Summary

More than anything, Mike Taylor wanted to be ordinary. Being a genius, he learned early in life, meant people expected too much. A career at the MI6 Help Desk seemed the perfect way to guarantee a lifetime of obscurity, until he got a very unusual tech support call.

Notes

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Chapter 1

June 2011

“This one’s the most promising,” Iris said, handing a stapled, printed CV across her boss’ desk. He was the senior IT manager for MI6, in charge of not only Iris’ Help Desk but a half dozen other departments. “The candidate’s name is Mike Taylor. Background check came up clean, so no problem with security clearance.”

“Hmm. Nothing extraordinary,” said Richard Parker as he skipped the CV itself and went right to Taylor’s transcripts.

Iris watched tensely, hoping she’d made the right choice out of the flood of CVs that had hit her inbox. Mike Taylor seemed to be the perfect combination of skilled and unambitious, just the type of steady, long-term worker Iris preferred. The background check supported that conclusion: middle-of-the-road student, the usual computer science sort, though with quite a few engineering subjects. Most of the appended notes read ‘Student could excel, if he applied himself’ and ‘Excellent potential’.

“Help Desk isn’t exactly rocket science,” Iris said, a hint of desperation in her voice.

Richard sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose where his reading glasses had left little marks. “If we’d actually given the field agents mandatory computer training before issuing them all laptops, your department wouldn’t be overworked.”

“Look what he marked as a salary range,” Iris coaxed, pointing at the printout of the online application, where a lovely checkmark sat next to ‘negotiable’. “His address couldn’t be in a worse part of town. We’re not dealing with some posh bastard who wants to get rich off a cushy government job.”

“I’d defy anyone to find ‘cushy’ at MI6,” Richard said, lips quirking up in amusement. “All right. You can have him — but no one else. Not until I see the impact of a single hire on your numbers. With the costs of hiring and securing new employees, it’s cheaper to spread around a bit of overtime than to hire additional staff.”

With almost embarrassing gratitude, Iris said, “Thank you, Mr Parker. I’ll get in touch with him right away. Did you want to interview him?”

“I’m certain that won’t be necessary. I trust your judgement. Now, what about this new trouble ticket system you want to implement?”

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July 2011

Mike Taylor turned out to be even more unassuming in person than he’d been in his online application. He was utterly average, fitting comfortably into one of the most common stereotypes in the IT department: in his case, the thin, never-sees-sunlight, glasses-wearing one. It was a shame, really, Iris thought as she led him through the maze of cubicles to the one he’d share. If he did something about his hair and got Lasik, he could probably be lovely.
“The system is automated. You’ll want to stick with the scripts. If there’s anything the script doesn’t handle, escalate it to tier two,” she said, gesturing him to his seat. “Annie, this is Mike. Mike, Annie Hodges will help you settle in.”

He murmured a polite greeting to her as he set down his rucksack — with a temporary ‘cleared’ security tag hanging from the zip — and sat down. Even though the poor lad couldn’t have weighed more than nine or ten stone, the chair creaked and wobbled dangerously. Help Desk received the cast-off furniture that had already gone through most of the IT department, so the chair was probably the best of a bad lot.

Annie, who was taking a call, stabbed the mute button on her headset and grunted a greeting of her own. She toggled mute off again and went back to her script. She was diligent, hard-working, and utterly without ambition. She worked her shifts, refused overtime, and spent every waking minute of her free time playing video games.

Iris had Mike log onto the help ticket system. She was pleased to see he hadn’t cheated and put his temporary password on his mobile or a Post-it note — either of which had got more than one new hire sacked. Once she verified that he could access the training software, she pointed out her office, invited him to come to her with any questions, and got out of the bullpen before anyone noticed her presence. Whenever she ventured out of her office for too long, people tended to ask about pay rises and extra time off, and she didn’t have the time or patience to deal with that right now — not with their insane backlog of trouble tickets.

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September 2011

“Help Desk call centre, this is Taylor, operator 4191. This is not a secure line. How may I help you?”

“Bloody fucking thank god,” James Bond snapped in a furious whisper. “Bond, James, agent 007, and if you hang up on me, I swear to Christ that I’ll rip out your intestines if I don’t get my arse shot off. Where the hell’s Q Branch?”

“I’m... sorry, sir? There’s been a power glitch —”

Bond froze, hearing footsteps outside the office — if it could be properly termed an office. Damned shack was more like it, with paper-thin walls made that much worse by the fact that he’d removed one of the windows so he could climb in. The bitter wind was cutting right into his bones, because apparently someone hadn’t mentioned to Mongolia that September was still autumn, not the middle of fucking winter.

“Sir? Are you there?”

He hissed, and the man — boy, his mind supplied — obligingly shut the hell up.

A full minute passed before the footsteps returned, now going in the other direction. At least now he had the approximate rotation for the guards.

“All right,” he whispered. “You’re going to need to concentrate and help me out here. I’m in a room full of computers, I think, only they’re like none I’ve ever seen — no bloody monitors or keyboards
for one. Which one’s most likely to control a bank of mobile missile platforms?"

There was a momentary pause. “Face the door, and while slowly looking from right to left, do a full circle, describing everything you see as clearly and succinctly as possible.”

Bond let out a relieved sigh, glad he hadn’t wound up with an idiot. He had a small torch with a red lens, which he aimed at the door, giving it another quick search.

“Hinges on the left, door’s not wired, handle’s a lever not a knob, no security — not that there’s any bloody need, in the middle of fucking nowhere. Blank wall beside the door, up to the corner. Shelves are wood, three of them. Bottom’s got old plastic tubs, those big blue ones, full of what looks like wires, only in this bloody hellhole for all I know they’ve got fucking scorpions and landmines. Next shelf up has either computers or, fuck if I know, video game consoles. Four of them, as black as anything can be under all this bloody dust, eight inches high, three across, round button in the centre front with a red light above. Shelf above that has five more and what looks like a bloody dot matrix printer, case so old it’s gone all yellow under the dust. Keep going?”

“Yes. As soon as I hear what I’m looking for, I’ll tell you.”

He turned the torch on the back wall, where he’d entered. “Back wall has what used to be a window and an American *Sports Illustrated* calendar from — Christ, 1988?” he said, shaking his head. Apparently being stationed here reduced people to new levels of desperation.

“You’ll probably need that. Take it down, but don’t bother looking through it until I tell you.”

Bond eyed the calendar suspiciously and started to speak, before he hissed a warning again. The footsteps didn’t approach, though, so after two minutes, he demanded quietly, “Are you taking the piss? What’s the bloody calendar got to do with anything?”

“The layers of dust indicate that there isn’t any permanent staff there. That means it’s not likely that one person holds relevant login information — it’s probably shared. If we need any such data, I’ll bet you a hundred quid that calendar is where you’ll find it written down.”

“Son of a bitch,” Bond muttered, pulling the calendar off the rusty nail. Sure enough, there were signs that it had been taken down and put back up multiple times. “There isn’t a bloody keyboard or mouse anywhere,” he complained, continuing his survey of the room. “The other wall’s exactly the same — shelves, boxes underneath. This time there’s nine of the computer things, four on top, five on the bottom.”

“Get down, eye-level with where the floor meets the wall. There will be ropes of cables running from each of the shelves, probably into a box about eight inches wide and one inch thick, with lights that flash. One of the cables will be running not towards the shelves, but away from it. Probably to a drawer of some sort. Find the cable and follow it to the drawer. When you pull it out, you’ll probably see a recessed screen. It may be touchscreen, but from what you’re describing, I’ll bet there will be an old clunky keyboard and mouse in the drawer, too.”

“On which side?” Bond asked, quietly lowering himself to all fours. Thankfully his mobile had a hands-free headset. “Oh, and is this going to be a problem? I used that search function on my mobile to lock onto their comms, since I’m in the middle of bloody nowhere.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that when I told you the line wasn’t secure?” the operator snapped. Then he took a breath. “The box will most likely be halfway between the shelves. And hold, please.” With that, the line clicked and went ominously silent.
“You said it wasn’t secure first,” Bond muttered petulantly, wondering if this wouldn’t be easier if he just shot all the guards — there were only eight or ten of them — and then disabled the missiles.

He went back to searching under the shelves for where all the cables came together, but saw nothing. Frustrated, he set down his torch, reached under the shelf, and picked up one of the blue tubs, muscles straining as he tried to back up with it. Movement made him freeze. In the shadowed red light of the torch, he saw dull tan, taupe, and white stripes.

Slowly, so slowly that his muscles trembled with the strain, he set the tub down.

“All right, lines are now secure,” came Taylor’s voice, sounding slightly irritated. “Let’s just hope that no one caught your piggyback before I had a chance to squash your signal. Did you find the terminal yet? Agent?”

Bond had only the fuzziest idea what Taylor was talking about. He’d been assured that the mobile’s search function was secure, but Q Branch had become... fuzzy in the last few years. “Found it,” he said, picking up the torch with slow, careful movements. He aimed it at the snake — a Halys viper, if his memory served — and said, “So did she. It’s warm, this box, isn’t it? Has fans to blow hot air?”

“Yes, actually. How did you...” The voice paused. “Oh. Oh, shit. You’ve found something’s nest, haven’t you? Be careful, agent.”

Only through a supreme act of willpower did Bond choke back his laughter. This puppy had no idea. “One moment,” he whispered casually, and started to inch forward.

It took two minutes, actually, before Bond spoke again. “Right. Found the box. All the wires come down into the box, except one that goes left, along the back wall, I suppose to the other shelves, and one that goes right, into another of these tubs. I take it that’s the one I want?”

“Who needs something as fancy as a drawer when you can have a plastic tub instead?” the tech said dryly. “Though I bet it’s waterproof. Yes, you’ll find your terminal in there. Though be cautious — whatever hole allows the cable to run through will also allow more creatures of the skittery variety. Watch for spiders and other unpleasant things.”

“The only ‘unpleasant’ thing here is me,” Bond muttered, taking the torch in his teeth to free up both hands. He rooted as quietly as possible through coils of dust-covered cables until he found not a keyboard but an entire bloody laptop — if something that weighed a good six pounds could be called a “laptop” and not a fucking brick.

He picked it up, tugging enough slack in the connecting cable so he could lift it to perch on the corner of the tub. “Laptop. Doesn’t look wired to explode.”

“Plastic or metal?” came the quick reply. “And how many inches thick when closed?”

“Ten inches across, almost that deep, two inches high. It’s a metal case with bumpers on the corners.”

“Go ahead and turn it on. You’ll probably see a login screen. Flip through the calendar to see if it has the relevant information written down in it. If not, click the password hint button. It will probably give you a month name.”

“Right.” Bond stuck the torch in his teeth again, found the catch, and pushed open the lid. The screen opened with a grinding feel of trapped dust, making him wince. He held still, listening for the guards, but heard nothing. He pushed it open the rest of the way, noting that once it was fully open, the screen swivelled from side to side on a now-loose hinge.
He pressed the power button, and nothing happened. With a sinking feeling, he flipped the thing over enough to note that the power cable — presumably meant to go to the round hole in the back — wasn’t plugged in. He sat back on his heels, took the torch out of his mouth, and muttered, “Fuck. Right, then. Plan B.”

“Plan B? What’s plan B?” Taylor asked sharply.

“Kill everyone. Thanks, Taylor. Sorry, no time for one of those surveys.”

After a pause, Taylor dryly answered, “Thank you for calling the Help Desk. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Bond grinned, tapped his earpiece to end the call, and unplugged the laptop. He’d take it with him. For now, though, he set it beside the dead snake, drew his gun, and went to deal with the guards.

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October 2011

“Mail for you.”

Mike Taylor looked up in surprise. He’d gone direct deposit and paperless with his pay, filled out all his personnel files online, and had never dared use his work identification to sign up for any professional journals, newsletters, or sales catalogues. (The fact that such things existed for Help Desk techs was vaguely terrifying to him.)

Still, he took the clipboard, inwardly wincing as he picked up the perfectly normal biro taped to a string, and signed for a package, delivered via interdepartmental mail. Didn’t anyone automate these days?

“Thank you,” he said, and took the box. It was a repurposed box from Amazon.co.uk, with the top flaps interlaced and covered with a phenomenal amount of tape. A Post-it had been stuck to the top, under more tape. The bold black scrawl across the Post-it read TAYLOR 4191 HELP DESK.

Assuming that the mail room had screenings for bombs and other hazardous things, he turned to Annie and asked, “Have you got scissors?”

She grunted an affirmation, slid open a drawer, and hooked a pair of scissors with one finger. Muting her current call, she asked, “Order something?” as she passed them back.

“Nothing that would be delivered here.” He opened the scissors and sliced through the thick layers of tape a bit apprehensively. Then he returned the scissors and unwove the top flaps.

He stood up so he could better open the box. A call rang through, but there were eight other Tier One techs on duty; one of them would pick it up. He started scooping out the styrofoam peanuts a bit warily until his fingers found something. It was hard, with an odd, slick texture.

Baffled, he pulled out more of the peanuts, until —

“Christ!” he all but yelped, jerking his hands back instinctively, because that was a perfectly reasonable reflexive action when confronted with a bloody snake.
Annie was behind him in a flash, looking over his shoulder as best her headset tether would allow. “Oh, wow,” she breathed.

Heart pounding, he swallowed, recognising belatedly that it was obviously a dead snake. A dead, taxidermied, posed snake. He took a couple of steadying breaths and started to get rid of the rest of the peanuts, refusing to allow his hands to tremble with the rush of adrenaline.

“I dunno that the department’s gonna let you have that in your cube,” Annie warned. MI6 had a somewhat strict decorating policy.

Mike snorted and finally removed enough peanuts to reveal the snake, which had been artfully mounted in a coil, jaws open, wedge-shaped head ready to strike. The base was a round disk of polished, dark wood almost the exact same shade as the snake’s dark bands.

It was, he thought a bit dazedly, actually somewhat pretty. For a bloody unexpected snake.

He set it down and dug through the peanuts for an explanation, only to come up with another Post-it, this one with tiny fragments of styrofoam stuck to the sticky edge.

*Thank you. -007*
Chapter 2

January 2012

“Help Desk call centre, this is Taylor, operator 4191. This is not a secure line. How may I help you?”

“There you are,” Bond said, exasperated. He leaned back in the very comfortable leather executive chair, resisted the temptation to play with the levers, and said, “I’ve been trying to find you for two bloody days. This is Bond, 007. Where the hell have you been?”

“I had two days off,” Taylor said, sounding puzzled. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“This damned USB drive doesn’t work. I think it’s because she’s got a Mac. I need to get this program onto her computer, though.”

“All right... Does anything happen when you plug it in?”

“Nothing. No windows, no notifications, nothing.” Bond huffed in irritation.

“Does the drive have any lights that flicker when you plug it in?”

“Green ones, but only for a few seconds. Then they go off.”

“On the computer, do you see a row of colourful icons? Including a two-tone blue square smiley face?”

Bond was relieved that he’d coaxed his target into handing over her login credentials. “There’s a silver icon that says ‘Macintosh HD’, some blue folders. Nothing else.”

“Move your mouse to hover at the edge of each side of the screen until the row of icons pops up. And when it does, don’t move your mouse away from it or it will disappear again.”

“Hang on, I hear splashing,” Bond said, swivelling the chair around. He glanced out at the sea, but saw no sign of his target. This was a strange reversal, being on his target’s yacht, open and invited, while his target was out scuba diving. Usually that’d be his job, often involving magnetic mines to attach strategically to the hull. “We’re fine. Two bloody days, I’ve had to wait. Be glad I like New Zealand.”

“I’ve always wanted to go there. Sounds beautiful. And I’d have to visit some of the filming locations from Lord of the Rings, of course.” Taylor coughed, and cleared his throat. “Anyway, did you find the dock? The row of icons?”

Getting back on track, Bond moved the mouse to the edges of the screen, and then froze. “It just went dark. What the bloody hell?”

Taylor chuckled. “Hot corners. Just move your mouse and keep looking. I suggest avoiding the corners of the screen from now on, though.”

With another annoyed little huff, Bond got the screen working again and searched the edges until he found what could only be the dock at the bottom of the screen, where the taskbar was on a proper computer. “I think I’ve found it. Ah — there it is,” he added, finding the smiling square. “You sure that’s not two blokes making out?”
“If it is, they’re incredibly happy about it, aren’t they?” Taylor said, and Bond suspected he was smiling. “Are you on a laptop or a desktop?”

“Desktop,” Bond said with a laugh. “Nice one, too. Expensive — not that everything else isn’t just as bloody expensive.”

“It’s a Mac — she probably had to nearly sell her soul for it. Is your mouse white with no left or right click, or not?”

“I’m on a yacht that probably cost half a million quid. Money’s not the issue — at least not until we get the names I need off this thing. The mouse is white, no buttons except a tiny grey one.”

“Lovely. Hardcore Mac user,” Taylor chuckled. “All right. Towards the last section of the dock, you’ll either see a stack of blue folders with an ‘A’ on top, or what looks a brown address book.”

“Wait, are you looking at a Mac right now?” Bond asked. He didn’t think they had any of them at MI6. Boothroyd had pitched a fit about changing over, last Bond had heard.

“Sadly, MI6 is a strictly PC environment. But I know Macs very well. I have a couple at home.”

“Useful,” Bond said, wondering just how good this Taylor’s memory for computers was. Before Taylor, he’d never got anything but irritation from the Help Desk.

“Once you’re hovering over the folder I described, hold down the control button on the keyboard, and click.”

It wasn’t intuitive, but Bond pressed control and clicked the blue ‘A’ folder. “Oh. That looks much more familiar,” he said, relieved to see an array of programs as if this were a normal computer. “Which do I want?”

“Towards the bottom is a folder called ‘Utilities.’ Hover over it to open the sub-menu, and select ‘Disk Utility’.”

“Right. Got it,” Bond said, feeling much more confident. “This isn’t the worst mission, but it’s been bloody irritating. You’d think someone would’ve planned for this.”

“There are very, very few jump drives that a Mac won’t open. You just got unlucky.”

“No one’s shot at me yet, so it doesn’t count. Right, so there’s a big blank area, icons at the top, and a list at the left.”

“Excellent. I suspect you’ll see a 250 gig... uh, GB Hitachi on top and a white —”

“Yes. Are you really Tier One? Not the... supervisor? Manager?”

“Yes.” Taylor cleared his throat. “Next will be a white almost envelope-looking icon, which probably has the word micro in it, or something to that effect, and will be less than fifty GBs. Do you see it?”

“Two?” Bond asked sceptically. “But there’s the ‘micro’ part.”

“That’s the one. Select the second white envelope — it will look like a subfolder — and click ‘Convert’ in the icons list at the top. Select ‘DMG’ from the Image Format list, and put it on the desktop.”

Bond followed Taylor’s instructions, idly wondering if he could get Taylor transferred to Q Branch.
He was too damned useful to be rotting away on the Help Desk with the other idiots. Of course, if he
did that, he’d lose his essentially exclusive access to the boy, and he was... well, too damned useful.

“All right. What now?”

“Close everything. You’ll have a file on the desktop now that ends in dot-d-m-g. Double click it, and
it will mount a white envelope on the desktop.”

“We’ll pretend that makes sense and move along,” Bond muttered wryly. “But yes, there’s a white
envelope now. You’re really doing this from memory?”

“It’s pretty rote by the time you’ve done it a thousand times,” Taylor said with a chuckle. “Now
double click on the white envelope. Your program will be in it. Copy it wherever you like.”

Bond did as instructed, and then frowned. Four separate executables, a half dozen of what he
recalled were data files, and a batch file. “Right. If this were a normal computer, I’d just use the batch
file, but I have a feeling you’re going to tell me...”

“Oh god,” Taylor said in a deeply disappointed tone. Bond braced himself for bad news. “I thought
Q Branch were supposed to be bloody geniuses. Agent Bond, please tell me that the program you
need to copy doesn’t end in e-x-e?”

“If I’m recalling this correctly, all four of them do. That’s what the batch file’s for, isn’t it? We need
to monitor her keystrokes, email, ports, and... the other thing,” he said vaguely.

“You have got to be kidding me. Fucking idiots. Not you,” he added reassuringly. “None of those
will work, 007. Can you give me time to find out if Q Branch has Mac-compatible alternatives?”

Bond leaned back in his chair and thought about his target. Three inches shorter than him, could hold
her breath for six minutes while diving. She thought he was a professional gambler vacationing in
New Zealand. “I can find something to occupy my time, yes.”

“Be cautious if you decide to spend that time in the ocean,” Taylor chuckled. “They have deadly
creatures in the waters off New Zealand. Tiny jellyfish that cause slow, excruciating death, so I’ve
been told.”

“Once again, I need to point out my own not-inconsiderable qualifications. Do you — Never mind,”
he said, realising only then that Help Desk techs probably had no idea what the Double O
programme was actually about. “Are you working at this time tomorrow? Or is this pointless? I can
just take the bloody computer to the local station, though when she goes missing, someone might
notice.”

“I assure you, it will be exceptionally easy once I...” Taylor paused. “I may not have sufficient
security clearance, actually. But I assure you, I will speak with the Q Branch tech in charge of your
op and instruct them on the —”

“Oh, Christ no,” Bond interrupted. “I’ve been avoiding dealing with him for two days, waiting for
you. He’s a bloody cretin. I wouldn’t trust him with a flowerpot. With a plastic flower. What do you
need to do this?”

“Oh, Christ no,” Bond interrupted. “I’ve been avoiding dealing with him for two days, waiting for
you. He’s a bloody cretin. I wouldn’t trust him with a flowerpot. With a plastic flower. What do you
need to do this?”

“Um,” Taylor said, surprise obvious in his voice. “I need a number you can get me now and a thirty-
minute time window during which absolutely no one will look at the computer.”

“That’s all? Easy,” Bond said confidently. “What number?”
“Can you give me the thirty minutes now, or will I need to wait?”

“Right now, if you like. We’re moored and there’s no crew aboard. I can keep her occupied, assuming she even comes back up. For all I know, the jellyfish may have her...”

Taylor laughed, low and without the usual sarcastic edge his laughter seemed to hold. “That would certainly make things easy. All right, in the upper left hand corner of the screen, there is an apple. Click on it and select ‘About this Mac’.”

“Done. Are you going to get in trouble?” Bond asked. “I can deal with your supervisor — not fatally, but I can authorise damn near anything I need to get a mission done.”

“I’d rather make it look like the programs worked and avoid the hassle, actually. Don’t worry about it, though I appreciate the concern. Now, click on the button that says ‘More Info’.”

“Done. If you change your mind, let me know. I can always send him one of the jellyfish.” He grinned, wondering if Taylor had liked the bloody snake. Bond was rather proud of that kill; he hadn’t even needed his knife.

“I think I’d rather you sent the jellyfish to me, actually. In glass, obviously, so I don’t die. I’m rather fond of your deadly mementos, Agent Bond.”

“You can drop the ‘agent’. Or just call me ‘James’.”

“Oh. Thank you, James. You can call me Mike.” Taylor paused. “On the left hand side, you’ll see a list, starting with ‘Hardware,’ followed by ‘Network.’ Expand the network list and look for a string of numbers labelled IP Address.”

“Found it. Want all of them?” Bond asked.

“Yes, please. Hold on, let me open a text editor. Okay, go ahead.”

Bond read all the numbers and let Taylor confirm them back to him. Then he remembered to ask, “Can I take out the USB drive? I’d rather not forget it.”

“Yes.” Taylor paused again, and Bond could hear the keys of his computer clacking rapidly. “Telecom NZ. Oh, this is going to be easy. Half an hour, James.”

“Perfect. I’ll call you back when it’s safe.” Bond hesitated, and then said, “If I don’t call you back, I need this — Let me give you a number. It’s 006, Alec Trevelyan.”

“Barring the computer shutting down for no reason, you needn’t worry — I won’t fail. And you’ll be fine as long as you avoid the jellyfish. And sharks. Talk to you soon.”

Bond considered correcting his assumption that he shouldn’t worry but let it pass. Taylor had no idea that Bond’s missions were uniformly hazardous, even life-threatening. No reason to upset him, though. Normally, the local station would handle that sort of thing if Bond were terminated, but they didn’t know about information coming through this informal channel. He’d have to arrange a backup plan himself.

“Thanks, Mike. I’ll call you back in an hour or so,” he said instead, and rang off. He retrieved the USB drive, pocketed it, and then undid everything he’d done. He probably should have asked Mike to talk him through the deletion, just in case, but he’d keep his target distracted instead.

He sent Alec a quick text, suggesting he get in touch with Mike Taylor, 4191, at the Help Desk if the
mission went balls-up.

Then he went to go distract his target.

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**February 2012**

“Package for you, Taylor.”

Taylor looked up with some relief from the endless mire of help ticket notifications that was dragging his work email into a special hell. He felt like Roy from *The IT Crowd* — ready to murder everyone who called in just to be told that they needed to turn it off and turn it back on again.

The box, therefore, was very well timed.

Taylor grinned at the address written out in black marker, causing Annie to raise an eyebrow at the unusual display of blatant emotion. She handed over the scissors without being asked.

“Should I get Audacity ready to record your scream?” she asked after muting her mic.

“Oh, I think I know what this is. The only question is, is it in glass or not?”

He cut open the tape, returned the scissors, and unfolded the box flaps. This time, he didn’t hesitate to dig into the peanuts, scooping them out into the bin. But instead of finding an acrylic block with a jellyfish inside, he found a second cardboard box. It was flat and much too large to hold a book, unless it was a very thick coffee table book.

The box had a stylised ‘AM’ on the top. Curious, he lifted off the top and found dark blue fabric with a card, this time cream-coloured card stock.

*Jellyfish are too squishy to smuggle.* -007

He set the card aside and unwrapped the fabric, revealing a wooden mask, intricately carved with blackened lines.

Taylor held it up, admiring the intricate lines even as his stomach fluttered. The snake he understood completely — it was part joke, part thank-you present. But this was a damn gift without any edge of humour to soften it. Taylor wondered just what kind of fuck-ups they had in Q Branch that an agent would be grateful enough for simple competence to reward it like this.

“Huh. Not a dead thing,” he muttered.

“Bloody creepy,” Annie said, looking over his shoulder. Then she said, “No, not you, sir, please hold,” into her headset and muted the call. “Looks like you got yourself a stalker, Mike. You don’t have a pet rabbit, d’you?”

