In Name Only
by BootsxBlossoms, Kryptaria

Summary

Beyond the world of BDSM clubs and fetish communities lies the Marketplace — a secret society of consensual slavery and service.

During an MI6 investigation into black market sales of Ministry of Defence assets, James Bond discovers what he believes to be a human trafficking ring called the Marketplace. He infiltrates the organisation as a buyer, but remains focused on his goal: follow the money trail.

On a private Marketplace cruise, one slave for auction catches Bond by surprise. Q is brilliant, ethereally beautiful, and vulnerable. Bond is instantly drawn to him, and he resolves to take down the Marketplace and rescue Q. What Bond doesn’t realise, though, is that Q is right where he wants to be.

Notes

What a challenging, fascinating fic this has been! The authors would like to stress that everything in this fic is consensual, in case you skipped the tags. This fic is an exploration of
power dynamics, kink, self-esteem, and the struggle to understand someone who chooses to live an alternative lifestyle.

We would like to thank the most wonderful team of betas, cheerleaders, and reviewers, without whom this fic never would have happened. In alphabetical order, they are: Cody_Thomas, CousinCecily, Honeybee221B, Jennybel75, Mitaya, Reluctantabandon, Snogandagrope, Stephrc79, and Trashyfiction.

As a matter of interest, BootsnBlossoms has written a meta on how she wrote Bond's perspective, and I've briefly written one about the Marketplace. **Warning: These metas have spoilers!**

http://bootsnblossoms.tumblr.com/post/48617071781/in-name-only-meta-bonds-perspective

http://kryptaria.tumblr.com/post/48670596810/in-name-only-meta-the-marketplace

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Chapter 1

Day One

“Welcome aboard Le Nautille, Mr Sterling,” said the cheerful blonde woman stationed at the foot of the gently sloped gangplank. She gave Bond a bright smile and returned his false passport, under the name of Richard Sterling. As he tucked it back into his pocket, she gestured him up the gangplank.

Le Nautille was a ten thousand tonne cruise ship owned by Charles Brinstead, a dot-com millionaire from San Diego. According to the intel provided by MI6’s Technical Services Section, or TSS, Le Nautille ran charter cruises up and down the west coast of the Americas. This was a similar venture, a thirty-day cruise from Portland to Alaska and back, except that this cruise was limited to invited guests.

Because of the exclusivity of the trip, the gangplank wasn’t crowded, allowing him to see ship’s sleek, modern lines. There were three levels of passenger staterooms and suites that he could see. Large lifeboats — hopefully adequate for all those aboard — hung from winches on one of the upper decks, aft. The comms array of antennas and dishes above the bridge seemed comfortably modern.

This trip was Bond’s last hope of running down an Eastern European crime syndicate involved in the black market sale of Ministry of Defence munitions. The last known link had been Pyotr Iakovich Marakov, who had died while being interrogated, leaving Bond with a sketchy paper trail and few leads. So far, every one of them had been a dead end.

As far as Bond and TSS could determine, the cruise was a cover for a high-priced human trafficking operation under the codename ‘Marketplace’. Just thinking about it made Bond’s hands itch for the feel of a gun, but he’d chosen to go in unarmed. He had no idea what security measures he’d face. At the very least, he expected that the two stewards carrying his luggage would search his belongings, most likely under the guise of stowing everything away for him.

Christ, he loathed human trafficking. He could deal with almost anything else, but the denial of basic human rights — of freedom — was anathema to him. The only thing worse was when the victims were children.

Icy anger settled over him at the thought. He looked up at the sleek, luxurious ship and decided that if the victims of this particular ring were children, he’d trap the responsible parties onboard and sink the ship.

When he reached the deck, another uniformed attendant gave him directions to the atrium for check-in, though it was just a formality. He already had a suite reserved, and the stewards broke off with his luggage while he made his way to the centre of the ship.

The atrium was a multi-storey open gallery surrounding twin spiral staircases. Two lifts were tucked forward of the staircases, with the purser’s station, reception desk, and destination services aft. Bond headed for the reception desk, pausing only to take a glass of champagne from one of the stewards circulating through the crowd. He wouldn’t drink — he wanted his wits about him — but he preferred to blend in.

As it was, his last-minute decision to keep his own wardrobe of bespoke suits had apparently been wise. The guests he saw were all in high fashion, many with ostentatiously displayed jewellery. They were an unusually eclectic group for an American cruise; as Bond made his way to the reception desk, he heard snatches of a dozen different languages. He noted that several stewards wore flag pins
that most likely indicated the languages they spoke.

There were a few passengers ahead of him at the reception desk, though the queue seemed to be moving quickly. That was the advantage, he supposed, of a small luxury cruise, rather than some massive floating city: there were enough attendants to give everyone personal service, which seemed an odd consideration for human traffickers. Typically, human trafficking involved warehouses, seedy brothels, and back-alley dealings, not this sort of glamour and hedonism.

As he waited, he kept a surreptitious eye out for security guards but saw none, and most of the stewards didn’t look capable of handling themselves in a fight. Their uniforms were black trousers for the men, skirts for the women, and blazers over white shirts and black ties. Oddly, all of them wore necklaces pulled out over their ties and shirt collars. Bond wondered if the gold and silver curb chains denoted rank or duties among the staff.

Probably not, he decided as he reached the reception desk. The woman who smiled at him from behind her computer wasn’t wearing one over her uniform. “Good morning, sir. Welcome aboard Le Nautille.”

He gave her a friendly smile, wondering if she knew about the human trafficking ring or if she was an unsuspecting corporate employee. “Richard Sterling,” he said, handing over his ticket and passport.

She typed briefly, and then said, “You’re booked in suite one, deck five, starboard. If you’ll sign here?” She offered him a tablet computer and a stylus. “If you’d like to link a credit card to your room key for convenience, I can do that for you now.”

Normally, he would refuse, preferring to have as little of his cover identity available for scrutiny as possible. Now, though, he needed to establish his financial credentials. He handed over a black credit card under his cover identity, glad he’d thought to have TJ, his TSS contact, construct a rich financial history for Richard Sterling. The operation had been thrown together at the last minute, so Bond had ended up authorising use of his own funds, but TJ had exceeded expectations.

The guest farther down the counter finished her check-in and looked over at Bond. She looked to be in her late fifties, though she was dressed in a black Dior trouser suit designed for a trendy woman in her twenties. She picked up the folder offered by her reception attendant, but instead of leaving the desk, she walked over to Bond.

“Buying or vacationing?” she asked with an educated British accent.

The question surprised him. Well, not the question so much as the questioner. Experience had taught him that appearances could never be trusted, so he shouldn’t have dismissed this woman despite how his instincts urged him to believe she was harmless. Up close, she looked even older, but only in the lines around her eyes and mouth. She dressed young and had a lively air about her, stripping the years away from the subtle physical signs of her age.

“Browsing,” he said, keeping his voice smooth and calm despite the instinctive distaste that rose up in him at the thought.

“I haven’t seen you before.” She transferred her folder to her left hand and extended her right. “Margaret Farnsworth.”

“Richard Sterling,” he said over a handshake. He gave her his most charming smile, trying to reconcile the thought that she could be involved with human trafficking. Really, none of the guests in sight had the sinister mien of people who would so casually destroy innocent lives for their own
pleasure or profit, and the dissonance had Bond’s nerves even more on edge than normal. If not for the intel he’d got from the last step in the smuggling chain, he would’ve imagined this to be nothing more ominous than a luxury vacation cruise — perhaps adults-only, given that he had yet to see any families with children.

“I’m browsing as well. I do hope we don’t end up competing,” she added with an entirely inappropriate sparkle in her eye. “These regent auctions don’t happen very often at all.”

Regent auctions? he wondered. The clerk interrupted before he could ask: “Mr Sterling?”

“Sorry.” He took the folder offered by the clerk; it was identical to the one Margaret held. “All set, then?”

“Yes, sir. There’s a schedule of today’s events in the front pocket. Muster drill is mandatory for safety, so please plan to attend. Have a pleasant voyage,” she said with a sunny smile.

Before he could step away, Margaret claimed his arm. “These trips are lovely, Richard. You’ll have a wonderful time,” she promised.

“I’m certain,” he lied smoothly. He pretended to sip his champagne and considered just how useful Margaret could be. Obviously their shared nationality gave him a connection he could play on, and she was far less distasteful than most enemies he’d interrogated. “You were saying? Regent auctions?”

“Their slaves are always the best,” she declared in a chillingly casual tone. “The regents are world-class trainers.”

Bond wanted to ask about the slaves — specifically what kind of force was guarding them and how they were tracked so he’d know best how to take down the organisation without undue harm — but M had been clear: the money trail was his priority. “The regents are in charge of the organisation, then?”

“Well, not in charge,” she said, her words maddeningly vague. She crooked a finger and one of the crew hurried up to offer her champagne. “It’s strictly a voluntary certification, but really, everyone knows that if you want quality, you buy from the certified trainers, if not the regents themselves. Not that you can’t find a gem in the rough, of course. Have you owned before?”

Repressing his flinch, Bond shook his head. “I’m afraid I’m new to the organisation.”

“Oh, this is a perfect introduction, then,” she assured him with a pat on his arm. Then, thankfully, she let go so she could take one of the glasses of champagne, without a word of thanks or even a smile. “What are you looking for?”

“A personal assistant — someone skilled with computers and organisation. I have my doubts, though. I need far more than a secretary,” he explained, hiding the discomfort in his voice.

“I wouldn’t write them off yet. Any slave trained by the regents will have basic household management skills, and every one of them can learn.”

Bond took a deep breath, told himself not to grit his teeth, and said, “I wouldn’t want to chance it.”

“Ah, you really are new, aren’t you?” she asked, giving him a sly smile.

He pushed aside his panic. “What makes you say that?”
She winked knowingly. “If you’d experienced a regent-trained slave, you wouldn’t be doubting. It’s quite all right.” She patted his hand. “You’ll see.”

He managed a polite nod and a smile. “I’ll trust your judgement,” he lied somewhat extravagantly. “But I should go and settle in.”

“Oh! Of course.” She gave him another pat before releasing his arm. “I’m just upstairs from you, suite three, deck six, if you need anything. And I’m certain we’ll see each other at dinner.”

“I look forward to it.”

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Bond let himself into the suite’s small foyer, which opened into a living area off to the left. Sliding frosted glass doors ahead and to the right led into a bedroom. From the bedroom, a door led out onto a small private balcony with a bistro table and two chairs. He also had a tiny office off the bedroom with a writing desk; his laptop had been set atop the desk and plugged in to charge. A small folded card atop the laptop listed instructions for accessing the ship’s wifi.

He loosened his tie, went back to the wardrobe in the foyer, and saw that someone had already unpacked his suitcases. What was a courtesy in many high-end hotels felt like an intrusion here.

He hung his jacket and tie before he went to the bar. He’d intended upon staying sober, but the civilised face these people had put on their crimes had turned his stomach. As he’d requested, the bar was stocked with an excellent selection of scotch, as well as both tea and a sleek silver espresso machine. For now, he poured himself a scotch and picked up the passenger information card. He read the first entry with growing horror:

_Do not leave a bound slave unattended. All slaves are to be free of restraints during the muster drill and in the event of an emergency. For safety reasons, all doors are designed to be opened from the inside even when locked. Should you require secure confinement for your slave, please request a bunk or cage in our attended barracks on deck three._

This was a bloody _nightmare_. Every instinct screamed for Bond to take decisive, violent action, but he couldn’t risk it. All too often, attempting to rescue hostages or prisoners ended with their death. He needed to be careful, to dismantle the operation with the finesse he’d bring to defusing a bomb. Cut the wrong wire and innocent lives would be lost.

Worse, this wasn’t even his primary objective.

Taking deep breaths, he turned away and went into the office next to the bedroom. From his laptop bag, he removed a standard-looking mobile phone that appeared to have a loose battery. He popped off the back case and pretended to try and repair it. As he did, he used a fingernail to flip a switch hidden under the battery. The device powered up immediately, and he wandered through the suite, pretending to look for the best mobile signal.

The bars on the display remained reassuringly flat, and Bond felt a measure of tension leave his shoulders. If the device had uncovered surveillance cameras or mics, he would have left them in place and acted unaware to bolster his cover story. But living under full-time surveillance was exhausting, and he was relieved that he’d be able to consider the suite a sanctuary.
After the electronic sweep, he did a thorough search-and-secure that anyone else might have considered extreme. He searched the undersides of the furniture, inside every electrical fixture, anywhere he might hide a recording device. If necessary, he would later use low-tech means to detect intrusion: talcum powder on door handles, single hairs laid across drawers, and so on. Now, though, he was satisfied that the room was secure.

According to the schedule, he had another forty minutes before the mandatory safety and muster drill. He considered trying to skip it, but he wanted to see what provisions were being made for the slaves. Afterwards, there were ship tours, which he would skip in favour of his own exploration, followed by an auction preview in the aft lounge, which doubled as a theatre. According to the schedule, the slaves being offered by the regents would be sold tomorrow night, not at the end of the cruise, as he might have expected. That made the thirty-day duration seem that much more excessive, unless people actually were interested in touring Alaska.

He thought about the hacker-proof computer system that surrounded the Marketplace. Technical Services Section had put its best techs on the task of cracking its security, and they’d failed. What the hell not only required that level of computer security but also needed thirty days of isolation at sea? With luck, he’d have a chance to interview some of the slaves and find out more: who they were and where they’d been taken. He’d also surreptitiously take photos, if at all possible, to send back to MI6 for facial recognition whenever he had the opportunity. Then he could work on finding the connection between this human trafficking ring and Marakov’s contacts.

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The aft lounge was an intimate space, with small tables instead of theatre-style seating, all angled in towards a round centre stage, currently unoccupied. They were seated according to their rooms, with passengers in suites having priority seating, which meant Bond was at the same table as Margaret and six others. He played up a level of anxious anticipation regarding the upcoming sale, excusing himself from too much small talk. Quietly, he listened, memorised names and details, and surreptitiously scanned for security guards — and found none.

The muster drill, meant to teach passengers how to reach the proper lifeboat in the event of a crisis, had been professionally handled but nerve-wracking all the same. Bond hadn’t seen a hint of the victims; they might well be locked away below, left to drown if the boat were disabled, which made the ‘safety’ text on the passenger information card all the more grotesque. He wondered what other illusions of propriety helped convince the buyers that this was somehow acceptable.

After the stewards cleared away the dinner dishes, the house lights dimmed. A man and woman stepped up to the centre stage; he wore a Henry Poole tuxedo, and Bond guessed she wore Alexander McQueen. The applause from the audience was warmly respectful, not merely polite, silencing only when the man lifted his hand.

He spoke with an educated, refined British accent at odds with a boyish grin that made him seem closer to thirty than forty. “I think they know us, darling,” he said, addressing the woman.

She visibly rolled her eyes and smiled. “On behalf of the regents, thank you all for attending this special event,” she said. Her accent was working-class, though soft and attractive, rather than grating. She held out her hands and looked around as though attempting to make eye contact with everyone in turn. She was charismatic, even captivating, and Bond immediately assessed her as the more
dangerous of the pair.

“For those of you who don’t know us,” the man continued, “I’m Philip Harrington. This is my wife, Angelique. We have the privilege of representing Britain to the regents.”

Angelique took over the welcome speech, but Bond was distracted, his mind suddenly racing. He leaned close to Margaret and very softly asked, “Harrington — as in Lord Southerby?”

To his shock, Margaret nodded. “Yes. They’ve been regents, oh, for the last five or six years.”

Bond nodded and sat back, resisting the temptation to order another martini. He picked up his espresso instead, hiding his surprise that peers would so openly associate themselves with the Marketplace. Just how deep into English society did this human trafficking go?

The welcome speech was brief, ending with Angelique saying, “We know none of you are here to see us. We’ve done our time on the block —”

“I thought we were doing that later tonight, darling,” Philip said, raising his brows suggestively after her.

“And if anyone would like to discuss the private sale of a slightly used Baron, please do come see me,” Angelique said smoothly, to the rich amusement of the crowd. “For now, though, this season’s finest offerings, every one from a regent-certified trainer!”

She and Philip left the stage as the house lights changed, focusing on the arching rear stage. Almost thirty men and women stood there, grouped in mixed pairs — one standing, one kneeling. All of the standing ones were in formal wear, holding leashes. The men and women on their knees were dressed in an eclectic collection from formal suits to leather bondage harnesses.

Bond forced his expression to remain calm as he looked them over. The fourteen kneeling ones had to be slaves; presumably the ones who were standing, holding the leashes, were the regents.

After giving the audience a moment to view the tableau, one of the standing women stepped forward. She was in her mid-thirties with an exotic mixed heritage that even Bond, with all his experience, couldn’t quite place. Her skin was the colour of pecans, her face heart-shaped. Rich black hair was elaborately pinned up in a soft style that framed her face and trailed down her neck, where she wore a single diamond pendant bigger than Bond’s thumbnail.

As soon as the leash went taut, her slave — a young, pixie-like woman with blond hair and huge eyes — rose, smoothing her hands down her short black cocktail dress before she clasped them behind her back. Together they walked a slow circle around the centre stage; a spotlight followed them. Both women had such an air of sensuality about them that the audience was held breathless.

There wasn’t a hint of reluctance in the slave’s demeanour. If anything, she seemed calm and confident despite the deferential way her eyes were lowered, as if she didn’t need to look around to know the effect she had on those who observed her.

Once they’d made a complete circle of the centre stage, the handler led the slave up to kneel at the back, by the stairs. Offstage, Philip’s voice said, “Number One, presented by Regent Chandra, of Ninon’s lineage,” and the audience applauded even more loudly than they had for Lord and Lady Southerby.

“Who is Regent Chandra?” Bond asked Margaret quietly as the second pair stepped off the rear stage for a circuit.
“She’s a trainer from Los Angeles. Ninon trained her.” With a faint sigh, Margaret added, “Ninon only trains one or two slaves a year — out of even my price range, I’m afraid — but Chandra’s are just as good, or so I’ve heard.”

He nodded, feigning interest in the next two slaves, but Number Four set off alarms deep in his subconscious. He sat forward, nerves prickling as he watched, momentarily thrown by the man’s supposedly docile appearance. He was a good four stone heavier than his trainer and three inches taller, reminding Bond of a tiger held on a leash of string.

“Who’s that?” Bond asked, fingers itching for a weapon.

“Regent Ira Lewis. He trains security specialists,” Margaret whispered. “Bodyguards, drivers, security guards, that sort of thing.”

Bond held back the urge to ask how — not how they were trained, but how any of these people could possibly feel safe with a bodyguard who’d been coerced into slavery. And Number Four wasn’t the only one; the slave behind him was also a bodyguard, this one female. What leverage did their trainers have on them? Bond frowned, thinking it had to be a threat to a family member or close friend.

His silence encouraged Margaret to talk to the others at the table, allowing Bond to observe everything in relative peace. He felt distinctly uncomfortable at the sight of a male slave who’d been so tightly trussed in leather straps that he could barely shuffle, though that was better than the man who crawled behind his trainer, hands bound up in fake leather gloves shaped like paws, face obscured behind a canine mask.

By the time the spectacle was nearly complete, Bond was debating finding a way to escape. But then the last slave rose from where he was kneeling, and Bond sat forward, protective instincts roaring to life.

Number Fourteen was slender — possibly unhealthily thin, though it was difficult to tell. Instead of something gaudy or revealing, he wore neat grey pinstripe trousers and a matching waistcoat properly buttoned over a long-sleeved light blue shirt. Instead of a tie, he wore the same thick silver curb chain collar as the other slaves for sale, with a leash attached. His head was bowed, causing a long, dark fringe to fall against his black-rimmed glasses. He was young, barely into his twenties by Bond’s best guess.

His trainer was a short, older man in a perfect dinner suit, though he wore a straight black tie rather than a proper bow tie. To Bond’s surprise, he had a chain collar visible over the tie and shirt collar —

And only then did Bond twist around to look for the nearest waiter to confirm... yes, he was wearing a similar chain, though the pattern of links was slightly different. He closed his eyes, thinking back to the ship’s stewards he’d seen everywhere, during embarkation and the muster drill, every one of them wearing a chain collar.

God, were they all slaves?

It couldn’t be possible. Christ, they outnumbered the guests. Why the hell didn’t they seize the ship? Most of them were roaming free, with access to weapons — silverware, if nothing else.

He turned back in time to watch the last slave walk by. He had his hands behind his back — not bound but simply clasped there, left hand around his right wrist. Bond had to force himself to watch, though every instinct was screaming at him to intervene.
As the thin, dark-haired slave was led to the last empty spot on the round stage, near the back, Philip’s voice announced, “Number Fourteen, presented by Regent Chris Parker on behalf of Tetsuo’s House, from the lineage of Imala Anderson!”

After a startled moment, the crowd began to applaud almost as enthusiastically as they had for Chandra and Number One.

Bond forced himself to applaud, though he couldn’t bring himself to feign proper enthusiasm. Instead, he studied the kneeling slaves, wondering what they were thinking. None of them seemed distressed. Tense, yes — that much was obvious — but none seemed ready to bolt in fear. Rather, they were surrounded by an air of excitement and anticipation.

“Why such enthusiasm?”

“Chris is the founder of the regents.” Margaret eyed Number Fourteen thoughtfully. “He’s definitely not my usual type, but if he really was trained by Chris Parker... Hmm.”

“What would it mean, exactly, to be trained by Chris Parker?” he asked. He shoved away his initial distaste at the thought of ‘training’ the beautiful young man kneeling near the back of the stage.

“Chris has been in the Marketplace for his whole life, practically — well, since he was of age. And he trained with Anderson.” She looked at him, brows raised. When he shook his head, she said, “Oh. Oh, darling, if you like boys at all, go have a talk with him. If Chris brought him out, he’ll be perfect.”

Bond thought about the fact that he would actually have to go through with at least attempting to purchase one of them in order to stay on the ship for the rest of the cruise, though the fact that they’d be auctioned meant he could conveniently lose. “I’ll consider it,” he said — and a part of him was considering it, though solely for the purpose of rescuing the poor boy.

A few audience members had gone up front to examine the slaves or speak with their trainers. Bond found himself staring at Number Fourteen again, wondering what would happen to him after tomorrow night. He expected to be sold; that much was obvious.

Margaret stood, interrupting his thoughts. “Well, I’m not interested in playing coy. Excuse me,” she said, putting her napkin down on the table. She gave Bond a smile and walked right to where Fourteen was kneeling in isolation. As if her open interest was a cue, several others rose and made their way over, attention fixed on Fourteen.

Bond wondered how many of them were interested simply for his body, how many for whatever talents he might have, and how many because of Chris’ reputation. He sat back, watching, waiting for the crowd to thin a little before going up himself. It was with some shock that he realised almost no one was taking to Fourteen himself — they were all directing their questions, attention, and complimentary remarks to his handler. In fact, all Fourteen got were admiring gazes.

Unacceptable, he thought, momentarily stunned by how nonchalant these people were about violating simple human courtesy and respect. He stared at Fourteen for a long moment, furious on his behalf, before his view was finally obscured by the crowds gathered around the other slaves.

Number One had drawn the most attention, with five people clustered near her, though none were actually speaking with her directly — just as with Fourteen. The man wrapped in leather straps was being put through a display routine, held at each pose by small carabiners moved between the D-rings at every joint. Beside him, a sleek-limbed woman knelt, head bowed, while one of the audience lifted her skirt to reveal a soft cock and balls dangling between her legs.
As if this were a signal, the crowd seemed to grow more curious and intense in their examinations. They were touching now or ordering the slaves to stand and move and pose. Their trainers never moved farther away than the leashes would allow, but they obviously weren’t there to protect the slaves from the potential buyers.

Bond’s discomfort grew as the audience’s mask of propriety slipped. A handful of people moved in on Fourteen, blocking him from Bond’s sight, causing alarm to rocket through him. The idea that they could be pinching at him as if he were supermarket fare being tested for ripeness...

Before he could quite explain to himself what he was doing, he was on his feet and striding purposefully towards where the crowd was gathered around Fourteen. When Bond chose to display his displeasure with something, people tended to pay attention — and he had no trouble pushing through the crowd to stare down at Fourteen. He seemed unharmed.

Bond glanced back up at Margaret, who was still there, eavesdropping on the conversations with Chris. “Couldn’t resist after all,” he said in his best authoritative tone.

Margaret smirked at him and patted his arm. “He’s definitely not my type. A shame, really. Can’t hurt to have a quick look at the others, though,” she advised, and left his side to go through the crowd, circling the stage.

Up close, Fourteen looked even younger. Save for a few dark freckles, his skin was flawless and pale, without a hint of stubble at his jaw. With his arms now folded behind his back, his shoulders were drawn out, highlighting the way his chest rose and fell in a quick, light rhythm. He knelt back on his heels with a curious tension, as though any touch, any provocation could cause him to bolt for cover — but only out of surprise, not fear.

“Hello,” Bond said gently.

Quietly, Fourteen said, “Good evening, sir.” To Bond’s surprise, he was British — and educated, judging by his accent.

“What’s your name?” Bond asked, before thinking that it might be some sort of violation of the organisation’s rules.

Still without raising his eyes, Fourteen said, “Q, sir.”

Q? What the hell kind of name was Q? That was no better than a number. It certainly wasn’t any sort of expression of the fragile young man’s individuality.

Feeling sick inside, Bond studied Q’s posture, searching for any hint of fear or pain or even narcotics — any sign of why he was so docile. “Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?” he finally asked.

“Not at all, sir. I would be pleased to answer, if I can.”

“What do you —” Bond hesitated, suddenly realising he had no idea how to politely ask what Q was expected to do, as a slave. With most of the others, it was obvious. Finally, he asked, “What do you do?”

“I’m a computer specialist, sir. Programming, database design and management, network design and security, cryptography —”

“Wait,” Bond interrupted, glancing at the man holding Q’s leash. He was talking to two other potential buyers in low tones. “Network design? What about web design? The internet?”
“Yes, sir.”

Bond stared down at Q’s bowed head, wondering. Had Q’s internet use been carefully monitored? Had he been on a restricted network? Why wouldn’t he have sent a message for help?

One of the other passengers approached, and Bond moved to block his access to Q. He thought fast; he needed to express his interest as a potential buyer, not a rescuer. *Stay on mission*, he told himself.

“I often work remotely,” Bond said quietly, wishing Q would look up at him or react in some way. He hadn’t moved, though, reminding Bond uncomfortably of the self-discipline required for a military inspection. “It’s difficult to ensure a secure, encrypted connection to the office. What could you do to assist with that?”

“I’m adept with all commercial grade encryption, sir, but my own private methods are far more secure,” he said confidently. “All I’d need is to deploy the proper software and data transfer system, and any device on the network with my app would not only communicate with full encryption but would be itself encrypted. Unfortunately, it would require connectivity to the network to decrypt, so there wouldn’t be any offline use. However, most people find that security is a small price to pay for the inconvenience, sir.”

Bond smiled at the self-assured tone of Q’s voice. Apparently he wasn’t completely broken — and that was very, very reassuring. “So you’ve been doing this for a while, then?”

“All my life, sir.”

“And in the Marketplace?” Bond asked more carefully. He wanted to give Q the opportunity to reveal any sort of information that could help Bond uncover his true identity.

“My first sale was seven years ago, sir.”

“Seven —” Bond cut off, reaching thoughtlessly for Q’s face. At the first touch of fingertips, Q allowed Bond to lift his chin, though he kept his eyes cast down.

Up close, he was even more beautiful, with high cheekbones and dark, expressive lips. When Bond’s thumb slipped over smooth, soft skin, Q’s eyes closed, and he pressed into Bond’s hand with a subtle tilt of his head.

The spike of arousal that shot through Bond’s body was at terrible odds with his inner horror. Seven years? Q couldn’t be older than twenty-five, if that.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty-eight, sir.”

Twenty-eight. Seven years in the Marketplace, with how many more years to prepare him for this sort of controlled, disciplined behaviour? How many years of training, subjugation, and brainwashing did it take to reshape a person into this sort of calm, complete surrender? Call it between two and five years, which meant Q had been taken as a teenager.

A decade or more. It was a deeply uncomfortable thought. No wonder he’d been trusted with access to computers. Bond looked past Q to the bodyguards, both dressed in tight spandex shorts and sleeveless shirts to better show off their muscular bodies. He thought about things he’d heard and encountered in the field — rumours of training programs designed to break soldiers and reshape them into mindless, obedient killing machines.
He looked back down at Q, reminding himself that he couldn’t save all of them — not yet. But Q... He looked so fragile, so young despite his age. Where had he been before his training? Had he grown up with a loving family that missed him? Had he been taken from the streets, perhaps after trying to sell his body to the wrong person?

Bond’s hand slipped back to touch Q’s hair, and Q bowed his head as he leaned subtly forward as though seeking the comfort of Bond’s touch. The silver chain leash swung forward, and the man holding the other end of it glanced over, attention drawn by the movement.

Every instinct screamed for Bond to take Q and escape. He mapped out exactly how it would happen, how he’d unsnap the leash and incapacitate — hopefully kill — the man holding the other end, how he’d pull Q against him and run for the nearest exit. The ship was hugging the coastline north of Portland; Bond was an accomplished swimmer. He could easily make it to shore despite the chill of the North Pacific waters.

Stay on mission.

Frustrated, he let his hand drop. Q eased back into his perfectly disciplined posture. He looked so small, so vulnerable.

“Will you stand?” Bond asked him.

With a soft, “Yes, sir,” Q rose, never once moving his arms from behind his back. He just leaned forward and stood with the kind of grace Bond hadn’t seen outside of Japan, where sitting or kneeling at a low table was still common in some places.

His head was still bowed, however, and his long, beautifully messy hair hid his eyes, making Bond frown a little. Very slowly and gently, so as not to frighten or startle Q, Bond brought his hand up to tap under Q’s chin.

Immediately, Q lifted his face, though he didn’t raise his eyes more than necessary. Bond must have imagined the way Q’s breath caught, and he couldn’t help but run a thumb reverently along the edge of Q’s jaw, just for a second. Q’s eyes closed too long for it to be a blink; otherwise, he went perfectly still, not even breathing.

Regretfully, Bond pulled his hand away, and Q leaned forward just a bit, as though chasing the touch. No power in the world could have stopped Bond from giving Q what he wanted for just a moment longer. He gently stroked Q’s cheek, watching with delight as Q pressed against his hand. Q’s eyes were hazel, Bond saw in the instant before they closed again.

Bond decided that it wouldn’t be wise to let a talented hacker get bought by the sort of vile character who would actually want to purchase a slave. He had plenty of cash in the account attached to his suite’s keycard, and he could transfer more from his other personal accounts. Whatever kind of trouble Q was in, Bond could get him out.

Bond finally stepped back, nodding with what he hoped was assurance. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Q,” he promised.

“I look forward to it, sir.” The words might have been a formula, a meaningless courtesy he’d been trained to repeat, but Bond was too experienced a liar not to hear something genuine in the way his voice broke.

Bond turned to leave, unwilling to watch as the other ‘guests’ started their own interrogations. At least Q was standing this time, so he wouldn’t have to look up at anyone.
Q steadied his breath and tried to find his inner calm, but his heart kept skipping at the memory of the British man’s touch. The man had driven away the other potential buyers for the moment, which meant Q could take advantage of the lull in interest. Deferentially, he lowered his head and closed his eyes; that much was permitted, though his posture was otherwise dictated by tradition. The darkness helped, though not as much as he’d hoped.

“Breathe,” Chris said suddenly, standing unexpectedly close, and Q nearly flinched. A small, strong hand clasped the back of Q’s neck for a moment, helping to ground him.

As the seconds ticked by, Q’s racing heart slowed. There was no rational reason for him to be so rattled by a buyer’s interest. He had no illusions about finding romance in slavery; it was the service itself that he craved, not the specifics of the person who commanded him. He was afraid he’d be sold to someone who wouldn’t use him for his expertise — that he might end up purchased for sex or domestic work and never touch a computer except during his contract-specified hours. Thankfully, that hadn’t happened with his past two owners, but that didn’t make him any less nervous.

Before his first auction, a small affair with only four slaves and thirty-three potential buyers, he’d spent hours talking to his first trainer about the paralysing fear, but he hadn’t understood it until he’d actually stood on the display table. Because of his stubborn, desperate desire to be owned, he hadn’t lost his nerve and run, and his resolve had paid off. His low minimum bid had been met, and he’d been bought and used, tentatively at first, and then with greater trust. But most of the work had to do with maintaining a website, and that was the sort of thing any college student could handle. He’d declined a contract renewal and gone back to the auction block.

The second time had been even harder — a massive auction held outdoors, at a French countryside farmhouse under the hot evening sun. He hadn’t ended up sunburnt, but the crowd of owners testing him left him dizzy and overwhelmed, sunk so far into himself that he hardly knew what commands he was obeying. His second owner, a man from Texas, had been a coldly logical businessman who’d made Q his senior IT department manager. Then he’d casually pointed at the IT department and ordered him to ‘fix that fucking mess’. The challenge had been everything Q had ever wanted, complete with a contract renewal for another two years. But he’d done his task too well, and his admittedly expensive contract hadn’t been renewed again once he had a successor trained.

This was his third auction, his third time on display. Each time it was terrifying, though this had to be the worst. Most auctions lasted only a handful of hours; this one wouldn’t be over until late tomorrow night, cruelly prolonging the anxiety even the most experienced slaves felt. Tomorrow during the day would be a bit better; he’d be interviewed at the ship’s computer centre, and while one of the buyers could do or ask anything, Q anticipated most of tomorrow to be focused around his computer skills. Tomorrow night, though, he’d be back on display, and the buyers would be caught up in a bidding frenzy.

“Stop,” Chris ordered, his voice sharp but low.

Q opened his eyes in surprise, his serenity shattered for a moment before he recognised what he was doing to himself. There was no sense in thinking ahead. He only needed to concentrate on right now, and not on the possible buyer who had left.

Slowly, he began to relax. He bowed his head just enough that he could lower his eyes and look
down at his feet, rather than scanning the room.

He breathed as Chris had taught him, letting his mind drift into a state that had taken him weeks to master, leaving him aware enough to recognise commands without actually paying attention to his surroundings. His place here was simple: Until he was directly addressed or commanded, his only duty was to hold his position.

Subtle shifts of his muscles kept his spine supple. He breathed and felt each beat of his heart. By the time the next buyer approached, he was centred and at peace once more.
Day Two

According to the day’s schedule of events, the slaves for sale by the regents were available for interviews at various locations throughout the ship. There was no mention of other slaves, though surely there had to be some. Bond couldn’t imagine that fourteen people, no matter how talented or beautiful, would make this cruise worth the effort. Too much risk of being discovered.

Fourteen — Q — was scheduled to spend much of the day at the computer centre aft of the atrium, on the same level as Bond’s suite. Before going to speak with him, though, Bond needed whatever information MI6 could provide.

One of the most discreet, clever pieces of TSS-issued gear was a compact satellite transceiver concealed in a small umbrella. Before breakfast, Bond went out onto his tiny balcony, tied off the transceiver to the railing using a small luggage strap, and hooked up the modem. The balcony was entirely private, but he’d still remember to put the transceiver away later, to hide it from room service.

Because of the potential for intermittent communications failures, Bond’s mission was given high priority for TSS comms techs. Despite how grainy and stuttered the video connection was, Bond was pleased to see mahogany skin, dark brown eyes, short-cropped hair, and a very familiar grin. TJ was one of the youngest techs in TSS, and perhaps the most capable.

“007. Didn’t expect you to check in so soon. Everything all right?” TJ asked, twisting to the side so he could lean back in his desk chair and prop up his feet, as was his habit.

Bond nodded. “How are you coming along with cracking into the Marketplace’s security?”

TJ’s smile disappeared. “Buggering bastards —”

“I see,” Bond interrupted with a sigh. He looked out at the dark blue water, the wave-tips turned silver by the cool early morning sun. “All right. I need intel on someone.”

TJ sat up, fingers poised over the keyboard. After a couple of keystrokes, he said, “Ready.”

“White British male, age twenty-eight, but could be up to ten years younger. My height, very slender build. Dark hair, hazel eyes.”

“Name?”

Bond huffed in frustration. “Q.”

TJ stopped typing and stared at the camera, wide-eyed. “Q? The Q?”

Baffled, Bond said, “Whoever you think he is, you’re wrong. You couldn’t possibly know him.”

TJ frowned in confusion, but gestured for Bond to continue. “All right, what else have you got?”

“He probably went missing in his late teens. Well-educated. Check arrest records,” Bond added reluctantly.

