldn’t tear his eyes away from how long and sharp that blade was, thin and dangerous like an exacto knife. “Please, oh my god Janessa, don’t—”

“We thought about cutting out your eyes,” said Janessa, the way you’d talk about deciding on lunch. She grabbed Q’s jaw with one hand, holding his face still, her fingers digging in. “So you couldn’t make more trouble. But David thought it’d be such a waste, since you’re so pretty, and I have to agree with him.”

Q sobbed, thumbed the cap off the pen, still hidden in the curl of his palm. He steeled himself to use it if he got half a chance, but if he telegraphed his movements then Janessa would know and she might stop him, and then he’d be really fucked.

“We settled on ‘slut,’” said David from the other side of the room. Q couldn’t see what he was doing, but he could hear the sounds of a cabinet being opened and closed, and saw David turn around to come back to where Janessa had Q pinned on the floor. “Right above your heart. Gonna hurt you right where you hurt us, so you’ll always carry it with you and never forget again.”

“And you know, if I get a little carried away, well…” Janessa grinned, her eyes too bright. “You’ll heal.”

The next thirty seconds were very confusing.

Gunfire exploded outside, painfully loud even from inside the house; Q could hear shouting, and then an explosion outside that rattled the walls of the room they were in. David cursed and went for a drawer, and Janessa grabbed Q’s collar and hauled him to his feet, nearly choking him in the process; his eyes were watering so badly he almost missed seeing the person come crashing through the window, thrown clean through from the other side.

It was Moneypenny. “You bastard,” she spat, rolling through the fall and getting back to her feet, ignoring the shards of glass as she dodged out of the way of the gunfire spitting through the window. Janessa dragged Q backwards, out of the line of fire, her knife at his throat, and Q couldn’t see David anymore, was too busy watching Moneypenny taking cover behind an upturned table as Eric Temple came through the window after her, his neck and shoulder smeared with blood. He had a knife in his hand; Q could only guess at where the Luger had gone.

“Eric, get out of the way,” David snapped, and Q felt his throat vaporlock when he saw that David had a gun out now and was leveling it at Moneypenny. Moneypenny pre-empted the situation by planting her hands on the ground and kicking the table with both feet, sending it smashing into Temple’s legs, and he snarled and staggered backwards, just in time for Moneypenny to brace herself on one knee and bring the Walther-PPK Q’d given her up to point directly at the Recluse’s face.
“Stay dead this time, you piece of shit,” she bit out, and shot him point-blank, the gunshot ear-splittingly loud in the small room. Temple staggered backwards, a horror of blood and gore where his face had just been, and then he dropped to the floor.

David shouted something, and Moneypenny threw herself behind the table again just in time to miss the bright spark of gunfire from David’s weapon. Q felt the knife-tip at his throat, Janessa’s arm locked tight around his chest, but his attention was on David, who was coming around the counter now with his gun still cocked. Janessa shouted something at David, but all Q could hear was ringing in his ears, and that was when Q saw a familiar solid figure step through the doorway at the far end of the room, gun aimed right at David.

Another crack of a miniature explosion split the room, another flash of light at the muzzle of James’ gun. Q heard it go off through his temporary deafness, saw David falling, felt the percussion of Janessa’s scream in his ears, accompanied by the realization that she still had a knife pressed right over his carotid artery. He acted without thinking, clicking the end of the pen to arm it before jamming the tip of it into the meat of her forearm crossed over his chest.

There were several long, agonizing moments where Q was sure she’d already slit his throat, because nothing was fucking happening. Then her arms fell away, and Q was stumbling forward as she simply toppled over behind him. He turned, his skin crawling instantly at the way Janessa was jerking and twitching, her muscles already spasming. Q dropped the pen as though it had scalded him, and then James was running over to him, gun still cocked and in hand, Moneypenny right behind him. James was saying something but Q couldn’t hear, was too busy backing frantically away from Janessa, staring in horror at the way she was clawing at her chest, having dropped the knife on the floor. She was gasping for breath, her air rattling in her throat, the spittle on her lips a terrifying purplish-red.

“Q!” James said again, nearly shouting in his ear. Moneypenny was scanning the room, her gun raised, her jaw tight.

“I’m fine, just please shoot her, oh my god.” Q swallowed, covering his mouth with his hands. James turned and aimed his gun, and Q jumped as it went off. Janessa twitched once more and then lay still.

James and Moneypenny were there, then, Moneypenny stepping to block Janessa from view as James put both arms around him, and Q found that he was shaking. “We’ve got you, Q,” murmured James into his ear. “It’s over.” Q let out a sob, pressing hard into James’ arms, eyes shut tight. Then two pairs of arms were holding him up, and Q could concentrate on just breathing, could live in the drag of air in and out of his lungs until the blood behind his eyes was gone and he could drift away.

* * * *

Predictably, James was only partially correct; it took several long hours after that before the day was over, but from that point on it saw a marked improvement.

James had met Moneypenny at the house outside Maidstone that Janessa and David had been using as their main base, both of them there in record time. Moneypenny had got on the horn and put out a Do Not Retain order on the plates of James’ stolen car, which allowed James to break land-speed records on the trip back from Calais while Moneypenny drove like a bat out of hell down from London. Mark, in a display of grace and intelligence that Q would not have expected from a man who’d just endured having his family threatened by lunatics, had managed to find the car the Markhams fled in on CCTV in only an hour, and the rest had been a waiting game.

M had sent more agents in Moneypenny’s wake, but by the time they got there, the theatrics were already over; Moneypenny had volunteered to go in first to draw out the watchers, while James
snuck around from the other side, and the two of them working together had mopped up everyone within five minutes, despite how long it had felt to Q at the time. For his part, Q wasn’t exactly sorry to have had fewer people witness his personal disaster than might have been advisable.

James cut the collar off Q’s throat while Moneypenny did another circuit of the house, making sure that all of the Markhams’ remaining lackeys were really dead. Q was sitting with James on the couch when she came back into the room with her weapon drawn, Q wearing James’ jacket, James’ arm around Q’s shoulders. Janessa’s body was by now curled on its side on the floor in a horrible parody of the foetal position, face purple and fingers curled into claws from the poison; David was where he’d fallen on the other side of the room, barely visible from where Q sat, and Temple was thankfully equally out of sight. Moneypenny took three steps into the room and stopped, staring at the tableau before her, and then wordlessly put her gun away.

“Situation has been dealt with, 007 is here and the quartermaster is safe,” she said, speaking into her comm unit. “Send a forensics and clean-up unit, there’s quite a mess.” Moneypenny exhaled, mouth quirking as she looked at James. “You might have called it in, Bond.”

“Couldn’t,” said James. “That tosser outside ripped my ear piece off, and I knew you’d have it covered anyway.”

“I want to go home,” Q interrupted, drawing their eyes to him.

“Medical first,” James said, glancing up at Moneypenny for backup.

“Hypocrite,” muttered Q.

“Bond’s right,” said Moneypenny briskly. She crouched in front of the couch, and her game-face was good, but Q could see the way her hands shook slightly when she reached out to press both of them against Q’s shins. “You’ve been poisoned at least twice today, and you need to debrief with M, but after that you’re on at least a week of mandatory leave, longer if you need it.”

James started when Moneypenny said the word “poison,” before turning to glare at Q, and Q hunched his shoulders a little. “Why the hell did you think I had that pen on me, just for fun? Adrienne met me at the bake-shop to give me an antivenin, that’s how they caught me out.”

“Why were you working on a bloody pen filled with actual poison in the first place?” demanded James.

“It wasn’t *supposed* to have any poison in it, I thought it was just ink when I took it out of experimental storage—!”

“Enough,” said Moneypenny sharply. “Come on, you two, I’ll drive us back; bicker in the back of the car if you must. Bond has to debrief too anyway. It’s a shame none of the idiots who did this are still alive for us to question; we’re going to have a right mess trying to sort out what happened to you in France, 007.” Q let himself be pulled off the couch and led outside, resolutely not looking at anything but Moneypenny’s back as she led them out to her car, James’ stolen vehicle having been the source of the explosion he’d heard earlier. James got in after him, and without giving Q time to protest or discuss, he pulled Q against him again, tucking Q against the broad expanse of his flank and draping an arm around Q’s shoulders. Q shut his eyes, grateful for a lover who knew when to hold and not to speak, and permitted himself to pillow his head against James.

They spent the ride back to headquarters like that, waiting at the site just long enough for the rest of the crew to arrive before Moneypenny took off for London. They stopped only once, at a small cafe just off the motorway, and there Moneypenny pressed scones and hot tea on both James and Q
before getting back in the car. Q closed off by the time they arrived at headquarters, speaking no more than absolutely necessary; the interview with M was blessedly brief, with a promise of a more thorough report to come.

Medical took longer. Q knew he was being an intractable little shit, but the only people he could tolerate today were a pair of trained killers, and everyone more normal than them needed to fuck off. He was finally cleared to be taken home, after being given a painkiller for his thumb and a warning to ice the hand and not use it more than absolutely necessary, only to have to wait thirty more minutes before whatever St. Bart’s-trained idiot that was holding James up decided that MI6’s resident weapon of mass destruction was fit to leave.

“Do you want me to take you home?” Moneypenny asked, sitting with him in the lobby of the medical wing. Her trip through medical had been fairly easy, just treatment for some abrasions and minor cuts from the broken window glass she’d landed in.

“Without question,” Q said, not looking up from his hands in his lap. “But I’m not leaving without James.”