“Rabbit?” he asked absently, tracing the lines with his fingertips.

She just sighed. “Go Google *Fatal Attraction* when you get home.” She went back to her desk and picked up the script where she’d left off.
Taylor packed the mask into the box to keep it from getting damaged by any of the sugary drinks and food that dominated all Help Desk surfaces. He tucked it next to his bag by his feet, thinking that mounting it in his flat just above the snake would make one hell of a statement indeed.

Then he blinked to cut off that train of thought entirely. Wouldn’t do to start picturing an undoubtedly well-muscle agent being in his flat to admire the placement of his gifts, would it?

His phone rang, and he sighed as he answered, just barely stopping himself from starting off by sharply asking, “Did you turn it off and on again?”
Chapter 3

March 2012

“Help Desk call centre, this is Taylor, operator 4191. This is not a secure line. How may I help you?” Taylor leaned back in his chair, thinking mostly about the programming manual he’d downloaded onto his phone earlier. RQOS had come out with an update, and he was considering installing a monitoring system for his flat. A few local properties had been burgled recently.

“If you were a mafia boss with a private art collection, what would you install under a floor plate?” came the bizarre response. “Oh — it’s Bond again. I’ve been dialling the Help Desk for the last hour trying to get you. Does no one there know how to transfer a damned call?”

Taylor smiled, thankful that the interruption from RQOS had been worthy of his attention. “Agent Bond. I’m glad you survived New Zealand. It’s all automated, so I don’t know that anything actually can be manually transferred,” he said with a chuckle. “What kind of metal is the floorplate?”

“Excellent question, since it’s under a cobalt blue Persian rug — the thick, hand-woven type. I’m surrounded by paintings, so the usual suspect, something explosive, is out of the question. I’m suspecting it’ll just communicate an alarm, but since no one’s come running, it’s most likely a step-off trigger, like a landmine. Which would be awkward, given that I’m most definitely not supposed to be in this particular country.”

Taylor sat up a little straighter, alarmed. He tried not to let it bleed into his voice, though, when he responded with a simple, “Oh. That’s awkward. Give us a sec.”

It seemed unlikely that there would be anything really powerful under the plate — if it had been strong enough to hold Bond’s weight for any length of time, it would probably ricochet any directed ammunition into the paintings. So it was most likely a control switch or relay.

“Wait,” Taylor suddenly said. “You’ve been standing there for an hour, waiting for me?”

There was an embarrassed sort of pause. “This is his vacation home, so no one’s here except the maid service, and they left earlier this morning. And my idio— er, Q Branch contact is... I don’t know, in after-school detention or something. I need a communications specialist, not an inventory fetishist who expects me to account for every bloody bullet I fire,” he added persuasively.

Taylor chuckled. He didn’t mind playing Q Branch stand-in for 007. In fact, he wasn’t ashamed to admit to himself that in the weeks following the last call, he’d been slightly disappointed every time the phone rang and it wasn’t Agent Bond. James. Not that Taylor would say that to the agent himself. “Fair enough. How big is this rug?”

“Twelve-by-nineteen or twenty feet, give or take — I’m estimating the far side. I’m at the principle border, lower right, by the room’s secondary entrance from the servants’ corridor. There’s a truly horrid glass sculpture covering the central medallion. The floor beneath should have been all travertine, so if there’s a pressure plate under the travertine, it’s got to be strong enough to withstand the weight of two-foot-square tile. I barely even felt the click, truth be told.” His sigh was frustrated. “If it’s going to call out for help, I’d just like to know, since I’m a bit limited on ammunition.”

Well, it would be easy enough for Taylor to find out — but it wouldn’t be wise to do a quick bit of hacking from the Help Desk. He hesitated, contemplating the risk of being caught (quite small, if he were honest with himself) versus the fun of keeping the operative alive (and thus likely to call again).
“If you give me the address, I’ll know in five to ten minutes. But you absolutely cannot share with Q Branch that I helped you, or I’ll be fired. Or deleted.”

“Actually, you won’t. I can guarantee that,” Bond answered grimly, before reciting an address that he had to spell out twice. Mike had never heard of Lubyanka, which was apparently a suburb of Moscow. That explained a bit about why Bond was so concerned about an alarm going off.

“Either way, I don’t want the attention,” Taylor said as he started doing a static IP records search for the address. The suburb was served by several telecoms organizations, but they weren’t exactly models of modern security, so it only took a few moments before he was trolling Whois for the security designer’s name and pinging the IP for verification. Hacking the network was disturbingly easy (should have gone with Red Queen, he thought evilly), and between that and the schematics the designer kept on his personal server (idiot), it took only a few quick minutes to figure out exactly what tricky little contraption Bond was standing on.

“Oh,” he said to himself as he fiddled with the router. “OK, so, I have good news and bad news.”

“What is actually an improvement over a customary mission, believe it or not,” Bond said wryly.

“The good news is that I’ve disabled all outgoing communications from the security system, so you don’t have to worry about the Rent-a-Cops. The bad news is that there are lethal countermeasures installed under the plate, so you can’t step off it just yet.”

“Fantastic. I’m going to guess the security is gas,” Bond said thoughtfully. “Probably something inert to displace the oxygen. The room’s environmentally sealed to protect the paintings.”

“Yes, it’s noncorrosive so as not to damage any of the artwork.” Taylor looked at the name of the gas on the designer’s schematic, but decided to save himself the embarrassment of trying to pronounce it correctly. “That means that if you can hold your breath long enough to get out of the room, you’ll be fine. I’ll open all the doors and ensure nothing is locked, so you’ll be able to run. Then I’ll lock it behind you again to keep it contained, so the poor maid doesn’t get a nasty surprise when she gets back. Just give me a moment.”

“You can do that?” Bond sounded impressed.

“It’s not that hard once you’re in the system,” Taylor murmured as he set the doorlock timers. “Are you ready? Count of three?”

“Ready.”

Taylor unlocked the doors and waited a few extra seconds for the command to reach Russia. Then he started counting for Bond, hand hovering over the lock button. He need to make sure none of the gas escaped to the rest of the house — Bond may not mind having fatalities, but Taylor would avoid it wherever possible. “One... two... three!”

He didn’t hear anything except a soft huff of breath.

Then there was a loud, metallic click — followed by a series of additional clicks that shouldn’t have happened.

Taylor sat forward, closing his eyes to concentrate on the sound through the single, low-quality earpiece on his headset.

“Privyet,” Bond said cheerfully.
“Thank Christ,” Taylor said with relief. This helping out against lethal security systems wasn’t something he had much experience with — it was a lot more dramatic and adrenaline-producing than he realised. Suddenly, RQOS didn’t seem quite so attractive.

“Not quite,” Bond said, just as Taylor heard voices start to shout in angry, harsh Russian.

He jerked the earpiece away from his head as gunfire rang out, deafeningly close. Then, he remembered Bond saying something about limited ammunition. He scanned the security system quickly, looking for something, anything, useful to use to help Bond escape.

Then, thank god, he heard Bond say, “Interesting,” before there was another loud flurry of explosions, followed by the sound of splintering wood.

“I’m looking for something to help you. There must be more lethal countermeasures around there somewhere...” Taylor muttered. “What’s interesting?”

“AK-12, prototype,” Bond said over three more sharp explosions. “Guessing 7.62 NATO, could be 39mm. She’s lovely,” he almost purred, followed by another quick burst of gunfire.

“Shiny,” Taylor said with a grin. “I’ve read a little about them, from one of the inter-office circulars. They’re not due to come out until next year, are they?”

“Which makes it very” — Bond cut off for a moment, over a loud thump and agonised scream —

“interesting that they have them.” He huffed in irritation. “That was a new silk tie.”

“There have been rumours about accuracy, so if it doesn’t have a muzzle break on it watch out for that.” Taylor paused. “Or, just empty as many rounds as humanly possible into the bad guys. I hear that the sound of shells falling during rapid fire is like a bell choir.”

Bond laughed grimly. “Let me just — Spasibo,” he said, and there was a single gunshot, followed by, “Now I have spare magazines. Check the fence. Is it wired? It wasn’t when I snuck in.”

Taylor did a quick scan. “Yes, looks like they’ve reactivated some of the security measures from the control room. Don’t touch it until I tell you. How long do you need to clear it? I’ll reactivate it behind you.”

For a moment, Bond said nothing, and Taylor wondered if he’d been hurt. Visions of blood loss and unconsciousness filled his thoughts, and he started to wonder if there was someone at MI6 — someone more qualified — that he should notify.

And then, almost reverently, Bond asked, “There’s a control room?”

“Well, yes,” Taylor said. Of course there would be. No one type-A enough to have deadly floor panels under Persian rugs would trust the running of his home security to someone offsite. “It’s the office in the front right corner of the building.”

“The one listed on my blueprint as ‘cleaning supplies’.” Bond took a breath. “Right, then. Care to have some fun, Taylor?”

“Something tells me you’re not about to invite me out dancing,” Taylor said dryly. “All right. Let me lock the guards out.”

“I’ll let you know when I’m at the control room,” Bond said, and went back to shooting a few seconds later.
There was definitely something to be said for having a pet Help Desk operator, even one who didn’t speak a word of Russian. With Bond providing translations, Taylor was able to help him figure out some of the more obscure security systems, and the experimentation never sounded a remote alarm, thanks to Taylor cutting off external communication. Of course, Bond had no damned idea how he’d managed — only that he had.

The quick response of the guards was worrying — especially given the military-grade hardware they were carrying. They’d operated like a trained squad, too, forcing Bond to take measures that were more reckless than even he generally preferred. Taylor couldn’t help with that, but he stayed on the line anyway. Not that Bond blamed him. Even listening in on an action movie had to be more fun than clearing printer jams or whatever else he did with his day.

Still, he couldn’t help but wonder how Taylor was keeping his cool, listening to a total of sixteen deaths. Was he treating it like a video game? Refusing to think about the aftermath of the shots Bond fired? Hopefully he wouldn’t end up in Psych for this. Just the thought made Bond feel a bit guilty, even though technically Bond was permitted to use any and all MI6 resources to complete his missions, including an unsuspecting Help Desk technician.

“I believe it’s clear,” he said, once he returned to the control room for the last time. “Since I’ve managed to completely cock-up the ‘leave no trace’ parameter of the mission, I think I’m safe to do as I like. Do you see anything that looks like a security vault?”

“Wine cellar, second door on the left,” Taylor answered quickly.

“Lovely.” Bond headed that way, stepping over a body and onto a handful of shell casings. When the metal rang out like bells, he paused and gathered them up, remembering what Taylor had said. He grinned and went to the back of the sprawling house, where the stairs led down to the wine cellar. At the top of the stairs, though, he stopped, realising he didn’t hear any emergency sirens. “Wait. Why aren’t the police coming?”

“Because I intercepted any calls that were from anywhere around you.” Taylor paused. “Don’t tell anyone I did that, either.”

Bond grinned fiercely. “You’re not going to get in any trouble. And if you did, I have a lovely illegal black market AK-12 that says otherwise.” He headed down the stairs and into the sort of wine cellar that could tempt Bond into a life of crime. He wasn’t poor by any measure, but he didn’t have quite this much cash to invest in a collection. He rather hoped he wouldn’t have to blow the house, but it was looking likely. He’d have to cover up the deaths somehow.

“I just don’t want the attention, Bond,” Taylor said insistently. “Did you find it?”

“Hmm.” Bond eyed the heavy steel door without touching it. It was a custom install, not a specific brand — probably the size of a full room, rather than a large single-piece unit recessed in the wall. “Security measures?”

“Disabled.” Taylor’s voice was matter-of-fact and free of smugness, however deserved. “It’s unlocked.”

“Suddenly I’m feeling redundant,” Bond said, grinning, as he pulled open the vault door. Automatic
lights came on, and he let out a low whistle. “Well. I found the rest of the guns,” he murmured as he walked between the racks hanging on the walls to either side of the doorway. “Don’t let that lock behind me, please.”

“Don’t tell me you’re claustrophobic?” Taylor asked, sounding amused. “Super secret spy agent, who just killed almost twenty people, afraid of small spaces? I might have to have a chuckle, if that’s the case.”

“Rather enamoured of breathing. Remind me to tell you about the sarcophagus one day... Well, there you are,” he said as he finally found the computer. He knelt down, took a multi-tool out of his jacket, and opened the screwdriver end so he could open the case. With any luck, the security codes to the Novaya Zemlya defence base — which didn’t exist — would be on the hard drive.

“Technically, this doesn’t exist. You’re certain you don’t want me mentioning this? This could damn well get you a commendation, you know.”

“No, thank you. I’m happy here at the Help Desk, not banished to Alaska or forced to be one of the incompetents in Q Branch,” Taylor said with a huff. “And what is the ‘this’ you’ve mentioned? Never mind. I’m certain it’s above my security clearance.”

“Just a bit,” Bond admitted, unscrewing the side of the case. “What colour’s your living room?”

“Blue. But don’t laugh. It came that way, and I’m not one for painting,” Taylor said defensively. But then it seemed to occur to him that wasn’t a normal sort of question to ask a Help Desk operator. “Why?” he asked suspiciously.

“What’s wrong with blue? I like blue,” Bond said absently as the side of the case clattered out of the way. He looked into the computer and frowned. “Well, bugger. Which one of you bastards is it? I don’t have enough pockets to carry all of you.”

“Something wrong?”

“Two hard drives in front — one’s an SSD — and four more down at the bottom.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Intel. Very illegal, very classified, very valuable intel that he’s using against a certain ministry official whom we like.”

“Is the computer on? I can probably find it for you.”

“It is,” Bond said, feeling the fan at the back, “but it’s not hooked up to anything — no keyboard or monitor.”

“That’s fine. You don’t need to see it; I do. Give me a name or some sort of identifier I can use to search out the files while I look for where it lives on the network.”

Bond searched the computer for stickers, and then he chuckled. “Would a Dell service tag work?”

There was a pause. “You’re kidding.” Taylor laughed. “The guy is keeping spy shit on a Dell that’s still under warranty?” There was a pause, followed by some typing. “The SSD is the only one that has serious encryption on it — the rest are... Oh. That’s just sick.”

“Stay away from that,” Bond said quickly, knowing exactly what Taylor had found. “Be comforted that it’ll stop as soon as I have this intel verified. Anything I should know before taking out the SSD? Do I need to power down or can I just unplug things?”
“Shut it off first,” Taylor responded quickly. “Though if you turn it back on when you’re done, I can melt the rest of the drives,” he said darkly.

Bond grimaced. “Are any of them just... that? I can take it back to Station M to run facial recognition. We might get one or two missing persons hits. Then we can burn the rest of the drives.”

“You said you don’t have room to carry them, right? What if I copy the files to a Station M server for you? Then you won’t have to physically carry them, and I can make sure the, uh, files don’t end up anywhere else?”

“Perfect,” Bond said, relieved. He powered the computer down and started to remove the SSD. For all the things he’d done in his career, there were some lines he would sooner die than cross. Even thinking of touching that particular drive made his skin crawl. “I know the DGSE is working — this may have links to Austria and Belgium. If this works... well, a lot of people will be very pleased. Let me call Station M and get you a server address. I’ll tell them I’m doing it. Does that work?”

“Yes.” Bond could hear as Taylor typed and clicked, then stopped. A chair squeaked. “Is he dead?”

“No. Not yet, at any rate. Why?”

“I can make it pretty hard for him to find a computer, anywhere, that will ever work properly for him again,” Taylor said with a dark chuckle. “I may not have a gun, but I can certainly make someone’s life hell.”

Bond grinned fiercely. “I’ll keep that in mind. For now, though — well, not that the sixteen corpses in his house will be any help. Believe me, I don’t plan on letting this drop.” He pocketed the SSD and then hit the power button. “Right. Calling Station M. Look for a directory there with my name. Dump the information there, and then destroy this computer.”

“Excellent.” The typing resumed. “This was kind of fun. Not the... well, the horribleness. But actually doing something useful. Thanks.”

“Thank you, Taylor.” Bond hesitated, and then hung up to call Station M. He wished Taylor weren’t quite so secretive about this, but it did guarantee that no one else would learn just how useful he could be.

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April 2012

Mike flipped the printer over on his desk and started pulling off the back panel. It technically wasn’t his job to do repairs to broken equipment — he was supposed to put a “DNR” (dead, needs replacement) tag on it and let someone else do the switch — but he was restless. Last month’s phone call with Bond had actually been incredibly exciting, and going back to routine power cycling was... not.

He sighed and stabbed a screwdriver into the crack between the panel and the casing with more force than was strictly necessary. He knew that if he let himself get promoted to Q Branch, he’d be able to do that sort of thing more often. But it wasn’t worth it. He’d spent enough time being the golden child (who was never actually good enough) to know that showing off and being clever never actually got you anywhere, except under a pile of crushing expectations. It was why he left MIT
without finishing, why he was a freeware developer, and why he would never leave the Help Desk. Besides, there was something... delicious, he decided, about being Bond’s personal tech.

He didn’t recognise the clerk who walked over and tapped his cubicle wall. “Taylor, 4191?”

“Yes?” he asked suspiciously. He’d been thorough in covering his tracks, but it didn’t stop him from being slightly worried that he was about to be busted at any moment.

The clerk offered a box, a foot square and a few inches deep, with a clipboard on top of it. The box was from an office supply company. “Sign.”

Taylor signed and took the box, unable to stop himself from shaking it. Though it was light, it jangled a little, like metal hitting metal. “Thanks,” he told the clerk before turning back to the box.

“Uh huh.” The clerk took the clipboard and left.

Annie wasn’t currently on duty, so Taylor spun his chair and rolled over to her desk to steal her scissors. He used them to cut the thick layers of tape, smiling at the TAYLOR 4191 HELP DESK scrawled in red marker across the top of the box. Inside, instead of peanuts, he found layers of bubble wrap. He put the scissors back in Annie’s drawer and returned to his side of the shared cube, where he shoved the dead printer out of the way.

Carefully, he removed the bundle of bubble wrap, exposing something painted in black and gold. He unwrapped the layers gently, revealing an exquisite black box painted with delicate gold filigree along the sides and around the top. In the centre of the top was a painted scene of two cranes in a pool under a starry sky. The brush strokes were hair-fine.

It was gorgeous. Taylor smiled as he ran his hands lightly along the surface of the image. For a brief moment he worried that it might actually be from the creep’s house, but dismissed the idea. Not only did it seem unlikely that Bond would be that crass, but the main colour in the background of the image was blue. He smiled at the idea that Bond had poked around some Russian shop, looking for something that would match his living room.

The lid was hinged. He opened it and then his smile turned into a grin when he saw a half dozen spent brass bullet casings, about two inches long. A small scrap of paper — a receipt from a Russian Starbucks — had a note on the back:

He’s dead. — 007
May 2012

Thank god night shift was quiet, Taylor thought, cupping his mug of tea between both hands. He’d finally relented and brought in a mug in from home — a ceramic monstrosity that held as much tea as three of the little paper cups from the break room and required two tea bags to properly steep without getting bitter. He muffled a sneeze and tapped his headset, hoping it was another wrong number. He’d had two of them so far tonight.

“Help Desk call centre, this is Taylor” — he cut off to sneeze again, remembering to mute it halfway through — “operator 4191. This is not a secure line. How may I help you?”

“You sound like death.”

Taylor smiled. “Hey, James. It’s been a while. What are we doing that’s fun today?” He grabbed a tissue and wiped at his nose, determined not to do something so embarrassing as sniffle while on the line with his operative. (He made a mental note to scout out when he started to think of Bond as his when he was feeling better.)

“I’d tell you, but it might get you excommunicated by the Pope. Would that bother you terribly?” Bond asked with a chuckle.

“No Catholic,” Taylor said with a rough laugh. He took another long drink of tea to stem a tide of unattractive coughs. “Can you be excommunicated if you’re not Catholic?”

“I think if they try hard enough.” He could hear the grin in Bond’s voice. “What are you doing working night shifts again? No wonder you’re sick.”

“I couldn’t get out of bed this morning, so I switched shifts with Steve.” Taylor didn’t have the time to click off the mic before he started coughing, so he covered it with his hand instead. “Sorry. Not just sick. It’s the damn plague.”

“Unless you’ve been kissing rats, you don’t have the plague. Have you been kissing rats? Do I need to be jealous?”

“If you’re jealous of rats, then you have issues,” Taylor said, doing his best to not let the idea of kissing Bond, whom he hadn’t even seen yet, give him the flutters. “Uh, wait. I’m pretty sure the plague wasn’t spread by kissing rats. Was it? Because that puts a whole new spin on my perception of medieval times.”

“I’m certain at least a few people caught it that way. Rats were everywhere, after all.” In the background, Taylor could hear the sound of water splashing. “There’s actually a theory that people were healthier because they slept next to their animals. They’d get minor diseases and build up resistance. Of course, they also had fleas.”

“That’s just...” Taylor didn’t know if the shudder that ran through him was from the mental image or his illness, but he didn’t finish his sentence. “Wouldn’t work anymore, though, would it? I mean, if I had a cat, and let it sleep on my pillow, that wouldn’t actually help.” He paused for another sneeze. “Where are you?”

“At the Fontana di Trevi, in Rome. And I don’t know a damned thing about cats. Biowarfare is another matter, I’m afraid,” Bond said thoughtfully. “You really sound awful. Shouldn’t you be at
“Yes. But I wasted my sick time earlier in the year. Well, I say wasted...” Taylor smiled. The seven days he’d spent at the annual Hackerspace UK meetup had been heaven, but it had used up all of his time off.

“I’d sic Medical on you, but they’d just steal your blood. Do you have tea? And there’s a Chinese place on the secure delivery list that does spicy egg drop soup. You can use it as rocket fuel. It’ll clear your sinuses.”

Taylor chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind. I’m looking at pictures of the fountain online. Looks pretty. Did you need something from me?”

“I need to be on the phone with someone. Business tourist out for a coffee very early in the morning, waiting to get a start on the day. So it’s either you or I dial random extensions at the office until I find someone who’s bored.”

Taylor muted the mic for a coughing fit, even as he grinned. Bond didn’t need him for anything. He just wanted to talk. He scrambled for something interesting to say, but his fuzzy mind wasn’t helping much. He stared at the Wikipedia page open in front of him, until he realised what he was looking at. “Oh, that’s just unpleasant. Did you know where the name Bubonic came from? Thank god I don’t have the real thing.”

“So you won’t be spending this Saturday night with an adorable little she-rat. Good to know,” Bond teased.

“She-rats aren’t really my thing,” Taylor said absently, staring at the wiki. “Look at all those skeletons. I didn’t realise the plague killed so many. Sixty percent of Europe? Wow.”

“You’re on Wikipedia, aren’t you?” Bond accused, though Taylor could hear his attempts to suppress his laughter. “It’s a black hole, Mike. Back away before you get sucked in.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” Taylor asked ruefully. “I tried to do some programming, but apparently my brain is broken. I don’t even know what I did in the code, but it’s going to take hours to unravel.” He yawned. “Who tries to use something named for the havoc it wreaks with genitals in biowarfare? And in the 1940s, too. They should have known better.”

Bond made a choked sound as if trying to suppress a laugh. “It’s just about twenty degrees here. There isn’t a single cloud in the sky. All the buildings here are beige stone and brick. At this hour, the streets are mostly quiet, though that doesn’t stop the local drivers from trying to kill everyone. I’m walking west, towards Vatican City. I’ve only been in Rome two other times, so it’s still new to me. I think I rather like it here.”

“It’s all the naked people sculptures, isn’t it?” Taylor shook his head. “It’s really a good thing you don’t need my help. Broken brain is not fun. What does it look like? Vatican City?”

“No idea. It’s not often that our company sends a specialist like me there.” Bond laughed. “I suppose Henry VIII might have, if he’d had the option. But if I had to hazard a guess, I’d say it’s big and expensive.”

“Isn’t it surrounded by a huge wall? And isn’t it the smallest country in the world? I wonder what their security is like.” Taylor closed his eyes, thinking about it. “Richest, smallest country, I bet. They must have an amazing network. Predictive behaviour cams. Thermal image scanners. Advanced biometrics. Hmmm.”
“Mike?”

“Huh?” Taylor opened his eyes again.

“Promise me you’re not going to try and hack Vatican City. Can you do that for me?”

“Why? That could be just thing I need to feel better. I bet their chief sysadmin really knows how to dance.” Taylor took another drink of tea, thinking about the delicious possibilities.

“Mike,” Bond scolded. “If you’re going to start a war between the Catholic Church and England, will you please at least wait until I’m well away from the contested borders?” He coughed; it sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Taylor gave it a moment’s thought. “What would that look like, exactly? A war between England and a church? I mean, isn’t not killing people sort of a thing with the religious ty—” He couldn’t quite finish his sentence through another coughing fit.

“You’re really not all right,” Bond said quietly through the coughing. “I won’t yell at you to go home. I’ll just point out the Crusades. Several Crusades. I forget how many. Ten or twenty, at least, including one full of child-soldiers. So no hacking.”

Taylor took a few deep breaths and another drink of tea. “Fine. But only because you asked nicely. Wait, that’s not right. Only because you said they’d send child soldiers after me. With axes. Would a modern crusader still use an axe?”

Bond laughed. “An axe and a machine gun, I’m certain. Best stay safe until you’re healthy enough to fight off the vicious children. They might even bring rats. Now stay on the line a moment. I might actually need your help here.”

Taylor straightened, set down his tea, and closed all his wiki tabs. He preemptively opened a few command prompt windows and executed his favourite cloaking script. “Okay,” he said. “But if you die because you’re counting on my fuzzy broken brain, I’ll be very put out. Shouldn’t you call Q Branch? Where they don’t have the plague?”

“It’s four in the morning, London time,” Bond said over a faint rattling sound. “And in theory all I need to do is copy a few files. I just know how ‘theories’ go out in the field. And now I’m in... God, what a dingy place. Doesn’t anyone dust anymore?”

“Sounds like a better use of Rome’s children than crusading, if you ask me. Where are you?”

“The cover is an antiques dealer. He’s actually doing a very lucrative trade in smuggling gold. All right. Good god, this computer’s older than I am,” Bond said in disgust. “It actually has a disk drive. They haven’t had those for what, ten years?”

Taylor chuckled. “At least. Maybe he thinks of it as an antique. Fitting for his old-school personality. People actually smuggle gold? Really?”