TJ typed a bit before raising his brows at the camera. “Thin, average height, dark-haired, white male, looks young. You’ve just described half the rent boys in London.”
If Q had been taken from London, others might have as well. The MOD munitions sales, two peers openly fronting the Marketplace, victims swept off the streets of London ten or fifteen years ago... Christ, just how far did this network reach?

“Computers,” Bond said, focusing back on TJ. “Encryption, especially. That’s maths —”

“Wait — are we back to my Q?” TJ interrupted.

Irritated, Bond asked, “Who is your Q?”

“He doesn’t exist. He’s a bloody legend among coders. He’s worked on a dozen open source programs — including an encryption routine we modified here, for in-house use, though the mods were just the packaging. His code is elegant. It’s gorgeous.” Leaning forward in his excitement, eyes bright, TJ added, “Some people don’t even think ‘Q’ is real. There are rumours that he’s Deep Blue’s next generation or the Cray Titan or that he’s a collective of bloody PhDs and programmers.”

Bond went cold inside. The Marketplace had security that even TSS couldn’t crack. TJ’s mystery programmer, ‘Q’, was a specialist in encryption. Slave Fourteen, who called himself ‘Q’, claimed to be a specialist not just in encryption but in network security.

Hackers tended not to be the loyalist sort in his experience — they did what they wanted, when they wanted. Even if Q himself were basically good, what was to say he hadn’t been under the thumb of less kind individuals? Would Q have used his abilities to wreak war and havoc?

Christ, the thought was terrifying. With Q’s skillset, he could do irreparable damage. Would he, though? Where were the limits of a Marketplace slave’s obedience when it came to acts of violence or terror? Until he had a chance to interview Q, to really get into his head and learn how he thought, Bond had no way to know.

First, he needed to find a way to get close to Q. “What else?” he asked tightly.

“What else what?” TJ asked blankly.

“Tell me more about your Q.”

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“What networking programming protocols are you most familiar with?”

Q hid a sigh — was every interview the same? — and answered, “Most of my recent work has been in Java and Java 2, Oracle, Netflow, Solar Winds, and Cisco Nexus. More broadly, I’m an expert in Unix, Linux, .NET, SQL, phpMyAdmin, and Peoplesoft. Even if I’m not familiar with any particular tools you would like to use, I’m capable of becoming thoroughly proficient with them, given a few days of uninterrupted access.”

He’d gone through this litany a dozen times or more since he’d been brought to the computer centre. He hadn’t expected this much interest in what really was a very specialised skillset, but Chris had, of course, been right. These interviews reassured him that there was a good chance he’d be bought for his skills and not just his physical appeal.

Of course, it helped that the day’s interviews were actually at the computer centre and not in a sales
showroom. And it helped that Q was once again dressed much as he’d been last night, though without the waistcoat. He was still leashed — apparently traditional for a regents’ sale — but otherwise he could have been an IT professional at a job interview.

As he spoke, the woman took quick notes on a BlackBerry, never actually meeting his eyes. She wasn’t a slave, as far as Q could tell; apparently she just couldn’t touch-type on a small keyboard. “What about network security?” she asked.

“Firewalls of all kinds, especially PIX. Intrusion detection. Though I’m familiar with vulnerability scanning systems and security analysis utilities —”

He faltered for a moment as motion behind the woman drew his awareness away from her. A man stood there, handsome and broad-shouldered, with captivating eyes like chips of pale blue ice. Q swallowed as if his throat were dry, an unconscionable lapse that would’ve got him beaten with a crop had they been anywhere but in front of a potential buyer.

He struggled to focus, finishing, “— like Snort, TCPDUMP, and WireShark, I find that programs of my own creation are much more effective.”

*Shark,* he thought, failing to entirely push the man’s presence out of his mind. There was something intense, predatory, destructive about him... Q knew he should be paying attention to the interview — the questions seemed to promise the sort of work on which he thrived.

As if determined to make Q’s life more difficult, Ice Eyes walked up to stand beside Q’s questioner. Unable to ignore the man, Q accepted his presence instead, pretending that he was the one doing the questioning.

Almost immediately, Q felt the tension slip away, bringing clarity and focus to his thoughts. The woman continued asking and Q answered, feeling cold blue eyes on him like a physical touch. He’d never responded to an owner this way before; his focus had always been the service, not the person he served, but now, he couldn’t push the man out of his mind.

“How do you feel about working in a team environment?” the woman asked.

Q blinked at her and repressed his immediate urge to ask if she was an idiot. He blamed the mental lapse entirely on the blue eyes at her shoulder, eyes that were full of a sort of dark humour now, as if the man felt the same way about that question as Q did.

“I will of course work in whatever role is required, solitary or as part of a team. I can provide leadership and guidance to a competent staff, or work under another’s direction. I work most efficiently on critical projects when given the time and freedom to concentrate without bureaucratic interruption.”

She had no reaction to what was most likely a sharper, more independent answer than was strictly necessary. The problem, of course, was that service and the freedom to create proper code didn’t mix. Creation required freedom, and Q’s process often involved long stretches of doing nothing but staring at a blank screen, interspersed between bursts of furious typing or occasionally scribbling notes on a whiteboard, especially for a high-pressure project.

“Are you equally as comfortable with hardware support as software?”

“I have yet to run into a piece of hardware that I haven’t been able to immediately reverse-engineer and reconstruct with improved functionality. I’ve modified intrinsically safe toughbooks for use in explosive environments, designed and —”
Finally, the blue-eyed man interrupted Q in mid-answer, silencing him more effectively than a slap: “While I’m certain this is fascinating to someone, you’ve had more than your share of time here,” he told Q’s interviewer in a voice that Q only now recognised from the lounge last night. He hadn’t lifted his eyes enough to see the British man who’d been the first buyer to approach him.

God, he was bloody gorgeous.

The woman looked over at the British man in surprise, and Q wondered if the two of them were going to break into an argument. Then Chris smoothed over the awkward moment. “I would be pleased to answer any questions, madam,” he interrupted deferentially, moving up to the woman’s side.

After a moment, she nodded. “Show me his records.”

With another deferential nod, Chris wrapped the end of the leash around Q’s left wrist to keep it from dragging on the floor. It wouldn’t interfere with his typing, though it felt awkward all the same. Then Chris turned away and led the woman to another computer station, where Chris used his Marketplace credentials to pull up Q’s detailed service record.

In seven years of service, Q had spent more time seated at a computer than on his knees. He’d never felt uncomfortable with that until now, with his instincts screaming at him to drop in front of this man. He’d worked hard at learning to maintain his composure under the most trying circumstances, but this man completely disarmed him. It was like being a novice all over again, half-trained and terrified that at any moment he’d make some mistake that would get him blacklisted from the Marketplace.

At first, the man seemed content to stare at Q. It was unusual for him, given the more cerebral nature of his service, but not so unfamiliar that he couldn’t find a measure of serenity in it. All that was expected was for him to be seen, and he found this sort of surrender easier than speculating about this man’s interest.

“He’s your most recent trainer, then? Parker?”

“Yes, sir,” Q answered. Because he didn’t get a nod in response — a nod being an indication, as Chris had taught, that his answer had been sufficient — Q added, “I completed four months of training with Chris at Master Tetsuo’s house in Kobe, followed by six weeks of finishing work under both Chris and Master Anderson in New York.”

“That’s very... extensive.” The man’s eyes flicked down to take in Q’s body, but quickly returned to his face. “But you were trained before?”

“Yes, sir. Prior to my first sale, I trained for eight weeks with Ethan Harrison. He retired soon after, and I spent another eight weeks with his successor, Melanie Harrison, before my second sale.”

“Why six months this time?”

Q tried not to smile; obviously, this man was new to the Marketplace, or he wouldn’t ask. “Both Master Tetsuo and Master Anderson train to rigorous standards, sir. The typical minimum training required before either will certify a slave is six months.” Modestly, he left it at that, though he found himself hoping the man would do the math and notice that Q had beat that six-month figure.

The man shook his head slightly; Q had to stop himself from staring at the gold highlights in his blond hair. “That’s... very dedicated,” he said a bit uncomfortably.

Allowing himself a very faint smile, Q studied the man closely, wondering how to best make him
feel more at ease. The tone of their encounter felt more conversational than ritualised, so Q pushed his boundaries a bit further, asking, “What sort of sales are you in, sir?”

The man’s blink betrayed his surprise. “International sales,” he said after a hesitation that felt like it lasted a moment too long.

A corner of Q’s mind wondered what he sold; the rest of him was too busy panicking to ask. He fought to keep his expression perfectly neutral, suddenly not wanting this man to buy him or even bid on him. The words ‘international sales’ seemed full of intercontinental flights, and though Q would never admit it to anyone, he’d been hoping to find an owner from England so he could avoid ever having to go near a plane again. So much for thinking that this owner would be ideal for him.

“That worries you,” the man said softly, interrupting Q’s thoughts. “Why?”

Startled, Q mentally examined his behaviour, his posture, anything that could have given away his fears, but there was nothing — not even the subtlest clue, as far as he could determine. So how had this man so accurately picked out what he was thinking?

Oh, hell. Was he one of Anderson’s or Chris’ old trainees? After retiring from service, a few slaves stayed in the Marketplace as owners. Every interview at an auction was a test of a slave’s training, but had this been something more intricate? Had he been sent by Anderson to test Chris’ training methods, or even Q himself?

Refusing to let panic get the best of him, he answered, “Fear of flying, sir.” It galled him to have to admit to the failure, but Chris had emphasised the need for honesty and full disclosure with a prospective owner. Most wouldn’t let a slave’s irrational fear affect their purchase decision. Those who would, in Chris’ opinion, weren’t true owners, and Q was better off without their interest.

The man frowned, his gaze going distant. Lost in thought, he stepped back, glancing out the window. Almost immediately, another potential buyer took his place, forcing Q to shift his attention. He bowed his head, leash rattling gently, and tried to concentrate on answering questions.

The next time he had a chance to look up, the British man was gone.

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“Hello?”

Bond let out a relieved sigh and glared at the black ‘No Video’ screen on his laptop. “TJ. It’s 007. Sorry to catch you at home,” he lied politely. In his distraction, Bond had forgot to account for time zones, and he’d had to pull rank on the TSS night staff to get them to patch him through to TJ’s home phone.

Baffled, TJ said, “Oh. It’s... it’s fine. Let me —” Bond heard a door close. “Okay, I’m alone. What’s up?”

“I have a list of skills for you. I need to know if these fit in with what you know about Q. Ready?”

“Uh, sure. But you know —”

Uninterested in the disclaimer, Bond rattled off what he’d heard while eavesdropping on several
interviews before he’d taken his turn. He was no slouch with computers — no modern field agent could afford such a weakness — but he’d never even heard of three-quarters of what Q had discussed.

“Oh, god, Bond. Yeah,” TJ finally said, his voice soft. “Yeah, that sounds like him. Do you have anything else I can use to confirm?”

“I’ve reviewed his CV, though I don’t know how much of it is believable. He started at MIT in 1997 and supposedly graduated from the California Institute of Technology with a PhD in 2002. The PhD is in Control and Dynamical Systems, if that makes sense.”

“I’m” — TJ cut off with a nervous swallow — “I’m searching for records, but... yeah, Bond. That’s my Q. I mean, the one I’ve heard of. God. Tell me he’s not a part of the trafficking ring.”

Bond’s gut twisted at the thought of Q being complicit in human trafficking. Bad enough he was a victim; had he been forced to help them? Bond shook his head, even though TJ couldn’t see him, and tried to think optimistically. Q could be useful to TSS, even as a consultant, and Bond didn’t want him to have to openly carry the stigma of what had happened to him over the past decade or more.

“No, he’s not. Email me whatever you find out. Sorry to interrupt your evening.” He disconnected and leaned back with a little shiver, looking out at the darkening eastern sky.

As a senior operative, Bond had a great deal of discretion when it came to the completion of his mission. He could cross international borders, operate in allied territory, and generally draw on the resources of MI6 without gaining prior approval. And as a Double O, he was authorised to use lethal force — anything and everything necessary to complete his mission.

He lit a cigarette and leaned forward, reestablishing the connection to MI6. Q was either an asset that needed to be rescued from enemy custody or — and he barely allowed himself to think it — a threat to be eliminated. He needed to determine which, and that meant that he’d need to get M’s authorisation for something he’d never imagined doing in service to England: He needed to buy a slave.

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“You’re bidding tonight, correct?” Margaret asked as she and Bond approached the main dining room.

He nodded, wishing he’d eaten more lightly at dinner. He was nervous in a way that rarely happened on a mission, when he had a clear objective that could usually be achieved through the tactical application of violent, decisive methods. Here, though, he could fail simply from a bidding error. Well, if he did fail, he’d have to find another way. He couldn’t allow Q to stay in enemy hands.

A uniformed steward, not wearing a collar, directed Bond to a conference table with computers, racks of iPads, and smartly dressed clerks. A calligraphed placard on the table read Bidders. There, Bond was asked to fill out a financial form, including his credit card or banking information.

After running a credit check, the attendant at the table — not a slave, Bond noticed, or else one who was hiding his collar — quickly walked Bond through the bidding process. The bidding was by silent auction, with bids entered on iPads. He issued one to Bond and showed him how to access the
Marketplace records for each slave, how to check bids, and how to enter a bid of his own. The timer in the upper right corner counted down to the close of bidding, currently displaying just over two hours and twenty minutes.

Bond turned away from the table, looking for Margaret as he walked farther into the dining room. The small chandeliers were dimmed except for bright pools of light along three sides of the room. Bond’s steps naturally took him towards the nearest spotlight, aimed down at a small display platform, three feet high.

The woman there was perhaps the most beautiful he’d ever seen, and he forgot his mission entirely as he stared at her. She wore nothing but a silver chain collar, the ends joined at the base of her throat by an open lock with a key hanging from it. She knelt with her knees spread, hands clasped behind her back. Her head was bowed, pale blonde hair hanging in soft, shiny waves over her shoulders. It took an unforgivably long time for him to recognise her as Number One, the very first slave he’d seen last night.

Immediately, Bond forgot about finding Margaret. He turned, thinking if Number One was here, then Number Fourteen was... there.

Tucking the iPad under his arm, he crossed the room, thinking only that he needed to get eyes on his asset, to assure himself that Q was safe. He told himself firmly that his asset’s condition was all that mattered.

Still, the bright light spilling from the ceiling froze Bond in his tracks as it turned Q’s pale skin ethereal. Q wore nothing but his collar — not even his glasses — and he looked young and vulnerable. His long limbs and thin frame made him seem much smaller, like some fragile, fey creature that belonged hidden in the forest, not here on garish display.

Every instinct was screaming for Bond to get Q out of there — to pull him down from the display pedestal, wrap that slender body in his dinner jacket, and get him to the relative safety of the suite, by force if necessary. Of everyone in the room, only the two security-trained slaves might actually give Bond a good run, unarmed as he was.

The mission took precedence. Bond had been trained and then overtrained, and as much as he broke the rules all too often, he wouldn’t risk failure. He was to attempt to purchase Q, not kidnap him.

The mission had to come first.

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When Q had first heard about the format of the regents’ auction, he’d thought it a mercy that the sale was stretched over twenty-four hours, rather than happening all in one adrenaline-fuelled rush. He’d been nervous last night, but really, it hadn’t been bad at all. The display in the ship’s lounge had been surprisingly subdued. Only the truly exotic slaves had been subject to more than talk; really, that sort of showmanship was at the core of their desire to serve.

After the viewing, the excitement level in the barracks had been electric. The fourteen of them had been temporarily housed in a pair of crew bunkrooms at the end of a hall, and they’d spent much of the night in relaxed conversation, away from the eyes of their trainers and the prospective buyers.

Today had gone perfectly; Q had answered every question with just the right mix of deference and
confidence. Later, he and the other slaves had eaten a light dinner in the crew galley, followed by a visit to the spa. There, a masseuse had worked every muscle into blissful relaxation, and as he’d sat in the chair having his hair and nails trimmed to Chris’ exacting specifications, he’d been nearly high on the thought that he’d earn himself a truly spectacular contract.

But that evening, as soon as he’d knelt on the display platform in preparation for the auction, the old fear crept back into him. He shivered despite the warmth of the room and tried to remember the little details of training that separated an experienced slave from a regent-trained one, small comfort though that was.

The platform was under its own spotlight. There would be no more civilised, quiet browsing. The buyers would walk around him, see every inch of him, be free to touch him as they chose. No longer confined to the professional atmosphere of the computer centre, they would ask him personal questions about his experience, his fears, his service. If they chose, they could call for the ship’s staff to bring whips or paddles to watch how his skin showed marks of punishment, and they might want him to be silent or might want to hear him scream and they might not tell him which at all, forcing him to guess. They might ignore him for a time, or they might circle like hungry lions.

Q’s heart skipped and thumped hard against his ribs. He resisted the urge to clench his fists. God, what he wouldn’t do to have a keyboard under his hands.

Any hint of vulnerability would draw them in, and Chris, damn him, knew that full well. At the salon, the barber had shaved his face again, though he’d shaved himself just that morning. Without the shadow of a beard, Q knew he looked younger, more fragile. His long hair just enhanced that impression, stripping more than a decade off his apparent age.

Clothed, he would have looked more like the hacker he’d once been than the IT professional he’d become. Naked except for his collar, he looked like he’d been crafted to endure pain or pleasure, to be used at an owner’s whim. To be despoiled.

Chris’ small, strong hand cupped the back of his neck. The hard press of his fingers calmed Q immediately. “I expect you to be perfect,” Chris said, his voice too soft for anyone else to hear the razor-edged menace that made Q shiver. “You will not disappoint my master’s House in front of the other regents, and you will not disappoint me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Chris,” Q said, trying to keep his voice soft and controlled.

Chris slipped his fingers under Q’s collar. He lifted the chain as though adjusting it, but when the front of the chain was high under Q’s jaw, Chris twisted it, tightening it hard enough to make Q gasp. For one moment, fear surged into him, an adrenaline tide that urged him to run. Blood pounded in his ears. His exhale was a thin wheeze. Blood flushed under his skin, heating his face and chest. His hands clenched tighter, though he couldn’t quite bring himself to break training and move.

Then, like a switch had been tripped, he surrendered, and the fear drained away like fog in hot sunlight. He felt his chaotic thoughts settle. He felt his body ease into the submissive posture Chris had demanded for his initial display. Q had chosen this; he’d signed the sale contract months ago, when Chris had first accepted him for training. He was a slave, not an animal. He could control his fear, ride it, use it.

Chris’ hand relaxed. When he smoothed the collar back into place at the base of Q’s throat, Q shivered and leaned into the touch. “Very good,” Chris said warmly, touching his fingertips to Q’s face.

Q turned into the touch and blinked. “Thank you, Chris.”
Chris stroked the back of his hand over Q’s cheek before making a minute adjustment to his hair. Beyond him, Q saw the doors open. Though everything was blurry without his glasses, he saw the stark black of dinner suits and jewel tones of evening gowns as the buyers walked in.

Chris stepped out of the way, taking position behind the display platform, and quietly said, “Don’t thank me, Q. You’re ready for this. All that’s left is for you to do is to be perfect.”

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Without entering a primary bid, Bond watched as the bidding on Q crawled up in minute increments over the next ninety-odd minutes. Bond found himself a seat at one of the tables where he could watch Q and review the complicated slave contract that Q had supposedly agreed to follow.

The first part was supposedly a standard Marketplace contract. In meticulous detail, it outlined minimal standards for both parties — everything from the owner’s responsibility to provide medical insurance and twice-yearly physicals to the slave’s absolute obedience to anything not specifically forbidden by the contract.

He glanced at Q; he hadn’t moved at all as far as Bond could tell. Only one woman was standing near him, paying more attention to her iPad than to Q himself. Bond switched back to the bidding screen and saw another bid had been added, with the minimum increase necessary.

He switched back to the contract, paging to the addendum specific to Fourteen. Q’s additions took up less than one screen and mostly had to do with the specifics of his continuing education and skill with computers. Ten hours a week of computer and internet access, minimum two-hour blocks. Minimum six university credits per year, specifics open to negotiation. Five-year contract. Glasses rather than contact lenses. No permanent body markings without separate negotiation, including piercings, tattoos, scarification, and brands.

He cast another glance at Q, who’d now attracted the attention of three bidders. Only one of them was regarding Q with the sort of proprietary desire that indicated possible competition in the bidding. The man was young, in his mid-to-late twenties, with shoulder-length black hair, carefully trimmed five o’clock shadow, and arresting green eyes. But he wasn’t attempting to touch Q, so Bond looked back down at the iPad.

No enquiry permitted into his name; contractually, he was ‘Q’, save for the purpose of travel requiring a passport or health certificates, all of which would be provided under an acceptable alternate name. Bond considered the possibility of criminal computer-based activity. Were there arrest warrants issued in Q’s real name? That didn’t necessarily preclude Q’s usefulness to MI6, but it could be a nuisance to clear up. Except for the business with his name — and, well, the nature of the contract itself — none of this sounded particularly like a threat to England. That, at least, was a relief.

A loud, sharp crack made Bond look up, hand twitching towards the gun he wasn’t carrying. Q was kneeling up off his heels, hands clasped behind his bowed head. Another crack made Q’s whole body jerk violently forward, though he didn’t fall or move his hands.

Bond was on his feet in an instant. He got two steps, adrenaline screaming through him, before his conscious mind took over, reminding him that this was expected. He clenched his fists and forced himself to watch as Q’s trainer, Chris, brought a riding crop hard across Q’s back a third time.
Then Chris handed the riding crop to a steward, possibly saving his own life.

All but trembling with the need to kill, Bond went back to his table, snatched up his iPad, and walked right to Q’s display platform. The whipping had attracted attention. Other buyers were drifting over, watching with interest as Q rose to his feet, hands still clasped behind his head. Bond moved to the side of the platform and saw three distinct marks in dark, angry red, across his shoulders, buttocks, and thighs.

As Bond watched, Green Eyes reached out, running a hand up the back of Q’s leg. His fingers pressed in on the welt across his thighs. Q’s muscles tensed, but he didn’t flinch away. Bond slipped through the growing crowd, resisting the urge to break the young man’s arm.

*Focus on the bidding*, he told himself, and forced himself to go back to the table. He sat down and tapped the iPad to open the financials for Number Fourteen.

He wasn’t entirely shocked to see the latest bid was nearly double what it had been earlier. As he watched, the number cycled even higher. He looked back at the platform, forcing himself to study the bidders instead of Fourteen. Immediately, Bond was able to identify three of the most intent bidders, though he guessed only the dark-haired, green-eyed man would be a problem.

For a few minutes, he allowed himself to get caught up in the numbers — one eye on the bids, one on the countdown clock. He hadn’t entered a bid himself, but he still waited, getting a feel for the rhythm of the bidding. The increments were increasing, though not out of control. Not yet.

Smiling to himself, Bond entered a substantially higher bid, far exceeding the pattern of increments so far. Then, he waited, counting out the seconds.

Nearly a minute passed before someone entered a cautious raise, at the same increment as earlier. Bond responded aggressively, appreciating the freedom to act without concern for budget.

The next raise was more aggressive. Bond let it pass and watched as the follow-up bid was, again, conservative.

He answered that bid with one that nearly crossed from aggressive to outrageous, hoping to eliminate the more casual bidders — if any were left, at these numbers. Then again, a glance around the room proved that many of these people had more than enough money to spare. Conscience aside, the bidding for Q could be looked at as a business investment if he was put to work for his computer expertise in addition to whatever else he might offer as a slave.

Bond’s breath caught as his mind immediately supplied more than a few images of that ‘else’.

He pushed the thoughts aside and checked the bidding; he’d been outbid again. Three minutes to go, and he guessed that there were no more than a handful of serious bidders in competition. Wary of sniping, Bond began bidding recklessly, typing as quickly as he could without risking error. He jumped the bid high enough that there was no immediate response.

Two minutes.

He sat back casually, watching the thinning crowd around Q’s display platform out of the corner of his eye. His fingers itched to take action — decisive physical action — against the two bidders he identified, but he held back. It would be counterproductive to get thrown off the ship for acts of violence.

He entered another outrageously high bid, feeling a touch of anxiety.
One minute.

Three more times, his bid was topped.

Each time, he added far more than the minimum required bid. Motion made him glance up to see one of the determined bidders walk away, apparently defeated.

Thirty seconds.

The world narrowed down to the clarity he felt when someone was shooting at him. Instead of calculating line of sight and the path to cover, he tried to lose himself in the numbers, thinking wryly that Q would be far better at this, given what little Bond had understood from his education and experience.

At twenty seconds, he entered another high bid.

He felt eyes on him and looked up, automatically searching out the competition at Q’s platform.

It was Green Eyes, now staring at Bond, rather than Q. Deliberately, the man looked down long enough to enter another bid.

Without hesitation, Bond topped it and met the man’s eyes again. Thoughtfully, Green Eyes studied the iPad, before he gave Bond a little smile. Then, deliberately, he lowered the tablet and walked away.

*Time.*
Day Two

When the lights came up, all the tension left Q’s body. He felt the ache of holding position and the sting of the welts, but it was done. Over. Either his minimum bid had been met and he was owned, or he’d try to find another trainer.

He knew, though, that he wouldn’t need another trainer.

The bidders hadn’t risked letting him see the computers they used. Slaves weren’t told their sale prices. Q actually had a bank account through the Marketplace with his share of his previous three contracts, and had no idea how much was in it. Strange to think that the Marketplace servers were the only ones he’d never considered hacking, even though he knew they’d never catch him if he tried.

The interest in the last half hour had been high, though — higher still after one of the bidders had asked Chris to demonstrate how well his skin held marks. From that point, everything had passed in a daze, until Chris ordered him to turn and step down from the platform. He stepped down as gracefully as he could on shaky legs, glad that one of the stewards had brought over a stepladder. At Chris’ signal, he lowered his hands and crossed his wrists behind his back, subtly stretching his tense shoulders.

He had no idea how this auction worked, but every auction was different. He’d expected to be held at the platform until his new owner came to lock the collar, but no one else was nearby — only Chris, who snapped the leash in place and led him away from the platform. For a moment, Q panicked, thinking he hadn’t been sold after all. Then he saw that all the slaves were being led out of the room.

They went aft through the atrium that pierced the ship with two grand twisting staircases, and farther back to the main galley. Only a few shipboard slaves remained there, cleaning up after dinner.

As soon as the galley doors swung closed, Chris told Q, “Relax.”

Q let his hands drop to his sides and flexed them, tensing and relaxing the muscles in his arms, up to his shoulders, and through his body. Chris offered him his glasses, taken from the case in Chris’ dinner jacket. Gratefully, Q put them on, and then accepted the bottle of water Chris handed him in silence.

He wanted to ask what Chris thought of the sale or when he’d find out who now owned him, but he kept silent. A few of the other slaves were talking quietly to their trainers, but most were coming down from the tension of being on display. Freed from formal restrictions, Q finished the water, left the bottle on a workbench to be collected, and knelt on the floor beside Chris, careful not to catch on the leash. Chris’ hand found his hair, gently petting him, helping him relax further.

It was over.

Still, a hint of uncertainty stayed with him. When someone approached, a woman in black kitten heels and a knee-length black skirt, he closed his eyes and tried not to visibly brace against the order to take him back to the barracks because his minimum bid hadn’t been met. It was ridiculous, he knew, but emotional reactions had little to do with logic.
“If you’ll check that everything is in order, sir?” she asked.

Q tensed before he remembered he wasn’t under formal orders. He looked up to see Chris now holding an iPad. His heart started to race as Chris tapped the screen. This had to be the electronic equivalent of Chris signing to release Q’s contract to his new owner.

“It looks —” Chris began, and then cut off, a momentary expression of unguarded shock crossing his face. Q’s breath caught; his throat went tight. “Verify the accuracy,” Chris ordered, handing the iPad back to her. With a murmured acknowledgement, she turned and walked quickly away.

Q wanted to ask, but the last six months of training had taught him not to ask questions unless specifically given leave or to request clarification. He closed his eyes and told himself to breathe; whatever had gone wrong, someone would sort it out.

The woman returned swiftly, saying, “It’s confirmed, sir. The funds have already been transferred.”

Relief swept through Q, who bowed his head to hide his grin. God, he shouldn’t have doubted. He tried not to speculate on the identity of his new owner, but he couldn’t help wondering. Was it the older man whose questions had been on network security? The couple who’d been interested in his ability to set up a backend for an online shopping service? The younger man with the exotic accent — South African, Q suspected — who’d asked about secure, reliable databases?

When the woman walked away, Chris twitched the leash. Q looked up to meet his eyes and saw he was smiling slightly. Softly, Chris said, “I expect to hear only the highest praise from your owner.”

“Yes, Chris,” he said, and tried to stay calm. Q had never before cared about his sale price, so long as his minimum price was met. Now, though, he desperately wanted to know. Chris wouldn’t be this excited for a low sale, and though he seemed as outwardly serene as ever, Q had come to know him over the last six months. The light in his eyes, the subtle twitch of his lips, even the way he stood a bit straighter all conveyed a sense of pride and satisfaction that told Q his sale price had been higher than expected. But how much higher?

Chris slid a hand under Q’s chin, holding him in place. “Your owner could have purchased any of Regent Chandra’s trainees for your price, Q. I expect you to be perfect — so perfect that you’ll get your five-year contract extension.”

Elation chased away the last, lingering remnants of fear and stress and anxiety. He might not know exact figures, but he knew that the pleasure slaves trained by Chandra, who had herself trained with the famous Ninon, were among the most expensive in the world. If Q’s owner had paid that much for him, surely he or she would want to keep Q for as long as possible.

As soon as Chris released him, Q bowed low, leash chiming softly as he moved. He set his hands on the floor and bowed his head so his hair brushed over Chris’ polished shoes — the highest sign of respect Chris would accept. “Thank you for everything, Chris.”

Chris held still for a moment, before a subtle shift in his weight signalled for Q to rise. When he did, Chris looked him over one last time and then smiled. “Make us proud.”

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There was nothing normal or easy about working for MI6. Bond had known that since the day his
old CO had asked if he minded taking on a little task for ‘someone higher up, someone important’. He’d known that the day he’d formally left the Royal Navy and taken his badge with MI6. But this, he thought as he followed a snowy-haired accountant back into the dining room, was an entirely new, incredibly distasteful experience.

He — or, rather, Richard Sterling — now owned a slave.

After the auction, the buyers had been escorted out to the cocktail lounge while the bids had been tallied and verified. After two martinis, Bond had managed to regain some of his composure, so he listened to the old man’s speech, smiling and nodding at the appropriate points. Shipboard safety procedures regarding the handling and confinement of new slaves, adjustments to Bond’s dining table assignment, a reminder not to remove the owner-identification tag from his new slave’s collar while onboard Le Nautille.

The mission had definitely become surreal, but still manageable. And then he saw Q, and his sense of calm, collected reserve fractured.

Still naked, Q now knelt facing the hull, rather than the centre of the room. Bond stared at his curved back and the welted line that had turned to a soft red, dark with bruising near the centre. His unbound wrists were crossed above the tight, pale curve of his buttocks, where Bond could just barely see the second welt. With his head bowed, the back of his neck was bared. The steel chain lay unyielding against his skin.

“Mr Sterling?”

Bond tore his eyes away from Q. He looked to the accountant and nodded, embarrassed at the older man’s knowing smile. “Sorry.”

“All you need do is sign the contract — all three copies, please,” he said as he led Bond to a table where three white folders lay open beside a silver pen.

In keeping with his act as Richard Sterling, Bond had already reviewed the contracts electronically. Now, he quickly skimmed the print versions, initialling or signing at each bright yellow tab. These copies, he noticed, bore Q’s signature — a neat, almost perfectly round ‘Q’ — but were dated five and a half months ago. The paperwork was actually astonishing, especially since none of it would ever hold up in any civilised court of law. And yet, these people took their rituals so seriously that again Bond found himself wondering what leverage they must have had to so effortlessly achieve the appearance of consent.

Once Bond had finished, the man picked up the first folder and handed it to him. “Your copy. You are encouraged, though not required, to log into the Marketplace database and note down your observations of your new slave. Reports from previous owners are available for your review.”

Bond nodded with a false smile, hiding his inward shudder at how matter-of-factly this was being handled. Even the Royal Navy had some guidelines on what went into a sailor’s permanent record — otherwise, Bond’s career path would have probably been significantly shorter, for one thing.

The accountant picked up the other two copies. Then he led Bond to Q’s trainer, Chris, who was standing beside the platform, once again holding the leash fixed to Q’s collar. The accountant handed him one folder, saying, “For your master’s records, Regent.”

“Thank you.” The leash chimed as Chris accepted the folder with both hands. Then he bowed his head to Bond. “Thank you for your confidence in our training methods, sir. I hope he is everything you desire.”
Fortunately, the collar around Chris’ neck allowed Bond to skip a courteous response; he wasn’t entirely sure he could find his voice to speak. He just nodded and passed around Chris, his eyes never leaving Q’s body.

Q had to know what had been going on, but he hadn’t moved at all. He hadn’t once lifted his head to see who was approaching. Would he remember Bond from their minimal interactions or recognise his voice? Did he know the name ‘Richard Sterling’ or would Bond be a complete stranger to him?

Bond could barely see Q’s eyes, cast in shadow by the long fringe and the glasses he now wore. A new tag hung from the collar, with Bond’s false name, deck number, and cabin number engraved on the polished steel. He was breathing lightly and rapidly, though his breath caught as Bond reached out to touch the lock that hung a quarter inch from his body, suspended by the chain around his neck.

Bond slipped the key out of the lock and removed the engraved brass tag that read ‘14’. He set it on the platform. The key went into the inside pocket of his jacket. Then he snapped the lock closed and watched a shiver pass through Q’s thin body.

An irrational corner of his mind whispered, ‘Mine.’ He immediately felt disgusted with himself for it.

As if echoing his thoughts, Chris extended the leash handle to Bond. “He is yours, sir.”

Nodding to him, Bond took hold of the leash, torn between wanting to unsnap it from the collar and the desire to draw Q close.

The accountant, still holding the last copy of the contract, said, “The stewards will have brought his personal effects to your suite, sir. Again, congratulations, and enjoy the voyage.”

“Thank you.” Bond gave him a polite nod and shifted away, suddenly feeling awkward. He wouldn’t just drag Q down the stepstool and out of the dining room, but he didn’t want to treat him like a trained dog, telling him ‘come’ or ‘heel’.

But he didn’t need to say anything. As soon as the leash shifted, Q rose and followed Bond down the stairs with quick, light steps. He was entirely unconcerned about his nudity and kept his hands crossed behind his back as though bound. Bond was tempted to demand someone bring clothes for him — pants, at least — but decided he didn’t want to wait. Best to get his asset to safety first.

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Panic trapped Q’s thoughts as soon as he caught a peripheral glimpse of his new owner — the one man who, as far as Q could tell, had almost nothing to do with computers and everything to do with the sort of intense, consuming hunger that had Q assuming he’d be bidding on Chandra’s pleasure slave. God, had he been purchased solely for sex? Was he never going to get his hands on a computer outside his negotiated hours?

This had to be because of the display with the riding crop. He knew that looking anything less than professionally competent was a mistake, but he’d trusted Chris’ instinct for sales. Now, he had a five-year contract with someone who might want him not for his intellect but for the mile-wide streak of masochism that had him wanting to throw himself at his new owner’s feet and beg to be used, despite his apprehension.

Focus on the service, not the owner, Chris had taught him. For seven years, his owners had wanted a
computer genius. If this owner broke that trend, Q would comply. His submission had always been more important than anything else — more than school or his research or everything he’d given up in his life.

He relaxed, following his owner at the perfect distance, surreptitiously studying the way he walked. Already, his mind was noting important details: the hallmarks of bespoke tailoring that indicated wealth, the breadth of his shoulders, the thickening of knuckles that had been broken. There was a sense of danger and strength about him that made Q shiver.

Outside the restaurant, his owner stopped at the lift and pressed the service button. Q knelt out of the way of both the hallway and the lift. The leash twitched. He checked his posture automatically but found nothing to correct. He considered looking up — this man had preferred eye-contact while questioning Q — but decided it was best to be on formal behaviour until told otherwise. His owner might be the type who demanded a higher standard from slaves he owned.

The lift doors opened, and Q tensed his legs to rise, though he wouldn’t move until his owner did. Before either of them moved, though, a woman stepped into view. Low designer heels, expensive gold anklet, hints of varicose veins. Her taupe gown was ankle-length, heavily beaded.

“Richard, darling. I was hoping to catch you,” she said, surprising Q. Was everyone on this trip British?

“Margaret,” Q’s owner, Richard, answered. His low, rough voice was surprised. “I thought you’d be asleep at this hour. I didn’t realise how long it would take to process the sale.”

“Soon enough. I wanted to congratulate you. He’s lovely, if you like that type.”