Moneypenny said nothing, just brushed her knuckles against his shoulder. Q kept his hands where they were, laced together in his lap. Normally he’d have his mobile out, or a tablet, something, anything to keep him occupied. But all his internal processes had shut down, and it was all he could do to manage basic conversation. He was grateful that Moneypenny had forced something with calories in it on him, since by now it had been easily eight hours since his last proper meal.

The door at the end of the hallway opened, and James strode in, looking as ill-tempered as Q had ever seen him. “Finally,” said Moneypenny, sitting up and swinging her long legs out from under her. “I thought perhaps they were trying to re-create your genome.”

“Bloody close to it,” he said, walking up to where Q still sat. Q looked up at him, and James’ face softened, doing something painful to Q’s insides. There was still a conversation he and James needed to have, but Q honestly wasn’t sure how soon he’d be able to get through it.

“Do you boys need a ride home?” Moneypenny asked carefully. She and James were both looking at Q now, and Q had to fight the sudden urge to simply crawl under the seat to hide.

It must have shown in his face, because James said, “No, my car is still in the lot, I can get us back to Q’s flat.” Q relaxed a little bit, and stood up, mutely pulling Moneypenny into a hug.

“Text me if you need anything,” she murmured into his ear.

“I will,” he promised. He found he actually meant it, too.

Nothing more was said between them till James got him all the way home, and Q paused in front of the keypad in his fake kitchen, blinking, having to strain to remember what the new password would be after nearly a week out of his own flat. “God, today feels like it took a month,” he muttered.

“To be fair, you spent quite a lot of it unconscious, from what I hear,” said James. He had stayed close by Q, not quite close enough to call it hovering, and if he was uncomfortable he wasn’t letting on.

“I also spent a lot of it vomiting, though thankfully I don’t remember much of that.” Q punched in the number code, shutting his eyes briefly, and as the wall pulled back to allow them entrance, a small white blur flew down the stairs, yowling at the top of her lungs. “Yes, yes, I’m home, hello.” Q bent down, scooping up his whining cat, finding a sudden lump in his throat as she wriggled in his
arms, pawing at his chest and maowing plaintively. “I know, I’m the worst owner ever, I left you all alone with only Moneypants to come visit you.”

He felt a hand at the small of his back, James gently nudging him up the stairs. Q let himself be guided into the safety of his own flat, still carrying Carly, who had settled against Q’s chest and started purring like a miniature car engine. James steered Q down the hall to the bedroom and sat him on the couch, and then sat down next to him, the leather creaking as they sank into it.

James looked at him, his gaze steady, his arm draped along the back of the couch. “Please say you aren’t about to ask me something complicated,” Q said.

James’ mouth quirked. “Just tell me what you need,” he said. His voice was so gentle. Q would almost have preferred more shouting; this tenderness would break him.

He took a deep breath. “I need,” he said, “to sleep for a week. And a metric tonne of paracetamol. And a pint—no, two pints of orange juice, the kind with bits, and I should probably eat something but the only thing I want is cheesy toast and I haven’t got any fucking food in the flat—” He just kept going, the words pouring out of him in a rush, his voice brittle in his ears, “—and I know it’s a lot to ask for but I really, really don’t want to be alone—”

“Q,” cut in James, reaching out to cup his face, “it’s fine. Really.”

Q swallowed. “Okay,” he said helplessly.

“I’m going to call for delivery,” said James. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.” He got up off the couch and disappeared down the hallway. Q curled up where James left him, cradling Carly against his chest and shutting his eyes to nuzzle her soft white fur.

He was still there five minutes later when the couch dipped again, James settling carefully next to him. He let James lift his head to lay it against James’ thigh, James stroking his fingers through Q’s unkempt hair, before his hand came to rest on the back of Q’s neck, thumb rubbing his nape.

“He’ll be here in thirty minutes or so.” Q made noise of assent in the back of his throat. “Now, I have a question; one grunt for yes, two for no.”

Q snorted, rolling over till he was laying on his back and looking up at James. James smiled down at him, and something in Q’s chest loosened a little; if James could still look at him like that, maybe he hadn’t totally fucked everything.

“Let me get this straight,” said James. “You poisoned yourself with synthetic snake venom that wasn’t supposed to be in the pen in the first place, but managed to get Adrien to meet you with the antivenin before suffering any lasting effects; you were chloroformed by a pair of thugs-for-hire and spent a few hours being sick everywhere, and then managed get out of handcuffs by dislocating your thumb; you then proceeded to subdue both men despite being viciously ill, and instead of getting the hell out of dodge, you hacked into MI6’s secure servers from a remote location, saved my life, Mark’s family’s lives, and Mark’s career, right before getting yourself kidnapped again.” He paused. “Are you me?”

Q was startled into a laugh, which actually hurt, both physically and in other ways. “Well, I don’t have your knack for awful one-liners, for starters.”

“I was talking about your atrocious disregard for your personal welfare, actually,” said James.

Q opened his mouth, intent on something about a pot and a kettle, then shut it again as he realized James had beaten him to the punch; James smiled lopsidedly as he saw the realization play out across
Q’s face. “Somewhere Moneypants is saying that we deserve each other,” Q noted instead, and got the satisfaction of James’ laughter.

“Something like that,” James murmured. Q smiled and shut his eyes, enjoying the feel of James’s fingers carding through his hair, Carly napping contentedly on his chest. They sat there on the couch like that till James’ mobile went off twenty-something minutes later, by which time Q had nearly fallen asleep with his head still in James’ lap.

He roused himself long enough to be surprised when James came back upstairs with three bags, two from Tesco and one from the delivery place he’d ordered from, explained with a calm “It’s amazing what a delivery jockey will do for a few extra quid.” Q got his cheesy toast and orange juice, eaten in his pyjamas at his own goddamn table, and then James dragged him to bed when Q nearly passed out with his face on his empty plate, submitting to taking a few paracetamol before collapsing.

Q woke some unknown number of hours later with a raging need to piss. He staggered out of bed, leaving James still asleep, and shuffled down the hall to the bathroom to relieve himself, and then was hit by the back-to-back realizations that his mouth tasted like something had died in it and that he was in desperate need of a shower. The one was an easy fix, the other a bit more time-consuming. Q normally wasn’t given to showering at 3 am, but once he’d thought about everything that was still on his skin from the past 24 hours, he couldn’t bring himself to crawl back in bed without a thorough scrubbing.

Twenty minutes later, cleaner in body if not necessarily in soul, he returned to the bedroom to find James sitting up in the dark with his back against the headboard. “Was wondering if I’d woken you,” Q said.

“I’m a light sleeper,” said James mildly. He was watching Q with an unreadable expression on his face.

Q crawled back under the covers, finding himself suddenly shy. He’d been so exhausted when they’d come home earlier, rubbed so raw by the events of the day, that he’d barely been able to parse the conversation still hanging unsaid between them, waiting to be had. He hesitated, and James opened his arms, giving him the invitation he needed. Q scooted in close, wrapping his arms around James’ broad shoulders and pressing his face to James’ neck, grateful for the warmth and the dark.

“Did you shower earlier?” he asked after a moment. “You don’t smell half as awful as you ought to.”

He felt James smile against his temple. “I did,” he said. “You were already asleep.”

“Ah,” Q went quiet. Unsurprisingly, he was now totally awake, and just hearing the tone of James’ voice told him that his partner was equally alert. Q chewed his lip, gathering himself; James’ hand came up to palm the back of Q’s neck, and Q shut his eyes.

“When we came home,” he said finally, “you asked me what I needed.”

“I did.” James’ voice was neutral; Q found himself grateful for the space to think, to find what he wanted to say. Q sighed.

“I need…” Q’s voice shook a little. He tightened his jaw and tried again. “I want to tell you—everything. I’m so tired of keeping secrets from you, especially these ones, it’s been so exhausting. And I’m sorry for not telling you sooner. I wish I had, I was just…” He trailed off, opening his eyes to stare into the darkness. “I was scared. Okay, I was bloody terrified. But what I need is to know
"if… You still want to hear me tell you this. If you still want to be here at all."

Maybe it was too soon for this conversation. Maybe it wasn’t soon enough. Q didn’t know anymore, but whatever James’ answer, all the cards were on the table, now.

James pulled back when Q asked that, enough so that Q could see his expression. James cupped the side of Q’s face in one hand, and even after the number of times they’d been intimate, it was still hard for Q to be looked at the way James was looking at him right now, as though he were at once the most precious and frustrating thing in the world.

“Yes,” he said at last. “I do. I rather want to lock you up somewhere that you won’t ever be at risk of poisoning or stabbing or murderous people coming after you, even though I know that’s not practical.” His mouth twitched; Q wanted to kiss him so badly then he thought he might explode, but he kept calm somehow. “But I do need you to tell me everything, Q. Even the parts you think I don’t want to hear. I can’t—go through this kind of revelation again. I can’t find these things out after you’ve been put in danger because of things you didn’t tell me.”

Q nodded, his chest tight. “Okay,” he said. “I won’t leave anything out.”

“Good.” James found Q’s hand, and raised it to his lips, kissing the backs of Q’s knuckles. Q leaned in and returned the kiss, with interest, and they did nothing much else for several minutes while Q reacquainted himself with how James Bond tasted.

“I’m sorry for being so callous,” James said eventually. He spoke slowly, choosing his words with some care; Q kept silent, not wanting to interrupt. “I’m—not good with feeling powerless. I shouldn’t have taken off again so soon. Or made you listen to all that.” So he’d known Q was listening, then. Q wasn’t that surprised.

“Quite the temper-tantrum for a man starting on his fifth decade,” Q noted, and smiled when James rolled his eyes. “It’s… I can’t blame you that much; it was a hell of a bomb to drop on you. I didn’t help by telling you to get lost.”