“Oh, absolutely. Most of it goes to arms deals, a great many of which are just across the sea. Africa, gold, weapons — it’s one great big black market whirlpool. Ah. CD burner. Lovely.” There was a faint rattling sound in the background. “I’m here to find names, account numbers, whatever will get me the next step up in the chain.”

“Well, if he has a CD burner, there must be a stack of burnable CDs around there somewhere. You’re going to have to brave the dust, I think.” Taylor felt a sneeze coming on, so he tried to preempt it by pinching his nose. Of course, that apparently shifted something, because all ability to
breathe through his nose promptly vanished. And didn’t return when he moved his hand back. “Maybe you should wear a handkerchief around your mouth and nose. Just to keep your sinuses intact,” he added miserably.

“Found them. God, and about four hundred CDs. This is his backup system,” Bond said thoughtfully. “I really need to start carrying a rucksack on intel gathering missions. I can’t always depend on finding my target data on an SSD. Are you running a fever?”

“A rucksack. With special padding to make sure nothing is jostled. Don’t you have a USB drive? Even computers that old will take one.” Taylor tried to take another deep drink of tea, but the cup was sadly empty. He eyed it with annoyance, unwilling to put Bond on hold long enough to get a new one.

“Of course not,” Bond said, irritated. “I had one on my keychain, but of course that’s in my locker back there. Feel free to head down to sublevel two to fetch it for —”

He cut off with a sudden hiss, and the sound of an ancient, clunky CD burner came through Bond’s phone — or his Bluetooth, Taylor suspected.

“Bloody fucking hell,” Bond whispered.

“What?” Taylor knew that if Bond was alarmed, it couldn’t be good.

“He’s coming to work early. Lovely.” Abruptly the sound of the CD burner cut off with a rattling, arrhythmic clunking sound.

“What are you doing to that poor CD drive? If the burn isn’t done, don’t interrupt it! It won’t work, you idiot!”


“Right —” Bond cut off as there was an explosive report that was becoming all too familiar, followed by a loud, heavy crashing sound, almost like overturned furniture.

“Another one bites the dust.” Taylor stopped himself from repeating the refrain. Wait, did I seriously just sing that? he thought in horror.

Bond let out a choked laugh, over the sound of someone else’s abruptly silenced, wet grunt. There was a thump that sounded distinctly humanoid. “Getting the drive,” Bond said in a normal voice. “Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Take down this number.”

Taylor opened a text edit window. “Ready.”

Bond gave him a phone number, followed by twelve more digits. “Call them, give them your address, let them take you home. Put it on my account. I don’t want you driving like this. They can pick you up in two days when you’re healthy.”

“Can’t.” Taylor said, smiling at Bond’s rather adorable protectiveness. “No sick time left. I took the
Tube in anyway. I’ll take it home.”

“Take the car service home. And isn’t there some reg” — in the background, Taylor heard a horrific crash of metal — “that you can go home without burning sick time if you’ve been there for however long?”

“I’m sure it doesn’t apply to me. I’ve only been here for just over six months. I’m fine. I’ll take the car home when I’m done with my shift, though. Just because the Tube is really scary in the very early morning. Did you get the drive?”

“Got it. I need to disappear now. Feel better, Mike. Don’t make me worry about you having the plague while I’m trying not to get shot.”

Taylor laughed. “I’ll be fine. There will be soup and blankets and maybe persuading Annie to take a shift for me in exchange for fixing one of her favourite game’s glitches. Be safe. Don’t get shot.”

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May 2012

“Help Desk call centre, this is Taylor, operator 4191. This is not a secure line. How may I help you?”

Bond stared out the window, squinting against the early morning sunlight. The desert was brutal. “Look at that. I’m getting better. Only four tries,” he said, pulling the curtain closed. He crossed his tiny room in three steps. “How are you feeling? Two weeks ago, you were on death’s door.”

“Much better,” Taylor said. “I’m still a little snuffy, but that’s not bad. You didn’t get shot, did you?”

“I don’t always get shot on missions,” Bond pointed out truthfully as he sent a text on his work mobile. “You do sound better. And the hard drive was intact. They were able to recover data to send me to my next target.”

“Oh. So you get to shoot someone instead of getting shot at. That’s a significant improvement. As long as it’s not intel gathering.” There was a pause. “Did I actually sing on our last phone call, or was that the result of a fever dream?”

Bond laughed at the memory. “You did, yes. You have a lovely singing voice,” he added, before he could catch himself. That was perilously close to flirtation, but it really was instinct with him.

“Like hell I do. And even if I did, you wouldn’t have known it when I couldn’t breathe properly, let alone sing. But I appreciate the attempt to make me feel better about it.” Taylor sounded rueful, but not embarrassed.

Grinning, Bond said, “Feel free to sing to me at any time. It gets lonely and quiet on the road — assuming the roads aren’t buried under three feet of sand from the latest sandstorm.” He looked at the response text and grinned even more. “It’s eight in the morning and it’s already thirty-eight degrees here,” he said plaintively.

“Isn’t there AC in your car? If it's broken, I can probably talk you through fixing it.”
“No car. I’m in Libya. Sabha, to be precise, which is a fair-sized city, by local standards, in the middle of fucking nowhere.”

“Well, if you’re bored, I’m not singing to you again. But I did dig up some more interesting facts about the plague if you’re interested.”

Bond grinned and sat down on the edge of his bed; it was too damned hot to stand. “Actually, that’s very relevant. While you tell me your facts, stand up. Do you see anyone coming towards you?”

There was a shuffling sound and the squeak of a chair as Taylor stood. “Did you know that perfume and cologne originated during the plague, because people didn’t bathe or change clothes, and they desperately wanted a way to cover up the smell?”

“That philosophy still holds true today in far too many places,” Bond said wryly. “I’m on the edge of the Sahara. No rats here, that I’ve seen. Possibly dinosaurs.”

“I wouldn’t kiss a dinosaur either, though. Just in case you’re curious. Though I bet they could be useful pets. Especially for you. I bet you’d have a riot with a velociraptor,” Taylor said with a chuckle.

“I saw Jurassic Park. They’re pack hunters. I’d much prefer something that hunts solo — small and portable. That or a pterodactyl, like Myfanwy. Is he there yet? Or she?”

“Uh, I don’t see any... Oh, yep, there he is. Should I run?” Taylor asked without actually sounding concerned.

Bond grinned. “No. I’m not certain how big the box will be. Packing was a delicate matter.”

“Uh... Hello there. Sure, I’ll sign.” Taylor paused. “Should I not shake it, then?”

“Don’t you dare,” Bond warned, smiling. “Go ahead and open it.”

“It’s covered in ‘fragile’ stickers, James. It makes me slightly nervous. Annie?” Bond heard the sound of a drawer opening.

“Another gift from your stalker?” a female voice asked.

“Yes,” Taylor replied with chuckle. The sound of scissors scoring packing tape filled Bond’s earpiece, followed by the sound of styrofoam being pulled clear from cardboard.

“That’s a lot of tape,” the woman said through the sound of tape being pulled off the styrofoam. Then, “Eeew.”

“Wow,” came Taylor’s much more reverent voice. “This is beautiful.”

Bond grinned, pleased. “Rattus rattus, female adult black rat. Isn’t she lovely? Which... well, is an odd thing to say about a skeleton, but at least she’s not carrying any plague fleas.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Taylor breathed out. “I don’t want you thinking I’m weird or anything, but I might actually be petting it. Lightly.”

Bond laughed, for the first time in a good ten days feeling his spirits lift. “Now I am jealous.”

“I’d offer to pet you lightly, but you’re never in town long enough to even try and hunt down the Help Desk in this maze,” Taylor responded with a chuckle. “How did you even find this?”
Bond shook his head, trying to push away the mental images evoked by the “offer to pet lightly.” Surprisingly pleased, he said, “I found the shop while looking for a barber, of all things. A family business — the owner must have been a hundred years old. They were artists with bones. Italy’s always been a bit odd about the dead.” He smirked, adding, “And you forget who I am, Mike. I can find anything. Including, I hope, the other end of this smuggling ring, so I can get back home for more than three days.”

“Well, if I can help, let me know. Come find me, if you’re back long enough to navigate the maze. It’s not pretty here, though. No shiny murderous things like they have in Q Branch. Just broken printers and old phones. You might be terribly disappointed.”

“I’ll call you when I can,” he promised. “Off for now. People to kill, buildings to level.”

“Good luck, James.”

Bond grinned. “Thanks, Mike.”
June 2012

The call started: “Don’t call me an idiot.”

Taylor immediately recognised his only consistent caller. He looked around, but the bullpen was quiet at this hour. Night shifts were a favourite, and he kept rearranging his schedule, despite Iris’ efforts to put him back on days, when they were busiest.

“That was only once, and you deserved it that time,” he replied, minimising his help ticket windows.

Bond’s laugh was low and deep. “At the time, I was being shot at. I had to interrupt the process. Besides, it worked out in the end. Better to have the whole bloody hard drive than a burned CD. And this time, no one’s shooting at me.”

“You must be bored stiff.” Taylor imagined him lounging somewhere, tapping his fingers impatiently. Not that he could actually visualise him; his “stalker,” as Annie called James, was still just a voice on the line. “What can I do for you, James?”

“It’s generally work-related. Really, they were supposed to do this for me,” Bond complained. “They pushed an update, except I had to interrupt it — I was going to miss a flight,” he quickly explained. “Now the bloody thing doesn’t work for shit, so Danielle said to reformat, except it’s... well, rabbit of negative euphoria, to quote.”

Taylor sat back and laughed. “You listen to Cabin Pressure? I’m actually a little surprised. Is it the same laptop you had last month, or did that not survive to the present crisis?”

“It’s a new issue,” he admitted sheepishly. “The last one got run over once or twice. And of course I listen to Cabin Pressure. I spend half my damned life on aeroplanes. Even the pilots aren’t appealing anymore.”

“Aeroplanes,” Taylor said with a shudder. “You’re a brave man. What kind of laptop is it this time? Anything less than the toughest of the Toughbooks, and I’m going to have to revise my opinion of Q Branch down even further.”

“It’s an Acer Aspire. Fragile little bastard. Even I would be hard-pressed to kill someone with it.”

“Are you kidding me?” Taylor stared at the triple-moon fantasy landscape wallpaper that was his desktop background. “What were they thinking? How does MI6 even have something like that available to your destructive lot?” He shook his head. “Nevermind. I don’t even want to know. Do you have anything on there that you need to keep, or would miss if it were gone?”

“Supposedly — and please understand that by ‘supposedly’ I mean ‘if the idiot assigned to me is doing his job’ — everything that should be on the laptop is mirrored somewhere in the labyrinth of MI6 servers. I can give you the mission file number. I’d get the files restored myself, but I’m not even up to the part where I can get online.”

“I don’t have the security clearance to get to the server where your files are stored,” Taylor said with a sigh. He could easily get in without any help from Bond’s offered logins, but wasn’t willing to risk his job over it. “Let’s not trust the safety of your data to Q Branch though, so I repeat the question. Anything you’d miss?”
“Well, yes. My entire cover story, including whatever the hell my venture capital firm is named. But I thought of a backup plan,” Bond said proudly. “You’ll love it.”

Uh oh. James’ plan B’s usually involved explosives or gunfire. “Do tell,” he said cautiously.

“I go buy a new computer — there’s an electronics store just down the Strip. Then you talk me through pulling the biometrics reader out of this thing, so I can login securely from here.”

“An excellent idea. But if you don’t mind, I can modify it a bit, just to make things easier for you,” Taylor said. He didn’t want to discourage James’ forward thinking about securing his data, but he also wasn’t bloody well going to let him get zapped by the safety measures that were undoubtedly wired into the biometrics reader. “How about a new laptop and a new biometrics reader? And a cable to transfer data from your old hard drive to your new one, just in case.”

“It’s not some sort of... hardware-locked reader? MI6-only or something?”

“Of course it is. But by the time the authentication protocols receive the login data, it’s just numbers. Which I can make dance any way I want.”

Bond laughed richly. “Agreed. Let’s go shopping,” he said, over the sound of movement and rattling keys in the background. “The store’s called Fry’s Electronics, if you want to get me a list of what to buy.”

“You’re going to need some tools, too. You’re going to physically crack that laptop.” He pulled up the website for Fry’s, scrolling through the delicious lists of available components. “God, I’m jealous. It’s a damn candy store.”

“If there’s anything you’d like me to pick up for you, feel free to add it to the list. I’m in Las Vegas, and I’m very good at cards.”

Taylor laughed. “I believe it. I’ll let you know.” He opened up a text edit window and started to type up a list. “It’s not really the components themselves, though, you know. I can buy components from anywhere — usually online. It’s the happiness that only comes from the tactile experience of running your hands over acres of shiny new cables and brand new circuit boards. Like the difference between being in a record store and buying your music on iTunes.”

“Mmm, car shopping,” Bond answered. In the background, Taylor heard the ding of a lift arriving. “Always test drive again, even if you drove the same car just the week before. Same with guns.”

“I suspect it’s the same feeling, though I’ve never gone gun shopping so I’ll have to take your word for it on that front. Is there anything in particular you didn’t like about your last computer? Or something you wished it had?”

“This little thing? It was fast — faster than any of the bricks they’ve issued,” he said thoughtfully. “Other than that... well, you’ve realised by now that gear doesn’t last long in the field. I only have this because it fits with my cover story. If I were on another type of mission, I’d probably have the same brick, if anything at all.” He paused, and Taylor heard the sound of obnoxious pop music in the background. “I appreciate all the help you’ve been, Mike. I can’t help but think you’re in the wrong branch.”

Taylor chuckled. “I rather enjoy helping you, as you well know. Your problems are never solved with a reboot. It’s refreshing. I should really just build you a laptop. Something sturdy that might actually last for more than just a single mission or two. Or create something that’s just a dummy terminal for a cloud-based operating system, so no matter how many cheap laptops you destroy, the
next one will always be like the last one.” He paused. “How do you feel about touch screens?”

“Very, very useful,” Bond said without hesitation. “Anything mechanical, like keys or a mouse, makes noise.”

“Excellent. They’re generally a lot tougher than a laptop, too, especially if you keep them in a case. Let’s try something new, shall we?” Taylor grinned. This was going to be fun.

Bond laughed, low and wicked. “Anything you’d like,” he said as the lift chimed again. The background filled with noise — loud music, loud voices, and the clatter and clang of what Taylor thought were slot machines.

“Careful, James, I may take advantage,” Taylor replied with a grin. It was so much easier to flirt over the phone, he thought. “We’ll start with an ASUS Transformer, just to ease you in slowly. Plus, it’s cheap, so if it breaks you won’t be out of pocket by too much.”

“I’m tempted to ask about battle-modes and missiles, but we probably don’t have time to really weaponise it, do we? And I’m really not certain it’s possible to take advantage of a field agent, though you’re welcome to try.”

Taylor couldn’t quite hide the strangled sound of him choking on his tea. Oh, if only, he thought, though he’d be far too embarrassed to actually have him over to his flat, where James’ gifts were accumulating in the oddest imitation of a deadly magpie’s nest.

He coughed and cleared his voice before saying, “I absolutely could tell you how to weaponise it, but the risk it poses forces me to decline. I certainly don’t want you arrested at the airport when you try to leave.”

Bond laughed. “I’ve smuggled worse than explosives through airports, but since this is theoretically an intel mission and not a hit, I should be able to live with it until I get back home.” The casino noise in the background dropped quickly to silence before Bond let out a sharp exhale. “Bloody hot here. How is it at home?”

“Sixteen and raining. I thought about trying to ride my bike in again today, but have you seen the showers in the exercise area here? I’m not totally convinced they’re not secretly Bio department experiments.” Taylor scrolled through the specs of the ASUS, making mental notes of possible modifications.

“It was over thirty-five here today,” Bond complained. “It won’t actually be nice until three in the morning, though I won’t keep you up that long. When does your shift end? It’s three in the morning there, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s oh three hundred here. I get off at oh six hundred. I’ll make it home just in time to watch the sunrise from my roof. Much better than sunset, in my opinion.”

“Everything’s still open here at that hour — or most of everything. Vegas isn’t quite as active as it was ten years ago at night. Trying to change to a family-friendly reputation, I gather. Thanks,” he added somewhat distantly, and Taylor heard a soft acknowledgement in the background. “You don’t have a backlog of calls waiting for your expertise? I really don’t want you to get in trouble. If you get fired, I might have to take matters into my own hands.”

“I think, technically, every time I help you with Q Branch equipment I’m doing something worthy of instant dismissal,” Taylor said with a sigh, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling. “And that’s before I have to do something damn near illegal, like helping you with your biometrics problem.
“You do?” Bond asked slyly.

“Don’t be an arse,” Taylor scolded with a chuckle. “Besides, it’s hard not to be fond of someone who sends you scary and deadly things with fair regularity, and whom you’ve never actually met.”

“Is that all it takes? What would you like next? Nellis Air Force Base isn’t too far away. Would you like an F-16?”

Taylor paused. He’d love to say “hell yes,” but could all too easily picture James actually bringing him a plane. He took the easy way out. “Well, as much as I’d love to rip the guts out of an F-16 just to play with the parts, the whole fear of flying thing sort of makes it a wasted gift. Besides, I’m relatively certain you’d get into trouble for that. And so would I, as your accomplice.”

“You say that as if I’ve never stolen a fighter jet before,” Bond scoffed.

“How about something that’ll actually fit in my flat?”

“Really, for all that this is the desert, the deadliest things here are the tourists. Though there are these hybrid scorpion-spider things. I’m not sure —”

“Oh, god. Stop,” Taylor interrupted with a shudder. “No spiders or scorpions, please.”

“Well, then we’re left with nature’s other creative ways to kill. Sunlight won’t last in London — it’s scientific fact that more than twelve sunny days in London means the world’s going to end, you know.”

Chuckling to himself, Taylor opened a new text doc for writing the code necessary to trick the security protocols upstairs into thinking that the cheap knockoff biometric scanner he was going to have Bond use was actually an MI6 exclusive.

“There have been experiments about bottling light,” he said somewhat absently, “but no one has been very successful. Lightning in a bottle — or, more accurately, static electricity in clear glass on a charged base — is about as close as they can get.”

“I’ve seen those. Science museums have them. Something to do with Tesla?” Bond guessed.

Taylor chuckled. “I can make you your own, if you like. Or teach you how to make something similar, that’s a little shorter lasting but absolutely spectacular in execution. And you’d get to use a hammer.”

“I believe by MI6 regs, I’m not allowed to use hand tools without proper supervision. Something about blowing things up.” Bond laughed again. “Nature’s already beaten you, though. Lightning strikes in sand can form natural glass sculptures.”

“Really? I’ve heard of desert glass before, but that isn’t the same, I think. That must be beautiful.”

“There’s an artist who uses it for inspiration... Damn, what was his name?” Bond mused. “He has some pieces at the Bellagio.”

It only took a quick bit of searching to find a glass artist displaying in Las Vegas. “Dale Chihuly?” Taylor paused, scrolling through the man’s website. “Wow. James. Have you seen some of these? People think of glass as so fragile. But some of these sculptures look really, really deadly. I’d hate to fall on Blue Moon. Of course, I wouldn’t be alive to feel the consequences.”
“That’s it,” Bond said. “Gorgeous work. Of course, I have a thing for deadly and beautiful, if you hadn’t figured that much out already.”

“Then you must be terribly disappointed in me,” Taylor said with a chuckle. “But you don’t seem like the type to have a tastefully modern flat that would let you show off any of those big sculptures to their advantage. I’d bet you’re a clunky wood antiques kind of guy.”

Bond laughed. “I have a flat I never see that was decorated by an interior designer. My sole requirements were that she not replace my bed and that the couch be comfortable. I think it’s all reproductions — god, I hope so. I’m not exactly easy on furniture.”

“Okay, redirecting the conversation away from those visuals...” Taylor said with a choked laugh. “I won’t even ask why you’re so attached to your bed.”

This time, Bond’s laugh was a bit lower and more... intimate. “Probably best not while I’m driving, at any rate. Or I will be driving, as soon as I put the address into the GPS. It’s right off the strip, but American highways are nearly as bad as ours. Christ, never go to Boston, Mike. Trust me. Or if you do, don’t drive.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, assuming I don’t get caught spoofing the authentication server like this. I could go to prison until the sun burns out.”

“If anyone gives you trouble for this, just give them my ID number. They’ll stop.”

“James, if I get caught, they’re not going to care about your ID number. They’re just going to haul me off to the brig, or the dungeon, or the tunnels, or wherever it is you people lock away the bad guys.”

Bond laughed. “I can’t give details, even if you had the clearance. Just trust me.”

“What, you’d hunt me down in the secret underground prison to make sure I didn’t suffer unduly?”

Mike asked his question with a little laugh, but James’ answer was quiet and serious: “Of course I would.”

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**June 2012**

The delivery came just days later, this time by overnight express from Las Vegas. The box brought to Taylor’s desk was all but covered in ‘Fragile’ stickers and was reinforced with wood at the corners.

“How the hell am I supposed to open this?” Taylor asked, wondering who in the bullpen might have anything even close to a crowbar. Annie came over with her scissors, but held back when she got a better look at the package.

“Oh, come on, Annie. You know you’re just as curious about what’s in this box as I am,” Taylor scolded, reaching for the scissors.

“I’ve already broken three this month,” she said, though she offered them to him. “You get to buy
Taylor carefully avoided wondering just what the hell Annie was doing with her scissors to break them so frequently as he took the offered pair. He stabbed and twisted and finagled the box, though being very careful not to disturb the contents inside, before the lid finally came free.

Inside were air pillows surrounding another box, this one of stiff cardboard, printed with a gold foil ‘B’ in swirling cursive. Taylor removed that box carefully, preserving the air pillows. He opened it, revealing dull gold and purple tissue paper surrounding a small forest of blue glass points, lethally sharp.

Taylor pulled it out reverently, turning it this way and that in an attempt to catch all the subtle nuances of the swirl and shade variance in the glass. He didn’t know what he was more afraid of: dropping it and destroying it — or catching it and then bleeding from the sharp points.

There was a metaphor there somewhere, but Taylor didn’t bother trying to track it down.

“Wow,” he finally said, grinning. “It will go splendidly by the Russian box, won’t it?” he asked Annie, who so far had been present for most of his gifts.

“And you haven’t shagged him yet? Bloody hell, Mike. You risk boring him. Give him my number if he gets lonely. I’ve got a fireplace mantle with nothing on it,” she said, reclaiming her scissors.

“I’m far, far too selfish for that,” Taylor couldn’t help but reply. “Besides, he always waits for me.”

“Well, he’s your agent,” Annie pointed out.

Mike smiled. “Yes, he is, isn’t he?”
Chapter 6

July 2012

“Help Desk call centre, this is Taylor, operator 4191. This is not a secure line. How may I help you?”

“Will you stop moving bloody desks so I can actually reach your extension directly?” Bond demanded. “That damned automated system...”

“I really can’t,” Taylor answered regretfully, turning on what he’d named his White Noise app, which masked the call from anyone who might want to listen in on the unsecure line. “There is this woman in the Intentions department who keeps calling me — she says it’s about missing files or email problems, but I know better. What the hell is Intentions, anyway? She doesn’t take no for an answer, and this is the best way I can think of to get her to leave me alone.”

“If you get me her name, I can talk with her.” Bond huffed, though he didn’t sound quite as irritated, as if the explanation had soothed his ruffled feathers. “How’s your — what is it? Day? Night? I haven’t seen daylight for three damned days.”

“Day. The Intentions crowd are apparently a bunch of night owls — something to do with watching the international morning news as it’s filmed — so I’ve switched up shifts. Why haven’t you seen daylight? Where are you now?”

“I’m in Paris, actually,” he said, sounding pleased. “Or under it, to be precise. There was supposed to be — well, something happening here, only either our intel was incorrect, or I’m in the wrong bloody part of Paris. Has Paris blown up, that you know of?”

“I haven’t heard anything about it, but we’re pretty isolated here at the Help Desk. It seems like the sort of thing the people here would take in stride, too, so it’s not as if there would be any running and yelling to give it away. Would you like me to check?”

Bond chuckled. “No need. They would’ve put up a sign in the lobby, most likely. So then, I’m going to call it quits. We’re hungry.”

Taylor cleared his throat. “We?” he tried to ask nonchalantly.

“Cherie and I,” he said, pronouncing the name with a perfect French accent. “I met up with her two days ago. Two days? Maybe three. We’ve been sharing food, but I’m out, and she’s very unhappy with me.”

_Time flies when you’re having fun_, Taylor thought bitterly. He liked it better when he thought James was stuck in the catacombs alone. “Was there something you needed? A map to the closest takeaway place?”

“I have an excellent sense of direction, so no need. Do you have any allergies?”

“Me?” Taylor blamed the change in shifts on apparently missing big chunks of the conversation. Dramatic changes in sleep schedules were always hard to adjust to.

“No. No allergies.” Taylor sincerely hoped Bond wasn’t going to try and send him something perishable in his usual brand of second-hand post box, though. “Why?”

“I’m a field agent. I ask questions. Sort of in the job description,” Bond teased. “Did you want one of these skulls? I could probably pry a few loose. Are they monks or politicians? Or nobility? I can’t recall.”

“I think it changes depending on who is in charge and what message they’re trying to sell. And, no thank you. Wouldn’t want some antiquities authority to come round knocking on my door. They’d take one step inside my flat, confiscate the skull, and have me investigated for being a serial killer or something, based on my unusual decor.” Taylor stopped, realising Bond probably had no idea that every one of his gifts was proudly on display. Oops.

“Definitely not. Though I wouldn’t have any difficulty breaking you out of the Met’s holding cells. The tablet is still working perfectly, by the way — though I managed to run the battery down, I’m afraid. I got bored.”

Taylor felt a stab of triumph at having successfully done a better job of outfitting a field agent than Q Branch had ever managed, with only a Vegas retail electronics store and a not-mechanically-adept man piecing things together for him hundreds of miles away. “I don’t want to know how you managed to run down an extended-life battery.”

“Cherie liked Angry Birds. All right, I should be out of the tunnels in about an hour, and home — What time is it? Daylight, you said? Please tell me it’s still breakfast time in Paris. I have nothing against French food, as long as it’s not prepared here, but I love their breakfasts.”