Richard hesitated for the briefest moment before saying, “Yes, he is.” Q took a shallow breath and prepared for Richard to order him to present himself, but the order never came. Instead, Richard took a sudden step forward towards the lift, almost catching Q off his guard. Q got to his feet quickly but gracefully and looked up enough not to trip as he followed his owner into the lift.

Margaret had apparently been holding the doors open with one hand. Now, she let them close, and Q saw her press the button for deck five. Since they were on deck three, Q didn’t kneel; the lift wouldn’t take more than twenty seconds to reach its destination.

“Establish your ground rules, and then stick to them,” she advised as the lift began to move. “You lucked out with one trained by the Regents. He shouldn’t give you any trouble at all.”

“Is this really the proper time?” Richard protested, sounding uncomfortable.

Margaret sighed. “I still remember my first personal slave, back in ’66. She was lovely. She went into journalism, you know.”

“Sorry?” Richard asked, sounding startled.

“Oh yes. I saw her on telly a few years later, covering the Watergate scandal. Stop by the boutique tomorrow morning,” Margaret advised. “They’ve got a full line of Arturo Valente’s leather. They’re leatherworkers — saddlers, mostly, but they make the best whips. One of his craftsmen is here. If you make an appointment early enough, he’ll design something custom for your boy there.”

“Q,” Richard said somewhat stiffly as the lift doors slid open. Surprised, Q lifted his head, but Richard didn’t seem to be addressing him.

As Margaret stepped out of the lift, she asked, “Pardon?”
“His name. It’s Q,” Richard said, leading Q out into the hallway.

Q hadn’t had any opportunity to explore the ship, of course, but he recognised the flooring. He’d been on this deck earlier; the computer centre was aft, which was a good sign. Perhaps his owner would let him spend any idle time there.

Margaret turned to regard Q, who promptly looked back down at the floor. “Ah,” she said, puzzled.

Richard stopped and used a keycard to open the last door on the right. “I apologise, Margaret. It’s been a very long day."

“Of course, dear. You have a lovely night, and I’ll expect not to see you before lunch tomorrow,” Margaret said, leaning in to kiss Richard’s cheek.

“Good night, Margaret.”

As Margaret went to the stairs, Richard led Q into the foyer of a spacious suite. Q moved to the side of the door and knelt, relieved that the floor was carpeted. He studied his surroundings in quick glances, wondering if Richard was naturally a tidy sort of person or if the ship’s slaves had been tending to his cabin. Either way, that was now Q’s job, though a neat owner was always easier to serve.

It hit him then that he was alone with his owner. For the first time in more than six months, he wasn’t with a trainer or other slaves. Arousal spiked through him, hot and sudden.

He bowed his head, reminding himself not to have any expectations of what might happen next — though he hoped it would at least be interesting.

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Bond stared at the beautiful young man kneeling by the door and wondered what the hell he was supposed to do now. Navigating the auction itself had taken up enough of his concentration that he hadn’t thought much beyond ‘secure the asset,’ and he felt oddly nervous. He unsnapped the leash and threw it onto the dresser with some disgust.

Rather than doing anything stupid, like picking Q up off the floor and telling him to get dressed and act like a normal human being, Bond walked into the living room, dropped the contract on the bar, and poured himself a drink. By the time he took his first swallow, he had a general plan — assess Q’s emotional and mental health. Reassure him that he was safe. Earn his trust.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked. He turned and was a bit surprised to see Q hadn’t followed him.

Perhaps taking that as a cue to move, Q stood and walked back into sight, absolutely unselfconscious and graceful. He walked right to Bond — far too close — and knelt back down only an inch away from Bond’s feet, saying, “No, thank you, master.”

Well, fuck. Bond had known, somewhere, that this was to be expected, but he wasn’t actually ready for the guilty twist in his stomach at the sight. He fought the urge to just start throwing clothes at Q, and dropped his head to look at his drink instead. “I have purchased you,” he started, swallowing back horror at the words, “primarily for your computer skills. I’d prefer if you didn’t kneel.” He couched his repulsion in the form of a statement of preference, hoping it was subtle enough not to
cause alarm.

Q rose, and the motion took him back a step. “Would you prefer me to dress, master?” he offered.

“Yes, please,” Bond said gratefully. Not only would Q’s being dressed help him deal with the murderous anger he felt when he looked at the welts on Q’s pale skin; it would also prevent his body from taking a more active interest. He hoped.

With a quiet, “Yes, master,” Q walked away, disappearing around the corner into the foyer. Bond heard the rattle of the curtain over the small front closet, followed by the sound of a long zipper, such as from a suitcase, and the rustle of fabric.

Q returned quickly, dressed as though ready for a day at a business casual office, carrying a thin black laptop. “If you’d like me to take notes now, I can,” Q said, stopping a few feet away from Bond. “May I charge this?”

“Go ahead.” Bond wasn’t sure if he’d last the month if Q asked permission every time he wanted to do something as simple as plug in his laptop. “I think it’s a good idea if we establish some ground rules. But first, do you have any questions for me?”

“How would you prefer I address you?”

Wishing he could tell Q the truth immediately, Bond said, “‘Richard’ is fine.” He watched as Q’s eyes scanned the room for power outlets. He apparently wasn’t very familiar with ships, judging by how he took in the stranger details, such as the benches built into the deep windows and the angular sofa that followed the curve of the walls.

Q finally located an outlet by one of the window benches, set his laptop down, and headed back across the room towards the foyer. Then he stopped and turned, asking, “What are the specifications of the network I’ll be working on, Richard? Or if you’d prefer to go to bed, I can look into it myself, if you give me login credentials.”

Well, that couldn’t happen just yet, even though Bond knew damn well Q didn’t actually need login credentials to find his way around. He made a mental note to secure his laptop; he didn’t know if Q was to the type to go snooping, but he was unwilling to blow his cover yet. It occurred to him that Q would be very, very useful in helping him identify potential targets, but he couldn’t risk it until he had a better grasp of what was going on under all that hair.

“Perhaps after we’ve gotten to know each other a little better. First, we need to talk about rules and expectations. Are you sure you don’t want something to drink? There’s water and Coke, if you prefer something nonalcoholic.” Bond waved at the bar.

Because Bond was watching closely, he saw the slightest hesitation before Q said, “Water, please.” Then Q turned and continued to the foyer, returning only a few seconds later with a charger and universal power adapter, the type that international business travellers used. The laptop’s plug was British, Bond noticed, and wasn’t compatible with the American-style outlets on the ship. He came back and took the water bottle Bond offered him with a quiet, “Thank you, Richard,” before he continued to the window bench and crouched down to start arranging the cables.

“First rule. I expect you to be independent. There is absolutely no reason for you to have to ask me permission for necessary actions. Be it plugging in your laptop, getting dressed, getting food or drinks, you don’t need to seek approval.” He hesitated, wondering how to phrase this particular requirement in terms that benefited Bond, not Q, so as not to arouse suspicion. “I trust your judgment in knowing what is acceptable. Any questions about that?”
“No, Richard. In regards to my service, did you want me to suggest system and security improvements or implement them directly? How hands-on do you want to be with the details of your network? Is there someone else — an IT manager, perhaps — I’ll be reporting to?”

“It’s likely that you’ll spent a fair amount of time working with my company’s technical section. But that’s not going to happen until” — he glanced at Q — “until I’ve cleared the way for you.” That was honest enough. “Also, that’s not the kind of independence I was referring to.” He took a seat at the couch in the corner, positioned to face Q, and waited in expectant silence.

Q finally got the cables unwrapped and plugged in. He sat up on the window bench — without asking permission, Bond noted — and opened the laptop. “What about sex and caffeine?”

Bond inwardly flinched at the blunt question. “What about them?”

Q glanced up from his laptop in surprise. “If it doesn’t interfere with my duties to you, should I ask your permission?”

“No,” Bond said, carefully keeping his expression cool and business-like. Instead of allowing himself to indulge in reluctance, he focused on the fact that this was a very good sign regarding Q’s mental health. It was gratifying to think the hacker hadn’t emerged from a decade or more of subjection irreparably broken. “You are your own person, Q. I’m not interested in a pet.”

This time, Q looked at him for almost a full second before he turned his attention back to the laptop. “Very well. If you’d like to outline your expectations, I can start planning how best to meet them.”

“I expect full honesty whenever I ask a question or opinion. I expect that you conduct your work as quickly and efficiently as possible.” Bond floundered a little, though he kept his expression schooled. What the hell was he supposed to say? He watched Q, who was simply waiting, not even taking notes, and made a quick judgement call. “And if whatever I ask of you seems too dangerous or risky for you to carry out safely, you will tell me immediately.”

Q nodded just a bit distantly. “Yes, Richard,” he said evenly, though Bond saw the faintest shift in his position, as if he was growing uncomfortable.

“You’ll be working independently as long as you’re with me. I’ll tell you more in the morning. For now, it’s been a long day. I’m sure you’d like to eat, perhaps bathe, and rest.”

Bond was learning to read the extremely subtle tells in Q’s body language. Someone had trained him to deceive expertly enough that even Bond, taught to spot deception, knew he was missing most clues to whatever Q was hiding. This time, Q looked at him for just a beat too long before he lowered his gaze and closed the laptop. “I had dinner before the sale, thank you.” He set the laptop on the floor, out of the way, and stood. “Where would you like me to sleep?”

Bond considered. He knew that he could easily have a cot brought to his room, but that didn’t solve the larger problem. Bond wasn’t much of a sleeper, and what sleep he did get was usually rich with nightmares. He didn’t know Q, and didn’t trust him — even if Q were banished to a cot in the front of the suite, any night-time movements might trigger Bond’s overtrained mind to a violent reaction. On the other hand, if Q wasn’t suspicious already about Bond, he certainly would be if Bond gave Q the bed and banished himself to the cot.

“I’ll have a cot sent up,” he finally decided. It seemed the lesser of two evils.

“I can make the arrangements, if you’d like,” Q offered.

“Excellent. I’ll be up for the next hour or so, working, so please feel free to let me know if you have
any questions.” After a moment’s thought, Bond reached into his pocket and pulled out the keycard. “If you need to leave and come back in, you’ll need this. Please secure another one from the front desk for yourself.”

Q took it. “Would you like me to find someone else for you for the night?” Q asked as he crossed the room towards the foyer.

Bond stared at Q for a moment before raising an eyebrow at him in disbelief. How could he so casually offer such a thing? “No, thank you,” he said coolly. “Good night, then.”

A flash of worry showed in Q’s expression, there and gone, before he simply said, “Good night, Richard,” and left the room. A moment later, Bond heard the door to the suite open and close.

Bond fought the urge to go after him, knowing that it would be completely at odds with his ‘you’re to be independent’ assurances. So he changed and pulled out his laptop, keeping an ear open for Q’s return.
Chapter 4

Day Two

While one of the ship’s slaves arranged to get a cot, Q let himself out onto the stairs leading to the whirlpools. The landing was a half-circle, allowing him to stay out of the way of the other passengers while still enjoying the night.

He had no idea what to think of his situation. The technical aspects sounded promising, albeit distressing; ‘international sales’ meant there was probably a great deal of flying in Q’s future.

At least Richard didn’t want Q celibate for the next five years, which most likely would end with a refusal to renew his contract, no matter what. Two months of celibacy had Q on edge; he couldn’t imagine going without for one year, much less five.

He was tempted to go socialise now, but wouldn’t risk it. Chris would kill him if he managed to get his contract abrogated after less than twelve hours. Safer to get a feel for Richard’s routine. Q still had no idea why Richard had taken offence to the offer to find him company, but he wasn’t going to ask. He had the feeling that Richard was spectacularly boring — probably in bed by nine most nights, alone. Apparently sex as a whole was off-limits, including discussing it.

Fine. Q could manage. It wasn’t ideal, but it definitely could be worse. At least he had permission to seek out companionship on his own. He’d give it a few days to learn everything he could about Richard, and then he’d see who might be interested in spending time alone with him.

Figuring it would take at least ten minutes to get a cot, Q asked for directions to the front desk. He hadn’t seen much of the ship and couldn’t resist exploring a bit, taking the stairs rather than the lift. The front desk gave him no trouble when he requested a keycard, once they checked his collar tag and found the sales record.

He finally went back to the suite and cleaned up the bar, throwing a glance at his laptop. If there was an internet signal he could hijack, he could check his email and see about the papers he’d submitted for peer review. He wanted to be published well ahead of the deadline for the ‘best of the year’ issue.

Two ship’s slaves brought in the cot. Q had them set it up in the far corner of the living room, out of the way of whatever Richard might want to do in here. Probably solitaire on his laptop, Q thought ungraciously. And unproductively. He pushed the resentment out of the way, quietly thanked the slaves (eyeing both as possible companions, though he’d have to see if they were reserved exclusively for passenger use), and then locked up the suite.

He left Richard’s keycard on the dresser before he removed his shoes. After a minute’s debate, he changed out of his trousers and shirt, thinking that he was probably going to need to buy pyjamas. He hadn’t worn them for years, but he didn’t want to offend Richard by sleeping nude.

This was going to be complicated.

He finally settled on a T-shirt and pants. He’d just do his best to stay out of Richard’s sight in the morning until he was properly dressed. For now, he considered a shower, but decided that he’d wait until Richard was more deeply asleep. The bathroom door was in the bedroom. No sense in disturbing his rest.

Instead, Q crossed the room, turning off lights as he went, and picked up his laptop. It was his
personal property, and while he might use it for his owner’s work, the contract specified it as an exception. Idly, Q set up a search for local networks and looked out the window, wondering what the rest of the trip was going to be like.

He found nothing of interest, so he cracked the ship’s network just for practice, if it could be considered that, given that it took less than five minutes. He downloaded his email and paged through the backlog until he found a request for clarification on a paper he’d written two years ago — one he thought no one had actually read.

Well, that made him feel better. Grinning, he started with his usual disclaimer about being a world traveller frequently away from internet access, before he got down to the interesting questions about artificial intelligence, self-awareness, and ethics.

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It was with a deep sense of relief that Bond listened to the door latch after readmitting Q to the suite. Q hadn’t been gone for very long, so Bond didn’t dwell on what he’d been doing, other than to assume that he had secured his own keycard to the room. Now that he was back, Bond could stop worrying.

Once he stripped down to his pants, Bond moved his laptop back to the office. He logged out, though he was certain that wouldn’t keep Q from prying if he chose, and plugged it in to charge for the night. Then he returned to lie down on the bed, hands folded under his head, staring at the ceiling. He didn’t exactly have a sense of how well their earlier conversation had gone; his inability to read Q was obviously something he was going to have to work on. Bond had demanded honesty in verbal responses, but not in body language; he wasn’t even sure if he had the right to ask for that.

He needed to get a better sense of what was going on in Q’s head. In his experience, a hacker was at his most chatty when happy and distracted with a fascinating project. He’d have to find something to distract Q, to encourage him to open up and chat. If the satellite uplink was cooperative, perhaps he’d call TJ and ask for his advice.

Satisfied that he had something of a plan, Bond let himself drift closer to sleep and tried not to think too much about the fact that he didn’t have a gun under his pillow. It was a ship, he told himself. He’d be fine.

The next thing he knew, he was standing, pressing someone’s body against the wall, hand wrapped around someone’s throat. He could feel a pulse flutter frantically underneath his hand, breath coming in short gasps. “Who are you?” he growled out, struggling to focus on the intruder in the faint light bleeding through from the other room.


Bond relaxed his hand fractionally, enough to ensure the intruder didn’t die of asphyxiation. Q — he knew that name.

Then the last two days caught up with him, and he finally realised exactly who he had pressed against the wall. His slave. His Q. Thin, unarmed, half-dressed. Not a threat.

Almost unconsciously, Bond leaned into him, relaxing his hand even further. “What are you doing in here?” he growled out.
Q took in a shaky breath. He was making no attempt to escape; he let his head rest back against the wall, baring his throat. “The bathroom entrance — I’m sorry, master. Richard,” he corrected himself.

The words were completely at odds with Q’s body language. His eyes were wide, pupils blown. His body was pressing forward, straining for contact. His pulse beat wildly, and Bond knew it wasn’t because he was scared. He flattened his hand over where Q’s sternum and collarbones met, and he dug in with his fingers just hard enough for it not to be mistaken as a gentle caress, and Q made a faint, desperate sound. Experimentally, Bond pushed his own hips forward, and felt Q’s erection straining at his pants.

Q tensed, but instead of pulling away, he spread his legs as best he could, as though inviting Bond to do more. He stopped breathing and bit his lip hard.

This wasn’t right, and Bond knew it. But his rational brain was still caught up in the tides of adrenaline and endorphins running through his system. His body had been jerked out of sleep in a moment of pure reaction, and now it wanted... It wanted.

Bond leaned forward, staring at where Q’s teeth caught his lip. He brushed his mouth against Q’s as he moved even closer, letting Q feel his need. As soon as Q’s mouth opened, Bond nipped at his lip, just to taste for himself.

With another quiet whimper, Q opened to the kiss, meeting it fiercely, though he didn’t lift his hands to touch. He licked at Bond’s mouth every time Bond tried to tease, and when Bond pushed, he surrendered, letting Bond explore at will, but he still didn’t initiate any touches; he only responded.

All at once, awareness and self-control crashed back over Bond, and he backed away slowly, hands held up. “I’m sorry,” he got out, putting more space between them. “I’m so sorry.”

Q dropped to his knees, panting, but kept staring up at Bond, though he had no idea how well Q could see in the dark without his glasses. “Master?”

“You startled me,” he said in a low, apologetic voice. “Are you hurt?”

He shook his head, still breathing hard, and shifted as though about to lift a hand. He caught himself, and instead of reaching for Bond, he put his hands behind his back. “No, Richard,” he said, bowing his head.

It was heartbreaking — not just the deferential treatment, but the aborted hand movement itself. He stepped forward again, crouching, before he gently pulled Q back up by his shoulders. “Don’t —” he started, as Q rose with him. But instead of stepping back, Q slid up against Bond’s body, shoulders straining at Bond’s grasp, and pressed his lips desperately to Bond’s.

Bond was no stranger to faked emotion. From the false smiles and flirtations of past marks to the barely disguised sexual frustration of others, he had experienced it all, and he considered himself an expert in body language. As far as he could tell, there was nothing disingenuous about Q’s behaviour now.

Q was all desperate mouth, writhing body, hard cock pressed into Bond’s hip, and Bond couldn’t bring himself to let go. He shoved Q back against the wall, moving his hands from Q’s shoulders to his wrists, and pinned them above his head. He met Q’s gaze and demanded, “Is this you not asking permission?”

Q’s eyes went wide, before he closed them. “I’m sorry, Richard. I shouldn’t have done that,” he said, the words halting and strained. His pulse raced under Bond’s grip, and he shifted back, until he was
pressed to the wall from his heels to his shoulders.

_No, no, no_, Bond thought, chasing Q into the wall with his own larger body. He didn’t want Q to fall back onto his training. He wanted the fire he’d just barely glimpsed. “Caffeine and sex,” Bond growled. “You’d better make up your mind about that right the hell now.”

With another quiet, strained whimper, Q said, “Anything you want, Richard. Please, just tell me what you want.”

It wasn’t enough. Q was still focused on what _Bond_ wanted, not what he himself wanted.

Bond closed his eyes and backed off again, letting Q’s wrists slip free. As much as his body screamed in protest, some smaller part of his mind was relieved. He hadn’t had enough time to think this through, and he was being given a reprieve. If Q had offered, even if with just more inviting body language, Bond would have _taken_. And probably hated himself for it. But this?

“You sleep in here tonight. I’ll take the cot.” Bond turned to leave.

“Richard,” Q said sharply. Then, after a moment, he said more softly, “No, Richard. Please, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that to you. This is my fault.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bond snapped before he turned back to Q, who was still pressed against the wall. He frowned, feeling suddenly, incredibly guilty. Remembering their very first conversation, Bond walked back to Q and very, very gently brushed a hand along his jaw. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I should have warned you not to startle me when I’m sleeping. I’m sorry for hurting you. I probably won’t get back to sleep, so I think at least one of us should be comfortable.”

“You didn’t hurt me,” Q said unhesitatingly. He didn’t pull away from the touch, but he also didn’t look up to meet Bond’s eyes. “I could try and help you sleep, if you’d allow. Please? I shouldn’t have disturbed you.”

Bond shook his head. “I’m afraid that if you tried to help me sleep, I wouldn’t be able to stop myself a third time.” _Idiot_, he reprimanded himself sharply. _So much for building trust_. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Unwilling to test his self-control any further, he turned and left before Q could protest.

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As the bedroom door slid closed, Q dropped to sit on the floor, wondering what the _fuck_ was going on. He lowered his head to his knees, trying to ignore the way his body was screaming for release.

Richard wasn’t gay. Or bi. That was the most likely explanation. This was a sexual identity crisis. Or maybe he was married, though there was no wedding ring, and his wife didn’t know he was an owner. Or, hell, maybe it was religious.

Whatever the case, it was going to be the death of Q if he didn’t _do something_.

He’d intended to sneak in, clean up, and go to sleep. He’d —

Oh, fucking hell. He’d left his laptop unlocked, email open.
He was on his feet in a heartbeat, but he froze, not going near the door. The sliding door was made up of frosted glass panes. Most of the lights in the living room were still off. He had no idea where Richard was or what he was doing. Q hadn’t been ordered to stay in the bedroom, but going out there would intrude — something Richard obviously didn’t want.

He could go out long enough to offer to move back to the barracks lower down. Hell, that would be a better solution for both of them. Richard could have his privacy, and Q could find company. There were always a few slaves who were allowed to find partners because their owners were generous or didn’t care one way or the other.

Would Richard go poking around in Q’s laptop? He shouldn’t — not by the terms of their contract — but Q didn’t trust anyone when it came to information security. He shouldn’t have even left the laptop out there at all, but he’d been trying to upload files to his cloud storage, and the ship’s internet was barely faster than sending them by stagecoach across the Wild West. Slower, considering how many terabytes you could probably load into a stagecoach full of SSDs.

Finally, he decided there was nothing he could do about it. He went into the bathroom, considered at least doing something about his current state, and finally decided he’d rather find a partner. Tomorrow. If Richard was strange at breakfast, maybe Q could even find someone before lunch. He could wait twelve hours.

So he took a quick cold shower that didn’t help, and then considered going to bed, but he was still too worked up. He was tempted to go into the little office off the bedroom, where he saw a laptop, but decided against it. Instead, he went out onto the balcony to let the freezing air calm him, wishing he had a damned cup of tea.

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Bond stood staring at the empty room, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do now. He had either completely broken any chance he had of getting Q on his side and set himself up for a ridiculously uncomfortable thirty days, or he’d just made made the first advances in securing himself a gorgeous lover, once Q figured out just what he wanted. If he figured out what he wanted.

The cot was small and unassuming, and Bond had absolutely no interest in testing it out. He walked over to the bar instead, finding a serviceable scotch, and poured himself another drink. What the hell was wrong with him, that he went from murderous to aroused in ten seconds flat? How had it not occurred to him that the only bathroom entrance was through the bedroom?

Thank god he didn’t have a gun under his pillow, after all.

Bond took a deep drink of the smoky liquor and surveyed the rest of the room. Sitting out, open and doing something, was Q’s laptop. Curious, Bond walked over to it, deciding Q was probably far past expecting privacy. He didn’t touch anything yet, but Q had obviously expected to be right back — there were several windows open, including a file transfer, word processing software, and several email windows.

Immediately, Bond’s eyes were drawn to phrases like “publishing deadline” and “request for clarification” and so much technical jargon Bond couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

TJ would not be disappointed, apparently. Q was not just the expert hacker his CV made him out to
be. He was a brilliant, genius-level hacker, a scholar, and a published author.

And he had just been on his knees in front of Bond.

Bond took another long drink, took a seat at the couch, propped his feet up, and prepared for a long night of processing and planning. He heard the sound of the balcony door open, and closed his eyes. He tried and failed not to picture dark, windswept hair and pale skin framed against the moonlit ocean.
Day Three

Bond sat on the sofa, waiting for Q to come out of the bedroom. He wanted his phone and his laptop. He wanted a shower and a shave, and he wanted to get into clean clothes.

For perhaps the hundredth time in the past six hours, he cursed his ridiculous behaviour and his hasty exit last night.

He couldn’t honestly say that he was looking forward to seeing Q. He had no idea what to expect from a situation like this. Would Q be angry? Horribly deferential? Completely indifferent? Bond hoped for a reasonable emotional response, like anger, but knew better than to expect it.

But, no matter what, Bond had decided his best course of action was to move forward with the day as he had originally intended. Take Q to breakfast. Get some fresh air on the deck. He needed to get a better handle on who Q was, inside. And he needed to identify his target so he could leave the ship — with Q — as soon as humanly possible.

Q emerged from the bedroom, wearing one of the ship’s courtesy robes, covering him from his knees to his wrists, T-shirt visible at his throat. He was carrying the dinner suit Bond had left in the bathroom. He brought the dinner suit to the foyer, where he set down the contents of the pockets.

“Good morning, Richard,” he said, without meeting Bond’s eyes. He took a thin plastic bag from the dresser and packed away the dinner suit, which he set outside the door to the suite. Only then did he turn to the wardrobe where his limited selection of clothes were still in his suitcase.

Bond raised his eyebrow, wondering if it would further damage his relationship if he suggested that Q was in no way under any obligation to do his laundry. He decided instead on a simple, “Good morning, Q.” He paused, taking in Q’s tired appearance. “Sleep well?”

“I slept enough.” He turned, the grey trousers from two nights ago and a button-down shirt folded over his arm. “Would you prefer I dressed here or elsewhere?”

“Dress where you like; I’m going to shower,” Bond said, standing. He picked up his own prepared clothes, which were draped over the back of the couch. “Do you need anything from the bedroom or bathroom first?”

“No, Richard.”

“When I’m done, I’d like to take you for breakfast. Perhaps a walk, too, before returning here to look at the project TJ is sending over. How does that sound?”

“Very nice,” he said, though not sarcastically. His voice was steady, calm, and neutral — had been this whole time, in fact. “Would you like me to make reservations?”

“Not in the main dining room, I don’t think,” Bond replied. The main dining room had shared tables, and he wanted to spend more time alone with Q. “Otherwise, I leave it to you to decide where we go.”

“Yes, Richard. I’ll see what’s available. Thirty minutes?”

“Q,” Bond said quietly, watching him. He couldn’t reconcile a genius-level intellect and scholar with
this formal, boring person, utterly lacking in personality, before him.

For the first time that morning, Q met Bond’s eyes. “Yes, Richard?” he asked with that same polite distance.

“You can be angry with me, if you like.” Bond would even take basic irritation.

A flicker of something like sympathy crossed Q’s expression. “May I ask a question, Richard?”

“Please.”

“Am I your first slave?”

Bond chuckled tensely. “Is it that obvious?”

Q smiled very slightly. He walked towards Bond, pausing only to drape his clothing neatly over the back of a chair. Then, when he was three feet away, he knelt deliberately, head bowed, hands behind his back. “You did nothing wrong last night, Richard. I shouldn’t have disturbed you, and I shouldn’t have tried to push you.”

“You pushed me?” Bond asked with some disbelief.

“It’s been” — he hesitated, and Bond saw his hands twitch — “over two months since I’ve been intimate with anyone. I lost control in a way that’s unforgivable. You explained that you aren’t going to use me sexually, and I allowed myself to forget that. Another owner would have punished me immediately, or this morning at the latest.”

Bond’s face showed nothing, but he flinched internally. Punished? That was disturbing. But thoughts about the cruelty Q must have suffered in the past were immediately displaced by the fact that Q had actually wanted him. He didn’t know what to think. Was Q really so brainwashed? Was it Stockholm Syndrome? Did his ‘trainers’ have something on him, to keep him in line even without Bond reporting back to them?

“Q, I need to understand...” Bond started, before stopping himself. Asking why probably wasn’t the best move so early in the game. “I need you to understand something: I’m not going to hurt you.”

Q said nothing, though his expression turned expectant, and then confused.

_Fucking heartbreaking_, he thought. “Thirty minutes,” he said instead, and made a strategic retreat to the shower.

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According to the ship’s directory, there were five restaurants: the expansive hall where the auction had taken place, the theatre where the slaves had been displayed the first evening, an aft restaurant and bar, a small café on one of the open top decks, and an outdoor grill on another open deck.

Suspecting that Richard would prefer the least formal environment possible — not to mention the least social — Q arranged for a table for two at the upper deck café. He assumed he’d be seated at the table, since Richard seemed deeply uncomfortable with the formal trappings of slavery. Because he’d been trained to prepare for contingencies, he asked about the weather and was told it would be
about sixty degrees in the shade.

God, this was going to be a nightmare. He needed to figure out exactly what Richard wanted and expected from him. Until then, he’d have to behave as close to ‘normal’ as possible, no matter how awkward or distasteful.

He dressed quickly, adding a warm cardigan. Then he went through Richard’s closet more than a bit enviously — his taste in clothing was even better than Chris’. He found a warm knitted jumper. There was a windcheater as well, one that folded down into a compact bundle that Q put into his laptop bag, along with Richard’s cigarettes.

It was depressing that Q’s first breakfast with his new master was going to be an outdoor working breakfast. At least he was damned well going to try and make it a working breakfast, laptop and all. Otherwise, he didn’t trust himself not to speak his mind, especially knowing that Richard wasn’t going to raise a finger to stop him.

He had his laptop packed and the living room straightened out long before Richard finally came out. Q was tempted to go hand him the dark blue jumper he’d chosen, but instead he said, “The upper deck cafe had available seating. If that’s acceptable, you might want to put on the jumper” — he nodded at the dresser, where he’d laid it out, neatly folded — “so you’re warm.”

Richard nodded to him. “Sounds lovely. Thank you for the jumper.” He stood, put his wallet and phone in his pocket, and walked over to the dresser. Q couldn’t help but stare — the memory of Richard’s body pressed against his was far too fresh in his mind. At the dresser, he turned back, and Q quickly looked down. “No need to bring your laptop. We can’t do any work outside the suite. Security issues.”

_Fucking buggering shit_, Q thought as he set the laptop bag down on the window seat. He took out the windcheater and looked longingly at his tablet, stowed in a side pocket. But he doubted that Richard would let him work on his own projects at breakfast, so he just put the pack of cigarettes into the pocket of his trousers, folded the windcheater over his arm, and joined Richard in the foyer.

“So, what kinds of food do you like and dislike, Q? Are you a sugar and sweets sort of person? Or a disgustingly healthy one?” Richard asked in a genial voice, holding his arm out for Q to take. Q accepted and resisted the growing urge to smack him in the back of the head. He wouldn’t have even before training with Chris, but god, it was tempting.

“My diet’s been carefully monitored since I began my advanced training six months ago,” he said as he let Richard hold the suite door open for him. _Definitely_ heterosexual, repressed desires, all that psychological nonsense. So what the hell was he doing with a slave?

“Not even close to an answer,” Richard replied, tone light with humour that rang slightly false.

“I haven’t been permitted sweets for those six months,” Q answered, struggling not to let a hint of exasperation creep into his tone. His mind was processing terribly mixed signals, between the conversation and Richard’s attitude and his incredibly strong, powerful arm — which Q could all too clearly remember pinning him against the bedroom wall, capturing his wrists over his head.

Maybe if he resorted to physical violence, he could force Richard past this repression and hesitance? If nothing else, a good kick in the shin would make him feel better.

“Again, not what I asked. I don’t care what you were permitted,” Richard said, disgust colouring the last word. “I want to know what you like.”
Hiding a sigh, Q finally said, “If left to my own devices, I tend to eat anything with enough sugar to efficiently provide enough calories and energy to allow me to keep coding without the need to rest. That’s really the only purpose food has, in my opinion.”

Richard tightened his arm around Q’s in an obvious gesture of approval.

Wonderful. Six months of voice training, and Richard wanted disrespect and blunt, thoughtless honesty. This was Q’s longest contract since he’d found The Marketplace — the contract he’d been looking forward to for years — and his owner was treating him like a vanilla-world date. A celibate date.

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Bond hid a frown as they made their way to the upper deck cafe. Q was sneaky bastard; he’d managed not to violate Bond’s condition about honesty, but only by being incredibly evasive. He had no idea why Q found it so difficult to express his own opinion, but Bond’s dogged persistence had the secondary benefit of evoking a genuine emotional response and not something manufactured or trained into him: irritation.

Q was doing an exceptional job of hiding it, of course, and it was only the tiniest of signals that Bond managed to capture and interpret: the tightening of fingers, the shuffle in a step, the slight clench of his jaw. Bond found it deeply reassuring. An honest response, especially a negative one, was a sign that Q might not have been as emotionally damaged as Bond had feared.

The upper deck cafe wasn’t anything particularly special in presentation, but its view more than made up for the wooden deck chairs. What spoiled it for Bond, however, was the display of human slavery that drew the eye away from the horizon of sky and sea. ‘Owners’ were seated at the tables, and their slaves were either serving or kneeling beside them. Some were eating from their own plates, others were being fed, and yet others were eating from bowls, with no hands, as if they were animals. The only good sign at all, in fact, was that they were all warmly clothed against the chilly morning air.

Bond stopped on the deck, fingers twitching for the gun he wasn’t carrying. How, how, could humans treat other humans this way? Bond had a streak of cruelty all his own, but he reserved it for use against criminals and threats to his beloved England. This? This was unacceptable.

He felt Q move, and turned when he heard the snap of a lighter. Q was lighting a cigarette — one of Bond’s cigarettes, a customised blend from England. He replaced the lighter in his pocket and offered Bond the cigarette.

Bond shot him a grateful look as he took the cigarette, though he was intensely curious about how in the hell Q had managed to anticipate that particular need. He took a deep breath, moving forward, carefully not dwelling on how momentarily splendid it felt to have someone offer him what he needed, when he needed it, without him asking. “Thank you,” he said to Q, voice low.

“My pleasure, Richard,” Q said just as softly, with what sounded like sincerity. Then he stepped away from Bond’s side to speak to one of the black-uniformed ship’s slaves. He quietly gave Bond’s false name, and she immediately sent a cheerful smile Bond’s way.

“Sir, if you would please follow me?” she invited, gesturing through the tables.
Bond gave her his best, false smile and straightened his shoulders to steel himself for walking through the display of human degradation. He carefully looked forward, either at the back of the woman leading them, or out to the blue horizon. Q fell in behind Bond, either out of deference or because of the narrow aisles. Bond resolved to forbid Q from sitting on the deck, no matter what anyone else might think.

Apparently, Q had anticipated that reaction. They were led to a table beside the railing, where there was already an ashtray laid out, along with two place settings and menus. The ship’s slave pulled out Bond’s chair — the one with the ashtray nearby — while Q went to the other side of the table, where he waited for Bond to sit first.

Bond resisted a very contrary urge to tell Q ‘On the count of three?’ and instead sat quietly. While he certainly wanted to draw out emotional reactions from Q, he didn’t actually want to embarrass him in front of anyone he might know.

As soon as they were seated, the slave — American, judging by her accent, from somewhere in the Midwest — asked, “Coffee? Orange juice?”

“Coffee for me, thanks,” Bond said, resisting an urge to tell her to stop being so damn cheerful when people were lapping at water from bowls not a few metres away. “Q?”

“Double espresso and a pot of black tea, please,” he said, with barely a glance at the menu.

With another chipper smile, the slave said, “I’ll get those for you right away. Your waiter will be with you in just a moment, sir.”

As she left, Bond watched Q scan the menu. “Do you cook?” he asked curiously. It wasn’t exactly a random question, but it was a fair start into the interrogation he intended on doing all day.

“My training included preparation of a limited menu, though all of my trainers warned me to never quit coding to become a chef,” Q said, flipping the menu over to scan the back.

Bond chuckled. “How long have you been a programmer?” He didn’t add ‘before all this’ to his sentence, though he wanted to.

“I was given my first computer when I was four? Perhaps five. I built my first database when I was nine.”

Bond let the image of a tiny Q with big glasses and bigger hair, hunched over an old computer, distract him from what was happening between the slaves and owners at his back. “What was the database? A catalogue of your action figures?”

Q’s gaze flicked up to Bond and back down to the menu in a flash of irritation. “Statistics of every horse race over the last ten years. I was modelling future race outcomes.”

“Did it work?” Bond asked curiously.

“I lacked all the factors involved — primarily weather, data on out-of-area races, and cheating. The theoretical analysis was sound as an underlying premise. Mathematical order can be imposed on anything.”

Bond looked at Q, who sounded not just irritated, but also defensive. Another honest emotional reaction. “I’m sure it can. What was the first big project you created that you’re really proud of?”