James nodded slightly. “I want all of you, you know,” he said, voice soft. “Simon, and Elliot, and William, however many names you have lying around. Or locked away out of sight.” Q smiled, and James smiled back, pulling Q closer again. “I wish I could have saved you from having to go through today,” James said very softly, into Q’s hair.

Q exhaled slowly. “Yes, it’s—not an experience I had wanted to have in common with you,” he said quietly. “But I should have known they would never stop until they found me.”

“You seem to inspire that in people,” said James, and Q found he had something in his eyes, having to blink rapidly to clear them. “Amongst other things.”

“I don’t give much of a shit, as long as I inspire them in you,” said Q.

“I wondered if I was competing with Eve for awhile, honestly,” said James after a moment, and Q let out a startled laugh. “Don’t laugh, you can hardly blame me.”

“No, I suppose you’re right.” Q cradled James’ hand in his, rubbing James’ knuckles against his own face: hands that had broken so many bones, endured and caused so much damage. “We had a—uh, a thing, right when we first met, but it was awkward and a terrible idea and I am thankful every day that we agreed to just move on, because she’s been a godsend.” He exhaled slowly. “She has only recently come round to the idea of you and me shagging, she was not keen on it at all.”

“I don’t blame her,” murmured James, and he smiled. “I’m quite glad to hear that she’s no longer out
for my neck, though, I must say.”

“You underestimated her for a long time,” said Q. “From what I recall, for awhile there you seemed to think she’d left field work because she got tired of having runs in her hose.”

“She did shoot me,” James pointed out. “And I wasn’t exactly at my best when she and I were getting to know each other, I might have spat in the Virgin’s face for how pleasant I was feeling most of the time.” He sounded vaguely put out. Q kissed the corner of his mouth by way of acknowledgment.

“Well, I’m just glad I’ve got someone to strap me back together if you ever don’t come home.” He hadn’t meant to say it, but it slipped out all the same, and James’ hand stilled for just a moment on Q’s arm before sliding up to cup his face again.

“I’m like a bad penny,” James murmured in his deep voice, and even in the dim light Q could see the shadow of his smile. “I always come back.”

Q laughed, because the alternative was to cry, and he’d had about enough of that today. “Fine,” he said, sliding both arms around James’ neck again. “Just—do that, then. Say that you’ll return to me, and I’ll give you no more reasons to not want to.”

James gathered him close, and kissed him, slow and deep. “Deal,” he said softly, against Q’s mouth.

He knew it was a promise that both would them would find hard to keep, but for the moment at least, it didn’t matter. After all, their versions of “trying harder” was a damn sight better than most people would ever get to in their lives.

* * * * *

The next seven days were like coming out of a long illness, rediscovering all sorts of muscles and behaviors that belonged to people who were not in the habit of fearing daily for their lives. It took almost a full 48 hours before Q managed to actually remember that he didn’t have to worry, didn’t have to keep checking on whether or not another of his decoy flats had been broken into. The relief winded him every time, and more than once James came up behind him and surprised him out of a daze, arms sliding around Q’s waist and a chin hooked over Q’s shoulder as Q stared into space.

“Sorry, are you not a fan of distant brooding?” Q asked lightly, when James caught him at it yet again while in the kitchen supposedly making tea. He covered James’ arms with his own, leaning back against him. Light streamed in through the kitchen windows, a crisp, bright morning outside that was probably still well below freezing. The cold snap this year was making him reconsider his preference for running outside; he’d have to buy some more insulated training clothes.

“I gold-medaled in brooding, I’ll have you know.” James kissed his ear. “I have a hunch that you won’t find anything you like by staring into the middle distance, is all.” He paused, and then added, slightly more seriously, “I can leave if you want me to.”

Q’s smile was faint, but real. “No, don’t. It’s—you’re right, I think.” Even through their clothes, Q could feel the comforting heat of James’ overactive metabolism. Q reached up, dragging fingers lightly through James’ hair, feeling the shape of his skull. “I may still need to go stare at the wall for a bit in the reading room, but I like having you here. If it’s all the same to you.”

James smiled against the edge of Q’s jawbone. “Good to know that when they retire me from the service, I’ll still be able to find work as your watch-dog.”

“Oh, I’m sure I can find a few uses for the world’s most dangerous man,” said Q lightly. He turned
around in James’ arms, sliding his own around James’ neck, resting their foreheads together, heedless of the slight dig of his glasses into the bridge of his nose. “Until you get bored, anyway.”

“Not happening,” murmured James. Q thought he’d never get tired of staring into the impossible spring blue of James’ eyes, but how he’d ever thought them cold, he didn’t know. Maybe he just hadn’t seen how warm they could be.

It wasn’t a mistake he would make twice.

* * * * *

James wound up staying with him the entire time. They made one trip out the day after they arrived to go to James’ flat, just to collect a few changes of clothes and say hello to Margaret, and they did stop by Tesco on the way home, but aside from that Q lived in his pyjamas and he and James didn’t leave the building.

Moneypenny and Tanner both stayed in touch, sending them text and email updates as the incident investigation proceeded. (All the text updates went to James’ mobile, as Q’s had been recovered from the street he’d first been taken from and was now waiting for him at work.) Q had initially thought to avoid everything and everyone until returning to work, but found it difficult to resist whenever he heard James’ mobile chime. James would give him a knowing smirk or just pretend not to hear it, and then Q would have to resort to something drastic like putting Carly on his head and nicking it off him, or just hacking into the mobile from his computer.

(The second time he did that, Q wound up thrashing around on the bed and howling in protest as James pinned him down and tickled him until tears ran down his face, which was totally fucking unfair on James’ part; not everyone could just turn off being ticklish like 007 apparently could. Bastard.)

The investigation at first turned up maddeningly dry, but bit by bit, the details trickled in. Probing some names and numbers found in a mobile at the Markhams’ house turned up the warden who’d been bribed to quietly release the two criminals and then alter the records to show a fake transfer; Interpol found the man now living in a small but expensive cottage outside Paris. Q’s suspicion that the virus hack a few months back was the work of the Markhams was vindicated when Tessa and Mark followed the trail of bank transactions to one of Albert Moaveni’s black hat associates, who’d apparently been paid per diem for his work and told as little as possible about what, specifically, the Markhams wanted. He’d simply used the virus to brute-force download as much of MI6’s internal data as possible, and then sent everything he’d acquired to the Markhams on a 500 GB hard-drive.

No wonder they’d taken so long to find him, Q mused, stretched out on the couch with his laptop, nestled against James’ sturdy form, “Aliens” playing on the TV. They must have had to comb through all the records themselves, sorting out what was relevant and what wasn’t.

“You watch this to relax,” James said. He sounded extremely dubious. Q looked up; Sigourney Weaver was busy screaming and running from the alien queen on-screen.

“Absolutely,” said Q. “This and Jurassic Park. Watching someone else have a day thousands of times worse than mine, what’s not to love.”

“You’ve got me there,” said James. “I’ll skip the aliens and stick to being shot at, thanks.”

“You’d make quite the intrepid space-farer, I’d wager…” Q trailed off, scrolling through the attachments Moneypenny had sent to his email, and sucked in a sharp breath as the next few images finished loading.
He must have tensed up, though he didn’t mean to. “What?” James peered over his shoulder. “What are those?”

Q swallowed, his eyes suddenly stinging. “Things they found at the house that I—the Markhams were staying in. I think they were meant for me.” He stared at the screen, flicking numbly through the pictures of newly-purchased men’s clothing, a small stack of mathematics texts, a fucking *Wii*, still in its unopened box…

“This from the people who were preparing to carve nasty words onto your person when we arrived,” said James. His voice was dark. Q shuddered, wiping angrily at his face. This hurt so much more than it should; it had been *five years*, why was he still so affected? He flashed on the mental image of Janessa curled on the ground, the look frozen on her face when she’d died, and made a noise in his throat.

“The fucking—nerve of them, I can’t even…” James’ arm came around him, holding him tight, and Q drew in a shaky breath. “They were always like that,” he said after a moment, managing to sound a little more collected. “They thought getting people to do what they wanted was just a matter of how hard you were trying. Makes me wonder if I ever really knew them at all.”

Q shook his head, shutting the computer and leaning over to set it on the table in front of the couch, and while he was up James twisted around behind him on the couch so that when Q sat back down he was between James’ thighs, James’ chest against his back. “How would you feel about having Moneypants come over for dinner tonight or tomorrow?” Q asked quietly. He leaned back against James, the warm weight of him grounding him, helping ease the dissonance in his skin.

“So long as you don’t expect me to put on a suit for the occasion, that sounds fine.” Q rolled his eyes but grinned anyway at the dry humor in James’ voice.

“No, that’s fine. I just…” Q took a deep breath and shut his eyes. “I figured it would be easier to tell you both everything at the same time, is all,” he said.

James sat up a little straighter, and Q felt the soft exhale against his neck. “If that’s what you want to do, then that’s what we’ll do,” James said after a moment. “But only if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” Q said. “I want it to be over with. I’m tired of—of all of this hanging over my head. I’m tired of holding you both at arm’s length and I just want to get it off my chest.”

James’ arms tightened around him, James nuzzling into Q’s neck and kissing over his nape. “Then I’ll ask her to come over straight away,” he murmured, and Q covered James’ arms with his own and squeezed.