The mouse he was using to play Free Cell with creaked a little under Taylor’s suddenly vindictive grip. James let a bloody Angry Birds addict of a girl touch their tablet? His tablet, he corrected sourly. It was James’ tablet and he could do as he pleased with it... Still, he couldn’t keep the slight hint of annoyance out of his voice when he said, “Yes, it’s daylight here. And yes, it’s about breakfast time, by Paris’ looser standards. I hope you and Cherie have a fabulous morning.”

“One last question, and then I’ll let you get back to your critical printer emergencies.” Taylor bit his tongue, telling himself it wasn’t Bond being dismissive — as much as it sounded like he was. He didn’t think Bond was the type to make fun of people to show off to a woman, but who knew.

“What time are you off shift today?”

A common enough question during their conversations; Bond seemed to use Taylor’s shift times as a compass. Taylor had to give it a minute’s thought due to the change. “Uh, seventeen hundred. Eighteen hundred Paris time. Seven hours from now.” Eighteen hundred — just in time for Bond to be taking his new conquest out for dinner.

Taylor tried to dismiss the thought. He had no right to be jealous of whomever Bond spent his time with; he was a pale, skinny computer geek, and (perhaps most problematic) male. Now that Taylor thought about it, their casual flirting, which came so easily on the phone, was probably nothing more than Bond’s way of ensuring his cheerful cooperation. Bond didn’t need to know that Taylor had a raging crush already — let Bond think he still had to bribe Taylor with gifts and sweet talk.

“Perfect. I brought the Aston Martin. We’ll be back in London well before then.”

_We will?_ Taylor thought with just the slightest hint of bitterness, telling himself it wasn’t fair to actively hate the Angry Birds addict, just because Bond still hadn’t braved the Help Desk to come and visit Taylor. It wasn’t her fault.
Entirely unaware of Taylor’s thoughts, Bond cheerily said, “Take care, Mike.”

“You too, James.” Taylor tapped the end call button with perhaps a bit more force than necessary, though all he got for his trouble was a sore ear. He ended the White Noise app’s masking routines, staring at the monitor for a long moment. Occasional stabs of vicious jealousy aside, Bond was still his friend. Perhaps even his best friend — and Taylor tried not to dwell on how pathetic that particular statement was. Stuffing his disappointment (sadness, if he were honest with himself) away, Taylor turned his focus back to his computer.

He decided he may as well upload the White Noise app to CNET now that it had run for three months bug free. The user reviews he usually got from the freeware crowd always cheered him up.

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Getting promoted to Tier Two tech support meant that Taylor... well, didn’t have to *pay attention*, precisely, but did have to at least engage beyond ‘cycle the power’ followed by explaining how to cycle the power. This particular call was as routine as all the others, and Taylor was caught up in explaining the difference between a system password, screensaver password, and database access password when he heard a commotion near the front of the bullpen. Because he had to concentrate to avoid telling the caller he was an idiot, Taylor couldn’t do more than peek over the cubicle wall, but all he saw was a security guard and Iris.

Then, Iris pointed directly at Taylor’s cubicle, and his mind flashed to that early scene in *The Matrix*, because the security guard — no, *two of them* — started walking right towards him.

*Oh, fuck*, he thought, physically feeling the blood drain from his face and extremities in panic. He never should have uploaded the app to CNET. Even though Taylor, for once, hadn’t actually done anything illegal this time, they still would want to question him. And, of course, this had to be the day he wore his “Free Kevin Mitnick” shirt, even if it was mostly hidden under his button-up.

To make it more annoying, someone’s mobile was going off with a repetitive feline yowl, and why the hell wasn’t Iris tracking them down to have them shot? They weren’t supposed to use personal mobiles while on shift, though everyone did. But no one was stupid enough to leave the ringer on, much less unanswered.

But... the yowling was moving — coming closer — and the security guard in the lead looked down with a little wince and hurried his steps. And then the yowling was right there, as the security guard asked, “Mike Taylor?”

He was holding a cat carrier. With a cat.

No, not a cat. A kitten. A tiny kitten, little more than a ball of grey fluff.

“How, yes?” he asked nervously, eyeing the carrier.

The security guard held out a clipboard with a tri-part form. Most of the form was filled out in a familiar, bold scrawl, though with a normal pen rather than a marker. “Read and sign the authorisation, please.”

Taylor hesitated, though the impatient look the guard was giving him, and the equally annoyed and fascinated looks the rest of the tech employees were shooting his way, prompted him into action.
Hoping to get out of the spotlight quickly, he was halfway through scratching his name out when he realised that the inventory transfer form was marked *Personal property: ‘Cherie’, ‘cat, grey, small’.*

And, of course, the damn thing was authorised by none other than Bond, James, 007. Who apparently really did have the rank in MI6 to, well, force two security guards to deliver a cat — and what looked like a large cardboard box of cat supplies.

*How thoughtful,* Taylor thought absently as he accepted the armload of supplies and the carrier box.

There was a little note hanging off the front of the cage, which the security guard set on the desk. Taylor turned it in his fingers and saw that same familiar scrawl:

*She really does like Angry Birds. No scratches on the screen. That coating worked perfectly. -007*

Taylor grinned fondly and let the note fall back onto the cage. He leaned down to peer through the door at the nearly frantic cat, and — deciding even whispering something like “Here, kitty, kitty” in the venerated halls of England’s international intelligence operations headquarters would be a form of blasphemy — stuck a finger in the cage and wiggled it.

Cherie hissed adorably before scratching him hard enough to draw blood. Taylor yanked his hand away with a wince and stuck his finger in his mouth. He smiled. “I can see why he liked you,” he told the angry creature.

“Do you need to go to Medical for that?” Iris asked anxiously, startling him. He hadn’t even realised she was standing there.

Taylor chuckled. “No, I’m fine. My friend wouldn’t have sent me a diseased cat, I’m sure.”

Her eyes went wide. “Your... Oh. They... they usually call Q Branch. Well. This means he was happy, right? No complaints?”

“Oh, he complains endlessly,” Taylor said, smiling. Then he cleared his throat. “Well, it’s time for me to clock out and take this dear home.”

“Of course. No need! I’ll take care of your sign-out. You go. Take care of her. Let him know we’re delighted for the... to have... for the cat,” she faltered a little desperately.

“Iris? What’s the matter?” Taylor asked, concerned at her unusually flustered state. Not much could damage her calm — it was how she had ended up manager of the bullpen, after all. “Are you alright?”

“It’s good! We’re fine. Fine.” She smiled and lowered her voice a bit. “If a Double O is happy, then we are. In fact, I’ll help you carry everything out to your car. Do you have a car? I issued you a parking sticker, didn’t I? Or do you need me to have security drive you home?”

Taylor resisted the urge to check her pulse. “Yes, I have a parking sticker. And I can manage, thank you.” He couldn’t imagine the immense displeasure of being locked in a car with security and a panicky kitten. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Oh. If you need time, take all the time you need,” she said nonsensically. “Get him” — she went suddenly, brilliantly red in the face — “it settled in.”

“Right. Uh, I’m sure Cherie won’t need me to take the day off,” he tried to say reassuringly. “Cats value their privacy and independence, I’ve been told. So I’ll —”
She interrupted quickly in a strained whisper, “Of course! I won’t say a word. You two... uh... Good night.” She turned and went right for her office, not waiting for a farewell.

*How odd*, Taylor thought as he packed up his desk and shut down his workstation. He knew Iris’ job was stressful, but this was the first time he’d seen her quite so... irrationally upset. Though he had once seen her throw a keyboard at a tech — and wasn’t that a sight.

He pulled his jacket on and swung his messenger bag over his shoulder. It was a trick to get the surprisingly heavy box of supplies tucked under one arm without dropping the cat carrier, but he managed.

As he made his way to the carpark, careful not to jostle the yowling beast, he couldn’t keep the grin off his face.

He didn’t have the Angry Birds app yet, but he’d download it as soon as he got home.

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**July 2012**

The range lights flickered in warning before coming on at full brightness, giving Bond time to close his eyes against the sting. He stepped back out of his firing lane and pushed off his hearing protectors as the red “do not fire” signs lit up. A half dozen field agents clustered at the far end of the range all gathered together; they’d left Bond alone at the lane closest to the door.

He signalled to the rangemaster that he needed five minutes. When he got a nod in return, he stepped out of the range and into the hallway, where he hit speed dial nine — what had once been the lowest priority call on his mobile.

By now, he knew the Help Desk phone tree menu by heart. More to the point, Taylor had clued him in on how to bypass Tier One support entirely, which meant he had a much better chance of getting hold of Mike directly. No such luck this time, but he made a fuss, demanded to speak to operator 4191, and was quickly transferred and put on hold.

He sat down on one of the benches outside the range and switched the call to his earpiece so he didn’t have to hold the phone. He listened to the cycling recording of what sounded like Danielle Marsh, ten years ago, saying, “Your call will be completed in the order in which it was received. We apologise for the delay.”

Had Taylor liked Cherie? He hoped so. Bond couldn’t have a cat — with his schedule, he couldn’t even have a cactus — but he wasn’t about to abandon her in the catacombs. And the only person he’d considered giving her to was Mike Taylor.

Which... was disquieting.

Then he came on the line, answering as always, “Help Desk call centre, this is Taylor, operator 4191. This is not a secure line. How may I help you?”

“How’s Cherie?”

There was a pause and a mouseclick that told Bond that Mike had activated the program he used to
keep their calls from being monitored, even on the unsecure line. “She’s truly adorable. We had a rough start, with her yowling at the bedroom door when I closed it behind me to go to bed, but we came to an understanding fairly quickly. One that means she gets to sleep on my head and I get to keep my fingers.”

Bond grinned, momentarily distracted, wondering what Mike Taylor looked like. He’d intentionally avoided snooping, a first for him. He wanted one part of his life not coloured by MI6, even if MI6 was at the root of their association. “You should know better than to keep a lady off the good pillows,” he said without thinking, before wondering what the hell his brain was trying to discover from Mike’s answer. No, he knew, and he quickly covered by saying, “At least she’s happy now, though.”

Taylor chuckled. “You assume that I have good pillows, and that I know anything about ladies. She does seem to be happy, though for a few days after her first visit to the vet I was afraid she was going to kill me in my sleep. At least I got some productive coding out of it.”

A part of Bond grinned at that; the rest of him tried to scold himself for it, but he’d never been very good at that sort of self-restraint. “And here I was thinking she was the second most harmless thing I’ve sent you, other than the mask. She can’t even be a kilo.”

“A kilo of fury and more sharp edges than such a beautiful little thing should be allowed to have,” Taylor said with amusement. “Perhaps I should invest in a mechanical mouse to keep her occupied. Or build one. With random lasers to chase and the occasional distracting noise. Wouldn’t want her to be bored.”

Bond grinned, relieved that they got along. For all he knew, Taylor had been throwing out the trinkets Bond was sending him — inappropriate, in-violation-of-workplace-regs trinkets. Gifts, in some cases, at least the ones that exceeded the ridiculously low annual expenditure threshold. Fortunately, Bond had managed to skip the last four ethics retraining seminars, so he could always plead ignorance of the updated guidelines, if Taylor reported him.

Which Taylor wouldn’t. He was confident of that by now.

“I think she’d love being coddled like that. But then, who wouldn’t? And we wouldn’t want her jealous of the tablet you designed for me.”

“Well, if she eats the mouse, I probably won’t design her a new one — I’ll just buy new cheap ones for her to destroy. But if you destroy your tablet, I’ll definitely go back to the design board.” Taylor paused. “On second thought, perhaps a mechanical mouse isn’t a wise idea after all. I’m sure ingesting gears or screws wouldn’t be good for her. I wonder if the ball of yarn stereotype holds true?”

“Ingesting yarn or string is worse. And no tinsel for her, either. I’m afraid your Christmas just got boring,” Bond said thoughtlessly, before realising he was probably revealing that he’d actually been reading up on how to have a cat as a pet. A pet he didn’t have.

“I don’t do tinsel. Or Christmas, actually. So don’t be concerned with my unexpected change of lifestyle.” Taylor chuckled. “Mechanical mouse it is. Now, if you have any tips on how to keep her from attacking my feet every time I walk past, that could be useful. When she’s older, I’ll be able to see her coming. Now, though, she just hides under the couch, ready to pounce at anything in reach.”

Bond grinned, not caring who saw him. “That’s my girl. I knew she was perfect for you, the moment I saw her.”
“An angry, hissing ball of deadly attack kitty, probably living in a skull? You know, the catacombs are a perfect place to hide a body. She might actually be an assassin kitty, just putting up with me until she finds someone better. If I go missing, you’ll know why.”

“I’ll find you,” Bond promised, trying not to laugh. “Just bribe her with catnip and Angry Birds. You don’t have to be scared of giving her catnip, even so young. I checked. She might not like it until she’s older, but it won’t hurt her.”

“We have bonded over Angry Birds — and thank you very much for that shiny new addiction, by the way.” Taylor laughed. “I’ll have to try some catnip for her. I’ve always found YouTube videos of stoned, tripping cats pretty hilarious.”

“You’ll have to make one and send me the link,” Bond said, wondering if he could give Taylor his email address. Bond was in the agency’s directory, wasn’t he? He’d never actually checked; he tended to regard MI6 emails as a hassle at best and had set up his email filters to route most of them directly to the trash.

He wanted to ask if Taylor was sleeping better now. He wanted to ask if he’d kept her named Cherie or if he’d chosen another name. He wanted to bring up all the things he’d read about — microchip trackers and reasons not to declaw her and the suggestion that he could leash train her, if he started early enough.

But his mobile let out an alert he only heard once or twice a year — priority call, direct from M.

“I need to take this,” he said, standing up abruptly. He pulled the hearing protectors off his neck and tossed them onto the bench, following with his tinted yellow eye protectors. “I may be gone a while. You two, have fun.”

“Be safe, James. Let me know if you need anything. I’ll send funny videos of Cherie if I manage to capture anything good.”

He smiled, irrationally pleased that Taylor had kept her name. “Thank you, Mike,” he said as he headed for the lift. After a moment’s hesitation, he disconnected the call. The line rang over to M. “007 here.”

“There’s been an incident. We need you in Turkey as soon as possible. Transport is en route,” she said sternly. “Come upstairs for your briefing.”

“On my way, ma’am.”

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August 2012

When Taylor came to work Thursday evening, having managed to get back on night shifts, he immediately felt a change in the air — apprehension, anger, the heightened sense of vigilance that he’d experienced only twice before, when tragedy struck. Once, it had been the bombing of Station C in Cairo, an event hidden from the news services, though it had cost MI6 the lives of three field agents and the station chief. The other was the supposedly accidental death of an MI6 courier whose plane had gone down over the Indian Ocean.
The tension in the air on those occasions had certainly spread to the bullpen, but it hadn’t directly affected them other than to lower their help ticket and call volume. Iris had passed around a bottle of whisky, and they’d mourned for their colleagues in silence. Taylor had spent the time working — fixing printers and recovering accidentally deleted files in a sombre silence.

His first thought was that James was currently in the field. Taylor had sent him a video of Cherie going insane over a laser pointer, but he hadn’t heard back. He hadn’t been worried at the time — James had warned him he might go off the grid.

But now, his stomach dropped, and it was all he could do to walk quietly to his cubicle without demanding information from random passers-by.

He’d just sat down at his desk when Iris hurried over, as if she’d been waiting for him. “Mike, could you come see me for a moment?” she asked tensely, gesturing back at her office.

Taylor nodded, swallowing back the flutter of nervousness that tugged at him. “Of course.” Perhaps it was a horrendous explosion of ink in the copy room; for once, he wouldn’t mind that sort of tedious job, just as a distraction.

Iris escorted him in and closed the door — a bad sign. Worse, she opened the cupboard over her filing cabinets and took down a glass and the bottle of whisky that he’d dreaded seeing. She poured and set the glass down on the desk in front of him. Instead of going to her seat, she sat in the other visitor’s chair, turning to face him.

“I’m afraid there’s been an accident, Mike. You and 007 — James Bond — He gave you the cat, a couple of weeks ago...”

Oh god, no. Taylor reached out and grabbed the drink, tossing it back in one burning swallow. “He’s not dead, is he?”

Iris’ tense expression fell. “I’m sorry, Mike. Agents Ronson and Bond are both...” She hesitated, not meeting his eyes.

Taylor had known in some intellectual way that being friends with a field agent — being actually attached to one — was, in some ways, a terribly masochistic thing to do. They stayed gone for weeks at a stretch, they had to put themselves in horrible, ridiculously unsafe situations, and there was never any guarantee that they’d come back alive. But Taylor had told himself that what he and James had wasn’t exactly a friendship in the strictest sense; they’d never met, and only shared occasional phone calls that were typically based around Taylor helping James with a technical problem. Even wrapped in cheerful, teasing exchanges as they were, the phone calls were, at heart, extremely practical.

But sitting at Iris’ desk right now, he didn’t feel like someone who had learned of a co-worker’s death, or even an acquaintance's death. He was familiar with grief and knew he was experiencing it now.

He felt crushed under the weight of losing a very dear friend.

“Oh,” he managed.

“Oh god, no.” Taylor reached out and grabbed the drink, tossing it back in one burning swallow. “He’s not dead, is he?”

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“Oh,” he managed.

“I’m so sorry,” she said and reached out awkwardly to pat his hand. “Why don’t you make it an early weekend? Go home and... Well, there won’t be a memorial service, I’m afraid. There will be for Agent Ronson, but the Double O’s...” She shook her head. “It’s not... I think the Royal Navy may do something, and M’s written something for Navy News...” She trailed off into silence as though realising her words weren’t helping. “I’m sorry.”
“I didn’t actually know he was in the Navy,” Taylor said inanely, looking down at his hands. “A sailor. Huh.” He didn’t feel like he should be allowed to go early — he assumed James had a lot of friends, and if they all went home early, it might be problematic. “I’ll stay. Too many people trying to wrap projects.”

After a moment, Iris nodded. “Of course. But if you need to — or if you just want to sit in here for a few minutes, I’ll leave the door unlocked.” She stood uncertainly.

Taylor stood, too. “I’ll just head back to my desk, thanks.” For some reason, he felt like it was deeply important that he stay by his phone. What if they were mistaken? What if James called, needing his help? What if... He shook his head and helped himself to a half shot of whisky before he turned back to the door again. “Thanks Iris.”

Sadly, she nodded again, and let him leave.
Chapter 7

August 2012

Taylor came home in a daze. He let himself into his flat, closed the door, and locked it, for a moment wondering why it felt so empty. James had never been here. It wasn’t like it had been at work, sitting there listening to the standard problems of Tier Two tech support, the driver errors and database crashes.

Then he realised that Cherie wasn’t attacking his feet, which she’d done every night for the past three weeks, every time he came home.

“Cherie,” he called, suddenly overwhelmingly worried. It was enough that he’d lost his friend today. If something had happened to Cherie, too? “Cherie!” he called more frantically as he kicked off his shoes and dropped his bag and coat on the floor.

He’d barely crossed the threshold from hallway to living room when he spotted the little puff of grey fur sitting on the coffee table, having a stare-down with a mobile. In a rush of relief, Taylor crossed the room and scooped up the protesting cat, scratching between her ears to soothe her. “Of all the days to change your habits,” he muttered with a groan, kissing her soft head fondly.

When she finally brought out her claws to insist that he put her down, Taylor dropped her back on the table. She went back to staring at the phone. It suddenly vibrated once, the screen flashing, and Taylor would have been amused with the way Cherie puffed up and hissed angrily at the device if he wasn’t suddenly struck by the realisation that the phone wasn’t his.

Taylor looked at the mobile, wondering how in the hell someone had managed to leave it here. He hadn’t put in any work orders for maintenance, so that seemed unlikely. And his lazy landlord wasn’t any better a candidate, either.

He picked it up, only to discover that it was plugged in. His couch had been shoved two inches to the side, in fact, to make room for the charger.

He was too upset over James to get properly angry at the intrusion, so he sat down and hit the power button to see if he could figure out who the owner was.

The mobile — a decent quality Android — was unlocked, opening to his touch. The buzzing was a voicemail alert. The home page listed no owner — only the current time and icons for the address book, voice mail, and texts.

Curious, Taylor checked the address book first. There were only two entries, first names only: Alec and James.

He almost dropped the phone, a surge of adrenaline making his hand tremble.


Before he could think better of it, he switched to the voicemail box and pressed play on the only voicemail listed. The voice that spoke was, crushingly, not James, but that of an unfamiliar man:

*If you’re listening to this anywhere but your flat, stop immediately and go home. Do not listen to this anywhere else.*
Then the recording went silent, but the message duration was a full two minutes. Heart pounding, Taylor waited. After a ridiculously long time, it continued:

All right. I assume you’re safe, or someone else has this, in which case we’re all buggered anyway. I’m supposed to tell you first off that James isn’t dead. I’m going out to him as soon as I can disappear, but he wanted me to sweep your flat and leave this for you first.

He needs… time, I suppose. He said he’ll explain more when I get there, but that does bugger-all for you. He did say you can call him, though I’m asking you to go easy. He was shot just a few days ago, and he’s still recovering.

As for me, he wanted me to let you know that if you need anything at work, just get in touch with me. My contact info is in this phone, but don’t take this phone out of your flat. Find somewhere to hide it. I’ve swept for surveillance devices, and your flat’s currently secure. You should be all right.

Finally, I’m supposed to tell you he’s sorry that this had to happen. If you don’t feel like calling him, just bin the phone. He hopes you’ll keep the cat or find her a good home. She’s a vicious little bugger, by the way, so you won’t be needing a guard dog.

He didn’t ask me to tell you that this has maybe been a long time coming, and to just go easy on him, all right? It’s not easy, in the field. Everyone needs to escape once in a while.

The message ended on that abrupt note.

Taylor stared down at the phone in complete and utter disbelief.

“Goddamn buggering stupid fucking spies!” he shouted suddenly, letting the phone drop to the table. Cherie, who had been sitting by his leg, jumped to her feet, tail puffing. “What the buggering fuck, James?!”

He stomped out to the kitchen to fetch his own bottle of whiskey — a slightly more sweet, American variety that, to him, tasted like candy. It took a long pull straight from the bottle for him to calm down a little, the burn in his throat and chest a welcome sensation.

He closed his eyes and replayed the message in his head. First, he processed the fact that James had been shot. Whether it was a handgun or a sniper rifle, he knew that had to hurt like hell, even if it hadn’t hit any of the annoyingly essential parts that were crammed under a person’s skin. He started a quick calculation about the likelihood of getting shot and not being hit in bones, blood vessels, internal organs, and so on, but quickly gave it up as far too distressing an exercise.

James had been shot. Someone had shot James. Not good. He took another drink and tried to breathe calmly.

Once the horror, fear, and anger at the first realisation passed, Taylor moved on to the second thought. James was taking a break from MI6. Very likely a permanent break, from what Alec’s message made it sound like. If James thought Taylor would get rid of the cat (the stupid bastard), then that certainly wasn’t a good sign. (As if he’d even consider it.) Taylor could understand wanting a break, but he didn’t see why it couldn’t be done by first getting fixed up at Medical, followed up with the sort of mandatory leave agents liked to complain about but usually took anyway.

Finally, Taylor moved to his third and final realisation. Of all the people, of all the possible contacts, James had contacted him. Mike Taylor. Help Desk nerd. He’d instructed his fellow field agent to check his flat, leave a message, and leave the lines of communication open in case Taylor wanted to contact either of them. It was no small consideration. It was, in fact, a huge act of trust, assuming that
Taylor wouldn’t just turn around and inform the higher-ups at MI6. He was mildly insulted by the suggestion that he would bin the phone instead of calling James, but he let it slide on account of stress caused by, well, being shot.

Taylor took the whiskey bottle back out to the living room and sat back down on the couch. Fortunately, the phone hadn’t suffered for his anger; the screen wasn’t cracked and nothing had jarred loose. He took another drink, starting to feel it in his fingertips and behind his eyes, and dialled James. The number that came up was international, with an unfamiliar country code.

He recognised James’ voice at once, though it was thick with sleep, scratchy, and hoarse. “Yeah?”

“Fucking hell, James. You scared me.” Alec’s words — *go easy* — bounced around his mind for a moment, so he took a deep breath. “Are you okay?”

“Other than being dead?” he asked roughly. “I’ll be fine. Been shot before. Twice.”

“I don’t think it’s supposed to get easier the more it happens. Are you really okay?”

“For what happened?” He barked out a soft laugh. “I’m bloody fantastic, for what happened. But listen — this is going to be bad, Mike. Really bad. You need to be careful.”

Taylor was just a Help Desk tech; he wondered if, in James’ present state, he’d forgotten that he wasn’t actually Q Branch. Much as he liked to pretend he was better, or above them, he wasn’t. But there was no point to reminding him. “Do you want to tell me about it? What can I do to help you?”

“Just take care of yourself. Something’s happening. We’re all targets, Mike. Especially the field agents, but maybe everyone.” He took a deep breath before he muttered, “Fuck it. We lost this one. Intel went missing that shouldn’t have — names. Active agents, and not just ours. All our bloody allies.”

Taylor swallowed. “Whose genius idea was it to put all of that sort of data together in one place? Christ, James, they’re the ones who should be getting shot. Not you.” He took another quick drink. “Is there anything you can tell me that will help me either get it back, or protect MI6?”

“It’s a physical retrieval, now. Someone had better get the damned thing back. But... Fuck, I’ve no idea,” he said. In the background, Taylor heard the distinctive sound of a cigarette lighter, followed by a sharp inhale. “How’d someone *know* to go after it? Might be human intel, or it might not. It was on a laptop — the hard drive. One of our laptops.”

“When you were sent to retrieve it, were you sent after the laptop? Or something else? Did the laptop ever leave MI6 custody?”

“Turkey. Ronson’s in charge of the op — local senior agent.” Taylor heard another long inhale, followed by a soft curse.

*Ronson*, Taylor thought, heart sinking. Iris had said that both Bond and Ronson were dead, as far as MI6 knew. Could Ronson have lived, just like Bond? He didn’t have the heart to say anything to Bond about Ronson. He had no new information, and Taylor didn’t want to upset him any more than he already was.