“None.” Q set down his menu and glanced to the side, looking around the restaurant. “With the
benefit of hindsight, I see how I could have improved every one of them.”

“That doesn’t seem the wisest approach to take. Doesn’t it lead to more frustration than actual productivity?” Bond asked, grimacing. He wasn’t one for hindsight, himself. It didn’t achieve much, in the long run.

“I find it disallows the possibility of settling.” His eyes shifted to look over Bond’s shoulder. Bond turned to see someone — their waiter, presumably — approaching.

This one, too, was cheerfully polite, with a bright smile despite the collar he wore. “Good morning, sir,” he said, his accent northern European, similar to Bond’s own, before he’d joined the Royal Navy. “May I take your order?”

“I’ll have an omelette, please, chef’s choice of toppings,” Bond said dismissively.

“French toast, please,” Q said, handing over his menu card. “And our drinks?”

The smile flickered out for a moment. “I’m so sorry. I’ll check on that right away, sir,” the waiter said, throwing a glance Bond’s way before he retreated.

Bond wondered at Q’s scolding response. Did his demand mean that he didn’t necessarily consider himself to be one of them? Or did it just mean that Q was attempting dealing with poor service on Bond’s behalf?

“I find the concept that you’d argue with settling on something odd,” Bond prodded, looking for the right buttons to push. “Considering that you’ve supposedly agreed to sign a number of years away to someone whose orders you’ll have to follow without objection.”

“Supposedly?”

Bond took the risk of lowering his voice even more. “I don’t believe this is consensual, Q. How could it be?”

Q was silent for a few seconds, his expression absolutely calm and neutral, though Bond could see that he was too still, too controlled; he was suppressing something. Bond hoped that Q would give him some signal, however subtle, that he understood Bond didn’t condone what had been done to him — that he wanted to help Q escape.

But then Q said, “Given that it appears you have no desire to own a slave and that you’re obviously uncomfortable with the idea of my service, may I suggest that you petition the marketplace coordinators for release from our contract? There —”

He was interrupted by the arrival of their waiter, carrying a tray with their drinks. Perhaps sensing the sudden tension at the table, he didn’t speak as he set out Bond’s coffee, the small pot of tea, and a cup of thick, rich espresso. He left silently, with a deferential bow of his head to Bond.

Before Bond could speak, Q continued, “There may be a monetary penalty. I’ll authorise your repayment from my own accounts. I would prefer this be done quickly, preferably before the trip ends, so Chris can arrange another sale to someone who does want me.”

Bond sat back, coffee in hand. That wasn’t what he expected at all. It didn’t make sense that Q, if he were being held against his will, would offer to pay to be released from his contract with Bond — especially when Bond had made it clear that he wasn’t going take advantage of anything but his computer skills. He briefly considered that maybe last night’s altercation could be the culprit, but dismissed it immediately. Q hadn’t been afraid. He’d been aroused.
Taking a slow, careful sip of the rich dark liquid, he steered his thoughts to more neutral ground. *Someone who wants me*, he’d said.

Bond leaned forward, meeting Q’s gaze with his own unapologetic, sharp one. “I’m afraid that’s not going to happen. My intentions, such as they were, are not presently relevant to this business arrangement. I found a hacker, I paid good money for him, and I intend to use him for my own purposes while I’m on board. I have things for you to do, Q. I expect your cooperation in rendering assistance.”

“All you want from me is my skill with computers?” Q asked, an edge of anger creeping into his voice, though he kept it hidden from his expression. “Nothing else?”

“I want your expert assistance on a very immediate problem of mine. I think the price I paid for you shows how much,” Bond said quietly.

“That doesn’t answer the question I asked,” Q pressed. “Do you want me *as your slave*?”

Bond considered his answer carefully. If he said no, Q might very possibly up and leave, demanding Chris release him from his contract with Bond on the grounds of some violation he’d probably make up if he had to. On the other hand, he didn’t know if he could say yes. He didn’t know if his self-control could take any more of Q’s incredible, naked body kneeling at his feet — especially if the last vestiges of his doubt about consensuality continued vanishing in the wake of Q’s protests.

“If that means I get what I want from you, when I need it, yes,” Bond finally answered cautiously. Q was his primary target now. He couldn’t afford to have Q vanish into a new contract.

Subtle as it was, he clearly saw a hint of disappointment in Q’s expression. “Very well.” He pushed back his chair and rose. “If you’ll excuse me, Richard, I should verify that everything I need on my computer is up to date, so I can better serve you.”

“Stop,” Bond demanded. Like hell he was going to let Q escape without actually eating. He looked painfully undernourished as it was. “Sit.”

Slowly, Q sat down again. He said nothing, though, and he looked down, hiding his expression. His hands were in his lap, out of sight, and his shoulders were stiff with tension.

“Before you do anything, you will have breakfast. We’ll discuss the project further when we get back to the suite,” Bond continued, done with politeness. Requests obviously weren’t getting him anywhere. “Though I still intend to take that walk. You’re too pale as it is.”

A muscle twitched in Q’s jaw. “I sunburn easily,” he said, absolutely neutral, still not meeting Bond’s eyes.

“I don’t doubt that. We can stop by the shop first, if you require it.” Bond paused. “Look at me,” he demanded.

Bond lifted his head and met Bond’s eyes in that practiced, enticing way of his. Only now, there was nothing in his eyes — none of the needy desire that Bond had seen last night, or the hint of interest when they’d discussed his qualifications with computers, but also no anger, no resentment. Only obedience.

Bond sighed. He’d have to work on that, even if it meant intentionally pissing him off again. Fortunately, Bond was very good at that sort of thing.
Chapter 6

Day Three

To date, Q’s most awkward meal had been his first day of university, when he’d been too young and inexperienced to be thrown to the wolves. Viciously, he was tempted to mention that Richard had single-handedly outmatched an entire table full of university students loudly asking whose little brother had got lost from the tour.

But he managed, falling back on his training with Chris to keep his temper in check, though he knew he was being intentionally disobedient by resorting to voice training, rather than speaking his mind. Instead of rising to Richard’s bait, Q kept his answers absolutely neutral, bland, and subtly in agreement with whatever point Richard seemed to be making. When Richard finally gave up, Q felt a vindictive, unworthy sense of satisfaction.

True to his threat, Richard insisted on a silent, awkward circuit of the upper deck — a walk that Q would have appreciated any other day, with anyone else. He couldn’t help but envy the slaves he saw who were leashed and bound, part of a normal relationship, rather than whatever it was that Richard wanted from him.

That was what Q couldn’t determine. He could almost imagine that this was some very complicated test (and if it was, Q was in for the thrashing of his life when it finally ended) except that Richard didn’t even seem to have the twitch-instincts of an owner or trainer.

For the first time, Q considered actually leaving the Marketplace, even though he knew this was his best chance to find what he wanted. It was just obvious that he wouldn’t find it through an auction, in which random chance could end up with him purchased by... well, someone like Richard.

Worst case, he could always go back to the soft world. Get a research position or teach. Go to Tibet and become a monk, because his sex life would probably be even worse than it was now, unless he started going back to clubs.

The problem was that he couldn’t be a slave without an owner. It wasn’t a one-sided relationship. For him to give, someone had to take, which was exactly what Richard wasn’t doing. Rebellion wasn’t punished, obedience wasn’t acknowledged, and it all just served to remind Q why he loathed the world outside the Marketplace so much.

He would’ve been apprehensive when they returned to Richard’s suite, except that he was fairly certain Richard didn’t even own a crop or whip. Maybe Q should go buy him one and tape a note to it: Hint. Not that Q would do that — and not that Richard would accept. He’d probably be horrified or offended.

Resigned, Q put Richard’s cigarettes on the bar and went to the window seat where he’d left his laptop. He sat down, relaxing a bit when he opened the laptop and logged in. As Q had thought, he’d left his email, upload manager, and research files open. His connection to the ship’s network had either timed out or glitched at some point, but he didn’t bother re-establishing it. He’d do that later, when he had the privacy he hoped he would get in abundance from his distant, unwanted owner.

Though Richard had walked into the bedroom to talk on his mobile, he was only gone for a few minutes before he came back out, staring intently at Q, phone still held up to his ear. “Just a minute,” he said, before letting his hand drop to his side. “Q? Come in here with me please?” He beckoned to
Q put down the laptop and crossed the living room. Richard’s laptop was open on the bed, because apparently he’d never heard of heat issues. It was a sad statement about the current circumstances that when Richard motioned Q onto the bed, there was no surge of adrenaline and desire — just a resigned sort of acceptance as he sat down beside the laptop.

Richard said, “Go ahead,” into the phone and clicked it off. He shoved it back into his pocket and turned it to face Q. Much to Q’s surprise, a face popped up on the screen, though it was pixelated and barely visible. All Q could really make out was dark skin and a desperately eager smile.

“TJ,” Richard said, “Meet Q. Q, this is TJ. He’s my technical services project coordinator for Universal Exports.”

“God, all right. Um, hello,” TJ said in a rush. The audio connection was a little better, but his voice still turned tinny or cut out completely as he spoke. “You did that work on pre-boot authentication. Brilliant. I mean, I couldn’t get anyone to listen, but it’s not like they actually had a clue, and your whitepaper just made it worse, but still — brilliant!”

_This is hell_, Q thought, giving his best polite smile. “Thank you.”

“I mean, it only makes sense, having a hidden boot partition, just in case — field operations and all that. What if the laptop’s compromised, right? Only then you’re tempted to put everything on there, and it’s not like time cards — well, maybe time cards, though not many of them fill those out. But just the theory alone is brilliant. Really. I’ve been such a fan of your work for ages.”

“I’m sure Q is flattered, TJ, but how about we focus on the task at hand?” Richard interrupted smoothly.

“Um. Yes, right. Right. Okay.” The video shifted to the local laptop’s desktop, and TJ said, “So, I’m going to transfer some files — let me just open up remote desktop. Um, it’ll be a couple of minutes —”

“No need,” Q interrupted, wanting this to end quickly. He picked up the laptop, balanced it on his legs (and yes, the bed was hot under the vents), and started examining the laptop’s protection.

Oh, look, he thought in despair. Windows firewall.

Maybe _this_ was Richard’s idea of punishing misbehaviour?

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Bond dragged the little chair out of the tiny, adjacent office to watch Q and TJ work. It was actually fairly amusing to overhear TJ gush at Q, who looked progressively more irritated by the moment. Not that Q was being overt about it, but he had his tells — ones that Bond had been watching for, very carefully.

Bond had explained to TJ that he wanted TSS’s least functional, earliest prototype weapons designs as a challenge for Q. TJ had reassured him that the plans he was going to transfer to Q were little more than an idea dump on sketch paper — or the digital equivalent. The prototype had the components and basic programming notations in the notes, but if it made its way to black market, it
would still be utterly useless and unsellable.

As much as Bond wanted to trust Q, he knew damn well he shouldn’t.

He listened as TJ explained, in halting technical terms, what he was sending. Q looked entirely unimpressed, though his hands were busy on the laptop. Bond had asked TJ if it was wise to allow someone so obviously brilliant to work on a laptop that had a connection back to MI6, but TJ had puffed up comically and assured him it was perfectly safe. Watching Q’s laser-like focus on the screen, he somehow doubted it.

TJ was still explaining the files when Q spoke over him, “This isn’t even a child’s toy, much less a weapons design. You have no stabilising systems to get the weapon to the target. Not that it would matter if you did, given the utter lack of geolocation capability. This wouldn’t even hit if you stood at the top of a cliff and pitched it down at a target.” In the background, TJ was still talking; apparently, Q had turned off the laptop’s mic.

Then he looked up at Bond and added, “One would imagine that MI6 would know better” — he dumped the laptop on the bed and stood — “Mr Bond.”

Bond stared at Q. “Shit.” He turned to glare at the laptop before muting the sound of TJ’s voice. “Well, that wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Q huffed disdainfully. “I suggest you upgrade your security. If you’ll excuse me, I have a contract to abrogate,” he said, taking a step towards the door before he turned back. “I’ll also need the key to my collar.”

“I don’t think so,” Bond answered. “The fact that I’m working for MI6 doesn’t actually change anything. I bought you for a purpose, Q.”

“You want an employee, not a slave, and that’s not what I want. And you signed our contract under a false name, entirely invalidating it,” Q accused.

“Don’t confuse my hesitation as a lack of want — just a lack of acceptance that any of this can actually be consensual. Setting aside the fact that the whole contract is illegal because it involves slavery, ‘Q’ isn’t exactly your rightful, legal name...” Bond paused, stopped by Q’s disbelieving expression. “What?”

“You’re serious,” Q finally said. “Not consensual? What could you possibly be thinking? Hidden armed guards in the walls, ready to shoot anyone who tried to leave?”

“What can I be thinking? This is slavery. Degradation. Humiliation. How can I possibly think anything else, Q?” he challenged.

“You’re the first person who’s ever bought me who didn’t want me,” Q snapped back. “If I’d wanted this, I would have an office job where I’m just another coder in a cubicle, trying to find one-night stands that don’t bore me to tears.”

Bond watched Q, cataloguing his body language. Q was angry, but there was more to it. He wasn’t embarrassed; it was the opposite, in fact. He was proud.

*Insulted*, Bond realised with some shock.

However much he wanted to believe that Q wasn’t here of his own volition, that didn’t seem to be the case. If Q were here under duress, he most likely would have jumped at the opportunity to bargain with an MI6 agent to eliminate whatever problem stood between him and his freedom.
More than that, Q wasn’t arguing the merits of an owner/slave relationship or the system itself. He was insulted that Bond would question his lifestyle choice.

Struggling to rethink everything he thought he’d understood about Q, Bond turned and closed the lid of the laptop. He’d deal with TJ later. Quietly, he said to Q, “I’m sorry. I think you can understand how I might have drawn the wrong conclusions. But the fact is, I’m here for a reason. And I need your help.” He paused. “If you’d be willing.”

Q stared at him, studying his expression. “There won’t be another regents’ sale for three months. I don’t want to wait.”

Bond considered, pleased that Q hadn’t actually said no. “The cruise is thirty days. Stay with me for ten. We’ll catch the bad guys, and you’ll still have more than enough time to —” he swallowed — “to find someone else.”

“Bad guys,” Q repeated, all but rolling his eyes in exasperation. “There aren’t — No one is here under duress,” he protested. “The Marketplace has existed for more than two hundred years. You’re wrong about it, whatever you —”

“I meant whoever infiltrated your organisation. I didn’t come here to shut down the Marketplace,” Bond interrupted. And it was true — that wasn’t his primary intent. Whether it was a by-product of his investigation or not remained to be seen. “I’m here because of a massive terrorist operation.”

Q’s eyes widened. “A what? Here? As in, here?” he asked sharply.

“Yes,” Bond said firmly. “Big money, excellent connections, an international presence, a habit of staying far, far under the radar. I’m sure you can think of a dozen ways a terrorist can use an organization with those qualifications for its own purposes.”

“Oh.” Q stared at him and sat down on the edge of the bed absently, his anger entirely replaced by apprehension. “We have to tell someone. Who is it? Do you know?” he demanded tensely.

“Q,” Bond said calmly, taking a step forward. “This is what I do. I don’t know who it is yet, which is why we can’t tell anyone. With your skills, you can help me get rid of the threat much more quickly and efficiently. And trust me, I will.”

“Is this even safe? I mean, you can — Look at you — I’ve never been in a fight in my life —”

This was much more familiar, and Bond knew exactly how to deal with a slightly panicked, beautiful creature. He took the last step forward that brought them within arm’s reach, and set his hand on Q’s shoulder. Q met his eyes nervously. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” Bond said, conveying gentle but firm reassurance in every way he knew how.

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” Q said with a weak attempt at a smile, “we’re on a boat. A boat going to Alaska. I’ve seen enough movies to know that this won’t end well.”

“Those were movies by Americans, featuring American cowboys. I’m the British Secret Intelligence Service, Q. MI6 does things a little differently.” Bond squeezed his shoulder and let the lie roll effortlessly off his tongue.

Q huffed, not quite laughing. “Yes, because you seem so harmless. And it’s Navy SEALs, not cowboys on boats.”

“Trust me, they’re the same.” Bond made a mental note not to mention his Royal Navy service. “I promise to do my best to keep you safe. Will you help?”
“I won’t have to shoot anyone, will I?"

“This isn’t a movie, Q. I don’t have any guns with me,” Bond answered genially, sliding his hand down from Q’s shoulder to his upper arm.

Q took a deep breath and nodded, closing his eyes for a moment. “All right. What do you need me to do?”

“TJ hasn’t had any luck cracking the system here. I need you to do it, and to sift through the financials to look for anything suspicious,” Bond said with relief.

Q huffed, glancing at the laptop. “TJ’s an idiot,” he said absently, and then gave Bond a startled look. “I’m sorry. That was unkind.”

Bond laughed. “Why do you think I snapped you up when I had the opportunity? But I promise not to tell your biggest fan you think so.”

Wincing, Q said, “So long as he doesn’t ask for an autograph. All right, I need time to think. Do you mind if I use the espresso machine?”

“Would you like me to come with you?” Bond offered.

“Did you install a bomb in it?” Q teased a bit weakly. He stood, and Bond stepped back to give him room. “I’ll be fine. Just please don’t disturb me while I’m working.”

Bond nodded. “All right. I need to do some work on my laptop as well. Would —”

“Oh, god no,” Q interrupted, looking at the laptop in question. “It’s not secure. They’ll find out about us. Just tell me what you need done, and I’ll do it.”

Bond had never had much of a problem with TSS before; some of the people, like TJ and Danielle, he even admired. But in the face of Q’s brilliance, it was hard not to lose faith in their abilities. “I have photographs I need to transfer from my camera to the laptop. They’re surveillance I took when I was investigating the terrorist who led me here. I need to see if any of the faces look familiar.” He paused. “What if I disabled the wireless connection while I worked? Would that be all right?”

Relaxing a bit, Q nodded. “If there are any security cameras onboard, I’ll pull the footage. Do you have facial recognition software, or should I get some?”

“I do have the software, but something tells me you’d prefer to use your own.”

“I’ll find something efficient,” Q promised. He cast one last suspicious glance at the laptop before he stepped around Bond and went out into the living room, right to the espresso machine on the bar.

Bond smiled to himself as he retrieved his camera, the memory of Q under his fingertips fresh in his mind. In some ways, his life had become much, much easier — with Q’s help, he probably wouldn’t be stuck here for a month after all. In other ways, he thought, watching Q move with quiet grace by the coffee machine, his life had become harder. How the hell was he supposed to resist temptation now?
Except to pull shots of espresso, Q didn’t move from the window seat, where he worked on his laptop in silence until noon. Then he stopped long enough to call room service for coffee — as if he needed more — and ‘whatever pastries are available’. Bond couldn’t help but wonder when he was going to reach some sort of critical caffeine threshold. Sugar and carbs would do nothing to negate all the coffee he was drinking. Bond called the guest desk and asked them to add sandwiches to the lunch delivery, but Q ignored them in favour of the desserts.

Watching Q through the bedroom door suddenly became that much more distracting as he typed one-handed and licked icing off his fingers.

When the camera was finally in the process of transferring its contents to the laptop, Bond sat back, trying not to dwell on the fact that he had purchased a willing slave — that Q wanted the sort of humiliating servitude Bond had witnessed on the upper deck. Q wanted to be treated less than human, wanted to be punished for misbehaviour, wanted to be used sexually. Bond tried to wrap his mind around it and failed, though his treacherous body found the idea of such willingness appealing.

Finally, as the skies outside went from twilight to full darkness — and Q had still barely moved when he checked again — Bond decided he had to intervene. Q needed to eat, and Bond had the perfect excuse to take him to dinner: an update on his work.

“Any preference for where to go for dinner?” he asked Q. Though he hadn’t spoken loudly, his voice was shockingly loud in the room that hadn’t heard much more than keyboard clicks in the last several hours. Q didn’t look up from his laptop.

“Room service is fine,” he said dismissively, still typing.

Bond stood in the doorway between the two rooms and observed for long moments.

“I’ve seen TSS techs say the same thing, working with the same diet you’ve been indulging in, only to land themselves in Medical for the effort. You need sustenance of the non-sugar variety. But you may choose the restaurant.”

Q looked up, blinked at the window as if surprised by the darkness, and reached for the empty plate at the foot of the cot next to him. “I’m —” He put the plate back down, ran a finger through the crumbs, and licked it clean with a muffled, “I’m fine. Do you want more coffee?”

“Fine now, yes,” Bond said, trying and failing not to stare at Q’s fingers and mouth. “Not so much later. Which eating area do you prefer?”

“Oh. Um, whichever,” Q said, licking a last couple of crumbs off his thumb. “Let me just start some downloads. Or should I call for reservations first?”

“Why don’t you call for reservations after you start the downloads,” Bond said, knowing it would force Q to select the restaurant. “But not the main dining hall, please.”

Q nodded, resuming typing with both hands for a few minutes. Just as Bond considered reminding him that they should probably eat dinner before breakfast tomorrow morning, Q put the laptop down on the floor and stood, cracking his back. He went to the desk side of the bar, where he set a hand on the phone and looked through the day’s schedule.

“There’s a shibari demonstration scheduled for the lounge at nine. Did you want to see that?”

Bond froze, trying to push away the immediate image of Q’s pale skin under red knotted rope. He couldn’t rationalise or even understand slavery, consensual or not, but bondage was something else entirely — something he’d enjoyed in the past, with the right partner. He needed to maintain his
cover as a member of the Marketplace and a new slave owner, and a shibari demonstration would be far easier for him to stomach than anything more harmful or demeaning for those involved.

He nodded, casually saying, “I think that could be interesting.”

Q looked back at him, a bit hesitant. “The demonstration will probably be sexual,” he warned. “And not... restricted by gender.”

Wondering what Q was thinking, Bond said, “It doesn’t bother me if it doesn’t bother you.”

“I spent four months in Japan, if you recall,” Q said as he picked up the phone. Then he looked back at Bond, asking, “Did you want one seat or two?”

One seat or two, Bond mentally repeated, refusing to think about watching a live demonstration of sensual bondage with Q on his knees beside the chair, playing the role of a willing, available sex slave.

He shook his head and took a deep breath. “Two, please.”

Q turned his attention back to the phone, avoiding looking at Bond. He quickly scheduled dinner at eight, confirmed that they’d be able to keep their seats for the show at nine, and then went for the wardrobes in the foyer, where he sorted through Bond’s suits before he took out one in conservative dark blue. He examined Bond’s selection of shirts and ties before making his choices. He carried them past Bond to lay out on the foot of the bed.

“If you shower, I can shave you,” he said, giving a critical look to the shadow of stubble on Bond’s jaw, as if he weren’t sporting the same faint growth on his own face.

Bond looked down at the clothing choices, his pleasure at finding Q’s selection flawless only somewhat mitigated by his discomfort at being served. He watched Q, evaluating his expression as he balanced his desire for flirtation and contact with that discomfort. Q — who was watching him expectantly, without any hint of reticence or embarrassment — wasn’t making it any easier for him to resist, and finally Bond’s hedonism (assured by Q’s obvious desire to serve) won out.

“All right,” he said simply, and turned to shower.

He didn’t take his time, scrubbing up and rinsing quickly in case Q wanted a shower of his own. Deciding it unwise to tempt fate, Bond redressed in his trousers from earlier, before opening the bathroom door to let Q in. Bond had already wetted the soap, and Q sat Bond down on the tiny stool by the vanity before he carefully brushed the lather over Bond’s throat and jaw.

Watching an unknown pick up his straight razor was unnerving, but Bond trusted his instincts; Q wasn’t likely to hurt a fly, much less to cut Bond’s throat. He worked in silence, his touch gentle and skilled. He was entirely focused on his task, just as he’d been all day while working on his laptop, and Bond could hardly reconcile the two. How could Q find any satisfaction from this — something Bond could easily have done for himself?

After he finished the first shaving pass, he ran a finger up against the grain of Bond’s beard, asking, “Did you want a second pass, or is this sufficient?”

“This should be fine,” Bond said with a reassuring smile. “Thank you, Q. Excellent work.”

“Thank you,” Q said, seeming genuinely pleased. He turned to the sink to clean up. “I’ll be ready to go shortly. Your dinner suit was dry cleaned. It’s hanging in your wardrobe. It’s too formal to wear in the lounge, even with those lapels, unless you’d prefer it?”
“I think what you’ve already selected is quite sufficient.” Bond quietly padded from the bathroom to the bedroom to look a look at the suit again, hesitating. “I’ll wait to change until you’ve started your shower.”

“Did you want help?” Q offered, stopping at the doorway.

Yes, Bond thought before he could stop himself, though he managed not to actually say it aloud. “I can manage, thank you. Wouldn’t want to be late. You go shower.”

Q nodded and slipped out of the bedroom, returning a minute later with a black pinstriped suit, which he brought into the bathroom. Bond heard the sound of the shower start again.

The door between them suddenly seemed very thin as Bond stripped and tried (though not very hard) to avoid imagining a very wet, very attractive Q in the shower. His shower. His slave, he caught himself thinking for a brief moment.

He stabbed his arms into his shirtsleeves and pushed the thought away.

The first time that Bond had actually been able to make Q happy so far was when Bond had allowed Q to shave him. Now that Bond was nearly certain that Q was here of his own free will, he allowed himself to dwell on the sort of person who would allow himself to be subjugated so completely; to live to serve.

Of course, it wasn’t really that much of a stretch if one replaced an ‘owner’ with other, more traditional entities. What did Bond live for if not to serve his country? He’d given everything — his body, his mind, his free will — to England. He’d died for England, even if it didn’t stick, and he’d do it again.

Bond listened as the shower shut off. Q’s earlier words came back to him as he quickly exchanged his worn trousers for the pair Q had chosen for him. ‘You’re the first person who’s ever bought me that didn’t want me,’ Q had said. How would Bond have felt if he’d offered his life to the country he wanted so desperately to serve, only to be rejected and told his desire to serve was wrong?

Bond was still evaluating the shift in his thinking when Q emerged from the bathroom. In marked contrast to the previous night, when he’d followed Bond on a leash, naked except for a collar, he looked like any gorgeous young man dressed for a date. Only the collar hanging over his tie, showing the lock and tag that had Bond’s false name on it, marked him as anything else.

As was his habit, he looked down, but this time, because Bond was watching for it, he caught the way Q’s eyes flicked over him, taking in the details of how he’d dressed. Apparently it either met with Q’s approval or he chose not to say anything; he simply walked past Bond to add the discarded clothes to the pile he already carried, and brought them all out to the foyer.

Then he came back, now carrying the cigarette case Bond had left on the dresser, and offered him one. “You won’t be able to smoke in the lounge.”

Bond nodded as he accepted the cigarette. “Shall we walk while I smoke? Give us a another chance to memorise faces?”

Q pocketed the cigarettes and offered Bond a light, again using his own lighter. “Memorise faces?”

“You don’t think our last walk was just an excuse to get you some vitamin D, now do you?” Bond asked after he accepted the light. “As useful as facial recognition software is, I prefer to know who I’m in close quarters with.”

“Humans colour their observations through experience. Only a computer can be close to neutral,
save for the programmer’s own biases. Enough iterations of adaptive learning could theoretically
eliminate that bias, but it’s untested.”

“Wouldn’t adaptive learning mean that the interface itself would develop its own bias? Make
assumptions based on past experiences or the probability of data?” Bond offered his arm to Q again,
and was pleased that he accepted without hesitation. He led them out of the suite. “Besides, I can’t
just carry around that sort of equipment and use it every time I need to be able to recognise faces.
There isn’t any substitute for old-fashioned legwork, Q.”

“Your expectations bias your findings,” Q countered as they stopped at the lift just down the hall
from the suite. “You analyse behaviour, body language, and words through the filter of whatever it is
you’re seeking. Either the data fits your parameters or it doesn’t — and those parameters change with
whatever you expect or want at the moment. It’s not a conscious process.” He looked at Bond,
frowning a bit, and said more thoughtfully, “A simple remote wearable camera, smartphone, and
voice command interface is all you’d need, and it would bypass modifications in behaviour meant to
trick the observer’s mind.”

As they stepped into the lift, Bond glanced at Q, thinking about TSS. He wondered if there would be
any way to bring Q in, to encourage a shift from serving a person to serving a country. Or if the
fundamental, interpersonal relationship aspect of the owner/slave arrangement was just too difficult to
replace.

Well, he had ten days to think about it, to try and win Q over.

“I’d suggest sending the idea to TJ for further development, but something tells me you wouldn’t be
interested,” he said as they emerged from the lift onto the deck. It wasn’t particularly cold yet, but
Bond pulled Q just a little closer anyway.

“I can write up a basic specification for you, but it would be pointless without the code,” Q said,
responding to the tension in Bond’s arm by pressing against his side, without hanging on him or
interfering with his ability to walk — two things Bond, as a fighter, hated. “And there would need to
be data transfer speed improvements. A dedicated server for analysis — the actual proto-AI would be
housed elsewhere, of course. You can’t carry that kind of computing power in your pocket without
getting into theoretical biological modifications, and those aren’t safe to implant yet for more than a
few months. A bit outside my expertise, unless I were to read up on them more. It could be useful,
though, for other applications. Security, mostly.”

“You know, it wasn’t all that long ago that people like you were excited about the concept of
quantum computers. Small enough to be a crystal in your pocket. Whatever happened to that
notion?”

“Two months ago,” Q said. “It’s huge — a phosphorous atom — but it is a working transistor. I
know one of the scientists on the project.”

“Do you?” Bond didn’t think it wise to admit that he’d seen Q’s email, so he fell back on information
that was readily available in his file. “Do you keep up with colleagues from your alma mater?”

“I stay up-to-date with current developments in related fields.” He glanced at Bond. “My continuing
education has always been a non-negotiable part of my contracts.”

“And would that be something you’d be interested in working on? An atom-based transistor?” Bond
asked, not pressing. Q’s evasiveness was as natural to him as breathing.

“Only if required by my master,” Q said with a little shrug. “My interest lies more in coding
intelligence and self-awareness.”

“Do you have any idea how frightening that sounds to a layperson like me?” Bond asked with a smile. “Not to mention, of course, that people of my generation grew up with Isaac Asimov’s tales of AI. And don’t forget the Terminator movies. And the Matrix.”

“Yes, let’s learn our science from pop culture,” Q said dryly. “Next you’ll accuse me of wanting to create Daleks — which are absurdly inefficient. Given their resources, I could do far better.”

Bond stared at him with mock horror. “You’re just a supervillain waiting to happen, aren’t you? Tell you what. You don’t judge me by American spy movies, and I won’t judge you by pop culture representations of artificial intelligence. Deal?”

“I would make an excellent supervillain,” Q admitted rather smugly. “Aren’t you glad I’m not interested?”

Yes, because if you were, your name would probably land on my desk, Bond thought. But instead of saying it, he held Q’s arm tighter. “It’s an incredible relief.”

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Dinner was much easier than breakfast had been, especially once Q figured out precisely how to manage his reluctant owner. Q had never been successful at soft world dating, but he could manage basic courtesy, and Bond — Richard, he told himself, since they were out in public — was really very easy to read. He wanted assertion, confidence, and defiance in a way that was in violation of everything Q had taught himself over the last seven years. But biting snark had once been second-nature to him, a defence mechanism against schoolmates who thought him easy prey, and Q found himself slipping into his old bad habits with disturbing ease. He just hoped those habits would be easier to break than his renewed caffeine addiction.

The meal served at the lounge was excellent, a mock-casual serving of common American cuisine. Kobe beef burgers on ancient-grain buns with french fried heirloom potatoes were just the type of frivolous luxury Marketplace members enjoyed, and Q found himself torn between pleasure at actually sampling the cuisine — usually reserved for owners — and envying the slaves who were leashed at their owners’ feet. At least the food helped offset the caffeine from his Coke and his after-dinner cappuccino, served with a ridiculously indulgent molten chocolate cake.

The only discordant note in the evening, in fact, was his heightened awareness that somewhere on this ship was an enemy, faceless and unknown, who might not hesitate to go after Bond — and perhaps Q, by extension. That thought encouraged him to stay close to Bond, who surely could handle himself in a conflict, even if he wasn’t carrying a weapon of any kind. He hoped that it didn’t make Bond uncomfortable, since Bond’s intimate, familiar touches were just part of his role as Richard Sterling. Really, he was an excellent actor, letting only a few hints of discomfort show in his body language.

After the last tables received their dessert servings, the lights in the lounge dimmed. Three spotlights illuminated, picking out bright spots on polished steel frames shaped like room-sized cubes. In the centre of each one was a kneeling figure, cloaked and hooded in black cloth. Music started, a slow tribal drum beat at first, and Q leaned forward, realising this was going to be a performance and not simply a how-to demonstration.
There were three artists, not just one, all of them radiating confident dominance despite the collars they wore. Each one in turn revealed his or her slave with a flourish, snapping away the black cloaks. The kneeling slaves were surrounded by coils of rope — black for the one in the centre, white to one side, red to the other. The bindings were done slowly, timed to the music, every move so perfectly choreographed that Q forgot to breathe. It had been three months since he’d last experienced anything like that, and the small, rational corner of his mind that wasn’t caught up in the performance wondered if he could coax one of the artists into a private demonstration later.

As the bondage progressed, there were a few murmurs of criticism from the other tables at how the artists seemed to be casually throwing ropes over the frames, all without lifting their subjects. Even Q couldn’t help but wonder; the lighting made it difficult for him to put together a mental map of where each rope was in relation to the others and what would happen when they pulled the ropes tight.

By the time the music stopped, Q was distinctly uncomfortable, all too aware of just how long it had been since he’d had any real intimacy at all. He felt like one of the slaves in the show, tangled up in meaningless coils of rope, anticipating without any promise of release.

And then it came, at least for them, when all three of the artists pulled on the free ends of their ropes in unison. The coils untwisted, lifting each slave’s body smoothly and gracefully, with the ropes carefully measured to make the transition seem like a flying dance. Even the jaded Marketplace audience applauded as the artists fixed the ropes and backed away, leaving only the bound, suspended slaves spotlighted.

Q stole a glance at Bond, who was watching with admiration but wasn’t completely focused on the stage. His eyes would wander from the stage to the audience and back to the stage, clapping when appropriate and occasionally sending an appraising glance Q’s way, but also taking in the staff and people in the room.

When the people on stage were suspended, Bond turned to Q. “During your time in Japan, did you learn to be the artist, or the one being tied up?”

God, he wanted to talk. Of course he did. Q pulled his thoughts into a sort of order and turned his attention to his not-quite-owner, reminding himself that he needed to be observed as being perfectly behaved, simply on the off-chance that his future owner was somewhere in this crowd.

“I have basic familiarity with the ties, but mostly I was the subject being bound,” Q said, keeping his voice neutral, free of the desire that threatened to wreck his focus all over again as he remembered.

Bond’s gaze was a sharp, nearly tangible thing as his eyes travelled Q’s body, seeing and assessing clearly, even in the dark lounge. Bond didn’t answer, but hummed briefly before turning back to look at the stage, freeing Q to do the same.

After another minute or two, the house lights came back up to a gentle, dim glow, and the audience was invited down to speak to the artists. Q distracted himself with his forgotten coffee, wondering how to best ask permission to not go back to the suite with Bond. At the speed of the ship’s internet, his laptop would be downloading through the night. There was nothing more for him to do — especially not distracted as he was.

“Do you feel better, now that you have something to offset the sugar in your system?” Bond asked. He didn’t appear to be ready to go yet — he sat back in his chair, icy blue eyes still moving from him to the stage to the audience and back again.

The bland, formulaic answer that came from voice training — a crutch he desperately needed at the moment — nearly slipped out, before he reminded himself that Bond favoured actual conversation.
Then he almost gave the same answer anyway; feeling ‘better’ implied that he hadn’t felt well before. Too many seconds passed before he finally said, “The quality of food served at Marketplace events is always excellent.”

“It certainly is.” Bond watched him for a moment before asking, “Is there anything else you’d like?”

*Any of the artists*, he thought irrationally, not that he’d ever say it aloud. But he did get up the courage to answer, “There’s no further work I can do tonight, without the tools I’m downloading. Do you have any need of me this evening?”

Much to Q’s surprise, Bond didn’t seem to be caught off guard at the almost-request at all. He gave Q a small smile as he straightened in his chair, “No, I don’t think so. Do you have my mobile number, just in case you need me?”

“Yes, Richard.” It slipped out automatically, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. It was his cover name, after all, and a perfectly valid answer, formulaic or not. And it wasn’t a lie; Q had memorised all of Bond’s contact information that he’d been able to access in his few minutes poking around MI6’s files.