* * * * *

Moneypenny agreed to come over that same night, of course. Q had suspected she was chomping at the bit to come check on him visually, and was staying away mainly out of respect for Q and James needing time to work things out between them. So they made pasta again, with bread and salad and a bottle of wine, and they sat and had an amazingly light-hearted dinner in which Q laughed more than he had thought remotely possible after the past two weeks, and then they all went into Q’s bedroom and sat down on the couch. Q sat between them, his legs across Moneypenny’s lap, his shoulders pillowed against James’ chest, Carly inviting herself to come sit in Q’s lap. He always ended up like this, somehow, but with Moneypants and James it felt perfectly natural.

It took hours. Q spent a lot of it staring at the window as he talked, and Moneypenny and James just listened. He told them about how it started (New York with its lights) and how he got in too deep to
go home (San Francisco, with its endless sky and fog), and he told them how it felt to be young and in love with the world at your feet. He told them about David’s laugh, and the fall of Janessa’s hair, and how it felt to fall asleep every night between two people who’d promised him the world and then went out and stained their hands red with blood to get it for him, and how little he’d known of exactly how deep and dark their madness was.

He told them about meeting Fezzik and Agrippina, how they’d become part of his family, and about fleeing to Europe when things went sour; he told them about the horror of discovering the truth, and the misery of having all his worst fears proven true to him when he’d tried to confront his lovers. He told them about contacting M, about the eight days where he’d had to drug himself to get to sleep at night so as not to arouse Janessa and David’s suspicions, his pure terror at the chance of being discovered. When he got to the part where he said good-bye to his partners for the last time before sending them to the job during which they’d be arrested, he couldn’t stop himself from breaking down, but to his great gratitude neither Moneypenny nor James tried to stop him from continuing; they just held him until he’d calmed down enough to keep talking.

He told them about the hoops MI6 had made him jump through, the new lives that he and Fezzik and Agrippina had had to commit to after the letter the Markhams sent Q. His father’s death, the years of contract work and isolation, the hobbies he picked up to keep himself occupied. He told them everything and left nothing out.

Finally, finally, after he’d scraped his insides raw and poured every last bit of himself out for them to judge, there was nothing left to tell. The room went silent; a glance at the clock revealed it to be past midnight. James sat up first, enveloping Q in one of his rib-crushing hugs and kissing his neck. “Thank you for telling us, Q,” he murmured into Q’s ear.

Q swallowed thickly, his throat sore from how much he’d talked. Moneypenny sat up then too, crawling over until she was wedged against James’ side and could wrap her arms around Q from the other side, pressing her face to his hair. “Guess what,” she said into his hair. Q grunted. “You’re still our boffin.”

He cracked a grin at that, and raised his hands, resting one each against James’ arm and Moneypenny’s arm. “Looks like you’re stuck with me, then,” he said creakily.

“I’m sure we’ll bear up under the pressure somehow,” said James, and Moneypenny squeezed Q’s arm.

Chapter End Notes

Eric Temple (The Recluse) as played by Robert Carlyle, aka "I'm Not Actually Insane, I Just Play Psychopaths Repeatedly In Films And Television."
Surfacing

Chapter Summary

Sooner or later, the sun always rises.

Chapter Notes

And finally, here we are, the last chapter! It's been such a phenomenal pleasure to write & share this with you, and I am so thankful for all the people who commented or left kudos, and everyone who lurked & read quietly. Extra kisses go to circ_bamboo and sailaweigh, for painstakingly going over the last chapter with me and helping me get it exactly right.

There is a master-post for this fic on LJ that you may be interested in looking at; in addition to the 2 pieces of art associated with this story, it also has a fanmix (found right here) and a notes & errata post (found right here).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Six weeks after Q cheated death twice in one day and the Markhams’ threat had been neutralized for good, a good eight months after Tiago Rodriguez set off explosives that shattered the sanctity of their home at Vauxhall Cross, the new headquarters of MI6 was finally ready.

All critical personnel had been working from alternate locations for the past two weeks, while carefully-supervised moving crews transported equipment to the new location. The warehouse no longer even faintly resembled the industrial behemoth it had been in a previous life, save for its fortified brick-and-mortar exterior that had withstood the worst of the Führer’s bombs during the Blitz. That had been one of the things that had caught Tanner’s eye, and Q had had to agree with Tanner’s assessment of their new home’s durability.

The insides had been stripped bare, down to their bones, before being scrubbed with enough cleaner and soap and high-powered water-sprays to bleach a whale skeleton white, and then the conversion had begun. Steel girders, fiberglass panels, soundproofing insulation inside every wall, miles and miles of fiber optic cables, huge wall-sized flat-screen LCD paneling in all the conference and war rooms for projections—construction crews had been working full-time since M had signed the project into life, and by some miracle of modern planning the conversion had actually finished on-schedule. Q had wondered aloud who had threatened the foreman of the project (and with what) in order to achieve such unheard-of good luck, and had been rewarded with such a wicked smile from Moneypenny that he’d spat out his tea all over his keyboard.

Q and the other department heads had taken a tour of the finished facility two days ago, and Q had been eternally grateful at evidence of the power of climate-control in the server rooms, as he’d been fighting with overheating on some of his equipment in their temporary location. Tanner was more enthusiastic about all the reinforced windows that still allowed in ample sunlight; Q didn’t care much either way, so long as his crew was happy, which they would be. Everyone was well sick of their
underground quarters.

It had been Tanner’s idea to mark their new start with a celebration. He’d voiced it to Moneypenny, Bond, and Q while they were out to lunch, just a few days after Q returned to work post-kidnapping. Q normally cared about as much for parties as he did for having his teeth pulled, but he couldn’t deny the appeal of the idea; the urge to delineate events from here forward as something new and different was a powerful one. He had no intention of being roped into organizing the damn thing, however, and skilfully avoided being drafted to the team Moneypenny and Tanner put together.

Now it was the big night—the Friday night before work at the new location would start, giving everyone the weekend to recuperate, excellent planning there, Tanner—and Q was nervous for reasons that had nothing to do with murderous exes, computer viruses, or broken equipment returned by wayward 00 agents.

“Q? Are you almost ready?”

“Almost, I’m just….” Q glared at himself in the bathroom mirror, pulling a face at his reflection. He looked good, actually, wearing a stylish dark grey suit over a hunter-green vest and a tie the same color but several shades lighter in a diamond-grid pattern, but it wasn’t his clothing he was so worried about. It was showing up arm-in-arm with James Bond, in front of all of MI6 and who knew how many other officials from other branches of government. With Q’s luck, the PM himself would be there.

It wasn’t that he and James were especially trying to hide anything. They had nothing to be ashamed of, for damn sure, no matter how behind-the-times public opinion might yet be. But years of hiding all the parts of himself that mattered was a bit harder to shake than he’d anticipated, and there were some things it was still just easier to keep quiet about.

James appeared behind him, looking as usual like he’d just stepped out of the pages of GQ in his suit, a charcoal-grey pinstripe three piece from Savile Row, matched with a tie the same sky-blue of his eyes and a dove-grey pocket square. He radiated good humor like a lamp lit from within, leaning in to drop a kiss on Q’s jaw. “Are you nervous, quartermaster?” he asked. His reflection grinned wickedly, and Q rolled his eyes.

“Shut it, you,” he said, but leaned back against James, who obligingly circled an arm around Q’s waist and kissed his throat again. “It’s been awhile since I had to swan around at some official event, that’s all.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“What if someone expects me to dance? I can’t dance, James. I’ll end up flailing around like I’m being electrocuted, I’ll knock over a waiter with a tray of cocktails, a martini will go down the PM’s shirt; it’ll be terrible.”

James chuckled. “This isn’t the kind of event where there’s dancing, Q. More’s the pity. You’ll have to show me your interpretive dance of being electrocuted some other time.”

James chuckled. “This isn’t the kind of event where there’s dancing, Q. More’s the pity. You’ll have to show me your interpretive dance of being electrocuted some other time.”

“Like when hell freezes over.” Q turned away from their reflection, sliding his own arms around James’ waist and resting cheek-to-cheek with him for a moment. “Let’s go; it’s already late. If I stay here any longer I’ll convince myself not to go at all.”

“Not happening,” murmured James into his ear, and dropped a short kiss at Q’s temple before pulling back and heading towards the front door of Q’s flat. Q resisted the urge to cast another glance at himself in the mirror and just followed James out instead. He consoled himself with the reminder that
as head of Q Branch, he outranked most of the people who’d be there tonight, and for everyone else, he could use the ageless tactic of smiling and nodding till they moved on to someone else.

* * * * *

As it turned out, Q’s predictions about the gala evening were pretty off the mark. The party was much less obnoxious than he’d feared, but then, he didn’t stay for very long.

By the time they arrived, a veritable armada of sleek black cars was already drawn up in the half-circle drive leading up to the front steps. Innumerable dour men and women in variations of the same black tuxedo flanked the main doors and all the entrances Q could see from where he and James were, approaching the front entrance from the pedestrian walk alongside the Thames. They’d opted to take the Tube, Q pointing out what a nightmare it would be to drive and park when James had proposed taking a car.

(Q would never admit it, but one of his many reasons for liking their new location was its proximity to St. Paul’s Cathedral and the Tate Modern, located within reasonable walking distance of each. He’d always liked the Tate Modern better than the National Gallery, and while the chances of him actually ripping himself away from his workstation during his lunch hour to go and stare at some installation at the Tate were slim, he liked that the possibility existed, if only in theory. Tanner probably suspected Q’s ulterior motives, sneaky bastard that he was, but he was smart enough not to comment on it.)

“Oh, how lovely of the PM to drop in,” Q said darkly. “My evening isn’t complete without being frisked by joyless bodyguards.” James merely smiled and extended his arm. After narrowing his eyes at James for several seconds just to make sure his agent knew exactly how unnecessary the gesture was, Q took the proffered elbow and allowed himself to be escorted up the steps.