When Bond spoke again, his voice was even raspier. “Istanbul’s the gateway to everywhere. Everyone’s taking bribes from all sides. He notified us that the laptop was moving. He intercepted it, but they got him and took the drive.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can do to help. But I’m just a Help Desk tech, so don’t...” Taylor shook his
head. “I’m sure all of MI6 is on it. You rest. Get better.” He wanted to convince James to come back, but bit his tongue. The raspiness sounded worrying.

“I’ve been out cold for almost two days.” He inhaled again, and Taylor wondered how wise it was for him to be smoking if he’d been shot. “It’s late there. Are you going to sleep?”

“Not bloody likely,” Taylor said with a completely mirthless laugh. “I think I have some work to do. If I fix it, will you come back?”

Instead of answering immediately, James sighed again and went quiet, so quiet that Taylor could hear something faint in the background. It took him a few long seconds to identify it as the sound of splashing waves, rhythmic and softer than a fountain.

“Did you see Alec? Talk to him?” James asked quietly.

“Oh.” Well, that answered that. He didn’t know why he had any right to be disappointed, given that they’d never actually met. But even if he kept in contact with James, it wouldn’t be the same, and he knew it. “Okay.”

After a moment, James asked hesitantly, “Did I lose you? I’m on... fuck if I know what these are. Painkillers of some kind. You know what I do, don’t you?”

James was a field agent. For MI6. Of course he knew that, and what it meant. So instead of answering, he tried to lighten his voice and asked, “Did your tablet survive, or shall I make you a new one?”

“The shots were higher than my pocket, but it’s in the river now. I really don’t feel like diving back in to get it. Or driving there. Took me long enough to get here.”

“Well, it didn’t occur to me to make it waterproof, so that would be a pointless exercise anyway. I can fix it in the next version, though. Any other upgrades you’d like to request while I’m back at the drawing board?”

“That fucking game,” he said with a faint laugh. “This phone doesn’t have it. Doesn’t have anything, so don’t try and text, till Alec gets me a replacement. Did you talk to him?”

“He left me a voicemail. On a burner phone he left in my flat. Bloody spies,” he couldn’t help but add. “He’s lucky Cherie is so small. Apparently she didn’t take to his break-in too well.”

“That’s our girl,” Bond said proudly. “And you’re all right? You’ll be careful?”

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine.” He thought about adding that he could always call Alec, but the fact that the number wasn’t local stopped him. He stood up from the couch and walked over to his desk. He was sure that Q Branch had some fancy equipment, but from what he’d seen at the Help Desk, his own technology was a hundred times better. He hesitated at the idea of tracking the list from home instead of work, but didn’t cave to the idea that he should wait. He wanted to see what the hell was going on. “When I’m done with the tablet, should I give it to Alec? Or prepare it for mailing somewhere?”

After one last deep inhale, James said, “I’ll come back. I always come back. Or maybe I never fucking learn.” He let out a sharp, bitter laugh. “Alec won’t be here long. He’s a pain in the arse who won’t believe I’m not dead until he sees me. That’s all. I asked him to keep an eye on you. Um, tall, taller than me by a couple inches, green eyes, blond hair, bad at shaving, looks like he bench presses things for a living.”

“James, I don’t know how tall you are,” Taylor reminded him quietly. “We’ve never actually met,
for some strange reason I can’t think of at the moment.” He’d always told himself it was because of James’ work and his own inability to keep a regular schedule that had him coming at regular times. It seemed like a poor excuse, now.

“Well, I don’t know how tall you are,” Bond retorted, sounding oddly smug about that. “I wasn’t cheating. I could have, you know. Your whole file, right there. Only I didn’t, because there’ll be one bloody thing in my life that’s not because of MI-fucking-six.”

Taylor shook his head. Checking a file you had rightful access to wasn’t cheating, unlike hacking James’ would have been. But he didn’t say that. And, of course, their whole... relationship? friendship? comedy club?... was because of mutual employment at MI6. But he didn’t say that either. In fact, he blamed the alcohol for what he said next. “Dinner. When you get back. I’ll give you the tablet if you’ll go to dinner with me.”

Of course, he instantly panicked, once it was said. The last thing he needed to do was scare James off. He had a hard time imagining that James was homophobic, but still; perhaps the phrasing hadn’t been the best. “I mean —”

“Bugger that,” James snapped, and Taylor’s heart sank. “We can’t leave our girl out of it. I’ll bring something to your place. Do cats eat dim sum? Look it up. Or teriyaki chicken. Everyone eats chicken, even vegetarians, because it’s bloody chicken. Christ, you’re not vegetarian, are you?”

Taylor laughed, both out of tension relief and at James’ descent into the nonsensical. “I’m not a vegetarian. Teriyaki chicken will be perfect. For all three of us.”

“Good. She’s all right?” he asked. “Has she grown at all?”

“Yes, though it’s been more of a stretching and thinning out process. It took time for her to get used to cat food — for a while, all she would eat was tuna fish from the can. Spoiled beastie. She’s calming down, now; she only draws a few ounces of blood a day.”

Taylor heard a creaking sound in the background. “Targeting laser,” Bond said. “Aim it at an intruder. If you don’t blind him, she’ll go right for it and claw out his eyes.”

“Did you just attempt to weaponise a kitten?” Taylor asked, laughing — mostly because he could picture it all too easily.

“It’s what I do, Mike,” Bond said sleepily. “I’m a bloody assassin.”

“Assassin kitty. I knew it.”
November 2012

Working Help Desk meant Mike Taylor was effectively invisible.

Perhaps out of concern for his “grieving,” Iris began to increase Mike’s responsibilities, even though he’d carefully monitored his productivity to stay just under the threshold for promotion. He’d painstakingly calculated the perfect path to career-mediocrity, only to have his... whatever’s fake suicide throw it all into a tailspin.

It was, however, useful. As a senior technician, he was dispatched on what Iris called “field calls” and everyone else called “getting out of the bloody bullpen for a walk every once in a while.” His new badge gave him access to all sorts of surprising places. He was tempted to take a few side trips, if not for the fact that badge use was monitored.

*Everything* was monitored, in fact, from doors and comms to environmental systems, air pressure, hot water, and even motion-sensitive light switches. It was a smart building, with a near-infinite number of signals, all routed to a computer *somewhere* in the building — though he had no idea where.

The thought gave him chills.

It wasn’t a 1984 Big Brother feeling so much as the lingering echo of James’ warning: an IT compromise, bad computer security protocols, and a building that collected data on its inhabitants, from the janitors’ use of cleaning chemicals to when M herself, the legendary head of MI6, got a fresh cup of tea.

Data, Taylor knew, was as much a weapon as a gun. More so, in fact. With the right data, he could construct every detail of a person’s life — or he could wipe that life from every system in the world, erasing that person far more thoroughly than mere death ever would.

So he accepted his promotion to senior tech and kept his eyes and ears open. He took note of where the cameras and sensors were. He began to learn which sinks operated from motion sensors rather than valves and which air conditioning vents wouldn’t kick on until a room was inhabited.

And when he was back at his desk, he began to watch — *just* to watch — internal network traffic ebb and flow with the people coming and going, a tidal force of data that peaked at half nine in the morning and again at three in the afternoon. The midday data surge was followed by a deep lull as people left the building for lunch, since on many days the cafeteria food was risky at best.

With two months’ worth of data, Taylor could have painted an accurate snapshot of MI6 — a day in the life, as the saying went. And all he needed was access to the network. This was the type of human intelligence that would’ve taken a team of infiltrators months to put together as they spread through various departments and observed with notebooks and watches, and they still wouldn’t have learned that the chief of staff, Bill Tanner, never drank tea, but M always did, so there was both an electric kettle and a coffee machine in the executive office.

The only flaw with his new responsibility was that he could *only* work days, but at least a steady schedule made Cherie feel better — and gave James a regular timetable to safely reach him at home. Taylor made it a point to always get home by six at the latest, even if it meant he had to order dinner in, rather than stopping somewhere on the way. James had started responding to the habit by calling every night at five minutes past — sometimes only for a few minutes, sometimes for hours, until they
were forced to plug in their phones or have the batteries run flat.

The day after one such marathon call, Taylor was yawning, thinking that he should’ve had more caffeine and less sugar at lunch. The three o’clock crash was hitting him hard, so he took the stairs, tempting as the lift was. He’d actually started avoiding the lifts anyway. They, too, were computer controlled, and lately he’d been thinking a bit too much of how the Red Queen controlled the Hive in Resident Evil (as opposed to the RQOS, whose cleaning bots apparently were known to occasionally display pack-hunting behaviour as a method of control).

He was jogging down the stairs two at a time when he felt the tremors, and at first he blamed it on post-lunch dizziness. He’d have to get chocolate or something to raise his blood sugar.

Then the building seemed to lurch, and pressure swathed him as his ears started to ring, all sound gone distant. He grabbed the stairwell railing and sat down hard. The laptop slung over his shoulder hit the edge of the stairs, and he had a brief, crazed moment of worry that he’d chipped the case, before he realised that the noise ringing in his head had been an explosion — a big enough explosion to rock the entire building.

That couldn’t be good.

Taylor’s first thought was how best to escape and find out what the hell was going on. Someone had to know — Security, perhaps. But his memory of the Protect and Survive pamphlet series came back in a flash, and he realised that he was in a very enviable position: in a stairwell, with a laptop, on a network. There was no safer place to figure out what was going on than here.

He sat cross-legged on the nearest landing, fingers twitching over his mobile very briefly before he pulled out his computer. He didn’t know anything yet, and it would be supremely unwise to place an international call to an unknown number when Security was probably on its highest alert. So he pulled up his terminal to access internal communications instead.

After watching it for two months, he had a feel for the rhythm of the network. Now, he watched data-tides shift as egress-point traffic spiked from people fleeing the building. Systems were shutting down in ways that were good (such as data integrity) and bad (such as firewalls).

“Not bloody likely,” he muttered, pulling open file browser windows to access the folders where he stored his most powerful network security programs. He targeted high risk areas first: the executive offices, the armoury, and the servers where the analysts kept their data. As he watched the quick destruction of port security protocols, Taylor couldn’t help but be impressed. Whoever was behind this was good. Genius-level good. They sliced through intervention programs like they were butter, using a combination of brute force, like overflow attacks, and unidentified security flaws.

Which only made sense if a) someone had put them there, or b) someone was completely familiar with their systems. Or both.

Taylor didn’t have time to focus on that thought, though, before he was completely drawn into the task of systematic intervention. It almost felt like a dance, anticipating where the hacker was going to attack and killing the viruses and worms before they could do their damage.

And it was, Taylor knew, a hacker. A single person sitting on the other side of MI6’s security protocols, trying to bring it to ruin. A genius, to be certain, but also someone who was arrogant enough to think he couldn’t be stopped by anyone within MI6.

And god, did Taylor enjoy proving him wrong.
Lulled by the slow pace of life on the Aegean Sea, Bond had fallen into the strangest routine of what was admittedly a strange life. Mornings, he swam lazily in water still warm despite the lateness of the year. Sometimes he didn’t get out of bed until midday, but he always spent at least an hour in the waves, letting the gentle stretch ease the pain of poorly healed wounds and abuse. His black market contacts kept him supplied with codeine or whatever opiates they could smuggle into Greece, and in return he bought their silence — everyone’s silence, with rounds at one of the beach huts that served as a local bar.

A part of him loved it here in this dingy hellhole at the arse-end of the Mediterranean. Every day, he ate fish that had been alive just a half hour before, fresh off the firepit or frying pan; he drank ouzo and thought that he’d just stay by the beach and drink until he couldn’t see anymore. And every evening, as it grew dark, he found himself going back to the shack he called home now, so he could talk on the phone.

It was ridiculous. He was infatuated with a voice and a fantasy, someone he’d never bloody seen while he’d had the chance — and now, he didn’t have the chance. He couldn’t even ask Mike to send him one of those horrid snaps taken in the mirror, because there wasn’t a data plan for shit out here. He was lucky to have analogue reception at all.

When the irritation grew to be too much, he’d ring off and go find someone to fuck, or he’d get drunk and play stupid bar games until he passed out at the hut with its mismatched chairs and rickety bar stools. He’d made the owner rich, at least by local standards, so he inevitably woke up to find his windcheater draped over his shoulders, his pockets un-picked.

On this particular dreary afternoon, he woke in the bar with a hangover that would drive a saint to suicide and the lingering memory of getting very angrily drunk so he could forget the temptation to do something incredibly stupid, like ask Mike what he’d been wearing, which was the first thought that had come to him as he’d heard the creak of bedsprings around midnight London time.

Down the bar, there was an overturned glass with a scorpion trapped underneath.

*Fuck.*

He found a few bills and waved them in the direction of his very wealthy bartender, who was making some effort to sweep sand off the floor. Why he bothered, Bond had no idea. Probably to have something to do. God knew he didn’t bother washing glasses.

Not that Bond cared, at this point. He took a couple of codeine, splashed alcohol into a glass, and washed the pills down, thinking that the next time he fell asleep at the bar, he should ask the bartender to kick over his stool so he’d at least sleep on his back. That hurt less.

He glanced unwillingly in the mirror, thinking he looked like death warmed over. Better he stay here in Greece, where he could die as the odd foreigner. He’d planned on coming back from the dead after a couple of weeks, then a month, then longer, and as much as a part of him wanted to actually see Taylor — to have that stupid chicken dinner date with him and the cat — he didn’t want Taylor to see him. And every day, it got worse.

Now, he looked away from his reflection, hearing words in American English teasing at his
consciousness. “... described as a major terror attack in the heart of London. No one has yet claimed responsibility for what sources are calling a possible cyber-terrorist assault on the British Secret Service.”

Bond stopped breathing.

He rose, steady on his feet for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, and turned.

“Early reports from the scene indicate at least six dead and many more injured, with victims being evacuated to local hospitals within minutes of the explosion.”

The scene on the telly was split between Wolf Blitzer and Legoland, smoke pouring from where M’s office had once been. M had earned his loyalty and hatred in equal measure, but for once, it wasn’t her who came to mind first.

Taylor.
Chapter 9

November 2012

Taylor played anxiously with his mobile phone — not the phone, but his personal one, the one listed in his MI6 file as his primary contact number. He’d memorised James’ phone number by now, and he was tempted to call, but he didn’t dare. The hospital was crawling with MI6 security and emergency staff who were primarily administering oxygen and handing out plasters. At a sharp look from a rather fearsome nurse, he held the oxygen mask back up to his face and breathed.

Of all the stupid bloody things... He’d passed out from the smoke, and thank god he’d been on the landing instead of the stairs. But when they’d pulled him out, they’d left his laptop behind — his MI6-issued laptop with his login and a very, very illegal set of programs all loaded and happily running. And even if the battery died, all they’d have to do was plug it in, and they’d see what he’d been doing.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to call James. He took another breath of cool, dizzyingly pure oxygen, and wondered how he could best escape.

When he heard his name called, he hoped like hell it was the physician on duty. One last check-up, and he’d be free to go, right?

He stood up from the creaky plastic chair, abandoning the oxygen mask. “Taylor here,” he said loudly, looking around for whoever had called him.

Immediately, he regretted his cheerful compliance. It wasn’t a physician in a comforting white lab coat but a uniformed, armour-wearing MI6 soldier, complete with some sort of machine gun held across his chest. He walked over with long strides and asked, “Michael Taylor, HD4191?”

The coughing fit he succumbed to wasn’t faked in any way whatsoever — it was simply brought on by his breath hitching in panic. The concerned look the guard gave him was slightly reassuring, but only slightly. “Sorry,” he said with a weak smile when he was done. He knew there was no point in fighting it; he’d just get shot if he tried to run away. And he’d had enough conversations with James to know how unpleasant that was. “Yes, that’s me.”

Instead of answering Taylor, the guard put a finger to his ear and said, “We have him, sir. Bringing him to your location now.” then, looking directly at Taylor, he said, “Come with me, please.”

Lovely. He was being politely arrested. Or detained, since he hadn’t been read his rights. Not that MI6 needed to, did they? They could just drag him to some underground bunker or secret warehouse and have him shot. He remembered James’ joking comment about the underground cages, but couldn’t smile. James was living it up in Greece. He wouldn’t come to the rescue, after all. Taylor’s heart sank at the thought.

He was brought out to a black SUV parked in the ambulance-only area. Tinted windows, thick tyres, the body probably armoured... Wonderful. He obediently got into the back — alone, which was a nice surprise. He hadn’t been searched and wasn’t handcuffed. He had his mobile.

Alec, he thought. But he didn’t want to do anything obvious, so he waited.

The SUV’s side windows were black, but he could see a little bit out of the windscreen over the guard’s shoulder. (He’d been asked to fasten his seatbelt, which trapped him behind the guard in the
They didn’t drive far before they went into darkness, and he remembered the underground cages all over again. It wasn’t a parking garage but a tunnel, one that went on and on forever, or so it felt. The driver was a soldier, too, and drove as if he were under enemy fire. The headlamps flashed on curved brick walls only inches away from the sides of the vehicle, and Taylor flinched more than once at a sharp turn that never quite scraped the SUV, but came damned close.

Then they came to an open area, where they halted before a single door painted the colour of murk — neither black nor brown nor green, but all of them at once. The passenger-side soldier got out and opened Taylor’s door. “This way.”

Taylor got out, wondering if he’d just quietly gone to his death — and then a little bit of irritation curled through him as he realised he was being a coward. He had nothing to fear. Yes, he’d broken the rules, but he’d saved lives. He’d saved the rest of MI6.

Feeling vindicated, if not actually relieved, he followed the soldier into the sort of tunnel that would have fascinated Taylor any other day — he loved exploring old ruins. Now, he just concentrated on maintaining that very fine core of resolve and not letting it dissipate like fog.

He was brought to what looked like a World War II bunker, almost exactly like the one in the Doctor Who episode with Winston Churchill. The air was unpleasantly cold and damp, making him cough twice until he tried to suppress it; the echoes were violently loud.

“Taylor?” The call this time came from a somewhat harried-looking man in a very nice suit. He was standing on a balcony halfway up the wall. “Up here. Can you handle stairs?” he asked, pointing to a set of brick stairs at the far side of the balcony.

Well, he wasn’t in chains and irons, or whatever those dungeon-style restraints were called, so that was another good sign, he thought. “Uh,” he started, voice rough. “I think so. But if I have a coughing fit, I hope you have some oxygen handy.” The man in the suit was watching patiently, not angrily, as Taylor started slowly up the stairs, feeling better about his situation by the second.

The man offered him a hand, saying, “Bill Tanner, Chief of Staff.”

Taylor couldn’t hide his surprise. “Sir? What can I do for you?” He had an idea of what might be going on, but deliberately ignored the sinking sensation in his stomach until his fears were confirmed.

“Come in,” he said, using the excuse of a handshake to guide Taylor through the double-width doorway. The space beyond might have once been a large walk-in cupboard or inventory storage space. It was divided into two rooms not by walls but by thin aluminium girders, one of which had a sheet of Plexiglas leaning up against it, scribbled with grease pencil markings. There were two desks, one in each partitioned space. An older woman was seated at the front desk, looking red-eyed but grim, all of her attention focused on a laptop. Her suit jacket was smudged with soot and torn at one cuff, and she had plasters on both hands.

Tanner led him to the back “office.” “Um. Right, sit down,” he invited, pointing at the single seat behind the desk. In a surreal show of informality, he leaned his hip against the desk, half-sitting, one foot swinging free. “Were you hurt?”

Taylor went around the desk and hesitated, recognising the laptop — the one with the Help Desk department inventory control sticker right there on the lid. “Smoke inhalation. Throat’s a bit rough, but that’s the extent of it.” His voice was scratchy and croaky, but the man didn’t look amused, merely sympathetic.
“Good.” He reached down and pulled the laptop open. Except for the cracks and scratches, it was apparently in good working order. As soon as Tanner touched the keyboard, it woke up, asking for Taylor’s login. “If you wouldn’t mind?”

Resigned, Taylor typed in his password, wondering if he could alt-F4 out of his running programs too fast for Tanner to notice. Probably not, with him perched above the screen like a somewhat fatigued bird of prey.

As soon as the desktop loaded, Tanner gave the laptop a little push, moving it so they could both see. Tanner swiped at the touchpad, opening each of the command windows in turn. Surprised, Taylor darted a look at him and noted that his eyes were scanning each window in turn as if he knew what he was looking at.

“Thought so,” he finally said, turning to Taylor. “You blocked the attack.”

“Yes,” Taylor said with surprise. “The attacker was good, but I managed to keep him from doing any significant damage after the explosion itself. I didn’t get anything useful for an IP address or location, though.” He couldn’t help the hint of bitterness in his tone at the last. A great disappointment, that.

Tanner huffed, shaking his head ruefully. “That’s because he initiated the attack from inside. Not physically, but he got in through legitimate channels. He compromised our sister organisations, but never triggered their alerts because his connection to them was innocuous.”

Taylor nodded, completely unsurprised. It could have been something as simple as the hacker getting in through an offsite backup routine — those sorts of things tended to be overlooked as the tunnels they could be. “The hacker used flaws in the system expertly. I suspect that he or she either has had access for years, strategically placing small doors into the system without anyone noticing, or worked here once. Or both.”

“Matches my assessment as well.” Tanner sat back. “How is it that of all of MI6 — our entire IT security division and Q Branch included — you were the only one not only to identify the threat but to take immediate, effective steps to counter it?”

Taylor hesitated. He was absolutely unwilling to bring James into this, but if Tanner was digging, it wouldn’t be long before Iris started talking. May as well be straightforward, wrapping the lie in a truth that could be corroborated. “I was, uh, friends with a field agent. He couldn’t get hold of Q Branch once and called the Help Desk. We exchanged phone calls occasionally, and his stories about his difficulties with Q Branch led me to take an interest in the state of the network. I suppose, since his death, I’ve been hypervigilant as a distraction.”

To his relief, Tanner nodded. “Bit of a law unto themselves, but that’s not your fault.” He studied Taylor’s face, frowning thoughtfully. “I can’t quite reconcile what you’re doing at the Help Desk, though, with your early test scores.”

Well, that wasn’t a place he wanted this conversation to go. “In my school —”

“Please,” Tanner said, wincing, “there’s no need to dredge back quite that far. I’d rather not remember my own primary school experiences, thanks.”

“In my experience,” Taylor restarted, slightly annoyed, “effort is rewarded with demands to accomplish even more, to be better still, to reach further — whether you enjoy the work you’ve been tasked with or not. I learned early not to extend myself unless the ‘reward’ was absolutely something I wanted.”
“Logical,” Tanner said, as if he actually approved. “What did Double — uh, Bond tell you about Q Branch?”

“Not much. He was very careful not to violate security clearance issues,” Taylor responded carefully. “He spoke mostly about the technology or technology planning gone, uh, not according to plan.”

With another visible flinch, Tanner glanced over his shoulder at the lady in the front office. She was typing at a furious pace, occasionally stopping to rub at her eyes with her sleeve. She looked like the type of woman who should have a handkerchief on her. Then again, she also looked like the type who shouldn’t be using what seemed like it might well be a high-end laptop for anything other than solitaire. She had to be someone’s grandmother.

“Q Branch has been under... well, long-term management — had,” Tanner corrected with another flinch. “I’m afraid Q — that is, Major Boothroyd — is no longer with us. M has tasked me with finding someone who, ah...” He made an indistinct gesture with one hand. “Well, who can bring it into the twentieth century, kicking and screaming.”

“Twenty-first?” he corrected automatically. Then, thinking better of it, he tacked on, “Sir,” at the end.

“Small steps, Taylor,” Tanner said apologetically. “The Quartermaster Programme — Q Branch — exists solely to outfit our field agents, though primarily the Double O’s. While you’d need to work closely with IT, Communications, Intentions, and R&D, your primary concern would be ensuring that our field agents have not only the gear and armaments to complete their tasks, but also up-to-date intelligence and whatever support can be provided, both in advance and realtime.”

That didn’t sound very different from what he’d been doing for James this whole time — though with sanction, access to resources, and the ability to do it right the first time. Of course, it also meant more agents, and significantly more responsibility.

“You want me to work in Q Branch,” he stated, just for clarification. He wondered if that were normal, promoting people from the Help Desk, of all places. He’d specifically chosen to apply for his position because no one was ever promoted out. The better you did there, the more they wanted to keep you, even to the point of rigging your performance metrics so you couldn’t promote out.

“Well, yes. It’s obvious — we need you,” Tanner said earnestly. “I’ve run my own numbers, but as a quick estimate, how much of the building do you think would’ve been compromised, if not for your intervention?”

“Oh,” Taylor said, running quick calculations. Hell, even the canteen had had a worm targeted at it. “Ninety-eight percent, I think?” The sensors in the bathrooms were about the only system safe from the attack, he thought.

Tanner’s nod was grim. “So far, the death toll is at eleven. I’ve no doubt it’ll go higher as rescue teams get through the collapsed wall outside our old office. Now consider how much higher it would have been, if not for you.”

Taylor hadn’t really thought of it that way, but it made sense. It could have been dozens. And the death toll wouldn’t have stopped when the attack was over; people would have continued to be in danger for as long as the information the hacker would have stolen had been in the wild. People like James. And he wouldn’t be stuck fixing printers anymore; he’d actually be working on useful things for exceptional people.

Before he could answer, the woman beyond the unbuilt wall stood, snapped a USB drive out of her
laptop, and crossed into the back office, heels clicking on the concrete floor. She sniffed but kept her chin up, shoulders back, as she walked right to Tanner. “This is everything I can think of for now, but I’m certain there’s more.”

“Thank you, Danielle. Danielle Marsh, Mike Taylor,” Tanner introduced, putting the USB drive down on the desk, rather than pocketing it.

Danielle gave him a sad, warm smile. “Mr Taylor,” she said, holding out one bandaged hand. Her nails were cut very short, and though she wasn’t wearing rings, Taylor could see where she normally did wear them.

“Ms Marsh,” he said with a pleased grin, taking her hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you. A friend of mine” — he caught himself before he could refer to James in the present tense — “admired you very much.”

“I’m glad to finally meet you,” she said, patting his hand between hers before she released him. “James was —” She closed her eyes and swallowed. “He was much more cheerful, those last few months.”

It was a surprising compliment, as was the insinuation that James had talked about him. Danielle seemed earnest and sweet, and Taylor looked down at his hands to hide his expression. He suddenly felt more than a little dirty, keeping James’ secret. “Thank you for saying so.”