He decided to save them both the awkwardness of waiting for a proper dismissal. He pushed back his chair and stood, saying, “Have a pleasant evening,” before he escaped. He was tempted to go down to the stage area, but there were too many owners for his comfort. Instead, he’d go down to the barracks on deck three and ask about the artists. With luck, they were free to take partners of their own choosing.

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Bond watched as Q retreated, fully aware of where Q was going but not willing to stop him. As much as he wouldn’t have minded bringing Q back to his own bed, he knew it was probably incredibly unwise. He needed Q to be cooperative and useful, and Bond didn’t yet have a good enough grasp of him to ensure that he’d be able to make Q happy in bed. If he wanted to kneel and be whipped until he was bleeding, neither one of them would end the evening satisfied.

Instead, Bond pushed it out of his mind and went back to observing and cataloguing his fellow patrons of the admittedly impressive show. Several of the ‘owners’ were up front speaking with the artists, testing their own knots on the ropes and running their hands over the knots on the still-suspended slaves’ skin. The slaves didn’t seem to mind it — their eyes were shut as they floated above the floor, and Bond wondered if they could really be as comfortable as they seemed.

After a few more minutes of observation, he decided it was probably time to leave. Without the threat of Q coming in and startling him out of a nightmare, Bond felt entirely justified in making full use of his small bar to drink himself into a light state of unconsciousness. If he was going to spend the night alone, he might as well take advantage of it, he thought to himself.

The walk back to his suite was an uneventful one, though Bond had to consciously avoid thinking about the loss of his companion on his arm. Q was his own person. Bond told himself he should be pleased that Q was off catering to his own desires for what was apparently the first time in months, but still the suite felt empty without him.
Day Four

Alert despite the scotch that had helped him sleep, Bond opened his eyes at the first soft click of the suite door. It was still dark outside the glass balcony doors. He checked his mobile and saw it was just before four in the morning. He heard the soft rattle of the curtains over the foyer wardrobes, and though Q was trying to be quiet, Bond caught every whisper of fabric as he changed clothes.

The sliding bedroom door was open. Bond watched Q’s shadow cross the living room to the cot on the far side. He listened to the springs as Q settled down on the mattress. There was no glow of the laptop; Q didn’t even go near it. He simply lay down.

Bond remembered that Q had said something about downloads both before dinner and before he left to find companionship; the fact that Q didn’t even check their status spoke more to his exhaustion than any visual check Bond might want to do. So he left him to sleep, and turned his attention to the files that TJ had sent just an hour earlier.

They were background checks on the passengers that Bond had been able to identify by name so far (TJ still hadn’t had any luck cracking security enough to get a roster), and after a couple of hours of reading, Bond was still no closer to identifying a potential target. The checks were almost disgustingly clean. The dusky pink of the sunrise through the patio door let Bond know he should probably switch from alcohol to coffee. He’d thought ahead this time, fortunately, and changed into the fresh set of clothes he’d brought into the bedroom with him before he’d retired for the evening. He slipped out without disturbing Q, still sleeping soundly under the blanket, to get a coffee from the mercifully deserted upper deck cafe. He tried to keep his thoughts focused on the mission rather than the vision of the vulnerable genius sleeping on the cot as he took a sunrise walk along the upper deck.

He debated bringing a coffee for Q as well when he came back, but decided not to on the off chance that Q would prefer espresso. He tried to be quiet when he slipped back into the suite, but it turned out to be unnecessary — Q was awake and dressed, damp hair falling over his glasses.

He moved the laptop aside and rose from the window seat a bit stiffly. “Good morning, Richard,” he said, his voice softer and more natural than Bond had ever seen, accompanied for the first time with what looked like a genuine, open smile.

“Good morning, Q,” Bond answered, returning the smile. He didn’t bother to correct Q’s use of his cover name — it served a useful purpose, after all. He almost asked if Q had enjoyed his evening, but decided that would be in rather poor taste. “Would you like some breakfast?”

He might have expected a protest about wanting to get back to work. Instead, Q said obligingly, “If you’d like,” and abandoned the laptop, starting across the room. “Should I make reservations somewhere?”

Now Bond’s curiosity was truly piqued. He knew as well as anyone what a good shag could do for a person, but this didn’t seem quite the same thing. There was something sated about Q that didn’t come just from getting off. It was something else. From where he stood at the doorway, he watched Q carefully, looking for... he didn’t know what, exactly. “Your choice, if you’d like to go out. Did your downloads complete successfully?”

“Yes, Richard,” Q answered, picking up the phone. He sounded positively cheerful as he reserved
an aft table at the restaurant on the sixth deck, specifying two guests as he had the previous day. Then he hung up and walked to Bond, saying, “They can seat us right away, if you’d like.”

Bond smiled and held out his arm. “Well then, shall we?”

The sixth deck restaurant was indoors, so Q didn’t go to the wardrobe to get jackets. Instead, as was becoming habit, he took Bond’s arm and let Bond lead him towards the door. Bond glanced at him, noting the dark circles under his eyes — two nights in a row of insufficient sleep, coupled with working too long on the computer yesterday — but Q’s hand on Bond’s arm was steady, not shaking from fatigue or the aftermath of too much caffeine. As Bond opened the suite door, he glanced at the long, pale fingers on his arm.

Then he saw the faint gloss of ointment over reddened, raw skin, just visible where the cuff of his shirt rode up.

Bond stopped, a sudden adrenaline reaction rushing through his system, completely at odds with the calm way he managed to carefully slide the suite door shut again. Q gave him a puzzled look. Bond slowly took a step back, turning to stand in front of Q, not quite fully releasing his arm.

Bond let his eyes drop again from Q’s face down to his wrist, pulling his arm straight. He unbuttoned the cuff so he could push the sleeve up further. About six inches further up from the marks on the wrist were another set, equally as red and angry. “What happened?” he asked in a low growl.

Q tensed, obviously repressing the urge to flinch away. He looked down and nervously said, “I — I made certain it wouldn’t interfere with my duties to you. I can type without any issues.”

“What? No!” Q interrupted, horrified. He shook his head, glancing up at Bond before he dropped his eyes again and quickly said, “This wasn’t — I wanted this. I’m sorry. I won’t let it happen again.”

“Who attacked you? Why didn’t you —”

Bond looked up at Q’s expression, only to be distracted by a bruise peeking out from under his collar. Bond gently pushed the fabric aside, revealing the thumb-shaped mark, and frowned darkly. “You don’t need to protect anyone, Q.” he said in a low voice, brushing his finger gently on the undamaged skin next to the bruise. “I can make sure they never hurt you again.”

Q closed his eyes and took a shaky breath. Then he looked directly at Bond and said, “He won’t, because I probably won’t see him again. I asked for this. In fact, I wanted to do more, but I knew I needed to be here for you this morning. This was entirely consensual.”

Bond nearly growled, fighting with himself to not provoke Q. He tore his eyes away from Q’s damaged skin, meeting his gaze, searching for any hint whatsoever that Q was lying. He didn’t seem to be — he wasn’t showing any of the signs of a lie — but there was something there, reminding Bond of the distance between them previous morning. Q’s content, happy mood was shattered; he’d gone defensive and stiff, controlling even the rate of his breath as if to hide whatever was going on inside him.

Bond took a deep breath and a step back, moving one hand away from Q’s collar, though he didn’t let go of his hand. Q’s fingers twitched; his pulse raced in defiance of how evenly he was breathing. Bond pushed back his vengeful desire to hunt down whoever had hurt Q — his Q, a possessive voice inside him growled — with the acknowledgment that Q wasn’t acting like someone who had been attacked. He had been acting satisfied.

Bond didn’t want to make the same mistake he’d made last time in assuming anything about what Q
wanted or needed; if Q truly had asked for this, Bond didn’t want to insult or shame him for it. But he needed Q to know that if it hadn’t been consensual, Bond could fix it for him. Prevent it from happening again.

“All right,” he started, holding Q’s gaze. “If this is truly what you wanted, I have no problem with it. But I need you to know that if anyone hurts you against your will, no matter how powerful or rich or connected, I will take care of them for you.”

“Thank you, Richard,” Q said automatically, looking down, his body’s subtlest clues at odds with his calm voice and absolute lack of expression on his face. Bond could clearly read the urge to put distance between them, probably to retreat to his laptop, though he knew Q wouldn’t even suggest it. In one brief exchange, Q had fallen back into a pattern of obedience, rather than self-assurance. Bond was disappointed, but had absolutely no idea how to fix it.

Bond took one more step back, another deep breath, and held out his arm again. “All right,” he repeated. “Breakfast.”

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Being the youngest student in class — youngest by five or more years — was bad enough, without being small, thin, and submissive. Invisibility had become Q’s only defence, invisibility and far too much self-denial to be healthy. Because of Q’s age, he’d been given a solitary dorm room in university, and in the dead of night, with his door not just locked but barricaded with his chair, he’d experimented and fantasised about what he thought, in an uninformed, adolescent way, he wanted. Night-time was for desire, letting go of the concept of ‘normal’. On waking, though, he’d hide away the evidence of what he’d done, sick with worry that he wasn’t normal and never would be — that something was inherently wrong with him, broken in a way that even doctors wouldn’t be able to fix.

It had taken years for him to finally learn that there were other perfectly ‘normal’ people like him, people who’d been just as unsuccessful with relationships full of nice dinners, boring movies, and even more boring kisses. The first time he’d let someone else tie him up, he’d come with just a single touch.

The next morning, he’d been so disgusted with himself that he’d wanted to die.

But by that afternoon, after locking himself in his room all morning, he’d rationalised what he was feeling, at least enough to function. He went back to class the next day and managed not to think about any of it until the following weekend, and then the one after that, until no matter how bad things got on Sunday or Monday morning, he learned to be okay with what he wanted on weekends.

Then, he found the Marketplace, and he accepted that there wasn’t anything wrong with him. He never forgot that self-loathing, but he hadn’t had to face it until now, more than seven years later.

Mechanically, he made it to the restaurant, though he had no idea what he said in answer to Bond’s conversational attempts. It must have been acceptable, though; Bond never gave him a second look, not even when he asked to excuse himself at the loo near the kitchen.

There, he locked the stall door and leaned against the cool metal wall, trying and failing to find equilibrium. He thought he’d been trained to deal with anything from an owner’s anger to an
outsider’s questions about why he was wearing a necklace locked around his throat. The only thing he hadn’t been trained for was this: someone who wasn’t even from the soft world, the world of BDSM clubs and kinky weekends and a vanilla lifestyle the rest of the week. Even that he could have dealt with.

But this? Someone who took one look at the marks on Q’s body and just assumed — without even giving him the consideration to think he would have said something if he’d been attacked. What kind of idiot did Bond think he was?

Obviously, one incapable of taking care of himself. But even that, Q could have accepted, however gracelessly.

It was the condemnation that cut right through his self-confidence, bleeding him far worse, far more painfully than anything he’d experienced since joining the Marketplace.

Not normal, whispered that voice in the back of his head, the one he thought had been silenced forever. He told himself not to listen, but the old fears had sunk claws into him, stripping away the fantasy to show an ugly side that was no more real, but far more vile.

What the hell was he doing here, playing games at ‘selling’ himself as a slave? He had a PhD. He was educated, gifted, and had no need to pretend just so he could indulge in a sick fetish that had no place in the real world. He wasn’t twenty anymore, caught up in a stupid rebellion against society. He was an adult, well-published, easily able to bring in six figures a year without any effort at all. Everything here — everything about the Marketplace — was nothing more than a group illusion, a massive game of ‘let’s pretend’, giving a small group of rich, privileged people a place to play out their fantasies. There was nothing — nothing — stopping him from walking out of the bathroom and finding some way off the ship and back to the real world.

He leaned his head back against the door to the stall and breathed, closing his eyes, fighting back the self-loathing. He told himself that this was nothing new. He’d been here before. Instead of remembering this morning, he made himself remember last night, and though it seemed garish and sick and twisted at first, he forced himself to really remember.

It had been good. It had been damned good, a thrilling high of sensation and endorphins and the rush of sexual pleasure that he couldn’t get without... without everything that Bond had implicitly condemned. And that wasn’t normal, no. Statistically, it really wasn’t. But nothing was normal about him, not from his earliest IQ tests to his facility with computers to his beliefs about the ethics of self-learning, self-aware computer systems. His sexuality was just one more ‘not normal’.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the far wall without really seeing it. He could leave. He could go find Chris and explain everything. Whether ‘Richard Sterling’ existed in records or not, Chris would believe Q wasn’t lying. He’d help Q break the contract. And though emotionally the idea of being sold again (being vulnerable again) was repulsive, intellectually he knew that this would pass. He’d wanted this for too long to let an outsider’s scorn stand in his way.

Or he could go back to Bond. Give him nine days more, as promised. He could treat it like a vanilla world business transaction, and remind Bond that he had no right to even discuss Q’s sexuality, much less criticise it, outwardly or implicitly. By Bond’s own terms, Q was nothing more than a contract employee, which was precisely how he should be treated — given the same consideration and respect as any contractor.

He got up and left the stall, feeling more balanced, if not actually better. He pulled off his glasses, tossed them on the counter, and ran water over his hands, tugging up his cuffs to cool the rope burns on his wrists. At the suite, he’d treated them with aloe found in the little first aid kit. Now, he let the
stinging pain sharpen the memory of last night.

He splashed water on his face, wishing he didn’t look half-undead from his lack of sleep. He was almost tempted to go down to the barracks and ask for somewhere to sleep, away from Bond, except that there was still a terrorist out there — one who might, by now, associate him with Bond. So his safest place was with Bond.

Nine days, he told himself, staring at his reflection. He’d got his PhD far ahead of anyone else’s predictions. He’d been published earlier than anyone had expected. There wasn’t a computer system in the world that he couldn’t hack, crack, or comprehend. There wasn’t anything he couldn’t do, if he set his mind to it.

He shoved the chain collar down under his shirt and did up the two buttons that he’d left open, hiding it completely. Bond didn’t need any reminders of the authority that he’d relinquished — and Q was done serving him in any way, other than this computer job.

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Bond waited quietly at the table Q had reserved for them, looking out at the ocean again instead of at the diners behind him. The truth of it was that Bond, who tended to think of himself as an extremely open-minded person, was simply uncomfortable. He couldn’t grasp Q’s desire to hand over his life to strangers, but he didn’t have to. Neither Q nor anyone else here needed him to understand or approve. He was the odd one here. The outsider. He didn’t need to understand any further than his mission required him to.

It was with uncharacteristic trepidation that he waited for Q to come back. Only with the benefit of his initial outrage gone was he able to evaluate their encounter more objectively. Q had been happy and relaxed and sated until Bond’s reaction to the marks. In his world of lies and secrets and blackmail and the worst of human behaviour, it made sense to jump to the worst of conclusions. But in this world of willing submission and forcefulness turned into art and something deeper, it was an insult. By questioning this world, Bond was questioning Q’s judgement and rationality.

What a fucking mess, he inwardly cursed.

He still needed Q. He still needed the technical genius to help crack the uncrackable security surrounding the Marketplace so he could identify and take down the terrorists that were hiding here. He’d have to make an apology, a promise to try harder, and finally — as honestly as he could — promise to leave the participants of this strange world in peace.

Bond braced himself as he saw Q walking towards him. The dampness around the edges of his face and hair hinted that Bond hadn’t been the only one trying to deal with unpleasant reactions. He waited until Q was sitting across from him before saying anything.

“It seems I owe you another apology,” Bond started. “I’m sorry.”

Q nodded steadily. “I think it would be best if we kept our relationship confined solely to business,” he said softly. “That will help us both maintain appropriate boundaries.”

Bond sighed with relief. Q wasn’t running, demanding to be released from his agreement, and that was very encouraging. “Of course. I’m grateful that you’re still willing to help me. I appreciate it.” He nodded toward the server who was coming with a tray of drinks. “I ordered you espresso and a
pot of tea. I hope that’s all right.”

“Thank you.” Q looked directly at him as though considering speaking, but he said nothing as the ship’s slave put down their drinks and took their breakfast orders. When Q ordered nothing more than toast, Bond took note but refrained from protesting. When the server left, Q turned back to Bond and said, “I recognise that it’s most likely safest for both of us if we maintain the fiction that your purchase of my contract was legitimate. However, I suggest that we minimise our interactions outside the suite as much as possible.”

Bond told himself that he had no right to the disappointment he felt, and nodded again. “That’s fair.” He didn’t want to be locked in the suite for another nine days with a coldly distant Q, but he’d certainly been in much less pleasant accommodations. He was also quite certain that no one would think it suspicious if he were to take walks and dine alone — and Q could, of course, advise him if it became a problem. “Have you had any luck so far,” he asked quietly, “speaking in general terms, of course?”

“I have access to the relevant local records,” Q said, pouring tea from the pot into the cup, before he started spooning in an unhealthy amount of sugar. “I’ll automate the process to extract usable imagery to minimise duplicates and speed up processing time. While that’s running, I’ll see what financial transactions I can find.”

“You can use my laptop if you prefer. I have no problems blaming it on TJ,” Bond deflected with a small smile. “But something tells me you’re not the type to be sloppy or slow enough to get caught.” He picked up the French press and poured himself a cup of coffee. While he enjoyed the first sip, he scanned the faces in the cafe, taking note not just of features, but expressions and body language. Once he set aside his initial reactions to the sight of adults naked and kneeling (and the disgust he’d originally held at the owners for causing it) he found it easier to tease out more subtle clues about personality.

The situation wasn’t perfect, no matter how hard they might have worked to idealise their fetishes and desires. He saw signs of discontent — boredom, actually, seemed to be the most common challenge the ‘slaves’ faced, judging by the way a lot of them seemed to retreat into idle silence when no one was paying attention to them. A few were actually seated at the tables, rather than on the floor, and some were chatting and interacting in a way that wouldn’t have made Bond look twice in any other restaurant, under any other circumstance. He couldn’t help but wonder if he’d passed people like this before. They were an international group, not at all limited to England and America.

“My laptop is more powerful.” Q said as he stirred his tea. Then he pushed the cup aside to cool and picked up the espresso, sipping cautiously at it. “This puts everything I want in jeopardy. Do you understand what it would mean, if I were caught?”

“I know a thing or two about putting everything on the line.” Of all things Bond might feel guilty about in his dealings with Q, asking his assistance wasn’t going to be one of them.

A hint of anger appeared in Q’s expression. He gave a slight, sharp nod. “Fine. I’ll let you know when I have anything more to report, or if there’s anything else that I need.”

Not an unexpected reaction, but regrettable anyway. “Excellent,” he responded in his best business-like tone. “I think I’ll take you back to the suite when we’re done here, and then I’ll go take advantage of the pool. Perhaps get to know some of our fellow passengers while I’m out. Is there any particular reason I should give for your absence?”

“Your orders.” He took another, longer drink of the espresso as though craving the caffeine. “Technically, you’re my owner. You can do as you like with me.”
“I think you’ve made your opinion on that particular subject clear,” he said, eyes traveling to where Q’s collar, with Bond’s false name on it, was now hidden.

Q sat back as if he’d been slapped. “I don’t need —” he began, before he cut off, taking a deep, tense breath. Much more quietly, he said, “I won’t have you criticising how I choose to live my life. You’ve made your feelings on my service perfectly clear, so you won’t have it except when necessary to maintain this fiction between us.”

Bond sighed and resisted the temptation to rub his temples. “I’ve already told you, you’re free to live your life as you see fit. I’m here to capture or kill a damn terrorist, whichever is the best available option, and that’s it. As soon as I’m gone, which I’m damn well hoping doesn’t take the full ten days, to be honest, you’ll be free to do as you please — or as others please, whatever the case may be. You’ll never have to see me again.”
Chapter 8

Day Seven

By the third day of his ‘arrangement’ with Q, Bond had taken to spending as much time out of the suite as possible. He told himself it was reconnaissance, though he knew that was a lie. Q was attractive and brilliant, and when he caught onto an idea or lost himself in his work, his expression turned unguarded, eyes alight and intense.

So, like a coward, Bond stayed away, unwilling to face the growing voice inside himself that urged him to *take*.

*Le Nautille* was at anchor outside a small natural harbour at the edge of Alaska, and many of the passengers had gone ashore for an excursion. Q had sequestered himself in the suite to work on deciphering the encryption around the ship’s financial records. The upper deck had an aft swimming pool that had been generally deserted in favour of the whirlpools forward of the bridge. The pool was heated, but in the icy Alaska spring air, the whirlpools were much more pleasant for relaxing. Not one to fear cold water, Bond took advantage of the full privacy to go swimming.

As Bond climbed up the ladder out of the pool, a familiar female voice said, “And here I thought I’d regret not going to see the bears.”

Bond accepted a warm, thick robe from the slave who was on duty — a slave who was apparently a certified lifeguard with emergency medical training — and turned to see Margaret looking him over. In contrast to the formal gown she’d worn at the auction, she wore a fuzzy cashmere sweater over jeans and hiking boots.

A week into the cruise, Bond was finally coming to terms with the fact that this was not a human trafficking ring, and he’d even got to know a few of the other owners. Now, as he looked at Margaret, he felt a twinge of guilt at his uncharitable first impressions of her.

She walked over to him, and he courteously extended a hand to steady her on the damp deck. She squeezed his hand, rose up on her toes to kiss his cheek, and said, “I’ve been wondering where you got off to. Don’t tell me that skinny young pet of yours has been keeping you busy,” she said, sneaking another glance at Bond’s chest.

Bond smiled back at her, closing the robe against the chill. “Not exactly,” he said as if confessing something. Bond was fully conscious that he needed to start laying the groundwork for abrogating their contract. It was a delicate balance between establishing that Q was an excellent slave and not putting himself in the unenviable position of being regarded with suspicion by the other owners. “As you know, I’m a first-time owner, and it’s a little more delicate a relationship than I’d initially imagined.”

“Nonsense. You’re probably being too hard on yourself. God knows I was,” she said, taking Bond’s arm in a way that reminded him uncomfortably of how he and Q used to walk through the ship together. “I was terrible at it until I stopped holding myself back — if you can imagine that,” she added with a little laugh. She headed for the deck chairs and released his arm to sit down. “Tell me all about it, dear. There’s nothing I haven’t heard.”

Helpful. Just what he needed. “Why don’t you tell me about your first? I may find that comforting,” he encouraged instead.
“It was 1963,” she said, remembering with the sort of clarity most people couldn’t reserve for last month. “I was off to the States — I told my parents I’d be seeing the States by Amtrak, their railroad, but I was far more interested in the Grateful Dead. They bought me Pamela as a companion. Safety in numbers and all that.”

“The Grateful Dead?” Bond asked, somewhat impressed. “I can hardly imagine it.”

“Care to see my tattoo? I do feel overdressed,” she teased, pointedly looking at his bare legs.

Bond chuckled. “Perhaps another time. Did Pamela get a tattoo as well?”

“Oh, god no. She was only a year older, but infinitely more mature. She was actually furious at me for sneaking out. Our relationship was awkward, though, because she belonged to me and my parents. So she was in my service, but also ordered to keep watch. Keep me safe in a foreign wilderness and all that. And god knows New York City back then was a delightful wilderness,” she added with a fond sigh. “But with Pamela, there was no clear ranking or authority. It was an utter disaster for everyone. I ended up cutting the trip short so we’d both stop being so miserable.”

Bond shook his head, smiling politely. “I’m not quite certain —”

“The point is,” she interrupted him sternly, “I got all of my mistakes out of the way with her. When I finally did buy my first slave, I knew what she expected from me. A firm hand, clear guidance, and my attention. A slave isn’t a houseplant that you can just leave in the corner and expect to flourish — and a houseplant doesn’t contribute meaningfully to your happiness either, unless you’re very odd. They need proper interaction: they give and we take, and everybody’s happy. So what are you stopping yourself from taking that puts you here in the freezing water all alone instead of in the whirlpool with that boy of yours?”

“I just don’t think we’re fundamentally compatible,” Bond hedged.

“There’s your first mistake. He’s a slave, not a — oh, what are they calling them? Civil partners? Don’t court him or try to win him over. Just give clear orders. And for love of god, dear, have fun with him. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

“Thank you, Margaret. You’ve been very helpful.” Perhaps too helpful. He couldn’t get the image of sharing the whirlpool with Q out of his head.

“Well, that certainly promised to be an uncomfortable situation, though it did have the advantage of laying the groundwork for the dissolution of their contract. He’d just have plan this out and take his cues from Q. “Sounds lovely,” he lied smoothly.

She smiled warmly at him and patted his arm as she stood. “I’ll see you tonight, then. Or if you’d rather, come to the spa with me. Most everyone’s off chasing bears” — she gestured to the wooded shoreline — “so there probably isn’t even a wait. A good massage will help you relax.”

“As wonderful as that sounds,” Bond said, standing, “I think I’ll pass. I have some work to take care of.” He leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek, carefully not breathing in her excessive perfume. “See you tonight.”
“I’ve finally got all the financial data,” Q said without looking up from his laptop as soon as Bond entered. “I was able to break most of the encryptions — banks aren’t as good at hiding the commercial origins of their encryption software as they’d like to think they are — but a few are giving me a bit of a challenge. I may have to resort to brute force.”

“Brute force?” Bond asked, a sudden, unbidden image of Q going at a vault with a hammer popping into his mind. “Does that mean I have to break into a bank?”

Q smirked. “If only it were that easy. I’m attempting every possible iteration of the encryption key. One will eventually open it.” He finally looked over at Bond, and then blinked. “You’re in a bathrobe?”

“I went for a swim. I did run into Margaret, who had some interesting suggestions regarding my outfit.”

A hint of colour crept into Q’s cheeks. “Most owners tend to be unrestrained in their observations,” he said somewhat delicately, and though he turned his attention back to his laptop, Bond couldn’t help but notice that his eyes first went to Bond’s clothes — or lack, as it were.

“So I’m finding. Something else interesting came from our conversation, other than her accompanying suggestion that I take advantage of both you and the whirlpools.” He stole a glance at Q, who was even more focused on his laptop now, before turning to dig around in the wardrobe. Q had stopped tending to Bond’s clothes, though if he set out his soiled clothes by the dresser, Q would put them out with his own for collection and dry cleaning every day.

“So somehow, I’m not surprised.”

Bond hummed thoughtfully as he took off the robe and laid it over the dresser. Then he turned to the wardrobe to find something casual and suitably warm. “I have started laying the groundwork for a clean break without any negative reflection on you,” he said, pulling out dark grey trousers and a blue jumper. “The backfire, at least in this case, is that she wants us to come to dinner with her so she can observe and suggest. We’ll need to plan appropriately.”

Q looked over at Bond, before he deliberately looked away. It took a moment for him to say, “There’s nothing to plan. She didn’t have a slave of her own. I can serve dinner and drinks. I assume room service is fine? There aren’t any cooking facilities I can use, I don’t think.”

Bond carried his clothes into the living room and rested his arms on the back of a chair, facing Q. “For you to get a new contract, we need you to appear flawless and me to be an inadequate owner. Margaret will see through anything but the best performance.”

“I trained with the best for six months,” Q said calmly, though the look he darted Bond’s way was anything but calm; his eyes flicked down to Bond’s bare chest the way Margaret’s had. “I can be perfect. And even if not, it’s one meal for two people. Whatever she expects to see, I can manage. You just be yourself.”

Bond stepped back from the chair, feeling suddenly uncomfortable, though he tried to hide it. “Right. I’m already sufficiently inadequate. That’s helpful. Still, if you think of any —”

“I didn’t mean it as an insult. I’m sorry,” Q interrupted. This time, he did manage to look at Bond, carefully not dropping his eyes below Bond’s face. “I meant that you’re inexperienced as an owner.
Any attempt to change that would make you more experienced, not less.”

“I don’t need to be merely inexperienced. I need to be so egregious in my flaws that even someone like Margaret will not be surprised when we end our contract.” Bond held up his hand to interrupt whatever Q was about to say. “I’m going to shower and change. You think about it.”

“James,” Q called back as he turned to go into the bedroom. When Bond looked back, Q said, “I’m not going to make you seem like you’re a threat to my safety, because you aren’t. Your discomfort at owning a slave will come through clearly enough, I promise. It’ll all be fine.”

Bond smiled again. “You can do whatever you need to secure yourself a contract, Q, short of getting me immediately thrown off the ship, or arrested. I don’t mind. I won’t see any of these people ever again, and I don’t care what they think of me. You, however, don’t have that luxury.”

Q gave Bond one of his rare genuine smiles. “Thank you, James,” he said, and turned back to his laptop. “I’ll shower once you’re done. This will probably take all night and into tomorrow, running on its own.”

Bond nodded, pulled a vest and pants from the drawers, and retreated to the bathroom. It occurred to him as he was soaping up that Margaret hadn’t actually specified a dinner location, so he resolved to ring the front desk to be transferred to Margaret’s room when he got out, and tried not to think about Q in the shower.

Really, Bond wasn’t so bad. Insensitive, something of a know-it-all, obnoxiously self-confident, and accidentally dominant — a far more polite term than ‘bossy arse’ — but not bad. His willingness to help Q secure a proper contract encouraged Q to forgive a great deal, in fact. Besides, Q was glad for the chance to get out of the suite, even if it was to go to another suite and play waiter for a few hours.

He showered and shaved carefully — he’d let himself get a bit scruffy — and put on the clothes he’d worn for the display the first night. He took some time styling his hair, though he just used his fingers, rather than putting anything in to hold the style. His haircut (or lack of one) was designed to encourage touching, and no one liked feeling gel or hairspray.

He went through the bedroom to the living room, where Bond was at the bar, frowning. After three days of their arrangement, Q had grown accustomed to speaking his mind, and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Dinner is in the dining hall. The main restaurant.”

Q’s first thought was that Bond would have to change. He’d need to wear his dinner suit, despite the unfortunate tailoring. “You’ll need —” he said, and then stopped himself, remembering that the main restaurant had assigned seating, but only for guests. Slaves were seated on the floor beside their owners.

Well, that explained Bond’s discomfort.

Bond took a drink of scotch, still frowning. “In light of this unwelcome development, do you have any suggestions?”
“It’s too late to do anything about your jacket,” Q said as instincts took over. He went to the foyer to retrieve the dinner suit and shirt. He hung them over his arm so he could open the dresser to retrieve the accessories. “Next time, midnight blue with a shawl collar. And fire your tailor.”

That made Bond laugh, though it didn’t quite hide his lingering discomfort. “Why would I do that?” he asked, watching Q with curiosity.

“Because notched lapels are common. Nouveau riche,” Q explained. Maybe Bond wasn’t rich at all; the dinner jacket might be some sort of MI6 disguise. That would explain the lapels, though not the bespoke label. “It’s like putting second-hand tyres on a Ferrari. And midnight blue is truer black. It would bring out your eyes.” He laid everything out on the bed and looked expectantly back at Bond.

Bond didn’t immediately get up, but sat watching Q. “What about you?” he asked.

“I don’t have a dinner suit, currently, but that shouldn’t be a problem. What I wear is up to you, if anything at all. This will do fine” — he indicated what he was wearing — “with or without the jacket, or you can pick something else, or nothing at all. There’s no time to properly fit anything else, if you wanted something in leather from the shops.”

Bond visibly swallowed and turned back to his drink. “Leather from the shops. Fucking Christ, Q.” He shook his head then stood and retrieved the suit. “I’m certain you’re fine the way you are, unless something else would better speak ill of my handling of you.” With that, he disappeared back into the bedroom and slid the door firmly closed.

Q sighed and wondered again if he shouldn’t press Bond to speak to Lord Southerby. Seven more days, he told himself. He got out Bond’s shoes and sat down on the floor by the dresser, where he found a polishing kit. Bond was just overcomplicating this. Fundamental incompatibility was a good enough reason to dissolve their contract. Normally, an owner would have to cite cause, and the slave’s behaviour would be investigated. This was actually the gentlest way out for both of them. It didn’t leave Q in quite as strong a position as if Bond had, for example, put him in the hospital, but he wasn’t about to suggest that. And he suspected, at least, that Bond wouldn’t do that, except perhaps in his sleep.

The night of the auction, Q had paid very little attention to just how good Bond looked in a dinner suit. Now, he caught himself staring almost as much as when Bond had been in those illegally tight bathing trunks. A lot of modern men, at least outside the Marketplace, carried a dinner suit like a bad fancy dress costume, but not Bond. It looked almost perfect.

Q got up off the floor, brought the shoes to Bond, and caught himself before he could kneel. Instead, he handed the shoes over and tugged at the left side of Bond’s jacket. “It’s cut asymmetrically,” he criticised. “Is your tailor blind?”

“My tailor is an expert at ensuring my special brand of accessories remain unseen,” Bond said with a raised eyebrow. When Q gave him a confused look — special brand of accessories? — he smiled. “Don’t worry. No guns, remember?”

“Oh. Well, that was awkward, though it did explain the oddity in the tailoring.

“You should have a different jacket for when you’re not...” He gestured at where he guessed a gun would go. Then he realised he had a hand pressed to the side seam of Bond’s jacket and was feeling the rhythm of his breath. Quickly, Q backed away and went to the dresser. For the first time in days, he pulled his collar out from under his shirt and flattened it neatly over his tie. “Leash or no?”

“I don’t go out unarmed often enough for it to be a concern,” Bond said, smiling faintly. “Let’s go
with no leash. I’m sure that will be another strike against me. And don’t forget, Margaret knows me as Richard Sterling.”

“Yes, Richard.” Q turned back, finding it easy to slip back into his old behaviours. Three days off wasn’t much at all. “Don’t try to provoke anything, please. Just behave as you normally would.”

Bond laughed and sat to pull on his shoes. “That probably isn’t wise. How about if I behave as I have been in your recent experience instead?”

Q wondered if he meant ‘recent’ as in the last three days, when he’d been a fairly decent, if extraordinarily boring human being, or ‘recent’ as in over the scope of their entire relationship, which involved being an incredibly judgemental, insulting prick.

Suddenly, the evening looked significantly more ominous.

“That will be fine, Richard,” he lied. And because he was trained to tell people what they wanted to hear, Bond wasn’t even suspicious.

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No longer arranged for the auction, the dining hall was back to its original cruise ship grandeur. There were fewer tables than the room would normally hold, perhaps because of the lack of families travelling four to a cabin. Instead of seating up to eight, each table was set for four to six guests, and a small army of servers dominated the room, ensuring that no water glass went unfilled.

Rather than taking Bond’s arm, Q walked a step behind Bond, off to his left. Bond had observed him in the lift — silent, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. Even armed with the knowledge that it was expected behaviour, and that Q didn’t object, Bond still found it uncomfortable to allow.

They were shown to a table near the centre of the room, where a couple sat at one corner, talking quietly between themselves. Bond’s polite greeting was somewhat strained when, after he took his seat, Q knelt down to his left, close enough to touch. A quick look around showed that no one actually seated at any of the tables wore a collar, though he could see a few slaves kneeling beside their owners’ chairs.

The slaves on duty here were in all black dinner suits, male and female alike, rather than the collared shirts and trousers or skirts they’d been wearing so far. Bond found it easier to pretend they were staff at an exclusive restaurant. When one came up to him and asked for his drink order, he decided to stick with wine for now. The last thing he needed was the lowered inhibitions that would come with anything stronger.

“And for your slave?”

Bond looked down at Q. They hadn’t been to the formal dining room, so he didn’t know what was expected, but he’d be damned before he’d make sweeping decisions about Q’s diet. He’d had enough of that, Bond thought, remembering what Q had told him about his previous restrictions of caffeine and sweets. “What would you like to drink, Q?”

“A glass of water please, Richard,” Q specified, shifting his position just enough that his shoulder brushed against Bond’s jacket.
After days without any physical contact, even that slight brush was electric. Bond cleared his throat and looked back up at the server. “Water,” he repeated.

The waiter left, and Q leaned close again. “Thank you, Richard,” he said with quiet formality.

Margaret arrived just as their server left again. She was elegantly dressed in forest green, smiling when she saw Bond. He and the other man at their table rose, an instinctive courtesy; Q just bowed a bit lower and stayed so close that Bond could feel him against the chair. She kissed Bond’s cheek, reached down to ruffle Q’s hair and went around the table to greet the other couple, asking if they had seen any bears.

Bond’s instinctive reaction was unforeseen and completely overwhelming. She’d not only touched Q who, by the rules of this absurd game they were all playing, was Bond’s; she’d practically petted him. Like a dog.

Bond glanced down at Q, frowning darkly, trying to control his reaction. Q’s hair was in complete disarray now, not that Q’s early attempt at artful tousling was much of an improvement, and Bond combed his hand through the strands, trying to get them to lay straight, before he realised what he was doing. Q shifted under the touch, pressing against the touch, bowing his head to expose the back of his neck.