They submitted to the security check—James was permitted to keep his Sig Sauer mainly due to his reputation, Q thought, but he was also faultlessly gracious with the two agents who looked over their credentials, and no one could do “charming” like James Bond when the need arose—and then headed into the main hall, joining the mass of people already assembled within. Q was still staring around with an expression on his face like a deer in headlights when he heard a voice say “There you are!” and saw Moneypenny striding towards them, moving with far more grace and speed than ought to be possible in heels as high as the ones she was in. She was resplendent in an ankle-length gown of sunflower yellow, the straps falling artfully off her shoulders, coy windows cut here and there in the fabric around her midsection, giving her the appearance of a Greek goddess coming to lay waste to suitors and challengers alike.

“Hello Moneypants,” said Q, letting a little relief colour his voice. “Good god, how many hearts are you planning on stealing tonight? You should just stand them all in a row and knock them down like dominoes, it’ll be quicker.”

“And more merciful,” added James, grinning broadly. “Hello, Eve. You look nice.”

“Why thank you,” said Moneypenny with a smirk. “Quite the compliment, coming from you two.” She pulled Q in for a hug, and then James, and then turned and led them through the crowd towards the far end of the room, where Tanner, Vicky, and M were standing around with drinks in their hands. Q had seen his coworkers in various stages of fancy dress before, of course, and while he’d always rather see Vicky with a drink in her hand than another stack of accounting forms for him to sign, it was still a rather pleasant surprise to see everyone looking so dapper.

“Oh, good,” said M, gracing them with a smile. “You both came. I was wondering if you’d turn up.”
Q exchanged a bemused glance with James. “Is there a reason you were thinking we wouldn’t?” asked James.

“Neither of you really go in for doing things because other people think you should,” Vicky pointed out reasonably. “I would not have been surprised if you’d skived off and gone to see a show instead.”


“Well it beats getting shot at, wouldn’t you say?” Q’s mouth dropped open, and for a moment he was what so many books describe but so few people actually were, gaping like a large-mouthed fish. James burst out laughing, and Q managed to snap his jaw shut.

“Right,” said Q with an effort, resisting the urge to dig an elbow into James’ side and very aware of the knowing look Tanner and Moneypenny just exchanged. “If we’re all done discussing the many ways Bond and I might have spent this evening instead of enduring harassment by nosy coworkers, would someone like to tell me when the PM is coming? Since I assume all of Her Majesty’s finest aren’t here just for free pastries.”

“In about an hour and a half, according to my unnamed but completely reliable source,” said M, his voice cheerfully innocent. “Plenty of time to knock a few drinks back first and get a bit pissed before we have to do any arse-kissing.” Moneypenny choked on her drink, and Q’s private estimation of M went up another notch. “Also, Bond. Word on the street is our great and fearless leader wants to meet you in particular, so I advise you to either get very drunk beforehand or come up with a Plan B.”

James’ eyebrows went up. “What would the fallout be for you, sir, if I found myself unavoidably called away?”

M waved the hand not holding his rocks glass of whiskey. “While I’m sure you wouldn’t leave if the situation were not dire, I’m also sure it’d be nothing I can’t handle.”

“M actually has to go over some paperwork with me before Monday,” interjected Tanner. “Really unfortunate, will probably take the whole weekend, might even have to leave early tonight.”

“The whole weekend in Brighton, you mean,” said Vicky in a low voice, and M cast her a pointedly bland look that caused her to hide her grin behind her drink.

“You’re all terrifying,” said Q. “I don’t know what I’d do if any of you were normal, really, I’d be at a loss.” Out of the corner of his eye Q spotted agents 003 and 006 sidling through the crowd like sharks, moving swiftly towards their little group, no doubt keen to sniff out if the rumors about 007 and their quartermaster were true. “Okay, if I have to spend the next however many hours making small talk, I need a drink. James, what do you want?”

“Basil Hayden or Laphroaig if they’ve got it,” said James.

“Will do,” said Q. He cast a glance at Moneypenny, who took the hint immediately and stepped forward to come with him. “Be right back.”

They slipped away through the crowd, Q feeling James’ eyes lingering momentarily on the back of his neck. He waited until they were lost in the throng of people and approaching the temporary bar to one side of the mammoth entrance hall before he slowed, breaking into a smile as he looked at Moneypenny. “Is everything set up?”
“You’re good to go,” said Moneypenny, grinning back and at him and slipping her hand into a nearly-hidden pocket of her dress, coming out with a small black key-fob. “It’s on the third level, turn left coming out of the lift and you can’t miss it. I don’t even want to know how much it cost, by the way.”

“Yes, well, it wasn’t as costly as you’d think; it was in dire straits when I first found it, but the money came from auctioning one of my program patents to Google last year,” said Q, and took the fob from her, tucking it into his suit pocket. “Bastards have been after me for it for years.” Moneypenny arched a questioning eyebrow, and Q pushed his glasses up his nose. “When you tap your Android against someone else’s to share data, remember to thank me.”

Moneypenny smiled and shook her head. “Jammy bastard, having you for a boyfriend. He had best appreciate you.” The words were scolding, but there was nothing but warmth in her voice.

Q smiled, and leaned in to throw an arm around her shoulders. “He does,” he said firmly.

It took longer than Q was expecting to get all the way to the bar, so long that Moneypenny decided to bring another round back for Tanner and M and Vicky as well. Q hadn’t known it was possible to carry four drinks at once, much less ‘carry four drinks and walk through a crowded room in three-inch heels without spilling a drop,’ but then he did work with people who were so terrifyingly competent as to inspire nightmares. One of these days he’d learn to stop being surprised by all they could do.

“Bless you, Eve,” said Vicky with real feeling as Q and Moneypenny returned bearing the new infusion of liquid good humor. Q passed James his Basil Hayden (003 and 006 had disappeared into the masses again while Q and Moneypenny were at the counter) and glanced around at the faces of his coworkers, his friends—his family, he realized. This was where he belonged.

“May I propose a toast?” Q said, before he could lose his nerve. Everyone’s eyes shifted to him, and M smiled, raising his glass before the others followed suit. “To good friends and new beginnings,” he said. “May bad fortune follow us all of our days, and never catch up to us.”

Next to him, James smiled. “And if it does, may we be half an hour in Heaven before the devil knows we’re dead.”

“Morbid, aren’t you,” commented Moneypenny. “Cheers, you lot.”

“Cheers,” they all said in unison, and clinked their glasses. Q knocked back a third of his drink, his face burning slightly, but if there was ever a time for sentiment, he supposed today was it. Now he’d be able to retreat to sarcasm and complaining for at least another twelve months.

The next hour passed pleasantly quickly, despite all of Q’s complaints about the event beforehand. Nearly everyone at MI6 turned out for it, save a few field agents who had the poor luck (or good luck, perhaps) to be on assignment. Q lost James in the crowd a few times—he’d worked at MI6 significantly longer than Q, after all, and had that many more people to chat up, if he wished—but every time Q found himself at loose ends for more than a handful of moments, James would turn up again, looking as dapper as you please.

It took a good fifty minutes for it to occur to Q that it seemed an awful lot like James was casing the building. But that would be ridiculous.

Still. “You know, there’s top-notch security at this event,” Q pointed out, as James glanced around the room with studied nonchalance. “They wouldn’t bring the PM here otherwise.”
“Of course,” said James pleasantly, in the exact tone of voice he used when medical told him something that he didn’t want to hear. Q rolled his eyes.

“Well, since it’s kept you from getting as drunk as M recommended, I won’t complain,” he said, hoping he was right and that James had really had only the one drink Q saw. “But there’s actually something I wanted to show you.” James looked over at Q and focused then, giving him his full attention. “If you feel you’ve satisfied the requirements of noblesse oblige, that is.”

“I was beginning to think you’d never ask,” James said by way of response. “Lay on, Macduff.”

“Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war?!” Q quoted to the air, and earned himself a raised eyebrow for his trouble. “This way, Mr. Bond.”

They headed to one of the arterial corridors at the back right of the room, and were nearly forced to turn back by the black-suited security team placed at the doors. James did something Q had never seen him do before and actually pulled rank—Q often forgot that technically Bond was still Commander James Bond, that ‘007’ was just one of his many designations—slipping them past the guards with a somewhat less-than-professional wave from the younger officer. Q fumed all the way to the lifts at the fact that being head of Q Branch still didn’t earn him access to his own god-forsaken building, PM be damned.

“Dearest Q,” said James, eying him with unmistakable smugness as they got into the lift. “Are you sulking?”

“I ought to ruin their credit ratings and wipe their hard drives,” Q said. “I can’t believe he had the nerve to ask me for more identification beyond my personnel badge. That arse.”

“There are benefits to being well-known,” James said amicably.

“Infamous, you mean,” said Q. “Right, this is our stop.” He stepped briskly forward as the lift doors opened, ignoring the odd look James gave him.

“Car-park,” James noted, following Q out and glancing around at the nearly-deserted level. “I must say, Q, as far as spots go for outdoor sex, this isn’t really…” He trailed off, staring at the vehicle Q was walking towards. “Q.”

Q stopped, biting his lip hard for a moment before turning around, fighting to keep his voice perfectly even. “It’s not the same car as the one destroyed up at your old manor house,” he said. “There was no saving that one. But it’s the same make and model. Or it was before I modified it, anyway.”

James was staring at him, as thunderstruck as Q had ever seen him. “You got me another Aston Martin DB5,” he said.