“Shall we go over your proposal?” Tanner asked Danielle.

“Please.”

Tanner picked up the drive again and pushed it into Taylor’s laptop, rather than going back to Danielle’s or a different one. Taylor sat there, feeling awkwardly as if he’d been forgotten, while Tanner pulled up a spreadsheet of... well, everything, Taylor read, unable to keep from leaning forward to read through his still-dusty glasses. New servers, routers, switches; thousands upon thousands of feet of Cat-6 and fibre, with terminals and tools to apply them; and a laundry list of the components that Taylor could build into an entirely new, secure, fast network.

Below that, she’d apparently begun to outfit a machine shop: precision machining equipment, testing and measurement tools, not one but three separate vehicle dynos. Everything from scanning electron microscopes to explosion-proof storage cupboards for, well, explosives. The list of firearms alone was intimidating, and that was before Taylor got to the knives and more primitive weapons, all the way down to three separate brands of cricket bats.

Only when they got to the end did Tanner pause. “A ferret?”

“Can you think of a better way to run cable through narrow ducts?” Danielle asked. “Other than a radio-controlled car, that is, and there’ll be too much signal interference.”

Well, Taylor didn’t think that was strictly true, but how could he possibly object to what was undoubtedly a Q Branch mascot?

“Right. Well,” Tanner said a bit bemusedly. He turned to Taylor and asked, “So, then? What do you think?”

“Well, if Ms Marsh would like me on her team, I’d be delighted,” Taylor answered, smiling at Danielle.

“Oh, good heavens, no,” Danielle said at once. “I’ve no desire to run the department. I have a
husband who’s put up with a wife in government service for quite long enough, dear.”

“Danielle would be your second-in-command,” Tanner clarified.

The choked laugh that escaped him wasn’t met with responding chuckles, so he cut it off almost immediately. “Me? Run Q Branch?” He resisted the temptation to tack ‘Seriously?’ onto that sentence. But Tanner and Danielle were looking at him expectantly. “How long do I have to think about it?”

“M wants to see you right about now,” Tanner said, looking at his watch. “We can deal with the pay rise and all that later. I’ve already pulled all of your records — spotless security check, very impressive. You’ll need another polygraph, but that’s just to tick off a box on the list. Our security procedures are more rigorous than the oversight committee’s, at any rate. It would be strictly a functional posting until you can go through personnel and all the management sensitivity training, but Ms Marsh has done all that already —”

“Call me Danielle,” she interrupted, looking at Taylor, not Tanner.

Tanner smiled wryly. “So she can take care of the performance reviews and all that, for now.”

Taylor stared at Tanner for a long moment. This was... unexpected, to say the least. He wasn’t sure he wanted the overwhelming responsibility that came with that sort of job. But then again, he thought, he’d been doing it for James for months now. What would have happened to him if Taylor hadn’t been around to clean up Q Branch’s messes? Perhaps the attack could have been avoided completely, if only someone competent had been in charge. How many field agents might have met less tragic ends — James included.

“All right.”

“Good. Danielle, source all of this and get pricing,” Tanner said, dropping off the desk. “Q, I’ll take you to meet M. And for god’s sake, get a cage for the ferret.”

Q, Taylor thought with a swallow. How the hell did that happen?

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Somewhere behind M, the soft words ‘Churchill’s bunker’ cut through the generally quiet but persistent buzz of nervous chatter that had permeated what was left of MI6, underscored by the sounds of fire suppression systems and emergency vehicles.

M stood above the turmoil, watching with cold fury as her analysts, operatives, techs, and general staff scrambled to make some sense of order out of the chaos left in the wake of the explosion. Her hands wrapped around the railing as she looked down at the flurry of activity, the still-hot metal stinging her palms. The injured were being evacuated to local hospitals, and the able-bodied were doing their best to help.

She wasn’t angry with her staff — well, perhaps she was, in an abstract way, because they hadn’t anticipated the attack or been able to prevent it. But more importantly, she needed to find a target and go on the offensive. This was unacceptable.

“Security won’t be entirely guaranteed,” the analyst behind her was saying. “The tunnels aren’t
entirely mapped out; they run for miles in unpredictable configurations, and the recordkeeping over the centuries hasn’t been consistent. But they’re working on it.”

M resisted the urge to snap at the woman. They? Who were ‘they’? How were ‘they’ working on it? How were ‘they’ dealing with not being able to use a single one of MI6’s potentially compromised computers?

She took a deep breath and held out her hand. It took the analyst only a moment to hand over the files — the raw, barely processed data that would help M begin to make sense of what had happened. She might not be the military hero that the past heads of MI6 were, but her ability to make sense of numbers was unparalleled, especially among these children who couldn’t put together a chart without Microsoft bloody Excel.

The character of MI6 had changed too much, she decided. They were too crippled by a dependency on vulnerable technology. But then, they had that tech because the human factor was too unpredictable. “Loose lips sink ships” was as applicable today as it had been in the last century.

God, sometimes she hated the fact that the British Empire had turned all their subject nations loose to go start their own squabbles, and then come running back to mummy for help. All the work and none of the benefits. It was like having ungrateful children running up uni bills and getting ASBOs.

“Ma’am?”

“Tanner.” She turned away from what might theoretically be her temporary office with something like relief. Tanner was the perfect blend of old and new — technologically brilliant but with enough people-skills to give him an advantage when dealing with politicians. And he wasn’t some fawning ‘yes’-man, but he also didn’t manage to piss her off every time she turned around. She just needed to clone about a thousand of him, and then they’d be able to have their vengeance.

He was being followed by yet another young puppy, this one looking as shaggy and dishevelled as every other attack survivor, only in desperate need of a haircut. Three hours ago, she’d put Tanner on the mission of wrangling Q Branch into something useful; Boothroyd had been too politically well-connected for her to safely oust him, but the attacker had done the job for her. Not that the little side-benefit made it acceptable.

“Ma’am, Q Branch reorg is underway,” Tanner said as he led the puppy up to her.

“About damned time,” M said, relieved. She looked down at the chaos again. “You’ve called in the Double O’s?”

“Everyone working priority two or less. I thought you’d want the priority-one missions to remain underway.”

“Fine.” She glanced back at the puppy again, wondering if he was some sort of intern. Bloody bad day to start an internship, if so. “Once you get the armoury organised, I want personal protective weapons issued to everyone who’s qualified and comfortable with one. Not that a terrorist’s going to try a streetside mugging, but guns will buck up morale. We can recall them in a month’s time.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Tanner got out his tablet and made a note — just one more reason she appreciated him. He wasn’t afraid to take notes in front of her, rather than trying to pretend at having a photographic memory, only to end up losing half of what she said. Once he was finished, he said, “Ma’am, this is Michael Taylor, formerly a senior Help Desk technician.”

She blinked, baffled, and looked at the boy. “Charmed, but I don’t think we have any currently
operational computers for you to fix.”

“Our new Quartermaster,” Tanner put in.

Choking back her near-outburst, she said, more politely, “I’m sorry?”

“Ma’am, he’s the one who repelled the brunt of the attack. The strike on your office was the first in a sequential series,” Tanner explained. “The first bullet was fired at you, but the shooter kept his finger on the trigger. Taylor here blocked every other bullet from hitting.”

M turned to look more fully at the person who, upon closer inspection, didn’t appear to be a boy after all. Casual dress and shaggy hair made him look younger than he was, though his somewhat nervous expression didn’t bolster her confidence whatsoever. “And how did you manage that?” she asked, watching him closely.

To his credit, the new Q stepped forward and squared his shoulders. “I anticipated his attacks on various systems as ranked by priority and repelled them.”

M wasn’t an expert at network security; she’d spent too many years in the field and had given too much of her life to the old art of spycraft. The most technologically advanced way she’d ever killed someone was with a gorgeous holographic scope just three years ago (she did so like to keep her hand in the game), and that was only if one didn’t count sending kill-orders by email. She understood enough, though, to recognise what Q had and hadn’t said.

“Did you have prior warning, allowing you to prioritise, or was this just all off the cuff?”

“I didn’t have any prior warning,” Q said, an edge of curiosity in his voice. “I was on my way back from a help call and had my laptop on me. Even though I’m just — I was on Help Desk, I know the network well. I was able to use what I had on hand and my prior knowledge of our internal systems to keep the hacker at bay.”

She gave him another sharper look, not just to take in the details of his scruffy, post-explosion appearance, but to see how he withstood the scrutiny. If he was going to head up Q Branch — and really, how old was he? — he’d have to withstand the Double O’s, for one thing, as well as the Section Chiefs and other branch leaders. If he crumbled too easily, the Double O’s, at least, would run right over him, and god knew where they’d all be then.

He kept his cool without any of the pride she might’ve expected after essentially declaring himself the hero of the day. Rather, there was a sense of resignation and loss about him.

Well enough. She’d puzzle that out later, when she had MI6 back on its feet. “Let me see your mobile,” she said, holding out her hand.

He raised his eyebrow but didn’t hesitate to hand over his MI6-issue mobile phone, an almost comical puff of dust coming from his trousers when he pulled it out of his slightly worse-for-wear pocket.

The mobile was spotless, in pristine condition. He was more interested in tech than in impressing management with a spotless appearance. The boy had his priorities straight.

She returned the mobile to him, saying, “Fine. Tanner, have Security escort him back to his house to fetch whatever he needs. I expect we’ll all be living here for at least the next few weeks while we get this security mess sorted out.”

“Weeks? I have” — Taylor hesitated, looking a bit wild-eyed — “I have a cat, ma’am.”
“Well, bring it here, then. We’re in a bloody tunnel system, not the Louvre. All the better to keep the rats at bay.”

“I’ll see to it, ma’am,” Tanner intervened smoothly.

M nodded, relieved that Tanner would explain things to the boy. “Go get your department in order, Quartermaster. Don’t do anything stupid, and there won’t be any oversight. I’m pulling most of our agents back home, so be prepared to aggregate all of their intel. Get it to Analysis and Intentions — wherever the bloody hell they’re camping. Any questions?”

“No, ma’am,” Taylor said, sounding calmer now.

She looked at him steadily, relieved to see a core of strength in him. He might just survive the next month after all. “You have dust in your hair.”

“As do you, ma’am,” he answered, without missing a beat.

She grinned and turned back to the scurrying chaos. They’d lost the first battle, but maybe they’d be able to win the war after all.
Chapter 10

November 2012

Nine days had passed since the destruction of MI6, and the building still reeked of smoke and felt like death. Bond paid the cabbie with money he’d stolen from M’s safe and headed to the security post set up in a tent outside the visitors’ entrance. In a classic governmental case of belated overkill, the wrecked building was surrounded by men in the uniform of the Met — men who looked far too military to be entirely convincing.

His first priority was to arm himself; he’d do no one any good if he were actually dead. Second priority was to find Taylor. His name hadn’t been on the list of the dead, thank god, but the Help Desk was in chaos. According to rumour, they’d been moved offsite with the other nonessential and administrative personnel, to a supposedly secure location. Bond hadn’t been able to find out any further details.

But why hadn’t Taylor called? Bond had carried the anonymous burner phone since leaving Greece. He’d checked it a dozen times — he’d called Mike a dozen times — but there was nothing. No contact. Why?

For now, he pushed the thought out of his mind. He’d arm himself and then he’d find Taylor, because that was what he did. He could find anyone. And then he’d — well, he couldn’t move Taylor and Cherie to his flat, because he didn’t have a flat, but he’d get them somewhere safe and anonymous, somewhere no enemy of MI6 would ever think to look for them, and then he could concentrate on finding the bastard who’d struck at his organisation.

As a dead man, Bond’s credentials had technically been revoked. Fortunately, he knew his way around and found a security guard willing to look the other way. Not that any number of security guards would have been able to stop him. For three months, Bond had gone without a weapon; now, he needed one.

According to M’s computer, critical services had relocated down in the tunnels deep below MI6. Inconvenient, that; Bond much preferred having the armoury on the first floor, just above the security desk. Still, he’d found the entrance to the tunnels back in his earliest days at MI6, and after a couple of false turns, he finally found the right emergency staircase.

His skin crawled at the thought that some outside force could cause such havoc at a distance. He very nearly felt redundant. He felt naked — no gun, not even a bloody earwig — and he kept telling himself that this wasn’t a mission, even though MI6 was no longer the safe haven it had once been.

It never would be again.

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Well, Q thought, staring at the somewhat-drippy and far-too-close storage cupboard wall. This hadn’t turned out exactly the way he hoped.

If Q considered the situation logically, it was easy to trace where he had gone wrong. The tiny toy mouse that he’d made for Cherie was perfect in his flat, but not here in the tunnels where they’d been
living for nearly two weeks.

Two weeks of sleeping in a cot in the cupboard that was his new office, as Quartermaster. Two weeks of no contact with the outside world because of increased network security. Two weeks of no bloody signal for any of his mobiles — not his personal mobile nor the MI6-issued secure mobile and, worst of all, not his ‘special’ mobile.

He hoped that Alec had contacted James to let him know what was going on, but he doubted it. Surely Alec would have come down to the tunnels if he knew. He would’ve tried to find Taylor, to help re-establish communication — at Bond’s request, if nothing else.

And it would be very nice if Alec showed up right about now to save Q’s life.

Q had replaced Cherie’s tiny toy mouse with a robot he’d found in a cupboard on one of his Security-escorted excursions up to the old Q branch. He’d armed it with laser pointers that went off at random intervals for Cherie to chase. It had been a brilliant plan to keep Cherie occupied while Q was stringing cable — not to mention providing endless amusement for Danielle and the rest of the morale-strained Q Branch technicians, at least until they could acquire a department ferret.

But as much as Q was starting to enjoy his new name and new digs, he found himself alone in cold, dark tunnels a lot more than he generally preferred. He wasn’t a nervous person by nature, but the fact was that while they had people working on mapping the tunnels for miles around their new location, security was not guaranteed.

Switching out Cherie’s laser pointers for a turret-mounted weapon had seemed like a wonderful idea. In a late-night fit of narcoengineering, he’d decided on a heavily modified .22 calibre handgun: powerful enough to cause damage, compact enough to let him load the ammo hopper with no less than four thousand rounds to make up for the small calibre.

Q had been amused when the bot had followed him out of the bunkers, its motion sensors spinning and whirring. It had even been amusing when it chambered a round in reaction to a paint can that fell off a shelf. It had ceased to be amusing when the bot starting shooting at everything that moved.

In hindsight, perhaps it would have been wise to take the heavily armed bot to a range to test it first, before releasing it into the tunnels with him.

The sound of metal hitting concrete echoed in the room, forcing a wince from Q. That would be the temporary shelving he’d set up for cataloguing inventory that had been moved from the rubble to the new Q Branch down here in the tunnels. Fortunately, Q had been fairly efficient about moving items out, so the loss wouldn’t be significant. A few external hard drives, an unloaded gun or two, maybe a tablet.

Q let his head fall back against the concrete wall with an exasperated groan. At least he had been smart enough to leave Cherie with Danielle.

Annoyed, he listened to the metal shelves rattling around on the floor. In a moment of thoughtlessness, he’d programmed the damned robot to be motion-activated, but not to filter out the results of its own actions. So, presumably, the bot was taking aim at the rattling shelf, firing, causing it to move — which triggered the bot’s motion detectors and started the whole process over again.

There is no such thing as a stupid machine, Q thought to himself. Just a stupid designer. But god, how much ammunition did this thing have left in the hopper? What would run out first: the ammo or the batteries?
At least Q could thank the stroke of luck that this section of tunnel was completely empty. Since the attack, everyone had been on wartime footing, as Danielle called it. A dimly-lit room of cots served as a barracks, and they all slept in shifts, working 24/7 to get Q Branch up and running. They still had operatives in the field who needed support, and naturally England’s enemies had chosen this moment to strike all around the world, while MI6 was distracted at home.

Q still shivered, remembering the secure intel briefing Tanner had given him: a four-hour nightmarish recitation of just how very close the world was to actually destroying itself in a firestorm of exotic weapons, chaos, and anarchy.

Which, of course, made him feel even more ridiculous and foolish — being trapped in a cupboard hiding from his own creation instead of helping. At least no one else was around to get hurt. Small mercies.

The sound of a bullet piercing the cheap metal made Q flinch. Too bad the shelves weren’t industrial. A ricochet would have been very handy about now. The bot was small enough that a single bullet strike, aimed or not, would probably have incapacitated it.

Q stared down at his laptop (which he’d managed to grab in his mad dash for the bullet-proof cupboard), wondering if there was anything to be done other than wait for the bot’s battery to die out. He didn’t have internet access in here, but he did have access to Q Branch’s own subnet. He put in his earbuds, sat on the floor, and started scanning the network for some way to save himself.

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The tunnels were comfortably dark, with vaulted ceilings and white tile everywhere turned a sickly yellow by the temporary emergency lighting strung from one pillar to the next. The setup lacked the panache of Major Boothroyd’s old lab, with its scorch-marked walls and labyrinths of inventory lockers, but this felt... cosy. A sort of World War II vintage chic.

Poor old Boothroyd. He’d been caught in the blast that had taken out so many others. Bond would miss him. He hadn’t been an efficient Quartermaster — otherwise, Bond wouldn’t have ended up getting primary support from a Help Desk technician — but he’d been damned fun at the office Christmas party every year, once they started serving the bourbon.

God only knew whom M had chosen for his replacement. If it was some bean-counter from Accounts Payable, Bond might just have to arrange an accident. He wasn’t about to account for every bloody bullet he fired.

He got a somewhat vicious grin, thinking of the potential fun to be had by dragging the new Quartermaster out into the field for a live demonstration. Maybe he’d get Alec in on it. Hell, he could even call Taylor to give him a play-by-play recounting.

There were a few desks here and there in various stages of assembly. One was little more than plywood over two sawhorses, but it actually had a computer — a MacBook, interestingly. He eyed it as he passed, wondering if he could use it to find out where Q Branch was keeping its new armoury, but there was probably security and encryption. He could hack M’s computer because he knew M. Easily guessed passwords and all that.

As he turned away, he heard a faint noise from the computer — a whirr of fans and a beep. He
turned and looked back in time to see a window had popped up on the screen.

Text was typed into what looked like a simple text editing program, the letters appearing slowly, one by one, as he watched. “Please identify.”

Suspicious, he looked around for any sign of a motion sensor, but saw nothing. There were cameras here, strung with new cables. If the cameras had facial recognition, all sorts of alarms would be going off. He chuckled, wondering what sort of automatic protocols there would be for a dead man to invade MI6.

Amused, Bond leaned down and rubbed at his aching shoulder. He typed in the string of words, numbers, and other characters that made up M’s login credentials and hit enter.

“How about you identify yourself first?” he typed back, wondering what the hell the security protocols were for this.

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Q watched the man on the screen, considering. The interloper was well-muscled, and if the situation had been different (not stuck in a cupboard, hiding from his cat’s favourite toy), then Q might have been tempted to admire the broad shoulders and admirably tight trousers. As it was, the low-res was functionally useless; he needed to see a cleaner image of the man’s face to attempt an identification. Q switched from the CCTV cameras that dotted the halls of Q Branch (MI6 refused to invest in nice ones, due to their repeated destruction at the hands of projects gone wonky) to the laptop’s webcam.

“Oof,” Q muttered to himself. Well-muscled interloper was apparently creepy homeless interloper. The man was unshaven, craggy-faced, in obvious need of a shower, and wearing the most absurd combination of a polka-dotted button-down and leather jacket. The tunnels were fairly extensive, and though MI6 had made a significant effort to map every possible access point, he supposed it wasn’t completely unreasonable to think a wanderer might have somehow made it in.

“I’m an employee here, able to verify your login if you have one,” he typed back. If homeless-looking guy was MI6, that would work out quite nicely for Q — well-muscled and rough-looking probably meant agent, which meant likely to be armed. Which would be very useful for Q in his current predicament. However, if he were just a random person who wandered in from the tunnels... security breach didn’t even begin to cover it.

“I don’t need to check my damn email. If you really are an employee here, just tell me where the armory’s hidden. If you’re not, tell me where the armory is anyway, and I’ll try for a capture rather than a kill when I come after you. Agreed?”

As soon as he was done typing, he walked away. Q switched to CCTV and watched as he began to
search the small, mostly empty inventory cupboards along the back wall. It really was a shame about the scruffy, weathered face, he thought idly. The body definitely deserved a second look, especially from behind.

Agent seemed more and more likely, but given MI6’s recent unfortunate event, there was no way in hell Q would just trust his gut. “Sorry, mate. Access to the armoury is limited to employees only. I’d be happy to assist if you can verify your identity. And ‘try for’ isn’t reassuring. How on earth is that incentive?”

He watched on CCTV to watch as the man eventually wandered back to the computer. He bent over, and Q reluctantly switched to the laptop’s view. “Accidents happen,” the homeless agent typed back without hesitation. Then he stood, treating Q to a view of a very flat-looking abdomen, despite the best efforts of the godawful shirt to make it unattractive, and hips that most definitely had no extra weight to them at all. He was just standing there, so Q switched (reluctantly) to the CCTV, where he watched the man hold up what looked like a cheap flip phone.

*Flip phone?* Q stared at it, wondering if they even sold flip phones anymore.

Then the homeless agent snapped it shut, shoved it in his pocket, and leaned down again. “Explain again why I’m supposed to be giving you my identity when you have yet to identify yourself,” he typed.

Q frowned. This was getting very annoying, and he was sick of wasting his time. He wanted out of this damn cupboard, and if the scruffy person hell-bent on getting armed wasn’t going to help, he needed to be done with this.

While the man continued exploring, working his way closer to the hallway where Q was trapped, Q typed, “I’m Q Branch. Which means that, when I tell you I’ve accidentally created an armed death robot hell bent on its creator’s destruction (which is why I’m stuck in a cupboard instead of harassing you in person), you should believe me. Are you an agent who can help, or not? If you are, give me your damn name already!”

If scruffy guy was an agent, that should be decent motivation, Q thought. Fortunately, it was only another minute before the man came back to the laptop.

“006,” was the response. “That should be enough, if you are who you claim. And what death robot? Are we making bloody Daleks now?”

It seemed like the unlikeliest sort of luck that the one agent in MI6 that Q knew (if only by reputation and a single voicemail) would happen to show up just at the right moment. Q took a deep breath and pulled up 006’s file, deeply grateful for the Double O agent files he could access on the limited Q Branch network. If he could access the real personnel files, he’d have more information, but this was a start.

“I wish I would have thought to program it to say ‘EXTERMINATE’, just to make it more amusing, but sadly I didn’t have the foresight,” he typed as he waited for the file to load. Then he frowned. “Photos don’t match. Try again.”


Q scrolled through the file for 006, verifying the information. Everything he said was accurate, but what Q found most reassuring was the fact that he’d specified his hometown so thoroughly. The map in his file referenced the town as Sarov, with a notation that the closed town’s name had changed
after the fall of the USSR (and Q briefly wondered what a ‘closed town’ in Russia was). He peered at the image of the man in the hall — he had the same body structure, same height, same hair colour. If he truly were undercover, then MI6 had a number of creative ways of altering facial structures.

Q switched back to the laptop view, but the scruffy agent wasn’t in sight. CCTV showed him at the back wall, and Q felt a moment of panic as he realised 006 was about to step past the corner of the hallway, into the death robot’s line-of-sight. Frantically, he typed, “Don’t go there!” but he knew it was a wasted effort. The agent wouldn’t see the message until he went back to the computer — and as the deafening echo of bullets fired down a concrete-and-metal corridor rang out, he wondered if he’d just managed to get James’ best friend killed.

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The tunnels under London were an extensive, poorly explored, and generally hazardous mix of bomb shelters from the turn of the twentieth century, command bunkers, London Underground tunnels, and now the lair of MI6’s upper echelons — everything from the idiot scientists of Q Branch to the executive team. Somehow, it was fitting; MI6 was more than half shadow government/half cult, anyway.

The armoury would be secure, unfortunately, but the security would be minimal and makeshift — nothing he couldn’t bypass. So between chats, Bond looked around, figuring he’d start with the closest doors first on the principle that Q Branch had always liked keeping an eye on its stock of weapons.

He opened the first door, figuring it was as good as any, only to discover that it had been wholly taken over by a nest of cables disturbingly like a technological version of something out of HP Lovecraft. He slammed the door before anything could come to life and grab hold of him — this being Q Branch, he wouldn’t be surprised if the cabling-cupboard had defence systems to do just that — and went to the next cupboard in line.

The tunnel with its single working computer probably should have felt spooky, but Bond didn’t scare easily. “Reckless disregard for personal safety” came to mind, in fact, a phrase the MI6 psych-rats seemed to enjoy applying to all the Double O’s. What the bloody hell did they expect? A prudent sense of self-preservation? Not exactly in the job description.

Still, fearless only went so far, and Bond wasn’t just trained but overtrained. He’d run out of cupboards, which meant the next thing to check was the hall at the back corner. He took two steps down the dark hall, staying within the pool of yellow-tinged light from the emergency lighting systems.

Suddenly, gunfire rang out — the sharp, bright ping of a .25 or .22, he guessed as he threw himself back around the corner. He heard the sound of crashing, wood splintering, pings of bullets off metal. Swearing the whole time in Russian, he ducked to make himself a smaller target in case the ricochet sent rounds down the hallway and into the cement ceiling supports.

Unarmed, unknown enemy firing down a confined hallway with no cover. Why hadn’t he stayed in Greece?

Then, he remembered something about a death robot. He’d thought it an idle threat — some bored Q Branch geek playing with pop culture references.
Apparently, the geek hadn’t been playing.

Well, *fuck*.

~~~

Q desperately wished that he had been able to open some sort of audio connection so he could yell at the bloody idiot. Next time he sent out a prototype death robot, Q thought bitterly, perhaps he’d load it with less than four *thousand* rounds.

Thank god, 006 was clever. Once the firing stopped, he shrugged out of his jacket, showing inhumanly broad shoulders, and tossed the jacket to his right, sending it flying across the hallway entrance. As soon as the death-bot started firing, he broke from his crouch, bolting right for the long pit where trains had once run.

The bot’s slaughter of the jacket was chillingly ruthless and efficient. As soon as the last shreds were finally still, it aimed at 006 instead. He stopped in mid-stride and dove sideways for the shelter of one of the concrete columns.

But what should have been a graceful forward roll turned into a collapse as the man’s right shoulder seemed to give out under him. As the bot kept firing, Q distinctly saw 006 curse — he didn’t need audio to understand *fuck!* when he saw it. Scrambling, the agent dove off the platform and into the murky, dark ditch.

Q realised he should open the cupboard door to wave a red flag or toss something heavy to give 006 time to get away. He pulled himself up off the cold floor and started digging through the plastic tubs on the shelves, looking for something useful to throw.