It was effortless to continue the contact, and Bond didn’t resist until Margaret made her way to her seat. Then he reluctantly let go — and just like that first time he’d ever laid eyes on Q, as soon as he pulled his hand away, Q leaned in close, just for a second, as though chasing after the touch. It took effort for Bond to turn his attention to Margaret and smile at her, rather than focusing everything on Q. “How was the spa?”

“How was the spa?”

“Lovely. You should have come,” she scolded. She turned in her seat to look down at Q, who was between them. “Let’s have a look at you. Head up,” she ordered. When Q lifted his head, she touched him again, this time under the chin, so she could study his face. “He is handsome. Very exotic,” she approved, looking at Bond.

Bond’s fingers twitched with the effort of not smacking her hand away, feeling outraged on Q’s behalf. He couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to be examined dispassionately like that, spoken about but not addressed directly. Then the memory of the evening before the sale — and the sale itself — came to mind. Bond reminded himself that Q had willingly signed up for this. “Isn’t he?” he managed. “Very clever, too.”

“Regent-trained,” she said, as if that were Q’s strongest virtue. She released him and turned to address the server who came to take her drinks order. Glancing down, Bond saw that Q was still holding his water glass and hadn’t spilled any of it; apparently, this was nothing unexpected for him.

Still, he couldn’t help but feel gratified (and perhaps irrationally relieved) when Q knelt back down on his heels and leaned against Bond’s chair, as though making it clear which of them he belonged with.

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Bond had absolutely no gauge to measure whether or not the evening was going well. By which, of course, he wondered if he were doing an excellent job of proving himself inadequate or not. Q
certainly wasn’t giving him any hints, and though Margaret had occasionally looked at him with sympathetic confusion, it wasn’t exactly reassuring.

He felt unjustifiably flustered.

“Did any of your friends see any bears?” he asked after they’d placed their dinner orders. Bond had tried to ask Q what he wanted, but Margaret had interrupted — *Oh, don’t worry about him* — and he’d let it drop.

“There are some extravagant claims, though I’m holding out for video proof. Besides, they all made it back, even the slowest ones.”

The couple across the table brought up the virtues of later scheduled excursions to see polar bears and whales. Margaret immediately launched into a discussion of spending three months living with natives in the far Northwest Territory of Canada back in the early seventies.

Bond went back to combing his fingers through Q’s hair, though he didn’t even realise it until the waiters showed up to serve their starter course of caviar and toast points. He counted the plates before he did anything, and realised there were only enough plates for the people actually seated at the table. The one set in front of Bond, however, held a more generous portion than any of the others.

He looked down at Q for a hint, but Q was still leaning against Bond, with every appearance of being content, head bowed. The only times he’d moved at all in fact were to take occasional sips of water and whenever Bond stopped petting him.

Angry at the thought of feeding Q his dinner like a dog begging for table scraps, Bond took a piece of bread, spread it with caviar, and reached down to hand it to Q.

Instead of taking it, though, Q leaned up and bit the corner, glancing up at Bond through his fringe. He licked his lips and bowed his head as he chewed and swallowed.

Bond froze completely for the briefest moment before adjusting his posture. This was nothing special or unusual, he reminded himself as Q took another bite. Compared to some of the things he’d seen over the last week, this was actually quite tame.

Until Q took the last bite, lips brushing softly over Bond’s fingers, lingering far too long to have anything to do with toast and caviar.

Bond’s mind was filled with unbidden images of Q’s mouth in other places, and he suddenly wanted this dinner over with *now*. But to keep up appearances, he merely took his hand back and served himself some caviar. And if his eyes held a little more spark than they had earlier, no one commented.

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It had been a very long time since Q had been hand-fed, and the experience caught him with his guard down. He fell into the more sensual aspects of his training, letting his mind — always on, always distracted — ground itself in the reality of an owner’s hands on him. The food was excellent, better than the meals served to slaves most of the time, though that made less of an impression than Bond’s possessive, caring touch.
The starters were replaced by salad, and after each time Q accepted a bit of greenery from Bond’s fork, he inched closer, until he was leaning against Bond’s leg, cheek pressed to Bond’s thigh when he wasn’t being fed. It was ridiculously relaxing, as if he could finally forget about the hellish stress of the last week: a sale to someone who wasn’t even Marketplace, MI6, spies and terrorists... If he’d wanted to deal with that, he would’ve got himself a government job.

Though Q heard Margaret mention him fairly often, he paid no attention to the conversation, except to monitor it for someone addressing him directly. Instead, he let the petting soothe him between courses, ate whatever Bond offered, and idly considered how to optimise the routine that was hopefully cracking the security on four international banks that might well have ties to their target.

The main course was a mixed seafood plate — crab legs and lobster was Q’s guess by the sound though he didn’t see until Bond offered a tiny fork. He ate, licked butter off his lips, and then pressed his lips to Bond’s hand without thinking, tasting a drop of butter that had slid down the fork to his fingertip. Q caught it with his tongue. Bond’s hand only froze for a moment before he turned his hand to brush his thumb along Q’s jawline.

The touch seared through Q, and he pressed into Bond’s hand, wishing that they were alone or that they’d done this a week ago. Distantly, he heard Margaret say, “See? Isn’t that better?” but he didn’t care to analyse what she was saying. She wasn’t saying it to him, so he was free to rub his face against Bond’s fingers, ending with a press of his lips that seemed artlessly casual but that Q had practiced what felt like a lifetime ago.

Bond, for his part, became freer with his touches as the evening wore on, his hand travelling from Q’s face to his hair to his neck and shoulders with little or no prompting from Q. He even, at one point, tangled his fingers in Q’s collar, playing with the lock and accidentally tightening it around Q’s throat.

At the tug on the chain, Q stopped everything — stopped moving, stopped breathing, closed his eyes so he could stop seeing, and just lost himself in feeling. Bond seemed to hesitate for a moment before he slid his hand to rest on Q’s pulse point. Apparently the rapid but steady beat he found there was reassurance enough, because he started petting Q’s hair and shoulders again, finally repeating the tug on the collar in a way that went right to Q’s cock, making him forget entirely about dinner, their plan, and the terrorist who might end up killing them all.

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“See? That’s what you want,” Margaret said as they brought out the dessert course.

Bond wanted nothing more than to glare at her. His current predicament had nothing to do with her meaningless chatter about dominance, ownership, and care for his slave, and everything to do with Q and his seemingly unconscious, trained reactions. It was incredibly sensual, and Bond had an extremely difficult time not just excusing himself and Q and dragging him back to their suite — whether it was to yell at Q for making it so damn difficult to be a bad owner, or to fuck him senseless, Bond didn’t know yet.

“Perhaps,” said Bond noncommittally. “Though one dinner gone well doesn’t a successful relationship make.” He stared down at the deliciously drippy plate of tiramisu and didn’t know whether to growl in frustration or arousal. He settled on picking up the dessert spoon, scooping a small slice, and offering it to Q.
Again, Q knelt up off his heels and leaned close, chest pressed against Bond’s thigh. He took the bite of dessert with closed eyes, licking the spoon in a way that was borderline obscene, though only Bond could see it — just as, when Q knelt back down, only Bond could see the flush that had risen in his cheeks.

Bond wondered if it would be against whatever small collection of rules these people had to take the dessert back to his room, but his thoughts were interrupted by Margaret’s response to his earlier statement that he’d almost forgotten he’d made.

“It’s a start, though. You have to begin somewhere,” she pointed out rationally. “There’s always an initial adjustment period. Owning a slave isn’t like borrowing a library book. It’s like getting married, only without the bloodthirsty divorce lawyer at the end.”

Caught up in Q’s sudden sensuality, Bond had to struggle to find his voice. “Thank you Margaret. You’ve been very helpful,” he lied, smiling at her. “I hope you have better luck finding proof of bears.”

“You go find me one, dear — but not too soon,” she added, eyeing Q with a smirk. “I can wait for the polar bear tours.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “Hiking isn’t a favourite pastime of mine.” He rose slowly, carefully buttoning his jacket to hide how Q’s behaviour had been affecting him. “Have a good evening.” As the others bade him good night, Q turned and looked up at him, still on his knees, far too fucking close for Bond’s liking — or not close enough. Then he rose so he was standing just inches away, and Bond almost missed the subtle, hidden way he set his glass down on the table so he could clasp his hands behind his back, and somehow end up another inch closer.

Anger and arousal hit Bond in equal force. He turned to leave the dining room, trusting that Q would stay close behind. Apparently Q had somehow forgotten that the point of this whole dinner was to prove they were absolutely incompatible for one another. Inciting Bond to lose focus of everything but the vision of fucking him against the wall wasn’t supposed to be part of it.
Chapter 9

Day Seven

The walk back to the lifts was quick and silent, with Q staying one deferential step behind Bond. There were two other couples crowded in with them, so Bond, instead of confronting him right away, simply stabbed the button for their floor. Q stayed close, close enough for Bond to almost feel his body heat, with Bond between him and everyone else in the lift as though making it clear who owned him.

The lift seemed to take an age to make it to their level.

When Bond finally made it to the suite door, he unlocked it quickly and pulled Q through a little more roughly than he’d intended. He let the door click shut behind them before he turned to shove Q against the wall. “I thought we had a plan,” he growled.

Q stared at him, wide-eyed, and Bond recalled what had happened the last time he’d treated Q this way. What scared the hell out of most people had entirely the opposite effect on Q, and that was without an hour and a half of interminable, hidden foreplay.

“What —” Q choked out, closing his eyes. He swallowed and made a visible effort to gather his wits. “I’m sorry,” he ventured uncertainly.

That, of course, wasn’t what Bond wanted to hear at all. It helped that it was obviously completely false. Bond pressed forward even more, moving his hands from Q’s shoulders to his wrists to keep them pinned to the wall. He leaned in, bringing his mouth inches from Q’s ear and asked, “Are you?” before biting Q’s jaw while rolling his hips forward.

Q whimpered at the contact and didn’t answer immediately. He met Bond’s thrust and held very still until Bond released the bite, but then he just moved his head away, baring his throat. “Please, James,” he said instead of answering.

Bond shoved Q’s wrists above his head and pinned them there with one hand. With his free hand, he tugged Q’s leg up, forcing him to wrap it around his waist. The shift in position caused their cocks to press together through layers of fabric, and Bond hissed. “Please what, Q?”

Scrambling to get his balance on one foot, Q pleaded, “Please, take me. Anything, James. Fuck me — anything you want. Please, just tell me what you want. Anything.”

Bond hesitated, hands gripping harder, hips pressing more cruelly. “Just tell me one thing. That wasn’t just a show for Margaret, was it?”

“No. It was — at first, it was what I was supposed to do — I was trained to do — but you liked it, and I wanted to,” he said in a desperate rush.

Bond watched Q’s expression for a long moment, looking for any signs of a lie or actual fear or anything that said this wasn’t a good idea, but all he saw was a desperate, genuine desire.

He switched hands, keeping Q’s wrists pinned, and forced the other leg up and around his waist. It was easy to brace Q’s slight weight against the wall with his hips, freeing one hand. He gripped Q’s hair tightly, yanked it to the side, and bit his exposed throat.

Q let out a broken, needy moan and writhed against Bond’s body, struggling for any friction he
could manage. He whispered “Please” and “James” and “Please” again, and he didn’t try to twist his wrists free or escape Bond’s teeth.

It was an incredible relief. An incredible rush.

Bond immediately regretted not doing something about their clothes before they’d ended up in this position, but that was something that could be fixed. He moved his teeth from Q’s throat to get to his mouth. “We’re wearing too many clothes.” He released Q’s wrists, moving his free hand to press roughly on Q’s collarbone. “See what you can do about that. I suggest you do a good job.”

Immediately, Q went for Bond’s tie and surrendered to his demanding kiss. One moment, Q’s fingers were adept and skilled at finding the layers of fabric in the knot; the next, when Bond nipped at his lip, he jerked his hand and pulled the knot tight again. Another thrust of Bond’s hips made Q whimper and clutch at the tie, nails scratching at fine silk, but then it finally came free, and Q went for the studs down the front of Bond’s shirt, forgetting entirely about his jacket.

Admittedly, Bond wasn’t making it any easier for either of them. Q’s weight was negligible, his legs strong, and with him trapped between Bond’s body and the wall, there was little chance of him falling. Bond kept his left hand tightly fisted in Q’s hair, tugging occasionally. His other hand was free for exploration, so it wandered everywhere. He undid the buttons on Q’s waistcoat and rucked his shirt up to flick his nipple before dipping his hand under the waistline of his trousers and pants to tease the tip of Q’s very hard cock. Every now and then, Bond would hit something just right, and Q’s responsive moans were nearly enough to make Bond want to rip down their flies right now and be done.

But Bond was nothing if not patient. He wanted the bigger reward that was Q pinned underneath him in his bed, begging desperately, writhing uncontrollably from an overload of sensation. So he bit and kissed and teased until Q wasn’t even pretending to try and undress him anymore. He’d pulled out the top few shirt studs, scattering them on the floor (after impressively keeping hold on them for long minutes before a bite caught him at just the right time). His hands were everywhere underneath, short nails scratching at Bond’s skin, pulling him closer every time he bit. He didn’t even have the presence of mind to plead anymore, except with wordless cries and the desperate way he moved against Bond.

It was perfect.

Bond dropped his hand from Q’s hair and steadied Q with both hands on his hips. Then Bond carefully unwrapped Q’s legs from around his waist, thinking to move things to the bedroom — but as soon as Q was on his feet, he dropped to his knees and looked up at Bond. He reached up, pushed Bond’s jacket aside, and pressed a hand to Bond’s cock.

Bond stared down, taking shallow, shaky breaths as he watched long fingers unhook his braces, unlatch the waistband, and unzip the flies. He took a breath to protest, but it was lost when Q pulled at Bond’s pants and ran his fingers down the length of Bond’s cock, with enough pressure to make him see sparks. Q pushed Bond’s clothes out of the way to free his cock, and then let go all too soon. Bond buried his hands in Q’s hair and pulled hard. Q whimpered and brushed his face against Bond’s cock, almost hiding the sound of tearing plastic.

Then Q’s hands were on him again, smoothing a condom down, and Bond’s first thought — to wonder where the fuck he’d got it — disappeared under the heat and pressure of Q’s mouth.

“Fuck, Q,” Bond groaned as nearly all other sensations vanished. He stared down at Q’s face, utterly absorbed by Q’s expression as Q looked up at him. It was almost too much, to see his cock buried so deeply in Q’s mouth. He shuddered and pressed one hand to the wall to keep himself upright,
leaving the other still tangled in Q’s hair.

This wasn’t how Bond wanted to finish — he would come far too fast — so waited only a few seconds longer before he pulled Q’s hair. “This isn’t exactly what I had in mind,” he managed to get out, meeting Q’s wide eyes.

Q stopped. He fucking stopped with Bond’s cock all the way at the back of his mouth and into his throat. Bond felt him swallow before he drew back just enough to take a shuddering breath, and then he just stared up at Bond as if waiting to be told what to do.

“You need to be naked and on your knees in the bed in two minutes,” Bond said shakily, using every ounce of self-control not to thrust back into Q’s waiting mouth. “I’ll be right there.”

Q pulled away with a show of reluctance that might well have been genuine. He bowed his head and said roughly, “Yes, James,” before he started to rise, only to kneel back down and start gathering up the discarded shirt studs.

“Don’t worry about those, Q,” Bond said in a low voice before he turned back to the wardrobe. As he listened to Q pad quietly to the bedroom, he searched for the lube and condoms he always carried in his suitcase.

Then reality came crashing back, and he wondered what the hell he was doing. This wasn’t part of the mission, and while he was willing to compromise his ethics for England’s sake, he wasn’t willing to coerce or take advantage of his partner.

Q called himself a slave. How could Bond know — really know — that this was consensual and not a part of that role?

But he thought of Q on his knees, the look in his eyes as he’d taken Bond’s cock into his mouth and throat. All Bond could remember was raw desire, without a hint of reluctance or hesitation, and the memory made his cock, still sheathed by the condom, twitch with hot, sharp interest.

He was going to do this, he realised. And while he couldn’t give Q everything he supposedly wanted — he couldn’t hit Q even with his open hand, much less with a belt or whip — he could do something.

He sorted through the wardrobe quickly and took out two of his ties. He took a moment to breathe and regain his equilibrium, pushing away the last of his worries. Then he set everything down on the dresser and stripped off his clothes.

He wanted Q. And damn this notion of slavery — Q wanted him, too.

He gathered everything else, took a deep breath, and walked back into the bedroom.

Q was naked as Bond had instructed, kneeling upright at the foot of the bed, breathing heavily but steadily. His hands were clasped behind his back, head bowed, legs spread. When Bond entered, he didn’t move, except for the slightest hitch of breath. His clothes were folded on the floor by the bedside table where his glasses rested.

Bond stopped, catching his breath at the incredible sight, before he walked over to stand next to Q. “Move up,” he demanded quietly.

Q unclasped his hands and let them fall forward. He crawled up the bed, somehow imparting an enticing grace to what should have been an awkward shuffle. He stopped when Bond touched his arm, and then he knelt up again, moving his hands behind his back. Just that little motion had him
breathing harder.

Bond crawled up on the bed behind Q, leaving his supplies by his knee. He shuffled forward until he was pressed entirely against Q’s back. He wrapped his arms around Q tightly enough that Q struggled to breathe in more than light, quick gasps. Q’s arms were pinned, and Bond grinned at the ineffectual scrape of nails on his skin. Then Bond ducked his head to nip at Q’s neck, and immediately Q’s struggling little gasps turned sharper. He arched his back as much as Bond’s hold permitted, arse pressing up against Bond’s cock as though inviting him to take. He managed a single, “Please,” before he lost his words again and gave up trying.

Bond left a trail of bites and bruises along Q’s neck and shoulders with his mouth and scratches on his sides with his hands. The touches weren’t hard enough to do any real damage, but Q seemed to appreciate them all the same. Bond waited until Q was all but shaking with the pleasure of it before he roughly shoved Q face-first into the duvet. Q gasped in surprise but made no effort to stop himself from falling.

Bond didn’t give him a chance to recover; he braced himself on his knees to wrench Q’s arms above his head so he could bind them together with one of the ties. Then he slipped off the bed quickly, losing contact with Q’s skin only for a few seconds to reposition himself at the head of the bed. He tugged at the metal headboard, testing its strength, and wasn’t surprised when it didn’t even rock under his hardest pull — not if this ship was used for Marketplace cruises at least once a year. Satisfied, he lashed Q’s bound wrists to the centre of the headboard, giving him just enough slack to roll over.

Q struggled to pull up his knees enough to lift his hips off the bed. “Please. Please, James,” he pleaded into the duvet.

That made Bond grin. “Please what, Q?” he asked again as he repositioned himself behind Q’s body.

“Anything, James. Please. Fuck me — anything you want. Please, James.” He dug his fingers into the pillows but made no effort to pull free of the knotted ties. “Whatever you want, however you want.”

Bond picked up the lube, but just held onto it for a moment as he crawled back over Q. He pushed him back down, letting his weight rather than his muscles do the work, enjoying the way Q’s breath came in ragged gasps. He used his free hand to tangle in Q’s hair again and twisted it to reveal the side of Q’s face. He bit Q’s earlobe carefully as he thrust his hips up, sliding his cock along Q’s arse.

Q’s cry was muffled against his own arm. He tried to arch his back up, but Bond was too heavy, the mattress too soft. He kicked at the mattress, trying to get the leverage to move. His “Please” was ragged, caught up in his sharp, panting breaths, but Bond heard it anyway.

Without moving, Bond uncapped the lube. Instead of pouring it into his hand like he normally would, however, he shifted over enough to pour it directly over Q’s arse. He capped the bottle and set it aside, still within reach, and started gently massaging the lubricant over Q’s entrance. He knew gentle wasn’t what Q wanted, but he wasn’t willing to intentionally cause serious pain. Q moaned and arched his back and spread his legs invitingly, and Bond slid one finger inside sooner than he normally would have done.

Q’s body was tight, straining against Bond’s hand, but Q made no complaint. He pushed up even harder, begging, “God — please, James — please fuck me.” Bond snarled and let his weight rest a little more heavily on Q, pressing him hard into the mattress. Immediately, Q stopped struggling, but kept pleading, “I’ll stop. I’ll stop moving. Just please, please fuck me, James. Please.”
Bond had to stop and take a deep breath to make sure he was still in control. “I will,” he finally growled before biting Q’s nape. He was two seconds away from just fucking Q, whether he was prepared or not — but instead, he slipped in a second finger, going slowly, careful not to actually hurt Q.

“Please, please, please,” Q whispered, trembling with the effort not to move. “Please, James, now.”

Bond ignored him as best he could, working Q open with his fingers and enjoying his broken pleading for a few more careful minutes. Then he pulled his hand away, and Q’s answering whimper was nearly a sob. Bond grinned, high on the rush of power. He cleaned his fingers on the duvet before reaching for the lube again. This time, he poured some directly on his still-sheathed cock, and then braced himself back over Q. “Ready?” he asked.

“Yes.” It came out clipped and desperate, more a whine given form than an actual word. Q’s body tensed, from his hands clenching the pillow to his feet digging in against the mattress, but he didn’t move. “Yes, please, James.”

Bond pushed in slowly, very conscious that Q was barely prepared and that this had to burn. Q didn’t protest or try to pull away; he just went still and quiet, except for little twitches of his hips pushing back against Bond. He only let out a single whimper as Bond pushed all the way inside, when his hips pressed hard against Q’s arse.

Then, very quietly, almost tentatively, he pleaded, “James, please.”

Bond pulled back out, leaving only the head of his cock in, and thrust back in and out again. This time, he wasn’t nearly so slow or gentle.

“James,” he wailed. “Please, James.”

Bond groaned in approval; the desperate pleading threatened to break his self-control. He slid out so he could get into a better position, bracing himself up over Q’s body. He nudged Q’s knees with his own, pushing, hoping Q would get the hint and lift his hips back up. It took Q a moment, as though he were caught up in not moving. Then he scrambled, kicking at the mattress, rucking up the duvet before he finally knelt with his hips up, though he didn’t try to lift his chest or move his hands.

Bond desperately wanted to ask if this was all right — if this was what Q wanted — but he refrained. Q had made his consent and interest clear. He rested a hand on Q’s hip, lined up, and pushed back in with a hard, rough thrust that he was certain had to hurt. Q turned his face into the blanket and let out a desperate cry, bracing hard against the bed and pushing back as if coaxing Bond to thrust harder. At this point, nothing short of the words “stop” or “no” could have made Bond resist the temptation, and he started thrusting harder and faster, encouraged by Q’s steady, wordless encouragement.

But then, just as Bond was close to losing the battle with his own self-control, Q gasped out a strangled, “James — James, wait — God, please —”

With an incredible act of will, Bond stopped immediately, panting, hoping like hell he hadn’t hurt Q. He looked for any visual cues that Q was in distress, but it was difficult with him facing away. “What is it? Are you all right?”

“I can’t stop,” Q panted. “I’m sorry. If you keep going, I’ll come. I’m sorry, James.”

Bond let his head drop in disbelief, forehead brushing at the delicate skin between Q’s shoulders. He started fucking Q again, more slowly this time, watching tension ripple in Q’s muscles, wondering who in the hell had trained Q to think orgasm delay was required.
“Damn right, you’ll come,” he growled, and he sped back up as he kissed and bit at Q’s nape.

With a shuddering exhale, Q clawed at the bed and tried to meet Bond’s thrusts. His breaths were edged in whimpers that soon shattered as his whole body went tense. He pushed hard against Bond’s thrusts, back arching, head thrown back, and every muscle locked tight. Bond pushed deep into him and forgot how to breathe under the tight, pulsing pressure of Q’s body.

It was one of the most beautiful, erotic things that Bond had ever seen. Between the sight of Q locked in throes of an intense orgasm, the clenching of Q’s muscles around his cock, and the thought that Q had come without even a touch, Bond lost what little self-control he had left. He started pounding into Q again, chasing his own release. Despite barely having the chance to catch his breath, Q immediately started moving with Bond, shaky and uncoordinated though he was. He pushed up onto his hands enough to arch back, saying quietly, “Fuck, yes, James.”

With those words Bond tipped over into his own orgasm. It completely overwhelmed him for long, blissful moments as he bit into Q’s shoulder to keep from crying out. When he came back down enough to feel Q still trembling underneath him, he released his bite and collapsed on top of Q.

As he lay there, feeling every subtle breath and shift of Q’s incredible body beneath him, he tried to remember if he’d ever had a lover surrender to him so completely — to the pleasure he could bring. But most of Bond’s seductions were related to his work or were one-night stands. There was never a connection — not like what he felt now.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked quietly.

Q shook his head. “No, James,” he said roughly. He made no effort to move away; he stretched a bit but seemed content to let Bond pin him to the mattress again. “Thank you.”

Bond closed his eyes, swallowing back an emotion he wasn’t ready to identify. He withdrew from Q’s body, and Q made a small sound of protest. He shifted to keep in contact with Bond, as much as the ties bound around his wrists would allow. Bond rolled onto his back, pulled off the condom, and reached over to the edge of the bed to drop it in the bin. Then he rolled back over, tucked Q under his arm and leg, pulling him closer, and leaned in for a kiss.

Q lifted up his head just enough to return the kiss with lazy enthusiasm. When he opened his eyes, they were very dark and entirely lacking in the sharp, focused, racing intellect that was his normal state. Right now, it didn’t look as if he’d be able to program a toaster, and Bond couldn’t help but feel smug at that.

“Do you want me to untie you?” Bond asked quietly, stroking his hair.

“I can clean all this” — Q made a sort of twitching motion with his fingers — “and then you can tie me up again, if you’d like.”

Bond pressed another kiss to Q’s lips, tightening his hand in Q’s hair. “Give me an hour or two,” he said with a smile, reaching up to untie Q’s wrists.

Q looked up, his expression still soft and relaxed. As soon as the tie around his wrists fell away, he touched Bond’s face and asked, “Can I get you anything?”

Bond tangled his hand in Q’s hair again. As soon as Bond’s fingers tightened, Q’s eyes closed. Grinning at the reaction, Bond said, “No, thank you. Shall we get under the covers? We’re in Alaska now; it’s just a little chilly.”

“I need to put out the dry cleaning.”
“No, you don’t. We can do it tomorrow.” Bond didn’t let go of Q; he merely shuffled and tugged and shifted until he was able to get the duvet down around their feet and then up over their bodies. He pulled Q close again. “You’ve got an hour or two, remember? Better rest.”

“I can call the desk for proper rope or cuffs, if you’d like,” Q offered, though he made no attempt to move. He snuggled back against Bond’s body, curling up, reminding Bond even more of a cat now that he was sated and tired.

“What would you like, Q?” he asked, yawning. Inside, Bond was thrilled that Q had responded so well to the bondage and hadn’t required much pain at all — if a little biting even counted. The sight of Q helpless beneath him was one to which he was already addicted. “Do you have a preference?”

“Anything not chain. Too risky,” he said, reaching back and twisting to pull the blanket farther up over Bond. “And tape that’s sticky even after it’s off, but that’s all right if you like it.”

“Do you like marks?” Bond asked, running his free hand up and down Q’s arm. “Or is it just being tied?”

“Can I pick both?” he asked with a faint laugh. “I like pain. I have a very high pain threshold.”

Bond took a deep breath as he pulled Q close, tucking Q’s head under his chin. “All right,” he replied quietly. “But no whips. I’m afraid that would be too much for me.” Memory threatened to interrupt his contentedness, but he ruthlessly shoved it aside. “You can call the desk for whatever you like after we’ve napped.”

Q twisted like a snake, almost too thin for Bond to hold without fear of hurting him. He lifted his hand to Bond’s face and said, “Above all else, I like service. Everything else is secondary. If it’s something you like, that’s all that matters — and if it isn’t, then we shouldn’t. That’s what service is.”

After a moment’s consideration, carefully watching Q’s expression, Bond nodded. He still didn’t fully understand Q’s needs, but tonight’s displays, from dinner until now, had done a great deal to catch him up. “Rope. No whips. No riding crop.” He hesitated. “I... I’ve been...” He took a deep breath, holding Q’s eyes. “I can’t beat you, Q. Not for pleasure. I don’t think my brain can make the switch.”

He saw the question. Saw Q discard it in favour of cuddling close against him. Q was all sharp angles and too-thin limbs, but there was nothing weak about him. “Whatever you like, James. I promise, it’s fine.”

“Thank you,” Bond said quietly, wrapping himself around Q. He closed his eyes and was almost immediately asleep.
Chapter 10

Day Eight

Q never did call room service, put out the dry cleaning, or even clean up at all. Bond wasn’t a spy, Q decided in a haze of sleepy pleasure. He was a bloody octopus, keeping Q deliciously trapped against a body that was positively sinful — not that Q minded. He was awake and wouldn’t fall back asleep, but lying on a comfortable bed in a gorgeous man’s arms, looking out at the deep green shoreline, he felt incredible.

It was an illusion, of course. In the harsh light of morning, Bond would withdraw out of guilt or discomfort or what passed for professionalism for spies, and Q would be back to the world of the Marketplace. He’d either find the data or not, though he knew he wouldn’t fail, and Bond would be off shooting his suspect. Then Bond would go back to England or his next mission, and Q would roll the dice again and hope he could find someone who would want him — really want him.

For now, though, he didn’t consider trying to get out of bed. Bond was sleeping, and it went against Q’s instincts to wake him. And he had no illusions that he’d be able to move quietly enough that Bond would stay asleep — not after that first night. Instead, he put together a quick mental list of things he should do before he got back to his laptop, and then closed his eyes, concentrating on possible ways to optimise his attempts to brute force the four financial institutions he was trying to crack.

It wasn’t long before Bond followed Q to consciousness. Unlike most people, however, he didn’t wake up by degrees, slowly crossing from sleep to awareness. Bond’s body went from sleepy to alert in about five seconds with a series of twitches that reminded Q of a machine waking from sleep and testing the functionality of its parts.

“Morning,” Bond said in a low, quiet voice. He didn’t roll away or attempt to untangle himself as Q had expected, however. If anything, his arms tightened around Q.

No crisis yet, Q thought, pleased. He shifted back against Bond and let himself enjoy the moment. “Good morning, James,” he murmured.

“Well, it’s been more than a couple of hours,” Bond said slyly before he twisted free, only to cage Q underneath him, grinning.

Startled — definitely no crisis, he thought — he considered what he knew of Bond for a half second. He wanted to touch, because god, a body like that should be illegal, but he raised his hands instead and reached up for the headboard, watching Bond’s expression intently. And because Bond responded better to snarky defiance than any sort of formality, he challenged, “I’ll let it slip, this time,” as he took hold of the metal bars.

“You know I don’t actually need assistance to keep you pinned down, don’t you?” Bond responded, grin turning feral. He wrapped his hands around Q’s wrists and pinned them to the bed. Then he leaned down to kiss Q, pressing enough to keep Q immobile without actually crushing him.

Thoughts of everything he needed to do melted away under Bond’s strength. Q spread his legs and flattened his feet on the bed so he could push up into Bond’s body, loving the way he couldn’t budge against Bond’s casually efficient hold. Even the kiss was perfect, morning breath and all, and his earlier regret cut through him again, because a sensual, primal part of him would miss this.
Experimentally, because Bond really did seem to like it when Q pushed back, he let go of the bars and tried to free his wrists from Bond’s grasp.

Bond tightened his grip and chuckled. “Afraid you’re going to have to try a little harder than that. If you can manage while I”— he bit behind Q’s ear— “distract you.”

As if that was incentive? Q turned his head, encouraging Bond not to stop, and tried to make a better effort this time, though all he ended up doing was flopping one of the pillows onto the bedside table. Bond’s laugh made Q shiver.

So he cheated. He gave another ineffectual twist of his wrists as Bond moved his bite over an inch, but this time, Q timed it with a much more careful, precise thrust of his hips, a hard push right up into Bond’s cock.

Bond’s responding groan was rewarding to hear, but Bond didn’t loosen his grip. If anything, it caused him to increase pressure not just with his hands but with his entire body as he sank further down onto Q with his own returning thrust. “You’ll have to do better than that, Q.” Though he was trying to hold onto his earlier wry humour, his voice was rougher.

_Cheat, cheat, cheat_, he thought, trying to find his focus, but it was harder than it should have been. He’d been trained to handle anything, but Bond had him scrambled, completely disarmed, because he _wasn’t_ responding the way he should have been. The dynamic was all wrong— not owner and slave but... dominant lover. God, that’s what he was.

The thought was jarring enough to cut through Q’s daze. He dragged in a breath and said challengingly, “Move up so I can get your cock in my mouth, and I will.”

“Actually, I have a better idea,” Bond said, staring down at him intently. He kissed Q roughly before he rolled them, and he kept hold of Q’s wrists as he pulled Q on top of him. Bond then used his leverage to push Q into sitting up, straddling his body. He let go of one wrist, only to grasp it with his other hand, and pushed both arms behind Q’s back. The position forced Q into a slight arch, shoulders pulled back, stomach taut. “There,” he growled.

“God, yes,” Q whispered, raising up on his knees a bit. “James. Condom. Please?” he asked, thinking that this was probably the best idea either of them had had all week.

Which, of course, was when his laptop pinged its success at cracking at least one password. Silently he cursed, hoping that Bond wouldn’t notice and would get a damned condom instead. Surely there were some in the bedside table.

“Was that something important?” Bond asked, glancing at the door to the living room. He let go of Q’s wrist with one hand, keeping the other locked tightly in place, and reached for a condom. But he just set it on the bed and looked up at Q questioningly.

Q didn’t move his free wrist. He wanted to lie, but he couldn’t— not even now. “My programs broke through one of the banks’ firewalls,” he said as steadily as he could. What happened next wasn’t his decision to make or even influence, tempting as it was. “More data to analyse.”

“Do you want to stop?” Bond asked, rolling his hips up.

The question threw him, even though he should have expected it. “Whatever you want, James,” he answered, the words coming out unsteadily.

“Fuck,” Bond growled, throwing another glance at the door. Q held his breath, not sure what he hoped Bond would want. Then Bond let go of Q’s hands, and Q felt a stab of disappointment. He
started to get up, only to have Bond pull him back down with the warning, “Don’t move.”
Immediately, Q froze, and his breath caught as he watched Bond pick up the condom and rip it open.

Yes, a corner of his mind selfishly crowed.

Bond rolled the condom in place. “It can wait.”

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Bond stood out on the patio, listening to the faint sound of Q typing. He suddenly, desperately wanted a cigarette, but his case was in the living room and he didn’t want to disturb Q’s work.

Well, that wasn’t exactly right, he admitted to himself. He didn’t want to face Q.

Introspection wasn’t one of Bond’s strong points — he tended to walk away when things were burning and let other people deal with the aftermath — but in this particular situation there wasn’t much room for escape. Beyond wanting Q, which he desperately did, he needed Q.

He closed his eyes, remembering Q’s expression when he’d finally walked back out to his laptop, cleaned-up and dressed, though his hair was still a mess. Q had been pleased, sated, and even — damn him — somewhat proud that he was finally going to have something useful for Bond. At the time, Bond had felt a little smug. Now he was worried.

Q wasn’t just a submissive. He carried the self-imposed title of slave. What the hell was Bond doing, encouraging him with sex and possessive behaviour? They had a deal: ten days in total and they’d part ways. It could even happen earlier if they found what they were looking for.

Fuck, Bond thought, angry with himself. If he found what he was looking for. There was no ‘they’. No ‘we’. Even if he was starting to feel something for Q (and there was no way in hell he was going to examine that train of thought too carefully), they could never work. Bond could be the dominant partner in sex — that was easy enough. But he couldn’t be an owner. And Q didn’t want a dominant partner. He wanted to be someone’s slave.

Bond dragged his fingers along the metal railing, letting the sharp cold of the Alaskan air focus him.

It was just sex. Bloody fantastic sex, but nothing more. As long as he made that clear to Q, they could part ways at the end of his mission without it getting complicated.

He took one last deep breath of the cold Pacific air, and walked back into the living room, closing the patio and bedroom doors behind him.

“I think I’ve found something, James,” Q said from the window seat that he’d made into something like his office. He had the ship’s amenities guide on the foot of the cot beside him and was using it as a hard surface for his mouse. “Most of the transactions are routed through secondary companies — business consultants, primarily — to keep anyone from asking too many questions. All of them are high enough to warrant a closer look in most countries.”

“What’s suspicious?”

Q turned his laptop slightly and beckoned Bond over. “There’s no transaction number here. It’s listed as ‘ship’s goods’, but there should be something more descriptive, and it’s going to a numbered
account. The other numbered transactions are all slave purchases distributed to the appropriate accounts, not things like fuel or food or port fees.”