Q nodded, shoving his hands into the pockets of his suit coat. “I would’ve had it done sooner,” he said. “But it took longer than I expected to get it in fighting shape, and then I had to pull my mechanic off the project to help with some stuff for the new headquarters, and—” James crossed the gap between them in three strides and pulled Q into his arms to kiss him so hard Q thought his spine was going to snap from being bent back, and then Q threw his arms around James’ neck and held on for dear life, his skin prickling all over with pleasure and relief.

“Ngh—” Q finally had to break away to breathe, grinning as he looked up at James. “Does that mean you like it?”

“It’s marvelous, and so are you,” said James, which was somehow not what Q was expecting at all.
He felt himself go pink, and James smiled very slightly.

Q cleared his throat, reaching into his suit coat again and coming out with the black key-fob he’d gotten from Moneypenny. “Here,” he said. “Let’s get out of here. I know London’s not the greatest for joyriding, but I’m sure you’ll manage.” He paused, then added, pointedly, “Assuming you are sober enough to drive.”

“More than enough.” James grinned outright then, all white teeth and hard eyes, like he’d scented blood in the water. “You may want to put out a DNR on the plates,” he added, and strode around to the driver’s side door, leaving Q to climb in the passenger’s side as James put the key in the ignition and turned, the engine roaring immediately to life. The look on James’ face at the deep, throaty purr of it was enough to make Q half-hard in his trousers.

“I am not putting a Do Not Retain order on your plates, James,” said Q. He had to work to put the cool note in his voice, but his hands gave him away, gripping the tops of his thighs with a combination of trepidation and delight.

“Oh, well, it was worth a shot,” said James, and reached down to the gear-shift, throwing the car into first and tearing out of the parking spot as though every secret agent in the Eastern bloc was after them.

The Aston Martin DB5 was a beautiful car to start with, but Q had found this one in a sorry state of disrepair; even if he hadn’t already been of a mind to make a gift of it to James, he’d have wanted to rescue that car from its avaricious owner, who’d cared more for his ponies and gambling than the priceless car in his possession and had been more than glad to part with it for an admittedly princely sum of money. Q had bent every inch of his considerable brain to restoring the DB5 to its former glory, going so far as to enlist MI6’s most talented mechanic for the job, and now the car gleamed from headlights to exhaust-port.

The exterior was unchanged—Q wasn’t going to attempt to tamper with the classics—but under the hood was a different story; he’d wanted it to have the strength and power of a modern car, knowing James’ tastes in the cars he drove, and so James’ DB5 had an adapted combustion engine with smoother shifting and a higher idle, capable of going from 0-60 mph in a shattering 3.6 seconds. And if James kept his foot on the pedal, it would keep accelerating all the way to its 188 mph top speed, courtesy of its 650 horsepower and 450 lb-ft feet of torque produced from its front-mounted 5.5-liter V12 that Q was still amazed he’d managed to fit under the hood.

(Q had upgraded the suspension and handling, as well; it was tighter than he personally liked, but it was a sports car, after all. And Q would never share James’ fondness for Formula One racing, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t aware of it.)

It had a completely up-to-date audio system, of course, plus a cleverly-hidden internal computer that monitored the car’s unique build and would inform its owner when maintenance was required and of what type. James listened to Q describe every last detail, that same frighteningly calm expression on his face, his actual glee given away only by the crinkles around his eyes as he steered the car down every last twisting road he could find on the way out of London.

“Now, this button,” said Q, gesturing at a small depression where a cigarette lighter might once have been. “I don’t actually want you to use these, obviously, but because you’re you, I figured it might be necessary.” James glanced over at him, taking his eyes from the road for only a moment; they were out in the country now, going at a considerably higher speed than was normally advisable, but Q had thus far refrained from begging James to slow down. “Press this button and a set of modified M134 mini-machine guns armed with 7.62 NATO cartridges will emerge—you’ll be familiar with them, they were in the Jaguar we sent you with to Japan—anyway, press the button a second time,
and they will fire continuously until you press the button a third time. If you think more firepower than that is actually necessary, I might be convinced to make further modifications, but I’d really prefer you keep this car at home.”

A smile creased James’ face. “You would think that you’d learn by now not to give me expensive things, Q, when you know I’m just going to bring me in pieces.”

Q huffed, even though he could tell James was teasing. Mostly. “Well you won’t be fucking me in the car until you’ve managed to keep it pristine for at least six months,” he said primly, and felt James’ gaze cut over to him, suddenly hot.

“Bet I can make you break that promise a lot sooner than six months,” James murmured. His voice had dropped in pitch, low and throaty like the rumble of the Aston Martin’s engine.

“I doubt it,” said Q, glancing out the window. It was difficult to feign disinterest when James Bond was radiating that raw, dangerous sex appeal the way some men wore expensive cologne, but Q’s poker face had improved expeditiously since the start of their acquaintance, for some reason. James slowed the car and turned into the next drive they came to, and Q fought back a smile of triumph as the car slid to a full stop. “All these knobs and bits, getting in the way. Such an inconvenience, really.”

“And here I was under the impression you liked my knob and bits,” said James, his voice still dark. Q choked, turning and smacking James in the thigh, and then James caught his wrist and pulled him forward into a kiss, catching the back of Q’s head in his other hand and holding him firm.

“That was fucking terrible,” Q said, or tried to, because he was suddenly so busy kissing James that smarting off was harder, somehow.

“Doesn’t matter, still worked,” murmured James into his mouth, and Q moaned. James shoved his seat back at the same time as he hauled Q across the middle, managing to finagle off Q’s seat-belt but still catching the gear-shift against Q’s hip until James had worked him past it. He settled Q into his lap and kissed him harder, Q’s long legs sprawled across both seats, James’ arm wrapped firmly around his waist.

“Says you.” Q cradled James’ face in both hands, bracing his shoulder against the car door as he kissed back energetically. The angle was bad, and Q would really have liked to know if anyone was in the house that owned the drive they were parked in, but he was still loose-limbed enough from the drinks he’d had at the party to not give a shit for a few minutes. “God, James…”

“You’re sure it didn’t work?” James was working a hand into the back of Q’s trousers, inside his boxer-briefs, pressing a finger teasingly against the tight pucker of his arsehole, and Q jerked, his breath catching in his throat.

“Positive,” Q gritted out. James’ eyes darkened, and he smirked against Q’s mouth, teeth scraping along Q’s lower lip. Q let out a groan, retaliating by pressing the flat of his palm against James’ trapped cock, grinding against him through his trousers. The rough noise James made went straight to Q’s own erection. Q broke away from the kiss, moaning and rubbing his cheek against James’ blunt jaw, reveling in the burn of stubble against his skin; James shaved every morning, like clockwork, but he still grew enough every evening to scrape Q’s skin raw, if Q wasn’t careful.

At the moment he didn’t care about getting roughed up, however. He wanted James as mad for it as Q was feeling right now, and judging from the noises in his ear and the hands gripping his hips hard enough to bruise, Q was well on his way there.
“Right,” he said, and just like that he was done. Q scrambled back across the car to his own seat, fastening his seatbelt and readjusting his glasses. “I think perhaps you’d better take us home.” James stared at him, his face flushed, mouth kiss-swollen, looking torn between mauling Q right here in the car and tossing him clean out of it. Q arched an eyebrow. “Well?” he demanded. “Take me home, James, I want you to fuck me till I can’t move.”

James’ mouth quirked. “You are an absolute shit,” he remarked, and then he was putting the car in gear and maneuvering them back out of the drive, the Aston Martin’s engine roaring eagerly as James turned it in the direction of London and buried the needle in the red. Q leaned back, fixing his eyes on the road, but after a moment he let his hand creep over to rest on James’ thigh, squeezing the muscle hidden underneath his fine suit. James’ gaze did not waver from the road, but he picked up Q’s hand and brought it to his mouth, wrapping his lips around Q’s forefinger, swirling his tongue teasingly around the tip. Q let out a strangled groan, clenching his other hand against the top of his thigh and shuddering with want.

The drive was quick. Which was good, because Q might well have caused James to crash the car if it had gone on for much longer. He spent much of it with his hand in James’ lap, massaging his stiff cock through his trousers, James’ hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, eyes fixed on the road ahead of them. Q bit his lip and withdrew his hand as James turned onto Q’s street, making for the leased garage Q had signed up for a week or two after his near death by crazy exes, when James had been at his flat for ten days straight. He knew he had five minutes at best before he was naked with James all over him, and the thought was making him so dizzy with anticipation he wasn’t sure he could walk straight.

Q found himself pushed up against the wall of the lift the moment they got inside it, James pressing bodily against him and tangling a hand in Q’s disheveled hair, breath hot on Q’s neck. “I’m going to break you, darling,” James rumbled, nipping at the shell of Q’s ear, earning a shuddery moan from Q. “I’m not going to stop until you’re crying and shaking and the only thing you can say is my name.”

“Big talk,” said Q breathlessly, but he had already lashed both arms around James’ sturdy frame and was rutting shallowly against him, heedless of the chance of being caught by another tenant. “But how can I say your name if you’re feeding me your cock?” James growled and bit down on the muscle of Q’s neck, and Q cried out as it went straight to his erection. Behind James, the lift door pinged and slid open, and Q all but stumbled into the hall, James right behind him.

There were a few moments where Q was absolutely sure that they were going to end up fucking on the kitchen counter of his fake flat, but he somehow got them both upstairs before he slid to his knees in front of James and fumbled James’ cock out of his trousers, James’ hands in Q’s hair, tight enough to make his eyes water, just how he liked it. James was panting now too, watching Q with dark eyes, the ice blue swallowed up by black. Q moaned, pressing his palms against the flat plane of James’ abdomen, framing James’ cock with his fingers.