~~~

*Death robot*, Bond thought, just a bit dazed at the surreal turn the night had taken. It really was a *bloody death robot*.

He was going to find the tech or techs responsible and start wringing necks. Assuming he didn’t bleed out.

He sank down against the trench wall and pulled up his shirt. Lovely. Another bullet wound, though this one hadn’t hit anything critical. It just hurt and was bleeding, and why the *fuck* had he gone to MI6 instead of tracking down Mike?

A weapon. Duty. Right, then.

He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, one hand pressed to the wound low on his right side. He considered the layout of the room. Four doors, a hallway or secondary room teed off to the right of where he’d been, which was where the death robot was. That’s why it hadn’t seen him when he’d been at the computer, around the corner. Line of sight.
Staying low, he ran back to the very end of the platform. He considered staying in the train tunnel, going to the next exit, and escaping that way, but that could be miles off, if he was on one of the dead branches. He couldn’t chance it. He’d need to vault up and dive to his right, since he was now facing the robot’s killing lane, and hope to get out of the way before he got shot again.

Sadly, this wasn’t new to him. Except that this time, he wasn’t on the bloody payroll.

He took one last look down at himself. The dark trench turned his blood to ink and shadow. He didn’t know if that was better or worse than the bright crimson it would be in daylight, assuming he lived that long. And if he wanted a shot at surviving, he’d have to stop getting distracted and start moving.