Bond leaned over Q’s shoulder to look at the transactions. The well-ordered numbers on the screen didn’t look suspicious to Bond. Each transaction number was accompanied by two account numbers (‘to’ and ‘from’, he assumed) and a descriptor. He frowned at the descriptors for the slaves — they were marked as consultants — before scanning the line Q was referring to. “It’s too even a number to be the result of bidding. Can you trace it to someone specific?” He leaned back, resisting the urge to nip at Q’s ear.

“Working on it,” Q said without looking up, though he wasn’t typing. He was staring at the screen, left hand twitching on the keyboard, right holding the mouse still on its makeshift pad. “What’s more important? Knowing where the money came from or where it’s going?”

“Neither. I need to know who is on the ship, Q,” Bond replied, walking over to the dresser to retrieve his cigarettes.

“I can check some communications,” Q offered with a blink as he looked across the living room at Bond. “Not all of them — not under these conditions — but anything routed through the ship-to-shore system. I have a timestamp on this transaction. If it’s questionable and not user error, there’s a good chance that he notified someone either right before or right after it was initiated, isn’t there? There would be in the movies.”

“Good thinking. Though the only reason that particular movie trick will work this time is because there’s no direct mobile reception out here,” Bond said, smiling. “It could narrow it down, at the very least.”

Q nodded and started typing again, closing the spreadsheet to open a plain black window. “Would you please turn on your laptop? I’m going to need some of your authentication, if I have to go outside the ship. It’s easier to borrow your authority than to create my own.”

Bond nodded, though Q wasn’t looking at him, and went to get his laptop from the office. He brought it back out to the living room and set it on the coffee table. Then, as he plugged it in to charge, he asked, “Do you need it within physical reach?”

“No, I’ll...” Q clicked a few times. “I’ll just take control of it from here. Your encryption isn’t too bad, but really. Is there a reason you’re using Windows firewall, or are you trapped in a government contract with Microsoft?”

Bond stared at Q for a minute, watching the focus and competence with fascination. In an entirely impulsive move, he walked over to stand next to him. Before Q could look up — if he even would have bothered — Bond threaded a hand through his hair and pulled. Instead of the protest he might have expected from anyone else — a TSS tech, for example, snapping at an interruption — Q’s hands went absolutely still. His breath caught audibly, and he didn’t fight when Bond pulled his head up to kiss him thoroughly. And though he kept his hands on the keyboard, he returned the kiss eagerly, eyes falling closed as his lips parted.

Bond savoured Q’s mouth, nipping occasionally, until the kiss ended naturally. When Q opened his eyes again, Bond grinned. “I’d say you should ask TJ, but perhaps it’s best if you composed an email in my name and conversed that way.” Then he released Q’s hair and sat down on the couch.

Q watched him for a few flattering seconds before he turned back to the laptop. He licked his lips, and as he started typing, he said, “There are some ways to improve even baseline security like that — such as the flaw I’m going to use to take control of your computer. There aren’t many people who
could do it, but there are enough.”

“People like you?” Bond asked, grinning.

“Mathematicians, coders, or in the Marketplace? There are quite a few computer specialists in the Marketplace” — he frowned at the screen and clicked the mouse a few times — “but none at my level. Unless they’re using a secondary identity, like I am. There are only five or six of us in the world at this level.”

Bond thought about Q’s impressive CV, the work he was doing now, and TJ’s somewhat ridiculous admiration. Then he thought about Q’s personality. Q wasn’t bragging, he decided. He was simply stating a fact. “What about the Marketplace security? TJ had trouble with it, and it’s taken you some time to crack. Did they hire that out to someone or is it someone from within the organisation?”

“Angelique Harrington — Lady Southerby,” Q clarified. “I believe she improved it, but the system was difficult because some of its layers dated back fifteen years — and,” he admitted, a guilty look on his face, “because I really didn’t want to get caught. I could’ve cracked it in twenty minutes, but I might have left traces.”

“You did the right thing,” Bond reassured him. He tapped his cigarette on his leg, watching Q work.

Without looking up, Q reached into the pocket of his trousers and tossed a lighter at Bond.

With a surprised grin, Bond caught it. “Thanks. Do you mind —” Bond paused, then tried again. “I’m going to take a walk while you’re working. I’ll bring us back some breakfast. What would you like?”

Q turned to him, and Bond saw the momentary pause, nothing more than a flash of consideration shown in the subtle hint of a frown. Then he said, “Whatever you’d like will be fine, thank you. Or I can call room service and have something brought in, for when you return.”

Bond shook his head. “Carrying food always seems to invite people to stop and chat with you. I haven’t had much luck with the morning crowd yet. Perhaps I’ll get a few new names.”

“Would you like me to come with you? As your slave, openly,” Q clarified. “In this environment, that’s even more effective for starting a conversation with strangers than going out with a dog or a child.”

He hated the idea of taking Q out as if he were a pet to be walked twice a day, but Q was right — and if they found a name, Bond would really rather have a face to go with it. “All right,” he cautiously agreed.

Q set his laptop aside, then hesitated, rather than standing immediately. “I can start some automatic searches and have my computer notify you by text message, if that would help,” he offered.

“That’s a good idea,” Bond replied as he stood to get his shoes. “I’m going to have my cigarette on the patio while you finish that up and make reservations. Do you need my phone?”

“I have all the relevant information, thank you,” Q said, already typing again. “You do know that you don’t need to carry multiple devices for cover identities, don’t you? A hidden partition applies to a smartphone as well as —” He cut off, head tilting slightly as he frowned at the screen.

“What is it?”

“Does the ‘Intesa Sanpaolo Bank Albania’ sound right to you?” he asked, frowning. “Because that’s
what this is listed as, but that’s not their routing number. It goes to a Swiss account.”

“That’s a very good sign that you’re on the right track. Do you have a name? If not, MI6...” He paused, forcing himself to remember that Q was a temporary assistant, soon to vanish. “We have agreements in place to make that sort of search easier. All I need is an account number to send to TJ.”

Q huffed. “The name doesn’t match. It’s not on the passenger roster. But” — he looked up at Bond and grinned proudly — “I have an IP address, and that means I can find his room number.”

Bond grinned and sat back down to think. “Excellent.”

The cold fact was that Bond needed to capture rather than just kill the target. Though he’d originally suspected that human trafficking was going to be the crime du jour, having someone with their hands on the money was even better. If this person was good (and he or she obviously was), the chances were high that he had a whole list of useful names and account numbers.

M would be very, very pleased.

But the cruise wouldn’t end for another three weeks. Bond considered calling for an extraction immediately — it would be easy enough to sabotage the boat and force the cruise to an early end, putting the target in MI6 hands for observation or interrogation — but there was a chance he or she wasn’t working alone. Already, the terrorists’ network had proven to be every bit as complicated as M had feared. Her furious speech on how the corruption of the USSR had been infinitely easier to cope with than the hydra of criminal organisations that had sprung up thanks to capitalism had been positively inspiring.

To make matters worse, technically Q’s job was finished. By uncovering the identity of the agent behind the money transfers, Q had done everything he’d agreed to do. What they’d done last night and this morning had no bearing on Q’s contract — on what Q wanted, no matter that Bond still couldn’t understand why.

“Can you find out if he’s in contact with anyone else on the ship?” Bond asked.

Q hummed thoughtfully and stared down at the laptop, his eyes going distant. “I might be able to... If it’s VOIP, yes. If it’s copper, I’d need supplies...” He twisted and looked in the direction of the flat panel TV over the bar, and then abruptly rose. He set aside his laptop, went to the bar, and crouched down to search through the cabinets. “I could probably tap the system, though —” He cut off and looked back at Bond. “Um. This... isn’t even vaguely legal,” he said hesitantly. “You don’t have... I don’t know, some sort of oversight committee to report to? You can do what’s necessary?”

Bond smiled at Q’s frankly charming concern for him. “I can do what’s necessary,” he assured Q. He thought about adding a comment about his licence to kill (against which a bit of hacking paled in comparison), but didn’t want to alarm him. Q was a genius, after all — he’d probably figured it out by now, anyway. “Do you need anything we don’t have here?”

“Lockpicks, though I can probably make those from our clothes hangers,” he said, turning back to the electronics under the TV. “I, um, may have learned to pick locks while doing grad student work. And it may not be necessary, if I can just hack the system. It’s fifty-fifty whether or not it’s VOIP, on a ship like this,” he said, closing the cabinet doors and standing. “Otherwise, we’d just have to follow him.”

“Grad school?” Bond asked with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. “I’m not sure I want to know, though I have to say I’m impressed. It occurs to me that someone like yourself could actually have
quite an impressive criminal record, and no one would know because you’ve done the digital equivalent of burning it.”

“Well, yes,” Q admitted, “but I don’t. I really do prefer my freedom. The idea of prison is terrifying.”

“Depends on the prison, I suppose. British prisons aren’t so bad. Russian prisons should be avoided at all costs. Though I’d have to say the worst prison I’ve ever broken out of was, surprisingly, not in a former Soviet country. It was in South America. God, what country was that?” Bond looked down at the barely visible scar on his hand that was left over from that little adventure, trying to remember. “Bolivia, maybe? Or maybe it was one of the Central American countries.” He looked at Q and smiled ruefully. “They all looked the same in the middle of summer, let me assure you.”

“That’s horrifying,” Q said, turning away to go to the phone. He flipped it over and unplugged it, examining the cable. “Have you considered not getting caught?”

“It’s a matter of doing what’s required of me. A concept you’re thoroughly familiar with.”

“Well, yes, but I know I’m at least safe,” Q countered, going to get his laptop. He unplugged it from the wall. “I’m valued for what I can do. When you get caught, you’re the enemy.” He gave Bond a sharp look and said, “And you’re probably awful about letting anyone at base or headquarters or whatever you call it know where you are, so they can’t even rescue you or negotiate for your release.”

“Putting aside the concept of value, because I’d like to think my service to my country is highly valued —”

“Oh. No, I didn’t —” Q shook his head quickly. “I meant by the — whoever threw you in prison in the first place. Not England. God knows they probably appreciate what you do for them. Most likely because not many people are insane enough to take your job in the first place, exciting as it must be. You just willingly put yourself in danger, that’s all. Even more than the police or military normally do.”

“And you don’t? You’re safe, are you? At least I could lie, steal, and kill my way out of those situations. You’re making an awfully big gamble on a stranger’s generosity, Q. And what recourse do you have if it turns out to be a gilded prison, but a prison nonetheless?” Bond looked up from his hands again, hoping that Q wasn’t falling into the same cold anger that the earlier false starts to this conversation had resulted in.

Q set the laptop down on the bar and plugged the phone back in. “It’s a matter of honour, knowing that both sides will follow the contract. The Marketplace also tracks mandatory medical visits, without owners present. Is there a chance of things going badly? Of course. But there’s just as much chance — more, perhaps — of something going wrong if you simply pick the wrong stranger for a date or one-night stand.” He turned to face Bond, asking, “Knowing what you know of my tastes, am I safer in the Marketplace or picking up strangers at clubs?”

Bond shook his head. “It’s not the sex that I don’t get. It’s not the concept of service, either. God knows everything I do is in service of my chosen mistress. But you’ve given up everything. You could be a programmer in the best software company in the world. A professor. A researcher at the best labs in the world. Bloody hell, Q. MI6 or any military intelligence agency in the world would kill to have you working for them.”

“That’s like saying I’m giving up on dating and one-night stands because I want to get married. I don’t want to serve an organisation that looks at me as just another number on a personnel roster. I want to make a difference. I want to be known. I want to make life better for even one person, and to
be valued for that difference.”

Bond thought about the men and women on their knees in the upper deck cafe. “I’m not sure I see how you being naked in public and allowing yourself to be beaten with whips gets you there.”

Q took a deep breath as though reining in his first instinctive reaction. He put his laptop aside, braced his hands on the bar, and boosted himself up to sit on it. “Let’s say, for one moment, that you and I are in a ‘normal’” — he pronounced the quotes — “relationship, and I woke you up in the middle of the night. But instead of actually doing what you did — not that I’m objecting — you said nothing and went back to sleep. I might not even realise it, so I’d intrude again. By the time it happened often enough, you’d be uncomfortable about admitting that I’d been waking you up in the middle of the night since the first day. That turns to resentment.”

Bond straightened, looking up at where Q was perched. “All right. So you’d prefer to be reprimanded with physical abuse rather than trying to deal with resentment by just talking it out?”

“I’d rather be in a relationship where it’s acceptable to put a stop to problems before they turn into resentment and lasting anger. Some people would prefer to talk that out. Those people aren’t here. I’m a masochist, but I’m not going to intentionally provoke someone to get angry, just so I can get off on pain. There are better ways. But it’s not physical ‘abuse’ — it’s physical punishment, yes, but it’s understood and accepted on both sides. If I wasn’t all right with it, then I’d have a rider in my contract. And there are slaves who do that. Not many, because most of us were spotted in fetish clubs or that lifestyle, but enough. Mostly professionals or business executives.”

“I suppose that’s where my fundamental problem is, Q,” Bond said softly. “Despite what one might think from the work I do, I’m not a sadist. But I appreciate the explanation. It clears things up a bit.” He looked back down at the now somewhat-crumpled cigarette in his hand and stood.

Q dropped down from the bar. “James... it may not be for you, but” — he frowned thoughtfully — “it’s something I can trust and believe in. There’s honesty and loyalty that doesn’t exist in most other relationships. Do you realise that the fastest-growing segment of Marketplace slaves is in finance and IT security? Imagine being the CEO of a company, and having a chief of IT security that you could trust, without reservation, to secure your network and never leave a backdoor or steal your client list or sell your secret projects to a competitor. Imagine having someone that faithful to you.”

“It’s not the faithfulness I don’t understand, Q.” Bond spun the lighter in his hand. “If I were to ever have a real relationship, it would have to have a very similar quality.” He waved his hand. “I’m not exactly an ideal candidate for a partner. I’m gone for weeks or even months at a time. I couldn’t talk about any of what I did, or even what countries I had been in, with any civilian partner. I’d have to have absolute faith in their ability to take care of my home, my finances... everything. And not cheat on me. Or worse. So I get it, I do. It’s the hurting them part that I’m struggling with. You’ve seen enough of my scars by now to know why I can’t associate that with recreation and pleasure. Not that I’m questioning your or your partner’s choice. It’s just —”

“There’s no requirement,” Q interrupted, shaking his head. “Do you know how often I’ve been punished with a whip or riding crop since joining the Marketplace? Four times. That’s all. Our first night together was my first misread in years, because I was interpreting your behaviour through my own bias. If I’d accounted for the possibility of an outsider, I wouldn’t have misread you at all,” Q said bluntly. “If I do make mistakes, I want to know about it, and I want to know in a way that leaves no room for resentment or future repeats on either side of the relationship. I refuse to be blindsided five years down the road with a laundry list of unarticulated, unaddressed problems that’s been brewing below the surface of a relationship. I need to trust that if I do something wrong, I’ll know exactly what it was, exactly how to keep it from happening again, and that the matter is genuinely
addressed and over and not going to come creeping back up later.”

God, that made sense. That actually made sense, and it was terrifying to imagine. Hell, what did Bond know about ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ relationships? Maybe Q’s approach actually was better. It was at least honest. What would it be like to have that kind of trust?

He tried to picture it, but he couldn’t. He didn’t know what it was like to trust like that. He put his life in the hands of his colleagues at MI6 with alarming frequency, but it wasn’t because he trusted them — it was a matter of lack of available options.

And relationships? He stared down at the coffee table, threaded a hand through his hair, and absently listened to the sound of Q moving around. Vesper, he thought, and for the first time in years, the name brought more than bitterness and pain.

Q wouldn’t betray him. He wanted honesty, and he offered loyalty. He took an unimaginable risk in signing his life away to strangers, all because he wanted to dedicate himself to one person. To belong to someone, completely and almost unconditionally.

Then Q touched his arm, and he looked up, realising only then that he’d been staring down at the coffee table as long minutes passed. Q was holding a mug in his other hand, steaming and rich with a perfect balance of coffee and whisky.

Gently, Q opened Bond’s hand to take away the crushed cigarette. “Come with me, James,” he said softly, drawing Bond to his feet.

Bond allowed himself to be led into the bedroom and out onto the little private balcony. Q sat him down in one of the bistro chairs and put the mug in his hands.

“Stay here,” Q told him before going back inside.

Bond didn’t say anything, but let his head tip back towards the sky. The midmorning sun slanted across the water, throwing the balcony into shadow. The air was cold, but it wasn’t enough to force him back inside. The bite of it helped bring his mind back away from hot summer days on the other side of the world.

Q came back a minute later, now wearing a warm jumper over his button-down shirt, with Bond’s windcheater over one arm. He gave Bond the windcheater and lit a cigarette for him. Once Bond put on the jacket, he handed over the cigarette and knelt down on the balcony, leaning against Bond’s leg.

For a moment, Bond froze. The protest died on his lips, though, and he quietly asked, “Q?”

Q looked up at Bond, shifting against him, shoulder pressed to his thigh. “Do you mind?”

Much to his surprise, Bond realised that he didn’t mind. He stared down for a minute, not quite sure what to do — until he realised he knew exactly what to do.

He switched his cigarette to his left hand, freeing his right to comb through Q’s hair. Q shifted to rest his cheek against Bond’s thigh, looking out at the water in silence.
Chapter 11

Day Eight

With breakfast came a name for their primary suspect, Augustus Kolya, who was one of the financiers who worked for the Marketplace. Q cracked into the Marketplace’s systems — nervously — and found Kolya’s CV in the personnel files for Danberry & Ellis; he’d been hired as an accountant. The setup for Danberry & Ellis, Bond noted uncomfortably, was damned near identical to the cover story for Universal Exports, right down to the modest legitimate business as the tip of a very large, very well-hidden iceberg.

“Ship’s records show only a few calls,” Q said from his laptop at the coffee table. He was sitting on the floor, legs stretched under the table, not out of deference but because he insisted it was easier to type and eat this way, without a proper desk. He’d taken one look at the closet-sized office off the bedroom and declared it worse than a coffin. “I’m sending them to your laptop. Quite a few of them are to Lady Southerby. God, I hope she’s not involved. I’ve met her.”

“And the others?” he asked, pulling out his mobile and placing it on the table.

Q reached out over the syrupy remains of his breakfast plate — pancakes — and picked up one of the stack of brownies he’d apparently decided was acceptable for post-breakfast dessert. Powdered sugar floated down over the table as he brought it to his side. “ Mostly to the other bankers. Ah. Ah. Offshore excursion planning,” he said excitedly. He took a bite of the brownie, used it to gesture to his screen, and then glared as powdered sugar covered his keyboard. “Fuck. He’s arranged to go on one of the offshore tours,” he said, typing one-handed while he took another bite of his brownie.

Despite not having made any decisions about their relationship, Bond couldn’t resist the temptation to lean forward, pull the brownie from Q’s hand, and take a quick swipe at the sugar on Q’s fingertips with his tongue. He grinned at Q’s startled reaction, and then laughed when Q twisted, catching his laptop with one hand so he could kneel up and kiss Bond over the remains of their breakfast.

“Did you want me to book you on the tour as well?”

“Actually, I think his guaranteed absence means I should go do some snooping around. How much time would you need with his laptop to see if there’s anything of interest on it?”

Q gave him a disappointed look. “Me? None. I’ll give you a program to put on it, and that’ll tell us everything we need from as far away from him as we can get and still be on the same boat.” He set the laptop down and twisted, moving up to all fours so he could stretch for the laptop bag on the far side of the couch. He tugged the bag over and started rooting through the contents. “This will be much less suspicious, and more efficient.”

Bond stared appreciatively at the sight on display before him. “When is the tour?” he asked with a sly smile that Q couldn’t see.

“Tomorrow. They leave at six in the morning.” Q shoved the bag out of the way and sat back down, plugging a USB drive into his laptop. Then he crooked a finger at Bond and said, “Brownie, please, James.”

Bond moved a little closer, picking up the brownie and offering it to Q — not to take, but to bite. Q would have to lean over his laptop, but no stray sugar would land there, either. “I love your creative
problem-solving skills.”

Q smiled and sat up, saying, “If you have any surveillance devices you’re going to plant, I can look at them as well. Make sure that you won’t be caught.” He ducked his head to get at the brownie, forgetting all about efficiency when he licked over Bond’s fingers to take a tiny nibble close to his hand, rather than the offered corner.

Bond swiped his thumb over Q’s mouth as he chewed. “The security for this cruise was far too thorough for me to risk bringing anything more than my essential communications equipment. Whatever you can do on his computer will be all I’ve got.”

“I’m profoundly disappointed,” Q said, deliberately licking at Bond’s thumb before he took another bite of the brownie. “I thought all spies carried bugs. You’re ruining my fantasies.”

“I can make an explosive out of almost anything. I’ll make sure to blow up something for you soon. Will that help?”

“Not while we’re on a boat,” he scolded, nipping at Bond’s finger — just enough to feel teeth. “You’ll have to think of some other way to impress me, I’m afraid.”

“Six tomorrow morning? We have time,” Bond said with a grin. He dropped the brownie onto Q’s plate and took Q’s laptop away from him so he could gently set it aside. “I’m sure I can think of something.” He slipped off the sofa and onto the floor and moved Q mostly out from beneath the coffee table with ease. “Did you ever order that rope?” he asked, caging Q underneath him.

Smiling a bit breathlessly, Q shook his head and reached up to pull off his glasses. “Someone has had me cracking the ship’s communications systems and logs for three hours this morning. Would you like me to call room service, to take me shopping, or to just fuck me under the coffee table?”

“Yes,” Bond growled before pressing down. Q let his glasses drop onto the coffee table so he could pull his hands back over his head, lacing his fingers together as he wriggled under Bond. He got his legs spread and all but purred as he lifted his head for a kiss.

Bond closed his eyes and let his head fall back, folding his hands underneath. He focused on the sensations of Q’s mouth and hands on him. They hadn’t done slow yet, so Bond was going to let himself enjoy it.

‘Slow’ was right, he thought a few hazy minutes later as Q worked down Bond’s shirt, nipping each button open. When he reached the lowest button possible, without untucking the shirt, he sat back on Bond’s thighs to look over the vee of exposed skin with satisfaction. “God, I hope you don’t mind me saying you’re beautiful,” he said quietly. “A work of art, James.”
Bond was fully aware of how he looked. He used his body as a weapon in more than one way. But seeing the naked appreciation on Q’s face was more than just gratifying; it was almost overwhelming that Q, who had immersed himself in a world where beauty was prized, found Bond attractive enough to look at him with such open admiration.

And he had no need to win Bond to his side or steal his secrets or get him to drop his defences. There was an honesty with Q, despite the strange start to all of this between them, that Bond never found in his professional life.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, tracing a light hand up Q’s thigh to settle on his hip.

Q smiled before he leaned back down, this time crawling up Bond’s body to nudge at his head. When Bond turned, Q licked the shell of his ear, and his exhale made Bond shiver. Then he leaned up another few inches to tug at the buttoned cuff of Bond’s shirt, again using only his teeth. As the fabric fell open, Q dragged the tip of his tongue, feather-light, over the exposed underside of Bond’s wrist.

Q shifted to Bond’s other side, this time pausing to kiss him, and Bond obligingly moved his other hand so Q could more easily get at the button. Q smiled into the kiss and murmured, “Thank you, James,” before he shifted to tug it open. This time, he pulled Bond’s sleeve down just enough to move his hand. Then he licked up over Bond’s palm and his first finger, before he took the fingertip between his lips and sucked, pressing his tongue deliberately against the pad, precisely as he’d done with Bond’s cock the night before.

Bond’s eyes flew back open at the sensation. “Fuck, Q,” he murmured, meeting his intent, heated gaze. Bond shook his head. “You’re too bloody good at being a tease.”

Q smiled slyly, licked at Bond’s finger, and crawled backwards, ducking his head to hide his eyes. “You can always order me to stop,” he said, and then made certain Bond couldn’t by pushing his shirt aside enough to lick at Bond’s nipple.

“Like hell,” he murmured, lifting his head to watch the sensual movements of Q’s tongue on his chest. He’d never thought of a tongue as being graceful before, but he was entranced now, shivering and biting his own tongue as he watched. He thought about telling Q it was no wonder his previous partners preferred to tie him up — Bond’s shirt hadn’t even been removed yet, and he was already painfully aroused. He refrained, of course; such a comment would likely be taken as a suggestion, and Bond wanted Q to keep going.

And he did, moving back down Bond’s body, hands braced on the carpet to either side of Bond’s hips. He caught Bond’s shirt in his teeth and tugged it free of his trousers so he could undo the last buttons, and then took care to pull one side away, then the other. Then he indulged, tracing the ridges of Bond’s muscles with his tongue, pressing kisses against his skin, staying just firm enough to keep from being ticklish, except where his hair fell against Bond’s body. He was in no rush at all, concentrating everything solely on teasing out Bond’s reactions as if to learn what he liked.

By the time he rubbed his face over Bond’s cock, despite the trousers and pants Bond was still wearing, it was almost too much to bear. As if Q knew what he was doing — and Bond had no illusions that he was at all innocent in this — Q didn’t tease for long, but he also didn’t use his hands to undo the belt. He caught the edges in his teeth and pushed the tongue through the buckle, and Bond had no doubt at all that he’d practiced this, because there was no awkward fumbling. He doubted Q’s teeth had even left impressions in the fine leather.

Q got the waistband clasp undone just as easily, and had taken the zipper pull between his teeth, when Bond’s mobile rang.
“Bleeding Christ!” Bond all but yelled as Q stopped moving to look up questioningly at him, still holding the zipper caught in his teeth. Bond stared, unable to focus on anything but the incredibly erotic vision in front of him until the mobile rang again. He debated for only a handful of seconds before letting his head fall back with a painful, resigned thump against the floor. The only people who would be calling him were M or her chief of staff — TJ would have texted, and no one else had the number.

“Hold that thought,” he growled at Q, reaching up to fumble for the mobile that was still on the coffee table. “Bond,” he answered, not bothering to hide his irritation at being interrupted.

“Lovely to hear from you as well, 007,” came M’s sardonic, sharp response. He could picture her hawklike scowl as perfectly as if she were standing before him. “What’s this note I have about TSS losing contact with you, sending you files, and never hearing back? Have the files gone missing, or are you too busy to write home?”

“M. Your sense of timing is impeccable, as always,” Bond said in a falsely cheerful tone. “Q and I have been diligently working on the specs TSS has so helpfully provided, and just haven’t had the chance to send our appreciation or an update.”

“Yes, this ‘Q’ of yours,” M said, and Bond couldn’t help but look at Q, who was kneeling back against the couch, patiently waiting. “What are you doing about that? Do we need to send in an extraction team, or are you just going to blow something up and try to start a war with America in your usual fashion? Despite its proximity, do recall that Alaska is not Russian territory, 007.”

“As much fun as it would be to start a war with America, I find my work with Q diverting enough to keep me occupied while I attend to the mission.” He paused, smirking at Q. “Besides, TSS wasn’t able to outfit me with anything I could smuggle past cruise security, so I’m down to improvising explosives. Slows me down a bit.”

“Oh, thank god. I won’t be overwhelmed by the paperwork,” M said dryly. “Is there anything else you’d like to report? Have you found the connection there?”

“I have a suspect, Augustus Kolya. I’m working on confirmation. I suspect I’ll require an extraction before the cruise is over, but I don’t want to miss anything.” He hoped a name would be enough to soothe her ire so she’d hang up and let Bond get back to what he was doing.

“There, that wasn’t so difficult, was it, 007?” she approved. “We’ll run the name and see if anything likely turns up on this end. Do try to call once a week, if it’s not too much trouble. Anything else?”

“Nothing else. Thank you, mum.” Bond grinned at the still patiently waiting Q.

M let out a huff. “You wouldn’t be half the brat you are today, if you were one of mine,” she threatened before she disconnected.

“She just called me a brat,” Bond said with mock thoughtfulness as he put the phone back on the coffee table. “And after I promised not to start a war with America, too.”

Q failed to hide his amused grin. “Would you like me to ruin her credit rating for you, James?” he offered, though it came out somewhat stuttered by his suppressed laughter.

“She’s the director of MI6, Q. I doubt such an attempt would turn out well for anybody,” he said with a wry grin. “Let’s keep your name from crossing my desk, shall we?”

Q gave him a disappointed look. “I wouldn’t get caught,” he said, and stretched back out over Bond’s body like a cat. “Really, James. I’m better than almost everyone. You should know that by
“At so many things, so I’m finding,” Bond said with a smirk. “Or have you lost your inspiration?”

He ducked to kiss and nip at Bond’s mouth, eyes falling closed. “Not at all,” he said, and kissed his way down Bond’s neck and chest, remembering every spot that made Bond gasp or writhe, until the memory of M’s phone call was finally lost.

As before, Bond lifted his head to watch Q tug his flies open. He pushed the fabric aside and pressed his tongue against Bond’s pants, rubbing slow, gentle circles over his cock. “You may be overdressed,” Q observed thoughtfully, intentionally evoking Bond’s memory of the previous night. Q’s breath sank through the fabric with shivery warmth. “Or have I gone far enough?”

Bond stared up at him in disbelief before leaning up just enough to comfortably reach his hands into Q’s hair, pulling tight. “You’re a bloody genius, Q. What do you think?” he said quietly, grinning. He sat up, abs flexing with the effort, and pulled Q up onto his knees. Hands buried in Q’s hair, he guided Q’s head all the way back, baring his throat for Bond to suck a bruise onto his skin.

There was nothing smug or self-assured about the needy sound Q made. He went boneless, spreading his legs to kneel down over Bond. When Bond backed away to study the mark he’d left just above the chain collar, Q said, “Please, tell me what you want, James. Anything.”

Bond didn’t answer at first, instead choosing to lavish Q’s throat with attention. He was tempted to give Q the same kind of slow, sensual licks and touches, but that didn’t seem quite right. Q didn’t like that — not for himself, anyway. And while Bond couldn’t hurt him, he could be rough.

He sank his teeth into Q’s skin, right over the edge of his collarbone, hard enough to leave an impression, but not hard enough to draw blood. Q gasped, arching encouragingly into the bite. Bond heard a scratching sound and looked down to see Q digging his nails against his own thighs, catching at his trousers.

Q was dressed in clothes that matched Bond’s — button down shirt and wool trousers. They were nice, but not bespoke, so it didn’t make Bond feel guilty at all. He yanked Q’s shirt from his trousers, then pulled at the front hard enough to rip the buttons off, exposing Q’s chest. Q shivered and clenched his hands into fists, breath coming quicker. He leaned back slightly, not to get away but to offer himself to Bond.

“It’s one thing to admire muscles, and another to see me use them to your advantage, isn’t it?” he growled, leaning forward to drag his teeth over the exposed skin as he twisted his fingers back into Q’s hair. “I’ll buy you a new one,” he promised.

“Will you —” was as far as Q got before Bond bit down hard on Q’s nipple. The words broke into a desperate whine, and Q shifted a bit, no longer breathing. Only when Bond licked to soothe the bite did Q stutter out, “Will you — do the same? Rip it off?”

Bond clenched the hands still in Q’s hair and pulled hard again, forcing Q into an arch that couldn’t be even slightly comfortable. “Would you like that?” he asked before dragging his teeth suggestively across Q’s chest towards the other nipple.

“God, yes,” Q breathed unhesitatingly. “Yes, James. Please.”

Bond tipped his head down, evaluating the hook on the trousers. He could probably rip it open, too, but zippers were dangerous things to get snarled. So he settled on another hard twist of Q’s hair, combining it with another sharp bite.
Q trembled with the strain of his position, but instead of fighting to get free, he shifted his hands back to brace his weight. He moved like he had no bones at all, body arched up in a pose that would’ve made a yoga instructor envious. The position strained his trousers over his erection.

“God, you’re amazing,” Bond breathed into Q’s chest, following it by sucking another bruise onto his skin, right over his sternum. He let his fingernails catch on the soft skin of Q’s sides before bringing them around to quickly undo his trousers. “Up,” he said, gripping Q’s arse to shove him up into an even more uncomfortable stretch.

With a little whimper of effort, Q forced his hips higher, weight braced back on his hands. His muscles trembled with the effort of holding his position. He moaned as Bond pulled his trousers down as far as possible before they caught on his thighs, forced apart by how he knelt over Bond’s lap. The torn shirt fell around his wrists, taut across Bond’s ankles.

“Fucking gorgeous,” Bond murmured appreciatively, gripping Q's hips hard enough to leave bruises, before ducking down to swipe his tongue over the tip of Q’s very interested cock.

Q nearly lost his grace, trying to push up and pull away all at once. “God, James,” he whispered, his voice breaking. “James, you don’t — you don’t have to...”

“Don’t move,” Bond growled, smiling because he knew Q couldn’t see it. He tightened his grip on Q’s hips even more, enough to ensure the bruises would be damned impressive, and Q whimpered even louder. Then Bond licked again, this time not pulling away, but dragging his tongue down over the shaft. The position prevented him from being able to duck down far enough to make it to the bottom, but he didn’t want to unwrap either of his hands from Q’s body to make up for it. “Good?” he asked before sliding his mouth back up again.

“James,” he gasped, body trembling, no longer with the strain of his position but from his twitching, failing attempts not to move. “God. Yes, James. But you don’t — or a condom. In my pocket. Or I can, for you.”

Bond had been tempted to interrupt, but there was something incredible about bringing the usually articulate Q to near incoherence. “I saw your medical report,” he said with a chuckle, before taking a chance, letting the slightest hint of teeth scrape at Q’s soft skin.

Q groaned and tensed even more, pushing his hips against Bond’s hands. But he said, “James — James, please. I can’t. I’m sorry. I can’t.”

Without letting go of Q, Bond leaned back enough to get a look at Q’s expression. “Why not?” he asked softly. “There will be an opportunity to return the favour.”

Q closed his eyes tightly, frowning. He swallowed and shook his head, taking deep breaths as though fighting to get back his self-control. “Condom,” he said, swallowing again. “Please, James. I can’t not.”

For one moment, the lust clouding Bond’s mind faded. It made sense for Q to be focused on his health — in a way, sex was his trade — but it was a sign that his surrender wasn’t complete. And for all that Bond wanted an independent, strong-willed lover who chose him, rather than a slave who felt obligated to please his owner, he also wanted Q consumed with lust. Still, he would respect Q’s wishes. “Don’t move,” he warned in response, before releasing one hand to dig in Q’s pocket. He had to release the other hand to tear open the condom wrapper. He pulled it off the condom with his teeth and rolled it on one-handed. The tricks you learn, he thought smugly. Once it was on securely, he ducked back down and swallowed around Q’s cock. He hated the taste.
of latex, but Q’s broken shout — “Oh, god, James!” — distracted him from it.

Bond returned his hand back to Q’s hip and gripped again roughly, this time pressing his fingernails into Q’s skin as he sucked and worked Q as hard and quickly as possible. He wondered if the shops downstairs carried flavoured condoms as he experimented with pressure and teeth, both of which left Q struggling against Bond’s grip, futile as it was.

That morning, when Bond had pulled Q on top of him and fucked up into him with lazy, glorious strokes, Q had tried to stop him long enough to ask permission to come. Bond had made it clear that asking that question ever again meant he’d stop. Now, Q just gave a choked-out, “Close, James,” without a hint of asking, and Bond encouraged him with a hard press of his teeth before he went back to moving.

He backed off as Q started to come a few seconds later, and he worked the head against the roof of his mouth with his tongue. When he relaxed his grip on Q’s hips, thinking to settle him back down, he saw deep red half-moons, some of which were welling with tiny pinpricks of blood. Bond removed the condom and set it aside on the coffee table with the dishes, staring at the marks.

Q was panting, his body inching down without any grace or coordination. Bond guided him into a controlled collapse and pulled him into his arms. “James,” Q whispered, burying his face against Bond’s neck. He draped his arms around Bond’s shoulders and murmured, “Thank you.”

Bond turned his gaze back to the damage he’d done to Q’s skin, but was surprised to find he didn’t feel guilty about it whatsoever. Looking at those marks — remembering how powerfully aroused Q had been — he could only feel a sense of satisfaction, even accomplishment. He stroked his hands up Q’s back, feeling the slight trembling still haunting Q’s overtaxed muscles. “You’re welcome.” Then he pressed a kiss into Q’s neck, smiling.

The sound Q let out was nearly a purr. He returned the kiss, lips finding the spot under Bond’s ear that made him shiver. “My turn?” he offered.

Bond was tempted to tell him no, that he’d rather go lie down for a while in bed. But he knew Q would see through it; he couldn’t hide the way his cock twitched as Q kissed his oversensitive skin. “Don’t rip my buttons,” he said instead, and Q let out a muffled huff that sounded suspiciously like laughter. “You know what I mean,” he growled as he pulled Q with him to the floor. “My clothes are tailored in very specific ways, if you recall.”