He breathed out, gusting hot air over the swollen frenulum, James’ cock fully erect now and unsheathed from its foreskin, and Q couldn’t resist. He wrapped his hand around the base at the same time as he wrapped his lips around the head, letting his eyes flutter shut in pleasure. He loved to suck cock, loved the smell and the taste and the weight of it on his tongue, and he liked how James’ cock was fat enough to stretch Q’s lips around the shaft like some kind of porn star. Q sucked for a moment, twisting his hand around the base, and he felt as much as heard James’ groan, before there was slight pressure on the back of his head, encouraging him to take more of James in, and Q was all too happy to oblige.

James groaned, the muscles in his thighs trembling under Q’s hand. “The mouth on you,” he gritted
out, yanking on Q’s hair again, and Q let out a muffled moan by way of response, his eyes tearing up slightly. “Going to take it all for me? Just open up for me, that’s it…”

Q tilted his head back slightly, opening up his jaw and throat, breathing carefully through his nose as James rolled his hips against Q’s mouth, pressing all the way forward till Q’s nose was buried in the coarse thatch of hair at the root of James’ prick. Q gagged, muscles of his throat spasming around the blunt head, and James made a hard noise that pooled heat in the base of Q’s spine. “You love it when I fuck your mouth like this, don’t you,” James said roughly, and Q whined, eyes snapping open as James gripped his head with both hands and started to thrust. “Love to choke on it, god, you’re so gorgeous, look at you, you’re already crying for it, fuck!”

Q clutched James’ hips, tightening his lips around the shaft of James’ cock, saliva dribbling from the corner of his lips in a bid to keep his mouth as slick and hot as possible. James rocked slow and dirty against Q’s mouth, pushing as far in each time as he could and then pulling out nearly to the tip, then thrusting in all the way in again and holding Q there with his hands in Q’s hair until Q coughed and choked, dizzy with lust and shortness of breath.

Abruptly, James pulled back, leaving Q gasping for breath and blinking tears from his eyes in an effort to clear them. “James,” he protested, coughing a little, and then James was pulling him to his feet and kissing him roughly, licking deep into Q’s mouth as if chasing after his own taste. Q kissed back greedily, slinging an arm around James’ neck and reaching down to stroke his prick, squeezing it a little to make James groan. “Bed?” he asked unevenly, when they broke away from each other, and James nodded.

Q very nearly killed himself tripping over Carly en route to the bedroom, but James had reflexes that Hercules would be jealous of and managed to save him before Q pitched into the wall and broke his face. They reached the bedroom without further mishap, making a token effort to fling their suits over the back of the couch before falling onto the bed in a tangle of limbs. Q scrambled up the mattress, dragging James up beside him and crawling on top, wrapping his hand loosely around their erections and gasping at the slick drag of skin against skin as he ground down against James.

“Fuck.” James gasped out the word like a last prayer, arching up off the bed, catching Q with both hands and pulling him down for another messy kiss. Q let himself wallow in it for a moment, totally lost in the salt-musk of James’ skin, the faint hints of bourbon still lingering on his tongue, the perfect hard nubs of his nipples, the tracery of scars over his chest, forked lightning in a pale sky. He was so gorgeous, forged by the raw force of his circumstances into a pure weapon, like a mountain carved to a peak by the wind and rain.

His preoccupation was cut short by James sitting up again, grabbing Q’s hand around their cocks and tangling their fingers together, stroking sloppily a few times before tugging Q’s hand away with a wicked smile. “James,” Q huffed, and got kissed soundly for his trouble, which was distracting enough to keep him busy for several moments as James leaned away, fumbling with something in the little nook in the bookcase.

James broke away again, nipping at the corner of Q’s mouth. “Kneel up for me, Q,” he said, and scooted back when Q obliged him until his back was braced against the headboard, tugging Q to him to straddle James’ thighs. “That’s it,” James whispered; Q pressed close, shuddering as James bit at his collarbone, and then he felt the slick press of a finger at his arsehole, circling teasingly around his pucker before sliding up and down the cleft of his cheeks, making Q whine and rock back, greedy for more.

“Don’t tease,” Q panted. He leaned forward, letting his forehead thump against the wall, arms around James’ sturdy shoulders.
“Oh, is that your job?” James laughed against his neck but relented anyway, pressing his finger deftly into Q’s arse, curling it as he eased in, and Q moaned, rolling his hips down against James’ hand. He was painfully close already just from sucking James’ cock, his own erection starting to ache, smearing a little pre-come against James’ abdomen every time Q’s hips stuttered forward and nudged James in the stomach with it.

The second finger came quick on the heels of the first, James twisting his wrist, expertly working Q open and watching Q’s face with hot, dark eyes. Q felt James’ other hand settle on the back of his neck, heavy and proprietary, and he arched into James’ touches, desperate. By the third finger Q was shaking, fresh tears leaking from the corners of his eyes as James crooked his fingers every now and then and drove up against Q’s prostate, dragging a guttural moan from Q’s mouth each time.

It had taken more than he’d like to admit to bare himself to James like this, to let James take him past the point of self-control into desperation and need. But James had never shown anything but care and appreciation for these pieces of Q that stayed so hidden the rest of the time, behind his smart mouth and iron will and the force of his intellect. Now Q could let himself fly apart, secure in the knowledge that James would only break him in order to put him back together more sweetly than Q ever thought possible.

“You’re so sweet like this, Q,” James murmured, taking his hand from Q’s neck and wrapping it around Q’s aching cock instead. “God, it’s just as well I’m not in Q Branch most days, I’d want you like this all the time, all hard and needy for me, just waiting for me to put you over the desk and fuck this tight little arse.” Q shuddered, digging his fingernails into James’ trapezius muscles. By all rights he should find the things that fell out of James’ mouth trite and cheesy, but when James used that voice like smoked whiskey right in his fucking ear it was all Q could do not to melt on the spot from base lust.

“Fuck, fuck, James, I want you inside me,” Q whined, and James chuckled, low and filthy. He leaned in and bit down on Q’s neck by way of response, twisting his fingers brutally inside Q’s arse, and Q choked on his cry, jerking hard against James’ hand on his cock.

“Not yet,” James said darkly. His fingers were thick, working Q relentlessly open, and Q’s breathing hitched, went ragged as he rode down against James’ hand, needing more, wanting to be filled.

“James, please—”

“Soon, darling,” James promised. He bit at Q’s throat again, the hand around Q’s cock slick now with Q’s pre-ejaculate and lube, and Q buried his face in James’ sweaty hair and made a high, desperate noise as James jerked him, those fingers inside him pressing harder and harder against his sweet spot. Q came apart like breaking glass, hips twisting helplessly against James’ hands, his sob muffled against James’ scalp. He collapsed against James’ chest, James catching him easily, kissing over his face as Q gulped for air.

James brought his hand up, pressing fingers smeared with Q’s spend against Q’s mouth. Q let out a rattling sigh, tongue flicking out cat-like to clean the mess from James’ hand, and he’d just come so hard he thought his brain might be dribbling out his ears, but the dark sound James made in his throat was enough to curl Q’s stomach with want all the same. James kissed him hard, tongue sliding through Q’s mouth, gripping his neck tightly, and Q kissed back, wanton and eager for more.

James laid him down on the bed, spreading him open easily, pushing his thighs up and back. Q gave him no resistance, fucked-out and warm from his climax, watching with heavy-lidded eyes as James spared a moment to roll on a condom and slick himself perfunctorily, and then he was pressing all the way home in one long thrust, bottoming out with a groan as he bent over Q. “Fuck,” Q hissed, and James stopped, watching him for a moment as Q adjusted. Even after taking three of James’ fingers
and having his bones melted into the bed from orgasm, Q needed a moment to get past the burn.

But only a moment. “What are you waiting for, an engraved invitation?” Q rolled his hips down against James’ cock, squeezing his muscles to grip James tight, and James growled at him an instant before Q found himself being fucked into the bed, the last of James’ self-control vanishing as James bent him in nearly in two. Q threw a hand up to brace against the headboard, and before long he buried his face in his own arm, sobbing into his tattoos as James found the exact angle that rubbed over Q’s prostate with every thrust. Q clawed at the bed, trying to get away from the overload of stimulation, but James was ruthless, hedging him in with his unfairly thick arms, groaning against Q’s throat as Q went to pieces underneath him.

“James, James, James!” Q choked, heedless of the tears staining his cheeks, half out of his mind from James around him and in him and on top of him. It was exactly how he wanted it, exactly what he’d been craving, too much and all at once. He needed it like air and only James could give it to him.

“Come on, Q, come for me, come on my cock, give it to me—” James’ voice in his ear was strained and raw, and Q shuddered, lashing an arm around James’ neck.

“I can’t, hnn—oh, oh…” James brought his hands up, hooking Q’s legs over his shoulders and slamming in again, and Q wailed, clawing mindlessly at James’ back. The angle was brutal, Q’s thighs trembling against the tops of James’ arms, but it was exactly what he needed: Q bucked up against James and came a second time, spasming hard around James’ stiff length, totally dry. James cursed against his neck, his hips stuttering against Q’s ass, and then he was pressing Q into the mattress as he shuddered through his own climax before coming to rest inside him, panting against Q’s shoulder.

They fell apart after a few moments, Q flopping bonelessly onto his side, eyes sliding shut as he panted for air. He felt James roll to the edge of the bed briefly to dispose of the condom before returning, curling around Q from behind, cradling Q’s face in a callused hand. Q kissed his palm, and James sighed, pressing his face to the nape of Q’s neck and going still.