He took a deep breath, crouched down, and vaulted back up onto the platform.

~~~

Q shook his head in disbelief as he watched Alec make his way to the corner of the trench via a shuffling crouch. The robot may not have had line of sight on him, but Q did. He watched the agent evaluate what Q assumed was a wound, and frowned.

Fuck, but Q needed some way to communicate with him. If he let 006 bleed to death in his own office because of his own stupid cat toy, especially so soon after losing so many friends, James would never forgive him.

Q silenced the echoes of understatement bouncing around his head by switching the music to S.O.S. by Rhianna (perfect mood music, really) and dumped the last of the useful items into the bucket in front of him. He set the laptop on a shelf, so he could keep an eye on Alec’s progress, and readied himself to start throwing things. Adrenaline spiked through him, but he told himself that getting shot in the arm by a .22 calibre bullet probably wouldn’t do that much damage.

Then a sudden realisation hit Q, and he cursed himself for being too fucking tired to think clearly. 006 was readying himself to vault back into the line of fire, and he typed fast while still holding the jar of bolts he’d chosen for his first volley. He hadn’t been talking to 006 on a standard-issue Q Branch computer — it was Danielle’s personal laptop, left in Q Branch last night to compile some code she’d been working on over lunch. And, god bless the woman, it was a MacBook.

Q opened remote access, typed into a new text file, and launched the built-in accessibility reader.

“DON’T MOVE,” he made the laptop read aloud at top volume in its worst female computer voice —

Just as the idiot agent — and god, they really were all idiots, weren’t they? — leaped back into the death-bot’s targeting sights.

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Bond hit the platform to the high rattle of low-calibre gunfire and a female robot shouting at him not
to move. Wonderful. A bloody female Dalek. Someone had a sick sense of humour.

He kept low, avoided a hit, and scrambled ungracefully to the right, away from the mouth of the hallway. Just then, he heard a door open, somewhere down the deathtrap hallway. Something moved — not human, perhaps something thrown — and he heard gunfire echo in the other direction, giving him just enough time to run for cover. Someone was apparently helping him.

Breathing too deeply hurt, breathing too shallowly didn’t get him enough oxygen, his shoulder ached, and he really shouldn’t have had those last two glasses of whisky — not for this.

And he’d wanted a gun. Thought it’d be safer. Bloody fucking hell.

The shooting stopped, thank Christ, so he got up onto one knee, pressed his hand to his side again, and forced himself to stand. Just his luck that he wasn’t drunk enough for the gunshot to not hurt, but at least the adrenaline rush was compensating. A little.

The computer over on the sawhorses was glowing at him. There were more programs open now, including one that said, in all caps, DON’T MOVE.

He stomped over to it, resisting the urge to kick the damned thing, and stabbed left-handed at the keyboard:

“thx wtf spex on roobt”

Right. So much for spelling. Hopefully, his unknown assistant really was Q Branch and not some bloody accountant who’d come down to play with buttons, and would understand a wounded field agent’s request for enemy intel and specifications.

“2011 Roomba vacuum robot with much-improved motors and speed, armed with a .22 calibre handgun on a turret, initially loaded with 4000 rounds. Motion-activated, with timeframe for reaction in the 2-4 second range. No adaptive programming.”

Bond stared at the text and looked down at the blood staining his shirt. Suddenly, this had all taken on a very surreal edge, making him think idly about the use of hallucinogens as an interrogation technique. Was this actually happening, or was he in an enemy holding cell somewhere? Because really? Four thousand rounds in a bloody vacuum cleaner?

This was a video game. He remembered Alec saying something about it, in fact: something about a murderous robot and gun-turrets that talked.

“while i deal with this, i expect you to look up the definition of overkill and be prepared to write a bloody essay on it,” he typed out very, very slowly, with judicious use of the backspace key. He wished he could use the shift key for emphasis, but that wasn’t currently an option.

“I will write any damn essay you want, on any subject you wish, if you get me the hell out of this cupboard without either of us dying in the process!!!”

Bond stared at the response, suddenly convinced that this was a very strange hallucination. Slowly, meticulously he typed his response:

“why are you in a cupboard”

“It was supposed to be on my side. Bloody thing betrayed me. I chose strategic retreat.”

Wishing there was a damned chair, Bond looked down at himself. The bleeding was getting worse.
Why couldn’t life be like a damned movie for once, so that two minutes of pressure from a hand stopped the bleeding? He took his hand from the wound and ignored the saturating heat that started to spread, concentrating instead on quickly unbuttoning his shirt. He wadded it up, pressed it to his side, and shoved the end under his belt. It wasn’t direct pressure, but it was probably better than nothing. If nothing else, it was less unpleasantly damp, at least for the moment.

He typed two-handed, ignoring what it did to the keys. “you’re in the hallway, aren’t you and that dalek is right outside where you are?”

“Yes. I threw the jar.”

“Don’t do anything again,” Bond typed, thinking that M would kill him for real if he managed to get some Q Branch geek killed. Of course, it was the Q Branch geek’s own damned fault for unleashing a Dalek. Obviously he hadn’t seen that episode.

Oh, lovely. He was dealing with bloody Rose.

Well, at least she had spirit. He continued, “just stay there and don’t die. I’ll come get you. acknowledge.”

“It’s just a .22. On the slim chance I get shot in the arm while helping you not get shot in the chest or face, it would be fine. Let me help.”

“Stay in the bloody cupboard. That’s an order. Acknowledge,” Bond typed, stabbing bloody fingers at the keyboard. Everyone else at MI6 folded when a Double O started snapping out commands — everyone except Danielle, but she wasn’t stupid enough to get herself trapped in a cupboard like this.

“I’m not under the jurisdiction of the Double O Programme. Nice try. But I promise only to intervene if the situation requires it. Do you have a plan?”

“Other than taking my belt to your bloody backside if you open that door” Bond typed before he could stop himself. This was an MI6 computer, wasn’t it? No, MI6 didn’t use Macs. He and Taylor had gone through that already.

God, he missed that steady, calm voice. How had he ended up with an overly helpful idiot? This wasn’t Rose. This was Arthur Shappey.

His plan depended on two things: lots of things to throw, and a guarantee that the trapped idiot wouldn’t open the bloody cupboard door. So he typed, “code red, arthur. Stay in the fucking cupboard.”

Without waiting for a response, he grabbed hold of the laptop by its screen and walked to the wall closest to the deadly corner where the death robot waited. There, he dropped the laptop and then gave it a good hard stomp, then another, breaking off some good-sized pieces. He crouched down, one hand smudging blood on the wall as he kept his balance, and picked up one of the chunks.

When he threw it across the hallway entrance, the death robot fired. He picked up one of the keyboard chunks, broke off a key, and tossed it; another gunshot. So size didn’t matter — motion sensor, definitely, and a bloody oversensitive one at that.

The question was, was the robot a fixed installation or mobile? It had an arc of fire, but could it turn the other way? And if so, how could he get it to turn without actually putting himself in the line of fire?

He leaned left, looking at the hallway wall. And it was definitely a hallway, not a room — about six
feet wide and an unknown depth. Christ, he wanted to look around the corner, but the thing had already shot him once.

Well, there was always bouncing. He pried off another key and took aim.

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Q stared at the screen in absolute disgust. Alec was an idiot. Worse than an idiot, he was a self-righteous bastard who wouldn’t even consider letting Q help him formulate a plan without haring off. If it had been Bond, they would have talked through options and had an efficient discussion about the best approach to the situation. Once, Bond had promised to come find him in the tunnels. But he was too busy drinking himself to death in Greece to —

He cut the thought off viciously. Let Alec get shot for being an idiot.

Then Q watched with horror as 006 eviscerated the laptop. Not only was Danielle going to be angry; it also cut off their communication.

What were his options now? He had no idea how long the bot’s batteries would last.

The gunshots outside were now coming swiftly, and —

Fuck!

Q threw himself down as a shot hit his cupboard door at just the right angle to dent the metal. Had the bastard turned the bot?

He felt the tips of his fingers and toes start to go numb as panic thrummed through him. His vision tunnelled a bit, bringing his awareness of the room around him strictly to the bright glow of his laptop. Why wasn’t he still back at the Help Desk? Why the hell had he let Tanner and M lure him into this? He didn’t want to be the head of anything much less an MI6 department full of things that wanted him dead.

While Q wasn’t prone to anxiety attacks, he was exhausted and his system was already completely awash in neurochemicals of the fight-or-flight sort.

In a fit of narcoengineering, he’d turned his kitten’s favourite toy into a mobile, self-aiming death machine. He’d got himself trapped in a cupboard. And now, James Bond’s best friend was going to get himself slaughtered in an attempt to rescue Q, after calling him Arthur Shappey.

Oh god. The absolute absurdity of surviving a terrorist attack only to die like this...

That did it. Q couldn’t help it. He laughed. And laughed. He set down the laptop, leaned back against the wall, and let himself not care about anything but the ridiculous irony until the panic leached itself from his system.

Breathing hard, he lifted his head and looked at the blessedly intact door. His fingers were trembling from adrenaline, but he managed to type the commands to open up the cameras.

The death robot... was dead. Toppled over, wheels-up, and looking positively mangled. His rescuer was leaning hard against the cupboard door, which was why Q couldn’t budge it — not with that
much weight keeping it closed.

The handle rattled. He watched on the laptop screen as Alec finally wrenched the handle hard enough to disengage the locking mechanism. He staggered back, and the door swung slightly open.

Q twisted around just in time to see Alec hit the far wall. There was far too much blood soaking through the wadded-up shirt pressed low against his right side, and there were more wounds now, freshly bleeding — two in his left arm and a graze on his right shoulder above a scar that was only a few months old.

“Fucking hell!” Q shouted in alarm, rushing to help Alec.

Alec’s head came up, bright blue eyes — much brighter than they’d seemed on the webcam — fixed on him. Then Alec dropped as if his strings had been cut.

Q stared at him for a ridiculously long moment. This person had blue eyes, whereas 006’s eyes had been listed as green. Q pulled off his cardigan and crouched next to his bleeding white knight, applying pressure and observing. Thinking.

*Fresh bullet wound scar above his collarbone.*

*Knows intimate details about Alec Trevelyan, 006.*

*Got himself shot for someone he assumed was a random Q Branch tech in a cupboard.*

Q bent a little closer hoping the shock, blood loss, and possible unconsciousness were enough to suppress the agent’s reactions a bit. He tipped the man’s head up and very gently lifted his eyelid, just to be sure the vibrant blue wasn’t the result of contact lenses.

It wasn’t.

It took Q only a matter of moments to find one of the old-school copper-wired phones that still ran through the tunnels in order to call a team down from Medical. He informed them that he had a wounded agent in need of immediate assistance, but didn’t mention a name yet. After all, he didn’t actually know if James’ eyes were blue or not.
Chapter 11

November 2012

Q sipped at his tea and stared at the blank after action report, wondering how to best write up what had happened without coming off looking like a complete arse. This wasn’t his job. He took after action reports — copies, at least — and analysed them for future improvements in tech, communications, or intel. Or theoretically he did. He hadn’t actually been in charge of Q Branch long enough to have ever seen one, except for in the management training handbook.

Being the youngest head of Q Branch was an honour. Being the youngest, most short-lived head of Q Branch... not so much. He wondered if they’d leave his name on the list of quartermasters or if they’d just strike him altogether for not lasting past the two-week probationary period.

Cherie hissed as the doors to his office opened. Q’s heart jumped as M walked in. He’d expected Tanner, or maybe Security, but not M herself.

“Ma’am?” he said uncertainly as he stood. Despite the late hour, she was perfectly turned out in ominous black, and Q recalled rumours that she’d once been a Double O herself.

“Well, it’s obvious to me that you deserve your position in Q Branch,” she said gruffly as she crossed to the creaky folding chair opposite the desk. She sat down, smoothing her skirt, and stared at Q with bright, razor-sharp eyes. “Only Q Branch could manage to take down a Double O who’s already dead. I’m breathless with anticipation to find out how you managed.”

Q closed his eyes momentarily and shook his head. So, it was Bond. What a hell of a way to meet.

But he couldn’t dwell on it, much as he would like to, given that the incredibly intimidating head of MI6 herself was seated across from him, frowning.

“It was a poorly executed attempt to increase my personal security while working alone in the tunnels,” he said, meeting her gaze. “A motion-activated, unobtrusive robot meant to shoot at attackers. I programmed it not to attack me, but apparently there was glitch. I apologise for not testing it more thoroughly before unleashing it in Q Branch, Ma’am.” He refused to apologise for the bot itself — it really had been a good idea.

“I think you just did.” She lifted a hand and twitched her fingers at Cherie, who stared at her suspiciously and started to inch forward. Q wanted to warn M about Cherie’s taste for blood, but M continued, “If it can take down James Bond, I’m authorising ten of the bloody things. Even half-dead, he’s one of our best. You might want to go down to Medical, though. Well, across to them, since they’re somewhere down here now.”

The grin that Q had started to indulge in at her praise for his murderous invention faded when she mentioned Medical. “Should I wear a bulletproof vest, just in case?” he asked wryly. He knew James had a temper, and though he was certain the agent wouldn’t actually shoot him, he wasn’t looking forward to the confrontation. *What an introduction,* he thought again sourly. Chicken would have been so much less complicated.

“I wouldn’t,” M said, watching as Cherie finally came close enough to sniff one short-nailed finger. “He’s not on any of the entry logs, which means he snuck past security. If he’s going to do that, then he damned well deserves to get shot.”

“All right,” he said slowly. “I’ll go as soon as I finish my after-action report.” He nodded at the cat.
“She bites, Ma’am.”

“As do I, if one believes the rumours. Go now. The bloody paperwork can wait. Wartime footing,” she reminded him.

Q smiled and stood, deciding that he actually really did like her, after all. She was steel and purposefulness and practicality — all qualities that he admired greatly. He would build her ten bots from scratch and make sure they danced perfectly. “Yes, ma’am. And thank you. I will be more cautious in the future.”

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Before Bond’s eyes were entirely open and able to focus, he heard an unfamiliar male voice saying, in proper English, “Agent Bond, you’re at MI6 Medical. You’ve been shot, but you’re stabilised. You’re perfectly safe, Agent Bond. Can you look at me, please?”

The speech was one Bond had heard far too many times. It quieted the initial pang of anxiety at waking in an unfamiliar, sterile white room, but that didn’t mean he had to actually obey. He closed his eyes and took a breath as he tried to inventory whatever the hell he’d done to himself this time.

Nothing hurt, but that was an alarming sign. If he was that drugged, then things must have gone very badly for someone — most likely, him. But why was he at MI6 and not out in the field? He’d awakened on American aircraft carriers, in overseas hospitals, and even on more than one medevac flight, but never at MI6. At least not like this. MI6 was for routine procedures and fixing up his own patchwork field treatments.

His right arm was free; the left was bandaged and splinted against his chest at an awkward angle. There was a dull sense of pressure low on his right side, and he knew it would turn to a blaze of fire just as soon as the painkillers wore off.

He opened his eyes and looked directly at the nurse, who finally shut up. “Go get someone in authority,” he said, and closed his eyes again. He listened to the man’s footsteps, glad he hadn’t argued, and tried to remember.

Well, he could remember, but it didn’t make any bloody sense. A robot that looked like the bottom end of a Dalek in an unholy mating with a plastic storage tub and a handgun? Not even in his worst nightmares.

But apparently, nightmare or not, it was also reality, at least according to the doctor who came in a few minutes later to recount a truly stunning array of small-calibre gunshot wounds. Of course, that just made it more surreal, because Bond never got shot that much on a mission. The fact that it had happened in the basement under MI6 was entirely unacceptable.

“I’ve already sent a strongly-worded protest regarding unleashing half-thought-out prototype weapons on some crackpot notion that proper scientific protocols don’t need to be followed,” the doctor finished up. “It won’t happen again, I assure you.”

“Fucking arsehole,” Bond said, a bit worried at the state of his voice. “It was a bloody brilliant Dalek.”

“It was reckless —”
“One more word,” Bond said threateningly, fixing his best opiate-fuelled glare on the doctor. “Get out. And find someone who’s actually in charge.”

The doctor took a breath and actually looked like he was considering saying something. Thankfully, he left in silence, which saved Bond the trouble of ripping out stitches or having something important — like the rest of his blood — fall out of that disturbing wound low on his side. Bond closed his eyes again and wondered how the hell he was going to explain this to M. He’d bypassed the security checkpoints, so she’d probably blame him for this whole mess.

“Thank you,” said a somewhat amused voice from the doorway. “You really thought it was brilliant?”

It wasn’t the doctor, so Bond turned and looked in that direction. Small, thin, hair that looked like he’d got caught in a wind tunnel, glasses... The only word that surfaced through the haze of drugs was ‘cute’, so Bond put on his most charming (post-surgery) smile and said, “Of course it was. You’re the madman who unleashed it, then? What are you, seventeen?”

“Thirty-one, actually, but I can see how in your drugged state you might be a bit off. Yes, it was me.” The madman frowned. “I’m sorry for what happened.”

The voice was familiar, but the underground room had loud ventilation fans, and Bond was surrounded by machines that were beeping as proof that he was alive. So he beckoned — his right arm seemed to work fine, which was a lovely change from his usual post-mission status — and asked, “Were you shot? You’re the one in the cupboard, aren’t you? Oh Christ, you even have Potter’s hair, don’t you?”

That got him a slightly disbelieving stare before a startled fit of laughter took over. “You’re quite the connoisseur of pop culture, aren’t you? I wouldn’t have guessed that about you.” He walked closer, and stared down at Bond’s wounds with what was obvious regret. “Yes, I was the one in the cupboard. No, I wasn’t shot. You effectively killed the Dalek before it could hurt anyone but you.” He paused. “Though M was so enamoured of the beast that I’m now under orders to build ten more, so there is still opportunity.” His grin turned wicked.

The voice was nagging at Bond’s memory. He stared at the tech (the kid, his mind wanted to think) and tried to remember who the hell he was. Had Bond hit on him at a Christmas party? Usually by about eleven o’clock at those parties, he couldn’t remember much at all. He definitely would’ve hit on this one, assuming he was amenable and not intimidated.

“Considering what I had to do to disable it” — assuming he was actually remembering the fuzzy flashes of the battle properly and not substituting something from a movie — “you might want to make me a remote power switch. I’m fairly certain I broke it rather thoroughly.”

“Yes.” The tech paused, looking uncertain for a moment, before he continued. “It was originally a cat toy, actually. With laser pointers randomly firing instead of a gun.”

A cat toy? Bond thought.

He remembered Taylor.

He started to sit up, only to realise, as the opiates failed under the sudden pressure of muscles moving below the bandages, what a spectacularly bad idea that was. He very cautiously let himself relax back into his pillows and held out his hand, demanding, “I need a phone. One that works.”

“Uh...” Whatever response the tech had been expecting, that wasn’t it. He dug in his pocket for
moment before pulling out his MI6 issue mobile. “Is everything all right?” he asked, handing it over.

Stupid question. Bond ignored it in favour of dialling the Help Desk. Now that he was officially back from the dead, he was entirely willing to abuse his rank to find Mike, even if he had to authorise a damned security team to go find him.

“007,” the tech said quietly, watching Bond’s thumb as he dialled. He brushed his hand carefully over Bond’s.

Bond glared in warning and started stabbing the 0 button to bypass the damned automated system. He’d learned that if he hit 0 fast enough and often enough, the computer just glitched and sent him on to a live person.

“James,” the tech tried again, resting his hand over the phone. “I’m sorry that my murderous robot for our murderous cat shot you.”

“It’s fine —” Bond got out, before his mind finally caught up.

He dropped the mobile.

“Mike?”

Taylor didn’t react when the mobile slipped from Bond’s hand — he stood carefully still, watching Bond, and let it clatter to the floor. “Hey. Sorry we had to meet like this. I hope you’re not...” He shook his head, smiling ruefully. “I did try to tell you not to run into that hallway.”

Bond stared up at him, feeling his mental processes trying to detach from the confusing mix of emotional responses — relief that Taylor was all right, excitement at finally meeting him, and more than a little discomfort, because despite his claim of being thirty-one, there was no possible way he could be older than twenty, twenty-three at most.

“You’re all right?” he asked, looking Mike over. “You weren’t hurt?”

Mike shook his head. “I’m fine. A little embarrassed that I managed to shoot up my new department, and you, so soon after, well, what happened. But I’ll live.” He moved his hand to rest on Bond’s uninjured arm. “I’m really glad you’re back, though. Things have been a little insane around here.”

Bond refrained from taking hold of his arm. “Where were you? I’ve been calling since the attack,” he said, before realising that it came out as an accusation. “You weren’t —” He’d asked that already. Mike wasn’t hurt. He was standing there, decidedly not hurt.

“I was in a stairwell on my way back to the Help Desk from a call in the executive offices when the explosion hit,” Mike started, leaning against the bed a little. “I’d been watching things carefully after everything you told me, learning the ins and out of the network, building programs to protect it. I had my laptop with me, so I was able to detect the hacker right away and keep him, or her, from doing any more damage. My work impressed M and saved a lot of people. The old Q died, and I got promoted.” Mike took a steadying breath and stopped, watching Bond.

“Promoted?” he asked, momentarily confused. The drugs were making him slow, but Mike had made it clear that he didn’t want to leave the Help Desk, to the point where Bond had stopped trying to coax him away.

“They gave me Q Branch. I’m Q now. I’ve been stuck in the tunnels for almost two weeks, setting things up, fixing MI6’s network. I didn’t have a chance to leave, and I didn’t want to contact you from inside, in case...” Mike looked around, flicking a glance at the CCTV. “I could probably have
dealt with it, but it didn’t seem wise to hide something like that in the aftermath of the attack. I didn’t want to risk you.”

Bond let out a sigh, feeling the knot of tension in his chest finally dissolve. “At least you’re safe,” he said, idly twisting his fingers in the blanket to keep from reaching for Taylor. All those mission-based phone calls didn’t give Bond the right to go pawing at him. “What about Cherie?”

Taylor watched Bond’s hand twisting in the blanket, and moved his fingers down to rest on Bond’s. “I’m sure she’ll be very angry with you for destroying her toy. There may be blood.”

“Sneak her in here for me, will you? And bring me a damned —” Bond cut off, staring at Taylor. “You’re my Quartermaster?”

Taylor laughed. “Yes. Not that it really changes much I suppose — it’s more official. And I —”

“I’m not bloody sharing you!” Bond snapped in sudden, irrational fury. “You wouldn’t even give me a damned extension number, and now you expect me to just let the other agents have at you?”

Taylor — Q — looked down at him with shock before he smiled incandescently. “Well, you’ll certainly have a significant advantage over the rest of them.”

The smile soothed Bond’s jealousy long enough for his rational brain to take over and remind him that he had no cause or right to be jealous. He looked away for a moment, examining the bandages on his left arm, visible under the pointless hospital gown. “That’s —” he began, wondering what to say. Taylor — Q, dammit! — had resisted all attempts to go near Q Branch, until suddenly he was in charge of the whole damned thing. And it was juvenile and selfish, but Bond didn’t want to share him with anyone, only now he’d be caught up in meetings and running the department. No more late-night phone calls while Taylor sat at his desk, letting legitimate calls ring through to his colleagues.

“That’s fantastic,” he said with a false smile; he was very, very good at lying. “So you can just bring me a bloody gun instead of sneaking one in. You know how I feel about being unarmed.”

Q’s smile grew a little uncertain. “Of course I will. And build you things that work. And not let stupid phone calls about printers interrupt our conversations.” He chuckled. “So, what treasure did you bring me from Greece?”

Me, Bond thought, and then tensed, quickly looking away. He was not going to go there. Guilt distracted him, and he shook his head, saying, “I left in something of a hurry.”

Q chuckled. “I’ll let it slide this time, but only because I was starting to wonder if you were ever coming back. When do you think you’ll be allowed to leave? You owe Cherie and me a teriyaki chicken dinner.”

“That’s all right” — he faltered, nearly calling him Mike — “Q. You’re busy. You have robots to build.”

Q’s expression fell. “Well, yes, but I don’t have to work all the time.” He paused, withdrawing his hand from Bond’s. “Unless you don’t want to, of course. I’m sure you have a lot to do, coming back from the dead.”

“And you’re a department head, not two weeks after we were attacked,” Bond said, trying not to sound petulant about it. Now he regretted coming back from Greece at all. He could’ve stayed there and kept calling, ignorant of Q’s new status. And if Q hadn’t mentioned it, then he’d still be Mike Taylor. He’d still be Bond’s.
He looked around the bed and found the control to raise the top end up. He was all too familiar with these things, unfortunately. The pressure shifted things inside him that weren’t meant to be shifted into new configurations, and he clenched his teeth, waiting for the meds to push everything back. It didn’t work, but he got the bed up anyway.

“I’ll need a gun and all the intel you have on the attack,” he said, bringing his right arm over to his trapped left hand so he could start pulling out IVs.

“Uh, no,” Q said, placing his hand over Bond’s. “You think I didn’t catch that grimace when you sat up? You are not leaving until you’re a little more healed. And when you do, it’s to come over to my place to have chicken with me and Cherie.”

Bond looked up at him. “Mike. You don’t have to,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry that my stupid machine damaged you when you came back,” Q said in a quiet and serious tone. “And I hate that it means that you can’t go right off into the field to catch the hacker. I know you, and I know another vacation isn’t what you need. You need to do something. And you will — when you’re a little better.”

Bond shook his head and looked back down at his arm, trying to mentally slot Mike Taylor into the file formerly reserved for Boothroyd — and failing. He could almost accept that this was Mike, even though Bond had refused to let himself build a mental picture. Not only had he intentionally not looked into Mike’s file; he hadn’t even asked leading questions about Mike’s appearance. He just hadn’t expected someone so... everything. Young and beautiful and breakable and so not appropriate for an almost-too-old killer. Mike deserved someone who actually lived and worked in the same city, who didn’t disappear from civilisation for months at a time, who would come home because the workday had ended and not because he was bleeding too much to actually complete his latest mission. And definitely not someone who was so good at killing that he didn’t even have nightmares about it.

Refusing to look at Mike — at Q — Bond pressed his little finger right over where the catheter went into his arm and used his thumb and forefinger to pull it out. It stung and felt wrong, but he was used to it. The IV tubing started to drip, so he gave it a flick to toss it off the bed. He should’ve stopped the drip first, but he was distracted. Usually he was much better at escaping from hospitals.

“I don’t suppose this is just you being too impatient to wait to come over to my flat, is it?” Q said with a frown.

“We’re at war,” Bond said stiffly. He moved his hand away, and blood welled up, but it wasn’t as bad as a bullet wound, so he let it pass. He reached down through the bars to find the catch that would drop them. “I’m not dead. That means I can work.”

Q watched him for a long moment as he fought with the bed. “All right. I’ll be in your ear. Try not to die; I’d be very put out.” He stepped back and raised an eyebrow. “Cherie and I spend most of our time in the new Q Branch. Come visit if you like, and have the time.”

Bond started peeling off the contacts and monitors, making the machines go wild. “I’ll try not to get in the way. You’ll be busy.”

Q stepped back. “You’re missing the point — we want you there. But good luck with your work.” He rested a gentle hand on Bond’s shoulder. “Even if I don’t see you, I’m sure I’ll talk to you soon.”

“I’m staying” — he cut off, thinking fast; he hadn’t found anywhere to live yet — “with Alec. Have
a courier drop off a gun for me. And a new laptop.” He didn’t want to think about the tablet that he’d made, with Taylor’s help, now rotting at the bottom of a river in Turkey.

“I won’t be able to give you a custom one this fast, but I’ll come up with something. Besides, the deal was dinner for a new tablet.” Q smiled. “You’re not getting out of dinner so easy.” And with that, he turned and left, making his way past the small army of medical staff who didn’t realise the futility of trying to keep Bond against his will.

*Thank god,* he thought, glad for the distraction from Q.

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“Don’t worry, you wouldn’t have wanted to see him anyway,” Q groused, scratching Cherie under the chin. “He wasn’t himself. He was being an idiot. All ‘just send a gun and laptop to Alec’.”

Q shook his head and turned his attention back to the parts catalogue he was looking through. He was making notes on what he needed to order from it for his new army of Double O killers, as he was morbidly calling them. But every few minutes, he would flip back to the parts for tablet modification.

“I swear!” Danielle exclaimed, startling Q and Cherie both. She bustled in with barely a tap on the door and huffed as she set down a paper cup of tea for Q, identical to the one she held. She sat down and glared, saying, “If I’ve ever told you that our agents are anything but troublesome children, I lied.”

“It's not as if I would have believed you anyway,” Q chuckled. “Why? What’s going on?”

“That idiot, 007, of course.” She sipped at her tea and gave Q a scolding look. “Next time, try to break a bone. At least — No, then he’d just want to conceal a weapon in the cast. Him and 006, Q. They’re the worst of a bad lot.”

“Oh. He’s off, then, I take it?” Q hid his disappointment by continuing to scratch Cherie.

“Naturally. I mean, it’s not that I’m not overjoyed to have him back, but really. Are you going to let him get away with that sort of thing? He could kill himself!”

Q looked up at her in surprise. “Well, what am I supposed to do about it? I tried to tell him to stay. Made promises about dinner and...” He looked at Danielle and blushed. “He’s not himself right now, anyway. He just needs to think he’s useful again.”

Danielle stared at him, and then sipped her tea and gave Cherie an exasperated look. “Good heavens, have you never dated anyone before? You don’t tolerate that behaviour. It’s obvious he’s an idiot, utterly incapable of taking care of himself. Not twelve hours ago, he was unconscious from shock and blood loss.”

Q’s blush crept up his neck as he watched her. “Seriously, Danielle. What am I supposed to do? Sit on him? He’s much bigger than me.”

“That’d be a start. Treat him like you would any other boyfriend. Really, they’re terrifying and intimidating, but inside, they’re all spoilt children. And the more you let them get away with, the worse they’ll be next time — and that’s without the added pressure of a relationship.” She took
another drink and leaned back in her chair. “Besides, if he ends up bleeding out in a taxi, M will be very upset with you.”

That earned her a raised eyebrow. “M?” How the hell did M know anything about it? He started digging around for his phone. Shit, he thought — he’d left it in Medical.

Danielle nodded. “She told me you’d be gone at least two days, possibly more.”

_The paperwork can wait, _she’d said. Q grinned as he got up and started gathering his things. “That does sound about right, doesn’t it.”

He had no idea what he was doing. But at least he had cheerleaders telling him he could. Now, if he could just find his phone to call Alec.
Chapter 12

November 2012

Alec’s house was an elegant white terraced house overlooking a small park in Knightsbridge. The keyhole was trapped; Bond opened the brass number plaque beside the keyhole, entered the eight-digit keycode, and let himself inside, feeling worse than he had after getting shot off the train. His head was pounding and the pain medications were wearing off. In a sadistic fit, the medical staff had refused to give him any more if he exercised his right to leave, possibly because he threw in something about “blocking the doors with the stacked up corpses of this whole department” being unable to keep him from leaving. That might have been overkill.

The house smelled of dust. Bond had a maid service for his old flat because he didn’t keep anything sensitive there. Alec did — including an arsenal — which meant the house fell apart whenever he was on a mission.

Bond’s vague thoughts of cleaning up and fixing himself lunch faded to dust. Instead, he made it as far as the sofa, where he eased himself down, put his feet up on the arm, and closed his eyes.

Leaving, he thought — and god, even thinking hurt — might have been a tactical error, though strategically, it was sound. He needed to get away from MI6. He needed to get away from Mike Taylor. From the Quartermaster. Sometime over the last year and a half, he’d got used to thinking of Mike Taylor as his. In his own mind, Bond had forged a connection between them without even considering how Mike would feel about it.

Very sociopathic, that.

But Bond had never considered that Mike might have his own plans (which apparently included becoming the Quartermaster on his own, despite Bond’s efforts to get him into Q Branch a year ago). He never thought that Mike would be young and gorgeous and too fucking good for a half-dead field agent who was useful only for drinking himself to death and killing anyone who crossed his path.

Bond’s dark, morose thoughts were made worse by the ebb of painkillers in his blood. He considered going downstairs, to where he knew Alec had emergency medical supplies — including enough painkillers to keep Bond from hurting for the next week — but he was too damned tired. Instead, he got up off the sofa long enough to retrieve a bottle of fair-quality whisky from Alec’s bar. That would do well enough to get him to sleep or unconscious. Same thing, really.

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“Not that I’m shy or anything,” Q said, his discomfort probably showing through clearly, despite his attempt to hide it, “but why are you insisting on a video chat? What’s wrong with a phone call or typing? And do you have any idea how insecure this is?”

“Because it’s eight in the morning, and I have someone to kill in forty minutes. Wouldn’t want me to be late,” Alec said from somewhere outside the camera pickup. All Q could see, in fact, were legs — thankfully in blue jeans and not bare — and the dizzying view of what looked like a cheap hotel room.
“Are you carrying your laptop by the screen?” Q asked with some horror. “You know that’s bad, right?”

“It’s fine,” Alec answered, and thumped the laptop down somewhere. And there was the bare skin that Q had expected, in the form of a too-muscular torso, visible as Alec bent down and turned on a sink. “You’re sure you’re the Quartermaster?” he asked sceptically, twisting to face the laptop as water splashed. “Do you even know how to mix explosives?”

“Not just explosives, Alec. The world is damn lucky I’m a white hat. Otherwise I could have it burning,” Q said grimly. “Now, can we skip you telling me that I look like a teenager and get to the part about what the hell I’m supposed to do about James?”

Alec ducked, and Q actually saw his face. He was far more handsome than his file photo implied (perhaps even more handsome than James), with deep green eyes and a square jaw, hidden though it was by half a coat of shaving foam.

“I can see why he likes you so much. You’re feisty,” Alec approved, and stood back up, leaving the camera focused on his torso once more. With every breath, a nasty scar on his ribs moved. Q suspected something large and angry had bitten him, and he had no idea how he’d managed to survive.

“Did you hear about what happened?” Q asked cautiously.

“I got an alert that someone’s at my house, so it’s either an unusually polite burglar who used the keypad or it’s James,” Alec answered. “What did he manage to do to himself? Why didn’t he just get a hotel? He doesn’t kip at my place unless something’s gone horribly wrong.”

Q shifted uncomfortably, telling himself that he was better off having this conversation with Alec halfway around the world in Mexico, rather than at a cafe where he might be tempted to strangle Q.

“Well, I was in the new Q Branch, testing a new robot. An armed defence bot. Which, uh, went a bit wonky. And I tried to tell James not to interfere, but you know how he is. He got shot” — Q paused — “a couple of times. Nothing life-threatening, but still...”


“Twice. Maybe three times. I’m not really sure how many times, actually,” Q replied wryly. “And I wasn’t trying to. The bot just went homicidal on me.”

“He’s never going to live this down,” Alec said, still laughing. “If I don’t get killed on this mission, I’m taking you out for the best — You are old enough to drink, aren’t you?” he asked slyly.

“God, what is it with you Double O’s and underestimating ages? Seriously? Is it just me, or do you often make that mistake? I’m in my thirties, for Christ’s sake.” Q was glad Alec wasn’t looking at him directly because he knew damn well how petulant he looked.

“Well, yes, but Boothroyd was older than rocks. By comparison, you’re, well, adorable comes to mind. But why the hell are you hitting on me from halfway around the world instead of shagging James in a supply cupboard somewhere? Shooting’s damned near a third date, for field agents.”

Q huffed. “Sorry, Alec. One Double O is enough for me. Besides, I hear you go more for the married ones, what with their not looking like teenagers and all. But really, I do need help with James. After the shooting, I met with him in Medical — which was the first time we’d met in person. He brushed me off and left against medical advice.”
Alec made a thoughtful sound but didn’t speak up immediately. There was more splashing, punctuated by the periodic wet splatter of shaving foam shaken off a razor. “Right,” Alec said thoughtfully, leaning forward a bit more. “So, here’s the thing. You’re both idiots. Let’s start at the beginning. Got anything against blokes? Dating, shagging, take your pick.”

“Obviously not,” Q said dryly.

“Not making any assumptions here,” Alec answered quickly. “So, what about James himself? I mean, you’re not calling to ask me to kill him. I hope you’re not calling for that.”

“If I wanted him dead, I could do it myself with the aforementioned world-burning tools, Alec,” Q answered wryly, before dropping into a more serious tone. “I’m worried about him.”

Alec sighed. “James is loyal. He’ll sacrifice his life for England. He won’t think twice about the cost. Even when he’s at his breaking point — Greece, for example... Well, you saw. Someone came after us, and he came back. But don’t for a minute think that means he’s nice. He’s not. He’ll lie, steal, fuck, and kill his way through a mission and do it without a single bit of regret.”

It wasn’t new information, but put that way it made Q pause. He wasn’t stupid. When he’d been promoted, he’d quickly made an effort to learn everything about the Double O programme and its operatives. But it was still hard to reconcile what he’d learned in those files with his friend, James, whom he’d come to know through phone calls, emails, and notes attached to surprisingly thoughtful gifts.

“I know,” he finally said. “It wasn’t as if I didn’t hear him killing his way through many a mission. He didn’t hide from me that he...” Q sighed. “I know, Alec.”

“How important is loyalty?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, short of asking him to betray another loyalty — to England, to me — James will do anything for you, if you earn it from him. He’ll kill for you, and he’ll die for you. Can you handle that responsibility, knowing what he’s doing when he’s out on a mission?”

“Yes,” Q answered, albeit quietly. “Loyalty goes both ways. It means that even if I could ask him to do whatever it was I wanted, I wouldn’t. And I wouldn’t ask him to stop doing anything that makes him who he is.”

Alec let out a sigh that sounded relieved. “All right. Because when he trusted you enough to give you that phone, it was both our careers he risked — assuming M didn’t escalate things all the way to treason.” He huffed and turned off the water, walking away from the camera. “So, the tough question now: Has James been enough of a complete bastard that you’re ready to turn your death-robots loose on him again, or can this bloody mess be redeemed?”

“It’s not that he’s being a bastard,” Q said, frowning as he watched Alec move around. “I’d like it very much if he came back and had dinner with Cherie and me as he said he wanted to, before. But he doesn’t seem to want to have anything to do with us right now. He refused — several times. Hell, Alec. He wouldn’t even look at me, really. He just...” Q shook his head. “He blew me off.”

“Or he made the decision to keep you safe. To keep you at arm’s length, because having anything to do with us is like skydiving into a bloody hurricane,” Alec said, sounding resigned. “He’s probably terrified for you. And of you.”

“Bloody fucking stupid death-bot,” Q groaned out, running his hands through his hair. “If I hadn’t
“Of you, not your robot,” Alec interrupted. He turned slightly, and though his face was still out of the camera’s field, Q knew Alec was looking at the screen. “Look, a few years ago, he got involved with someone. He left MI6 to be with her, and she betrayed him.”

Q sat back to process that for a moment. It confirmed the vague sort of suspicions he’d had about Bond’s past relationships — though he would never have guessed that he’d be willing to give up MI6 for anyone. He pushed aside his curiosity about what happened to her and focused on Alec again.

“He’s been talking to you for how many months?” Alec asked.

“Quite a few,” Q confirmed. “And I come with the added benefit of being thoroughly vetted by MI6. I’m not the enemy, Alec. I’m not even a civilian.”

“She was Treasury. Thoroughly vetted, sent to work with him on an MI6 op.”

“Fuck. What the hell am I supposed to do? I’m not willing to just sit back and let him kill himself because he’s got cold feet about being involved with me. I thought we already were involved, in the more important ways. What else does he want from me?”

“For you to not get fucked over by being involved with him,” Alec answered. “He’s not an idiot — god, I can’t call you ‘Q’ without thinking of Boothroyd. He let you get close. Suddenly he’s panicking. So, he’s going to do what any Double O would do in that situation.”

“You can call me Mike, if you want.” Q sighed. “He can’t just get up and run off to chase the bad guys, Alec. He’s hurt from my stupid machine. And everyone seems to expect me to just know what to do to keep him here, keep him from getting himself killed, and that’s where I’m stuck. Because I can’t just sit on him, no matter what Danielle says.”

Alec barked out a laugh. “Why not? He was shot. Even a skinny thing like you could probably take him down, assuming he didn’t get into my stash of morphine. He wants you to be a part of his life. He’s just too bloody stubborn to admit it to himself. Otherwise, he’d fuck you to get you out of his system and move on.”

Q asked with concern, glad for an excuse to not have to respond to the second part of what Alec said. “You have a stash of morphine?”

Alec gave him an eight-digit code, along with an address in Knightsbridge — about as economically far from Q’s cramped, tiny flat as one could get, short of Buckingham Palace itself. “Go ahead. The armoury’s in the basement as well. Train her as a sniper. I could use her as backup on my ops. God knows she’s got the instinct.”

Q laughed. “Thanks, Alec. I’m heading over there now. And good luck with your mission.”
“Just have the sofa dry cleaned before I get home — that or change the sheets. James knows where
the guest bedroom is.” He saved Q from having to answer by closing the lid to the laptop.

Q chuckled before closing the chat window. He stood to start packing a bag — several days’ worth
of supplies for both him and Cherie.

Right. Sit on James. He could do that.

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The double-beep snapped Bond awake — which he immediately regretted, thanks to the searing hot
knife someone had apparently embedded in his gut while he had been unconscious. “Fucking
Christ,” he groaned, staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling. His mind wasn’t registering any sort of alarm,
though, which meant he was somewhere safe. It took him a few seconds to recognise Alec’s house.

He rolled onto his back, wondering why the hell he’d let himself collapse on the uncomfortable sofa.
Then he thought about dragging his arse up the stairs to the guest room and decided the sofa was just
fine. He twisted and looked over at the coffee table, where he’d left most of a bottle of whisky. The
thought of reaching for it at the moment was absolutely unacceptable.

“Alec!” he barked as loudly as his gut would allow, which wasn’t very.

The sound of soft footsteps, too soft to belong to Alec, who tended to stomp like an elephant when
he was in his own home, echoed in the hallway. “Wrong friend,” came the response before Mike
appeared in the entryway to the living room, carrying a stuffed rucksack, a laptop bag, a cat carrier,
and a large bag of what looked (and smelled) like takeaway.

Bond stared at him; this wasn’t supposed to have happened. “What the fuck?” he asked, more
baffled than angry or even irritated — at least until he swung his legs down off the couch and sat up,
and the invisible knife inside him moved.

Mike frowned at him. He dropped the bags in the doorway, then leaned down to pull Cherie out of
the carrier. He walked over to stand mere inches from where Bond was taking deep breaths and
trying not to swear. Even sitting up apparently hurt.

Gently, Mike dropped Cherie onto Bond’s lap, took him by the shoulders, and carefully pushed him
back to lie down. “Cherie is under orders to sit on you to keep you off your feet. I’d do it instead, but
I suspect that might be a bit more painful than you’d prefer. Hungry?” Mike shoved the whisky aside
and sat on the coffee table.

Tempting as it was to look around and make damned certain he really was in Alec’s house — where
Mike couldn’t be — Bond wasn’t quite that stupid, even in his present condition. Besides, Cherie’s
angry bite to his finger proved that this wasn’t a dream. “What the fuck?” he repeated, thinking in
some fuzzy way that those three simple words encompassed everything going through his mind.

He was glad of the cat, too. He knew better than to try and dislodge her so he could do something
even more stupid, like grab at Mike to pull him close.

“Did you think I was going to let you get away that easily?” Mike asked, leaning over to brush his
hand over Bond’s face. “I mean, it took me a few hours, and a little help from Danielle and Alec, to
figure out what to do. Because you’re stubborn, and I wasn’t expecting a rejection. But here I am.”
Bond closed his eyes, thinking this was all too much. “You’re an idiot,” he said, petting under Cherie’s chin. She rolled over, latched onto his hand with her claws, and started gnawing on his fingers. “Why the hell aren’t you running?”

“Why on earth would I do that, James?” Mike asked with a small smile, leaning over him. “You’re my agent.” Then he kissed him despite everything that had gone wrong — despite Bond stalking him, passing out from blood loss and shock the first time they’d met, walking out of Medical, and all his efforts to warn Mike off, and even despite the fact that Bond was half-dead and couldn’t be pleasant to kiss at all.

He got his free hand up into Mike’s hair, not caring that it pulled at the bandages around his left arm, and tugged him off the coffee table and onto the couch. Mike was alive and unhurt and too stupid to run from Bond, and that said more about Bond’s luck than the fact that the damned robot hadn’t actually scored a fatal shot.

Mike groaned into the kiss, pushing himself forward reflexively before he stopped moving, hands fluttering lightly over Bond’s arms without landing anywhere. Then, as Cherie let out a hiss, Mike suddenly jerked back with a startled huff. “Damn cat,” he muttered, shaking his hand as he sat up, smiling ruefully. “Apparently she’s going to be a little possessive of you.”

Bond reached out to take hold of Mike’s bleeding fingers. As they touched, he had second thoughts — and third and fourth thoughts, because Mike deserved far better than someone like him — but he did it anyway, because apparently they were both idiots. He pressed a finger over the two bloody fang-marks on Mike’s fingertip.

“If that’s what I think it is” — he nodded in the direction of the takeaway bag — “we could always distract her. Cats eat more chicken in the wild than they do people. I think.”

Mike chuckled. “Not our cat. She doesn’t actually eat anyone, but I think she might be part vampire.” Mike brushed one more light kiss across Bond’s lips before he stood to fetch the bag. “I suppose given where she came from, it’s not an unreasonable assumption.”

Our cat, Bond thought dazedly. He watched Mike set out takeaway containers and tried to get himself to believe this was real. Mike Taylor was a voice on the phone, a competent tech, and a lifeline to sanity. But he was also here, now, with Bond. He wanted to be here. And god help them both, Bond wanted him just as much.

Bond risked bleeding to death (slowly) by moving Cherie off his lap. He ignored the slash of her claws.

Mike looked up at her indignant hiss, just in time to see Bond actually stand up, in defiance of medical wisdom. “James —”

Tape stretched and stitches strained as Bond pulled Mike into his arms. He buried his face against Mike’s unruly hair and muttered, “Just because I have to share you as Q doesn’t mean I’m sharing all of you.”

“Bloody well better not,” Taylor huffed out against Bond’s shoulder. “I think we’ve earned having this to ourselves, don’t you?” He gently wrapped his arms around Bond, trying to avoid his injuries. “Why don’t you go lie down on the bed? I’ll get Cherie some chicken to sate her carnivorous thirst for a while, and we can just talk and relax and I can call you an idiot again.”

Bond laughed, feeling strangely daring when he pressed a kiss to Mike’s cheek. “You romantic, you,” he accused. “I’ll go turn down the bed. We’ll take Alec’s. He won’t mind, and it’s bigger than
the guest bed.”

“No, he won’t mind. He said to just make sure we change the sheets before we leave.”

“You — Of course, you talked to him,” Bond said, leaning back to look into Mike’s eyes. It was strange that he looked so unfamiliar, even though Bond knew Mike’s voice better than his own. Usually, relationships went the other way around for Bond — if he could call them relationships at all. “And yes, that’s a compliment, me suspecting you hacked the house security system without setting off the countermeasures.”

“I would have set them all off if I had to,” Taylor said, looking right back at Bond. “But fortunately, you have very good friends. I have to admit, we owe them a lot. Alec, M, Danielle.”

“Danielle threatens me every time you department assigns me so much as a bloody pen, M ordered me shot, and Alec getting involved just means that we have an assassin acting as a matchmaker,” Bond teased, brushing his right hand a bit gingerly through Mike’s hair. It was soft and dark brown and too long, and Bond was already addicted to touching it. “And since you’re now one of the executives at MI6, you get to deal with them all. I just shoot people.”

Taylor laughed and pushed into Bond’s hand, letting out a low hum that couldn’t be mistaken for anything but pleasure. “You just want to get out of the dinner party, don’t you?” he said before leaned back up to nip at Bond’s lips.

Bond’s pleased hum cut off as he reluctantly backed away from the start to a very, very promising kiss. “Dinner party? You’d best mean with Cherie.”

Taylor laughed and gave him a gentle but firm shove. “Bed, now, before I have to literally drag you. Which I promise won’t be pleasant for anyone. I’m not that strong and may have to resort to robots.”

“Christ, not more of your bloody robots.” Bond stood his ground long enough for one more kiss, not quite willing to believe that Mike could possibly want him. “Will Cherie be all right down here? Has she ever done stairs before?”

“I honestly don’t know what’s more alarming,” Taylor said with an expression of exaggerated disbelief. “That you underestimate our rather evil cat’s abilities to the extent that you don’t think she can tackle the stairs, or that you think she belongs with us in bed. Did you miss the glorious bloodshed?”

“But you said she sleeps on the pillow with you,” Bond said, unable to resist ruffling Taylor’s hair, though it pulled at his stitches. When Taylor glared at him — insincerely — Bond surrendered, laughing, and backed away. “I’m going. I suppose if I tell you to bring the whisky, you’ll say no?”

“And here I foolishly thought you’d want to remember things tonight,” Taylor said with a shrug. “But, if you insist...” He looked speculatively at the whisky bottle, hands on his hips.

“They refused painkillers, since I left against recommendations. It’s not my fault,” Bond protested. “Or do you think you can distract me, given that you also had me shot?”

Taylor’s grin turned wicked. “Oh, I bet I could come up with something that wouldn’t pull at your stitches,” he whispered as he leaned into Bond, mouth grazing his ear, making Bond shiver and forget, at least a little, about his injuries. But then Taylor took a step back and folded his arms. “Not that it will be necessary. I set the bastards straight. There are a handful of prescriptions in my bag for you — painkillers and antibiotics, which you’re not refusing.”

Bond laughed, not caring how much it hurt. “All right. Forget the whisky,” he said, to his own
surprise. “I’ll turn down the bed, you settle the cat, and then come upstairs and tell me how you
siccéd your robot army on the vampires in Medical.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Taylor said, giving him one last kiss before he turned, as if bracing
himself, towards the kitten. “Here, beastie. Let’s dial down your need for human flesh with a bit of
nice chicken, shall we?”

Over the sound of Cherie’s hissing, Bond took himself upstairs. Only when he was past the first
landing did he pause, both to give himself a quick rest and to take the flimsy, anonymous flip phone
out of his pocket. He dialled the second speed dial as he started up towards the second storey.

“Tell me you didn’t shoot him,” Alec said.

“I’m an idiot, but not that much of one,” Bond said softly. “Thank you.”

“Idiot. Try not to bleed all over my house. And do as he says. This one’s clever.”

Bond smiled. “That he is.”

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