“Much better than sticking around and talking to the PM,” Q mumbled. James snorted and kissed his sweaty skin, but somehow had nothing else to say. Q smiled and reached up to cover James’ arms with both of his own, and did not mind when Carly wandered up the bed a few minutes later to settle against his temple.

He didn’t know exactly what he’d done in life to deserve this, but he would burn everything that stood in his way to keep it now that it was here.

* * * * *

“I have to say, when you said you wanted me to come with you on some errands, this isn’t really what I had in mind.” Moneypenny’s voice was dry; Q could hardly hear her over the wind blustering past them, even with Moneypenny’s face turned in towards his. She walked in step beside him as they made their way across the cemetery grounds, bundled up in their winter coats against the brisk cold of Sunday morning.

“What, a nice walk through a graveyard not your cup of tea?” Q grinned, and then winced as the wind picked up, cold air biting at his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose. “I admit I wasn’t expecting it to be this windy,” he added, raising his voice a little to be heard over the bluster.

“You might have warned me we’d be outside, it’s only luck that I’m not wearing a dress at the moment,” Moneypenny observed, and elbowed him lightly in the ribs. Q hardly felt it, but he flailed
They had left Moneypenny’s car parked along the main road through the cemetery, and were crossing the grounds on foot; Q hadn’t been here in more than two years, and while he was fairly confident of being able to find what he was looking for, he thought it best to approach from the same direction as last time. The cemetery was a forty-minute drive outside central London, in Tring, where Simon Dubois had grown up, and he had visited only a handful of times since leaving secondary school. Q felt vaguely as though he shouldn’t be coming here empty-handed, that he ought to have a bouquet of flowers or something, but the urge to come visit had only occurred to him yesterday evening. And one of the nice things about visiting cemeteries was that the dead didn’t expect much of anything from you, so it was difficult to let them down.

“You are one of the only people I’d let drag me out to a cemetery with ‘There’s something I want to show you’ as my only explanation,” Moneypenny continued, grabbing for Q’s arm as he nearly tripped over a headstone half-hidden in snow. “If this turns out to be some kind of sick prank, you’re in trouble.” She snaked her arm through his and patted his arm, and Q grinned, leaning in to her and matching his steps to hers.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. But that reminds me, I’ve been meaning to ask you the best way to hide a body, Moneypants.”

“Try ‘not in broad daylight,’ for starters.”

“Duly noted. Ah… there it is.” Q had spotted the herald angel statue he’d been looking for, the nearest landmark to what he’d brought Moneypenny here today to see. He changed their trajectory, tugging Moneypenny along with him as he made a beeline for a small stand of graves perhaps five meters from the angel. They drew even with the gravestones, and Q crouched, brushing snow away from the markers as Moneypenny looked on curiously.

“Christopher and Bethany Dubois,” Moneypenny read aloud. “Your mum and dad?” Q nodded, already shuffling to the next grave over and brushing that marker off too. Moneypenny frowned, and then caught her breath. “Q, is this your grave?”

Q grinned up at her over his shoulder, his expression only slightly rueful. “It is. Or, well, it’s Simon Dubois’ grave. They buried an empty casket here when that identity was declared dead. I got to pick what went on the gravestone.” He ran his fingers lightly over the engraved words, remembering how strange it had been to pick his own epitaph, how full of foreboding the act had felt: *All which it inherit, shall dissolve, And, like this insubstantial pageant faded, Leave not a rack behind.*

Moneypenny stared at him. “You are weird,” she said after a moment, but she crouched next to Q and slung her arm over his shoulders, kissing the side of his head. “Feeling a bit morbid today, love?” she asked, her tone softer than before.

“Not really.” Q smiled, staring down at the tombstones, wondering vaguely why he didn’t feel more melancholy. A graveyard was the place for it, after all, but his heart was light today and he didn’t really want to have to work hard to justify that. “I haven’t been Simon for almost five years now. I got a clean slate.” He looked quietly over at her. “I guess I didn’t bollocks it up too badly.”

“Nah, you did alright,” Moneypenny smiled at him, and then stood up, giving him her hand up as well. “That does remind me, though.”

“Mm?”
“Do you… well. Are you alright with us just calling you Q?”

Q arched an eyebrow at her as he accepted her hand and stood up, stuffing his hands in his pockets to hide them from the wind, his fingers still tingling from the chill of brushing away the snow; he should have brought gloves. “You’ve known me for over two years, and you’re just now asking me this?”

Moneypenny huffed. “Well, I just! I dunno, I figured I ought to at least ask. I could tell you didn’t love being called by your—your legal name, I suppose, but maybe you’d like ’Elliot’ better?”

Q shrugged. Moneypenny extended her arm once more, and Q took it, amusing himself for a moment with the mental question of who would offer whom their arm the next time Moneypenny and James happened to be on a mission together, should the situation ever arise. He couldn’t decide if he hoped it would or it wouldn’t. “I don’t care all that much, to be honest,” he said. “You’re not wrong, I don’t love ‘Will,’ but that’s mostly because it has just never felt—real. It felt like another pseudonym. Elliot’s the same, in that respect.” Q cast a last glance at his parents’ graves, suffering another pang that he hadn’t brought any flowers with him, and decided to visit again the following weekend to rectify that error. Maybe he’d bring James.

“’Q’ isn’t even a pseudonym, though,” Moneypenny pointed out. “It’s just a letter. A… rank, even. Like being a double-oh.” Q smiled faintly, turning and walking arm-in-arm with her back towards her car, more than ready to be out of this bloody wind.

“To you, maybe,” he said finally, when they were more than halfway back to the car. “But it’s… When I got promoted to Q, I felt like I was finally where I belonged. Somewhere I could do and be everything that I’d always wanted, without having to be afraid or ashamed of any of it.” He smiled, eyes watering slightly as he turned his face into the wind, watching the bare tree branches shiver under their light coating of snow. “‘My avocation and my vocation, as my two eyes make one in sight.’”

Moneypenny’s mouth quirked, and she reached over to squeeze his arm with her free hand. “I’ll just stick to calling you boffin, then.” Her smile turned wicked, and Q braced himself as she added, “Though now I’m curious to know how James feels about calling out a letter of the alphabet during sex.”

“James calls me lots of things during sex, Moneypants,” said Q blithely. “I can make you a list, if you like—”

“You wouldn’t!”

“—but you might not want to read it at work, is what I’m saying—”

“Q!”

* * * * *

“Have a moment, Q?”

Q glanced up from his computer screen, frowning at Tanner. It was actually the troublesome computer program he was working on that had earned the frown, not the Chief of Staff, but Tanner smiled and deposited a pastry bag on Q’s desktop anyway. The wrapper was brown with cupcakes printed on it, the tell-tale sign of goods from A Piece of Cake; the bakery had reopened just a few weeks prior, to Q’s immense personal satisfaction. MI6 had gone to great trouble to be able to guarantee that the Stantons were at no risk of retaliation by any of the Markhams’ associates, and Q
had amused himself endlessly at wondering how much of that was due to a deep need by fifty percent of MI6’s employees to restore their access to Adrienne’s scones.

“Bribery will get you nowhere, Tanner,” he said, reaching out to snatch the bag with his prize in it before Tanner could renege. “Now tell me how I can help you.”

“I have information on 007’s upcoming mission for you,” said Tanner with a small smile.

“Ah,” said Q. “Yes, I saw the email; I’ve not gotten to it yet, though.” He straightened, saving his progress with a keystroke and turning to face Tanner. “Was there something about it we needed to discuss?”

“More or less,” said Tanner. “Our intel on the drug cartel 007 will be pursuing is contradictory, so I wanted to go over some of the potential scenarios 007 might find himself up against, depending on how it falls out.”

“Right,” said Q, “pull up a chair, I’ll open the file.” Tanner turned to retrieve the spare chair against the wall, but as he passed the end of Q’s desk he bumped a short stack of notebooks and paperwork with his hip, sending the top notebook spilling to the floor.

“Oh, bugger, sorry about that…” Tanner crouched before Q could bend to retrieve it himself, pausing as he stared at the page the notebook had fallen open to; it was a sketch artist’s notebook, the blank kind with crisp, heavy paper, and the page Tanner was looking at contained several graphite sketches. All of them were variations of the same two designs: an apple and a pair of crossed pistols, both stylized. “What’s this, then?” he asked curiously. Q rolled his eyes and held out a hand for his notebook back.

“It’s for a personal project that I add to every now and then,” he said, which was as much he was going to say to anyone about his tattoos at work, and then, pointedly, “Chair, Bill Tanner. Or your computer’s update goes to the bottom of my staff’s to-do list.”

“Right,” said Tanner, grinning and turning around again; Q had the sneaking suspicion that Tanner only put up with Q’s peevishness because it suited him to do so, but then he was actually Q’s favorite coworker aside from Moneypenny, so that was alright.

“I swear, sometimes I don’t know what you lot would do without me,” Q said mildly. He hid a smile as Tanner picked up the chair and brought it back over to sit beside Q’s at the desk, and maximized the email about 007’s next mission on his screen. “So. A group known for their horrific brutality, suspected in money laundering, drugs and weapons smuggling, and ohhh, sex trafficking, that’s always excellent…” Q scanned the details, eyebrows climbing steadily into his hairline. “Tanner, this brief makes it sound like Bond has a better chance of swimming across the Atlantic than making it out of this in one piece.”

“That’s about the size of it,” said Tanner.

“Business as usual, then,” said Q. “Let’s get to it. Won’t do to go letting the side down.”

“We live to serve,” remarked Tanner, and Q smiled.
The Aston Martin DB5.

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