With another huff, Q asked, “Is that how you pick up other spies in bars, then?” He ducked quickly down Bond’s body and licked his chest as if pretending to be too busy to continue teasing, though he lifted his gaze to watch Bond’s reaction, and Bond could see he was grinning.

“Other spies are generally off-limits,” Bond said, settling comfortably, smiling. “We’re too in love with trying to kill each other to bother with sex. Well, unless we’re feeling particularly suicidal.”

“Right up your street, then,” Q said wryly between the kisses he set in a line down Bond’s abdomen. He set his hands to Bond’s hips, and then twitched his fingers, grinning up at Bond as he asked, “Should I use my mouth, or are we in a rush?”

“No rush,” Bond said before pausing. “Well —”

“Oh, no,” Q interrupted, his voice taking on an absolutely innocent edge, at odds with how he looked down at Bond’s body. “You said ‘no rush’, James. I wouldn’t want to disobey,” he challenged, and ducked his head to close his teeth around the waistband of Bond’s trousers.
“All right,” Bond said merrily, “but if my back spasms because of this hard floor, I hold you responsible for massaging it out.”

Q got his trousers down less than an inch before the fabric got caught up between Bond’s weight and the floor. As Q moved to the other side, he asked, “Is the opportunity to get my hands on your body supposed to not be incentive, or am I missing nuances of that threat?”

“You don’t need an excuse to touch me, Q. I give you official leave to massage my back at every convenient opportunity. A hardship, I’m sure, but we’ll manage, I suppose.” He wondered if Q had any training for it. Then he realised what he’d said, and the implication, but he didn’t want to think about it at the moment.

With a satisfied, thoughtful hum, Q said, “I’ll surprise you, then. But if you’d prefer to stand... you did seem to enjoy that.”

“Oh, fuck,” Bond ground out, thrusting up. “God yes, but next time.” Not only was he happy to lie there without having to do anything; he wasn’t sure he’d be able to hold onto his self-control and not just fuck Q’s mouth if he were to stand. Q’s orgasm had been intensely erotic, and Bond was already far, far too close, despite their banter.

“I look forward to it,” Q said, and went back to teasing the trousers down over Bond’s hips an inch at a time. His hair tickled at Bond’s abdomen and his sides as he worked, deliberately drawing out the undressing until Bond was ready to shove his clothes down and tell Q to get on with it already.

He finally moved back to the waistband of Bond’s pants. Instead of taking it in his teeth (or in his faster, clever, far more efficient fingers), he turned his head and worked his tongue underneath, licking low on Bond’s belly, so close to his cock that Bond could feel the heat of Q's exhale.

“Q,” Bond warned, reaching back up to thread his hands through Q’s hair. He didn’t tug, but the threat was palpable. Not that Q would find it a disincentive, he thought.

In answer, Q took the waistband in his teeth, stretched the elastic, and backed it down just enough to expose an inch of Bond’s cock. He eased it down gently, and for an instant, Bond felt Q’s lips on bare skin. Then Q was gone, moving to the side to work the fabric down in minuscule increments, with ‘accidental’ brushes and ‘coincidental’ licks that Bond knew were intended to chip away at his self-control.

The problem, of course, was that Bond knew damned well what Q wanted. Perhaps if Q hadn’t come already, he’d be willing to give in. But short of ordering Q — which took the fun out of it entirely — there was nothing else to do but lie back and let his self-control be tested.

So Q licked and nibbled and tugged the cloth away, and Bond fought to keep his hands gentle in Q’s hair and to keep from giving him orders, and he wondered how the fuck Q had managed to do this to him after what they’d done just hours before, in the first light of dawn. Then, finally, he felt pressure on his cock, and he looked down to see Q ease down, tongue and lips working to unroll a condom — without his hands — all the way down the length of Bond’s cock.

“Bloody hell, Q,” he groaned, hands tightening involuntarily with the effort of not thrusting up into Q’s mouth as he backed off, torturously slow. “You’re going to have to teach me that. I might need practice. Lots and lots of —”

With a soft little laugh, Q ducked his head, hard and fast, timing his swallow perfectly to flex his throat against the head of Bond’s cock. He held his position for a few long seconds before he followed the twitch of Bond’s fingers back up. He inhaled, sharp and quick, before pushing back
down with another hard swallow, tongue flexing against the underside as he moaned in pleasure.

Bond’s gasp was sharp and impressed as he fought not to tear at Q’s hair. The downside to using serial seductions for stress relief was that no one partner ever learned what the other truly liked, nor was likely to engage in activities that weren’t necessarily mutually beneficial. The sad fact was that none of Bond’s recent lovers (recent being since Vesper) had ever bothered to take him apart slowly and methodically, testing for what made him shiver in delight. And even Vesper’s efforts to seduce him and charm him away from MI6 had been selfish.

He and Q hadn’t known each other for long, but already Q was finding and pressing his most delicious triggers. As soon as Bond showed the slightest sign of starting to lose control, Q would react, repeating the action, giving himself wholly over to whatever Bond wanted.

Bond closed his eyes and fought against a sensation more overwhelming than just physical pleasure. It was the promise of cataloguing this information for future use that had him almost asking Q to stop. It was almost too much, being the subject of such an intent and purposeful study.

Unable to resist, Bond opened his eyes and lifted his head to stare once more. Q’s name slipped out, barely a whisper. Q didn’t stop; he looked up again, Bond’s cock all the way down into his throat, eyes bright from the effort and struggle to hold his breath. Bond looked down and remembered that same desperate, needy look from last night, with Q on his knees in the foyer. Just as last night, Q backed up enough to drag in a shuddering breath, never looking away from Bond’s eyes.

But instead of asking him to stop, or back off, or do something other than take him apart in every possible way, Bond found himself repeating Q’s favourite refrain. “Please,” he said quietly. Brokenly.

Q’s eyes widened, before he bowed his head, moving fast and hard. The mounting pleasure caught fire, and Bond’s fingers twisted in Q’s hair. Q pulled against Bond’s hold to keep moving, and Bond braced his heels on the carpet and thrust up until everything went white, lost in a rush of gasped breaths and pounding heartbeats and dangerously addictive pleasure, because Q never tried to stop him. He swallowed and licked and worked Bond’s cock until Bond was trembling, the orgasm drawn out almost to the point of painful oversensitivity, leaving him wrecked.

He barely noticed when Q finally pulled gently away and removed the condom. He only stopped Q from leaving his side because he couldn’t let go of Q’s hair. At the least little tug, Q halted and laid back down, body curled up against Bond’s. He rested his head on Bond’s chest and wrapped an arm around him, fingers curving along his ribs.

Bond pulled him close, hiding his expression by tucking his face into the back of Q’s neck. He felt like he should say something — ‘thank you’, at the very least — but he didn’t dare open his mouth to speak. He simply wrapped Q’s body around his own, sharing body heat, until their breathing settled into a slower, tandem rhythm. The hard floor was uncomfortable, but he couldn’t think of anything but the feeling of Q’s heartbeat and breath against his skin.

After long, quiet minutes, Q’s arm tightened fractionally. “Thank you, James,” he said quietly.

Bond shook his head. “That’s my line. That was... You were...” He paused, drawing a slow steady breath. “You’re incredible.”

“You allowed me to do that,” Q corrected. “You don’t let anyone else see that side, do you?”

Bond pushed back just enough to turn to face Q, sliding down enough to meet his gaze. “It’s not like it is in the movies, Q. There is no time. Ever. For anything. For learning favourite colours, let alone
what makes you...” He stopped, dragging a gentle hand over Q’s shoulder.

Q caught Bond’s hand and pressed a kiss to his palm before he pointedly turned Bond’s wrist. It seemed ridiculous, after that sort of intimacy, that Bond was still mostly dressed. According to his watch, it was barely past eleven in the morning.

“Thirteen hours,” Q said, with another quick kiss. “That’s hardly any time at all, if you’re paying attention.”

“You pay attention,” Bond said quietly, brushing his thumb along Q’s jaw. “To more than just what you want and feel. That’s the difference. No one else does. Especially not to people like me. We’re not supposed to allow it.” Bond rolled onto his back, wondering what the fuck he was doing. Something in the back of his very jaded mind told him that he was going to pay for this. Dearly.

“It’s a matter of perspective,” Q answered. “That was what I wanted. Can you even imagine how incredible it feels, watching you like that, knowing I’m the reason? That’s more gratifying than anything else.”

Bond nodded and sat up. Phrased like that, he found it easier to process. There was no promise in those words, no suggestion for future application. He turned to look down at Q, who looked incredibly debauched. His mouth was swollen and red. His neck and chest sported Bond’s bruises, bright red and purple against pale skin. And his hair was absolutely gravity-defying, sticking out randomly and in seemingly impossible configurations.

Bond laughed. The knot in his chest eased as he ran a gentle hand through Q’s hair. “I think we need to do something about this. I think a good soak might be in order.”

Q grinned. He sat up, torn shirt hanging from his shoulders, and lifted his head for a kiss that Bond couldn’t resist stealing. When Bond pulled away, Q’s eyes opened and his smile turned sweet. “I’ll see about massage oil, for after,” he offered.

Bond stood and stretched, back popping uncomfortably, and pulled Q up with him. “Do you have swimming trunks?” The surprised look was all the answer Bond needed. Q might have been comfortable with public nudity, but Bond wasn’t. “You can borrow one of mine.”

“Thank you,” Q said as he bent down to pick up the condoms and wrappers. Then he laughed and started to gather up his scattered buttons. “If you’d rather, I can put this shirt out for repairs. I’m afraid I can barely sew, and that usually comes with bleeding.”

Bond looked at the shirt critically. “That’s beyond saving, I think. I promised to buy you a new one, and I will. Besides, I’m not a fan of needles in any context, even domestic ones.” He playfully pulled the shirt the rest of the way off Q to throw into the trash. “The bathtub in the suite is a little small for both of us, but the whirlpool is right out front. Any objections?”

Q’s eyes lit up. He crossed the room and put his arms around Bond’s waist, asking, “Can I bring condoms, or are you shy? There are things I’ve always wanted to try, but never had the opportunity.”

Bond stared at him for a moment before returning the embrace and huffing out a laugh. “You can bring them. But I won’t promise anything unless we’re alone.”

Q grinned and turned to kiss Bond’s cheek. “I won’t argue. I rather like the thought...” He trailed off and kissed him again before he pulled away and said, “I’ll get towels and robes.”

Bond caught his wrist, wondering what Q was thinking. “The thought of what?”
Q avoided his eyes. “It’s nothing, James. I shouldn’t have said anything at all.”

Bond’s smile slipped away as he pulled Q a little closer, keeping one hand wrapped around Q’s wrist. He looked down before settling the other on Q’s hip; the red marks of his fingernails stopped him. He instead brushed a gentle thumb over the bruising. “What?”

“It’s not appropriate, James,” he insisted. “I’m sorry.”

Bond hesitated, knowing there were exactly two ways out of this. He could either demand Q speak his mind, which would be dangerously close to an order, or he could let it pass, and leave Q to his thoughts.

He pulled Q closer, moving his hand from Q’s hip to his chin to try and meet Q’s gaze. Q lifted his head at the touch and met Bond’s gaze slowly, reminding Bond of precisely how Q had responded that first night of the cruise — enticing and perfect, but also formally distant. So he did the only thing he could think of.

He pulled Q in close to kiss him. Q made a quiet sound and pressed close, not seductively but almost clumsily. He got one foot between Bond’s, nearly stepping on his toes, and lifted his hands to Bond’s face, holding him in the kiss.

Bond couldn’t help but feel a level of satisfaction with Q’s lack of grace. It seemed less practiced and more genuine. More real. “You don’t have to apologise for your thoughts, Q, whether you share them or not. They’re bloody brilliant, aren’t they?” He nipped one last time at Q’s lips before turning towards the bedroom. “I’m just going to clean up a minute. I’ll be right back.”

Q smiled and moved out of Bond’s way, going to the wardrobes in the foyer. Bond glanced at him on the way to the bathroom, seeing now how he used his formality the way Bond used aggression and cockiness as armour, hiding what he was thinking and feeling. Q could retreat into trained responses, and no one — no one here — would find fault with it, no matter what was going on inside him.
Day Eight

Much as it might have surprised Bond to hear, Q thought of himself as a professional. He’d never fallen into the trap of getting emotionally entangled with anyone — trainer, owner, not even his earliest dominant partners, back before he’d ever heard of the Marketplace. He was a submissive, yes, but submissive in no way implied stupidity, especially not for him. He wasn’t looking to fall in love. In some ways, what he wanted was more than love — more rare and less transient.

So he was not going to develop feelings for a man who didn’t even want him in a way that held meaning for him. Which was what he told himself, firmly, all through forty minutes of cuddling in the hot tub, wearing Bond’s spare swim trunks since he didn’t have any of his own, and through more than an hour of touching every inch of that man’s body, hands slick with oil, applying his limited knowledge of anatomy to tease out every last knot and hint of tension that he could find. Q kept it all in context of his service, both to maintain his own reputation for when he was sold to someone who did want him, and as a matter of honour, because Bond did own him, at least for now.

Between last night’s distraction and this morning’s damage, Q was out of anything more formal than his T-shirts. He hid one under a jumper that could almost pass for formal, but there was nothing he could do about his casual jeans. When Bond emerged from the bathroom in a robe and went to the closet to find his clothes, he spotted Q and stared.

Q resisted the urge to drop to his knees, reminding himself that it would probably irritate Bond. Instead, he said, “I’m sorry. This is all I have. I sent our worn clothes to be laundered, but it’ll be a few hours.”

Bond walked over, a mischievous glint in his eye, and wrapped his hands around Q’s arse to pull him close. “Don’t apologise. I approve.” He gave Q a quick but rough kiss before going back to the closet.

Q couldn’t help but follow, looking Bond over. The hot tub had been torture — there was nothing legal about those swim trunks, even if half the people there hadn’t bothered with clothes at all. The fact that Bond was clothed, at least minimally, just meant more people stared, leaving Q torn between vicious, inappropriate jealousy and a smug sense of satisfaction that he was the one Bond kept close.

“Wherever you want to go, they have room for lunch,” he said, a little bit incoherently. He shook his head and explained, “I called all the restaurants to verify they have room. Most people are ashore again today.”

Bond stopped, hand on the cuff of one of his shirts. He looked at Q for a quiet moment before he turned and moved to sit on the couch. He took a breath as if steeling himself, and smiled up at Q.

“I need appropriate clothes, depending on where we’re going,” he said, eyes flicking to the closet. But instead of getting back up to finish dressing, he leaned back, watching. It was almost expectant, even if the smile was slightly strained.

It was a mark of Q’s distraction that for one moment he had no idea what was going on. Then he realised Bond was waiting for him to find clothes, and he silently reprimanded himself for not having done this already, while Bond was washing up after the massage. Normally he would have, but then Bond didn’t seem to expect it, and he couldn’t tell if Bond liked it, and god, his life was complicated. So he tried to ignore the sense of satisfaction that curled up deep inside him and went to go find
clothes, thinking viciously that if they just called for room service, he could stay in that robe — which was undoubtedly covering a towel at most. Probably not even that, in fact.

Informal, he decided, thinking of the grill up on the eighth deck. It would be bright and sunny up there, satisfying Bond’s need to expose Q to natural light, and it would be both windy and casual. And selfishly, he’d already seen Bond in a gorgeous dinner suit and bespoke tailoring. He wanted something more casual this time, for the contrast. It wasn’t as if he’d have this opportunity for that much longer.

Black jeans, he decided as soon as he spotted a royal blue jumper that looked like it would be body-hugging tight. For underneath, he chose a dove grey long-sleeved T-shirt that would be thin and comfortable. He folded everything into a neat pile, then picked up socks and casual black shoes.

He brought Bond’s clothes out to the living room sofa, rather than the bedroom, and he knelt down in the space between the table and the couch mostly for the excuse to get his hands on Bond’s bare legs. When Bond didn’t object, he indulged, feeling the lightest trace of oil still clinging to damp skin. But he stayed silent, resisting the urge to ask about scars that weren’t his concern — especially since he imagined most of them had come from work, which would be classified.

After this was all over, he’d have to snatch a copy of Bond’s file, just so he could have his questions answered. Now that he knew how to get into MI6, it would be comparatively effortless, though he’d only do it once.

Bond reached down to run his hand through Q’s hair. “That’s from a rusty machete of all things,” he said quietly as Q’s fingers found one of his many scars. “I have a friend, Alec. We were working in Afghanistan some years ago, looking for a particularly effective and elusive terrorist. He wasn’t actually an Afghani, but he had a thing for poppies. Not just an opium addiction, but an actual artistic appreciation for looking at the fields of them in the mountains there.

“Alec and I had been waiting there, in a tool shed, for days. It was hot during the day and freezing at night, but it was the only spot to hide for miles. We had eyes on the field, just waiting for him to show up. But we were bored.

“So we had this great idea. What can we burn to keep us warm —”

“Oh, god,” Q muttered, already seeing the potential for disaster. Bond didn’t need a slave; he needed a babysitter. Who the hell let him carry his own matches?

Bond chuckled. “It wasn’t long after... well, I wasn’t in a good mood, and he was trying to cheer me up. Who knew it only took a few flowers to have such a dramatic effect? Beautiful flowers, too. White and papery and ridiculously innocent looking.

“So, the terrorist finally showed up, but we weren’t paying as much attention anymore. Alec tried to shove me out the door to get me running, to wake me up, but it backfired. I tripped over a damned shovel and fell on a rusty machete.” He paused, chuckling. “Not nearly as sexy as hand-to-hand to save the day, but amusing. Don’t tell Alec I told you. I’m sworn to secrecy.” He laughed again as he leaned back.

“You’re actually allowed out of the country?” Q couldn’t help but ask. “Or is it that the government hopes you’ll bring chaos to our enemies, rather than attracting it to London?”

“That’s probably a fair assessment,” Bond admitted, still moving his fingers over Q’s head. “It takes a special kind of personality to do the things we do.”
Q leaned his head on Bond’s thigh and closed his eyes, telling himself that there was no point in worrying. Bond was going to be like this no matter what, and in a few days, he’d leave, and Q would never see him again.

This, though... This was too intimate. Q told himself that, but it still took effort for him to say, “It’s already late. If we wait much longer, lunch will become dinner.”

Bond hummed, bending down to kiss Q’s head. “Go on, then,” he said quietly before sitting back expectantly.

Telling himself not to read too much into this, Q moved away from Bond and sorted through his clothing. The simple task of helping Bond dress served its unintended purpose of helping Q relax and focus on the reality of service, not feelings that had no place here, and by the time he helped Bond put on his jumper over a T-shirt that was too tight to be worn out in public on its own, he felt much calmer.

Leaving the suite also let him breathe more comfortably. He was wary of the fact that a terrorist was actually here, on the ship, but he felt safe enough — there was a reason he hadn’t left the suite alone since finding out the true reason for Bond’s presence. He told himself that was the reason he stayed close to Bond, almost close enough to touch unintentionally if they fell out of step. Then he told himself he was an idiot — but he also didn’t move away.

“If you’re willing to postpone lunch for a little longer, perhaps now would be a good time to go buy you a new shirt,” Bond suggested, casting a glance at Q as he he pressed the button for the lift.

“Of course I don’t need to. But I think I’d like to keep you in good supply in case I decide to do it again,” Bond said with a positively wicked grin. “Perhaps even an extra pair of trousers to experiment with. For curiosity’s sake.”

That thought was enough to distract Q into wondering if he could coax Bond into tying him up first. He gave an answer, though he had no idea what he said, and followed Bond into the lift. He couldn’t quite avoid feeling resentful over the time they’d spent as nothing more than colleagues or business associates or whatever they’d been, until last night’s dinner.

Bond must have picked up on Q’s distraction; in Bond’s line of work, he must have to be able to pick up even the subtlest cues, and Q suspected he wasn’t being subtle. Bond wrapped his hands around Q’s wrists and pulled him roughly forward. He leaned in to bite Q’s ear before whispering, “And don’t think I forgot about needing rope.”

Q sagged against Bond, every instinct — every desire — urging him to submit, to revel in Bond’s control. But in the back of his mind, underneath the whispers of “yes” and “please” and “more”, all he could think was that this was going to end. Service, he kept telling himself. It was the service that mattered, not the owner he served.

The thought was no comfort against the sense of loss he felt, knowing that Bond would soon be gone.
This is temporary, Bond told himself through the rest of the day. He repeated it in his head as he sat across from Q in the high wind on the very top deck, where the chill of the Alaskan spring had driven away all but a few determined guests and slaves. He told himself not to get attached as he teasingly leaned across the table, encouraging Q to try morsels from his plate, and tried not to think about feeding Q last night in the hall downstairs. He firmly made himself recall that he’d be disembarking, probably by Anchorage, and flying back to England — alone — as he pulled Q close against his side for their walk through the ship. He even tried to rationalise the walk down to the third deck, where his suspect’s cabin was located, as reconnaissance rather than an excuse to prolong their closeness.

If not for the collar around Q’s neck and Bond’s solitary lifestyle as an MI6 agent, they might well have been perfect for one another.

They never made it back to the cabin; Bond didn’t dare allow himself to be alone with Q until he had his equilibrium. Instead, they went back to the nightclub for an intimate dinner, where a small orchestra and a sultry female singer provided entertainment, rather than anything more sexually charged. The performance was the perfect excuse to sit close beside Q, rather than across from each other, and Q at least missed the last half of the performance as he rested his head on Bond’s shoulder and gently licked and nibbled at his ear and neck, one hand curved over Bond’s thigh.

By the time the performance ended, Bond was hard-pressed to remember that they were working — or he was working, while Q was acting the role of an obedient, desirable slave.

Under cover of the applause, while the lights were still dimmed at the end of the show, Bond rose. He reached for Q, but he was already on his feet, slipping between the chairs to move behind Bond’s left shoulder, where he’d walked whenever Bond didn’t have an arm around him. Silently, he followed Bond through the dark maze of tables to the exit, where he got ahead long enough to push the door open for Bond. He’d been doing that all day as well, and at some point, Bond had stopped pausing in doorways, taking it for granted that Q would get the door for him. The thought was disturbing.

He caught Q’s wrist, pulled him close, and wrapped an arm around his waist. “We’ll stop by the shops on the way to the room,” he said, thinking that if this was just sex — if this was just for one or two more nights — then he wanted Q to remember him. If he couldn’t give Q pain, he could at least give him the release of uncompromising bondage.

Q turned and met his eyes for an instant, colour rising in his face before he looked deferentially down. “I believe the shops should be open late,” he said quietly.

The boutiques lined either side of the atrium, tucked between a small library and a casino aft and passenger staterooms forward. No trace remained to show what was sold on normal cruises; now, the very first window showed mannequins in leather straps, harnesses, and full bodysuits with masks and hoods. Inside, a male and female mannequin wore more complex harnesses strapped to horizontal poles that Bond recognised, after a moment, as the hitching posts for a cart. Towards the back were large metal cages, and Bond turned away, trying not to openly show his disgust.

He paused at the next shop, where the mannequins were wound with rope as well as leather, this time much more tame: cuffs, collars, and belts. He looked inside a bit warily, but the only ominous thing he saw was the display of whips, crops, paddles, and canes on one wall.
“Let’s start with the basics, shall we?” Bond asked with a confidence that was affected more than felt. He pulled Q into the shop, strolling past the implements of pain to admire the tools of bondage further in the back.

Or, tried to admire. Some of the ‘accessories’ were obviously for nothing but show. He lifted a cuff with an aluminium lock the size of a thumbnail and held it up for Q to see, eyebrow raised.

Q’s lips twitched. “Would you like me to show you what might suit your needs better, Richard?”

“Please,” he replied wryly, hanging the offending item back on the rack.

Immediately, Q ventured into the racks, glancing from side to side without pausing. Bond watched him move with confidence and expertise, thinking of himself in a gun store: pausing to browse or admire, but knowing exactly what he was looking for.

In this case, Q stopped at a dresser of thin drawers that probably held souvenir T-shirts during a conventional cruise. Now, the display on top was of cuffs constructed of layers of leather stitched together with stout-looking buckles. Towards the back were stacks of small cardboard boxes from several different lock manufacturers, all of them reputable.

Q lifted one of the cuffs and held it out to Bond in both hands, head bowed. “It’s unlikely to warp and too reinforced to tear. The post that goes through the buckle” — he held it up, showing that the end was looped back on itself — “is designed to take a lock, preventing it from being unbuckled.”

Bond took the cuff from Q, evaluating it with perhaps more of a professional assessment than was strictly necessary. It was well-constructed enough that even he wouldn’t be able to tear through it with just brute strength, nor would he be able to work it free with a lock on it. He couldn’t help but steal a glance at Q’s bare wrists, still held out, and imagined what the dark leather would look like against the pale skin.

Pale, fragile skin. Bond took one of Q’s hands, turned it palm-up, and brushed the edge of the cuff roughly along the delicate inner-wrist. “It’s a little rough around the edges. Will that be unpleasant?”

Q shook his head, breath catching, though his hand was steady. “No, Richard,” he answered. The slight flush in his cheeks grew darker, and though his eyes were cast down, shadowed by his fringe, Bond could see his pupils had gone wide.

Bond turned his head to look at the rest of the rack’s offerings. “I don’t know that locks are necessary,” he said instead, looking at the boxes. “Do you have an opinion?”

Q darted a glance at the boxes before looking back down. “No, Richard. They should be secure with just the buckles. The locks would prevent anyone from removing them without the key.” Then, with another twitch of his lips, he added, “Or lockpicks.”

Bond felt a twinge of annoyance at Q’s refusing to offer an opinion, but disregarded it in favour of stepping closer and running a hand through Q’s hair. Q bowed his head and let out a quiet sigh. “You could probably effectively hide a lockpick in here, and I wouldn’t know about it, would I?” He tipped his head to whisper in Q’s ear, “I approve.”

He caught the way Q’s breath hitched on his inhale. “I could demonstrate my lockpicking skills, if you’d like,” he offered just as quietly.

Bond was torn between two equally compelling images: Q demonstrating his lockpicking skills in a manner that might prove useful for the mission, and Q doing his best to free himself while Bond did his best to... distract him. Judging by Q’s light breathing and flush, Bond was certain Q wasn’t
thinking about the mission. “I think I’d like that,” he answered just as quietly. “Why don’t I go find something that might actually present a challenge while you finish here?”

“Yes, Richard,” Q answered, holding out his hands for the cuff. “What should I get?”

“A set of these, for your wrists,” Bond said, resting the cuff across Q’s palms. He stared at Q’s wrists for a moment, remembering how he’d looked bound by the ties. The black leather would be dark and unyielding against his skin. The ties Bond could write off as nothing more than a game. Somehow, the thought of using the leather cuffs was far more serious. More real.

He waited for a sense of discomfort, but it didn’t come.

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Q took a breath to regain his composure as Bond walked away. He resisted the urge to turn and watch, torn between the excitement of knowing what would probably happen tonight and the desire to present a perfect facade for anyone observing his behaviour. Soon, Bond would leave, and Q would hopefully be auctioned off again, able to put Bond out of his mind and focus on someone who wanted all of him.

For now, though, he couldn’t think of anywhere else he wanted to be. He could all too easily imagine that he really did belong to Bond — which was how he needed to behave, he reminded himself. So he focused on finding cuffs that fit him exactly, even though he probably should have searched the drawers with cuffs that would fit multiple sizes. He didn’t want to send Bond home with cuffs that would fit any partner; it was unfair, but Q wanted to be remembered.

He knew his measurements and found the appropriate cuffs quickly, but he didn’t want to take the chance that the labels were wrong. He set one cuff down, rested his right wrist against the leather, and struggled to fold the still-stiff, new layers around.

“Allow me.”

The voice was deep but light, unfamiliar. Q glanced up and saw one of the buyers from last week’s auction — the green-eyed man who’d asked to see how his skin took marks. For the auction, he’d been in a dinner suit; now, he was dressed casually in faded blue jeans and a jumper over a button-down, with the sleeves pushed up to bare his forearms. He had an American accent that Q couldn’t quite place — possibly Midwestern.

“Thank you, sir,” Q said, stepping back to give him room.

But the man pulled the cuff out from under Q’s wrist and waited expectantly, idly playing with the leather, running it between his fingers.

Q hesitated for an instant, wondering where Bond had gone. With another owner, he would have known exactly how to respond. He had a feeling that Bond wouldn’t even want him talking to anyone else, but he had no clear guidelines.

Finally, he fell back on his training. He knelt, raising his right wrist, placing the left behind his back. Strong fingers closed tightly around his wrist, and he felt his pulse jump. “That’s better,” the man said, wrapping the leather strap in place. He pulled the buckle tight, and a shock like electricity went up Q’s arm, stealing his breath.
Automatically, he switched hands. The man laughed quietly and ruffled his fingers through Q’s hair, ending with a sharp tug that made Q’s eyes close. “I’ve been wondering where you were,” he admitted as he buckled the second cuff in place. “Have you been kept busy or is your new owner neglecting you?”

After days of speaking his mind, Q found it surprisingly difficult to fall back on his training. “It’s not for me to say, sir,” he managed after a heartbeat’s pause.

When the second cuff was buckled in place, the man released Q’s wrist. As Q put his hand behind his back, the man took hold of his hair again. A twist and a tug brought Q up on his knees, head tipped back, giving him no choice but to meet the man’s eyes. The gentle touch to Q’s face was a startling contrast to the painful sting on his scalp.

“Do you plan to renew your contract in five years?”

Q stared, reading avaricious, hungry desire in the man’s face. He must have been bidding against Bond. Q’s pulse gave another jump, and he said, “My owner hasn’t discussed it with me, sir.”

“Hmm.” The man’s fingers drew over to Q’s lips, brushing over his mouth. A part of Q was straining for any glimpse of Bond, or even the now-familiar sound of his footsteps; the rest was filled with triumph that this man had wanted him. “Will Parker be handling your sale again?”

“Yes, sir,” Q answered, feeling soft skin against his lips as he spoke.

He smiled and moved his hand down, trailing one finger along the line of Q’s bared throat. “Have his contact information sent to me. Room three hundred, deck six. I think I want to keep my eye on you, Fourteen.” He brushed his finger over Q’s collar and gave it a sharp pull, making Q gasp again.

“Let him go,” said a very low, dark voice from behind the man.

The hands left Q, who caught one glimpse of Bond, glaring coldly and dangerously at the other man. In a sudden panic, Q bowed his head and berated himself for not having found a polite way to escape. Not that he would be in any sort of trouble, though it was his fault that the situation had escalated.

“Sorry,” the green-eyed man said, though he sounded anything but. Instead, he sounded casual, even amused. “I found him wandering loose. It looked like he needed help.”

“I can see why you’d need to rely on proximity to ensure the proper behaviour of what’s yours,” Bond said, taking a step closer, “but I’ll remind you that you lost, and Q is mine.”

The man looked about to respond, but Bond didn’t give him a chance. In a swift, efficient movement, Bond swung, fist connecting with the man’s jaw with a crack. The next thing he knew, the man was sprawled against the stack of drawers, barely on his feet.

Bond leaned in close to him and growled, “The only reason you’re still on your feet is because I have better things to do. Touch him again, and I’ll make an exception. Do I make myself clear?”

Q closed his eyes and took deep breaths, trying to push aside his panic, but he couldn’t think of how to put a stop to what could easily escalate into an even worse situation. Bond had struck first, which could cause difficulties not only within the Marketplace — which didn’t matter to Bond, beyond his investigation — but with civil authorities, if the green-eyed man decided to make trouble. But Green Eyes had crossed a more ephemeral line of etiquette in his handling of Q. And Q knew it. He should have put a stop to it, but he hadn’t, because he’d wanted it. He wanted the context of what Green Eyes had so naturally expected — obedience, the dynamic that the Marketplace fostered.
Why the *hell* couldn’t Bond touch him like that?

He ignored the little twinge of bitterness. At the moment, as far as everyone but himself and Bond was concerned, he was Bond’s slave. That meant he had to intervene.

While Q was struggling with himself, the shopkeeper had come over and was attempting to settle the matter. Head bowed, Q opened his eyes and scanned around him until he spotted Bond’s shoes — fortunately far away from where Green Eyes was standing, with the shopkeeper between them. After unbuckling the cuffs, Q moved towards Bond slowly and unobtrusively, relieved that he knew how to not draw attention to himself.

When he was at Bond’s side, he leaned against Bond’s leg lightly enough to make his presence known without startling him.

Bond froze for only the briefest moment before reaching down to tangle his hand in Q’s hair. But even while his hand was gentle, petting Q’s hair carefully, his body was stiff with tension; every few seconds in the conversation, his hand would lift and twitch towards his belt, where Q suddenly realised he’d probably, under normal circumstances, have a gun.

Q’s heart rate spiked again; the situation that seemed barely civilised wasn’t even close, if Bond was thinking in terms of weapons. He hesitated for an instant before he dropped his head a little lower and arched his back, pulling his hair through Bond’s fingers.

Bond stopped his coldly quiet argument to look down at Q, tugging on his hair to tip Q’s head up, meeting his gaze. His expression was far more neutral than Q had expected it to be, but Q could see the icy fury in his eyes.

For a moment, Q forgot all about defusing the situation. He closed his eyes and forced himself to speak, though his instinct was to remain quiet. “I’m sorry, master,” he said, quietly but clearly, choosing his words with care.

“It’s not your apology I require,” Bond said coldly, returning his gaze to the man.

“It was my fault, master,” Q said quickly; it wasn’t *entirely* true, but it was true enough. “He was only trying to help. I” — he hesitated, instinctively wary of having that anger directed at *him* — “encouraged him further.”

Bond looked back down at Q, expression darkening, hand tightening in Q’s hair. Then he looked back at the man. “Come near us again, and I will do far worse than bruise your jaw.”

Q heard the shopkeeper and the green-eyed man, but his focus was entirely on Bond. He tried not to fight Bond’s hold, waiting for any hint of what he wanted. Q assumed they’d be leaving, and he moved the two cuffs to one hand. Hopefully he’d have the chance to drop them somewhere on the way out, or there would be even more trouble for Bond.

Finally, Bond released Q’s hair and pulled out his wallet. Q heard the rustle of cash, and then he was being pulled to his feet by Bond’s strong hand on his upper arm. They walked out of the shop at a pace only slightly faster than normal. It took Bond only a few steps to move his hand from Q’s arm to his waist, though instead of his usual light embrace, the grip was tight enough to bruise.

“Did he hurt you?” Bond asked in quiet growl, taking advantage of their proximity to speak softly without having to lean towards Q’s ear.

“No” — Q faltered, for a moment having no idea what to call him — “Richard.”
“The Northern Pacific is an excellent place to dump a body. No inconveniently populated shores for the bits to wash up on,” Bond said coldly.

Nervously, Q wondered just how long Bond could cling to his anger. “It was my fault, Richard. I was having trouble buckling the cuff in place. I didn’t stop him.”

“No, you didn’t,” Bond said. He stopped in front of the lift and pressed the button with his thumb. Q noticed for the first time that he had a set of silver padlocks and locking carabiners in his hand.

Q stared at the locks, thinking that if Bond were any other owner, tonight would be terrifying and exhilarating, and he’d probably be a wreck just thinking about it. With Bond, though, he anticipated something far less dramatic. Probably nicely diverting. Assuming that Bond didn’t leave the suite to go kill Green Eyes.

He wanted to pull away and drop to his knees and either explain why he hadn’t stopped Green Eyes or just beg for forgiveness, but Bond’s grip hadn’t loosened at all. So he stayed silent, and when the lift doors opened, he let Bond pull him inside.

Bond was ominously quiet in the privacy of the lift and on the walk forward to the suite. After unlocking the door, he held Q closely and opened the door himself. He shut it and locked it behind him, still one-handed, and walked Q to the bedroom. He took the cuffs from Q’s hand, then finally stepped back, staring almost dispassionately at Q. Only his eyes gave away that he was feeling anything at all, but whatever that emotion was, it had shifted away from cold rage to something else Q couldn’t identify.

“Take off your shoes and jumper. Then lie down on your back,” Bond finally instructed in a perfectly calm voice.

It was one thing to face an angry owner whose actions were generally predictable; this was something else entirely. With no idea what Bond might do — and with the knowledge that Bond had no familiarity with anything that might be considered ‘normal’ by Marketplace standards — Q’s panic returned. For the first time, he considered trying to defuse the situation through something other than obedience, and even wondered how he could get in touch with Chris or anyone else.

Trying to hide his nervousness, he removed his shoes and pushed them against the wall by the bedside table, out of the way. Then he pulled off his jumper, holding his glasses in place. He folded the jumper quickly and set it on top of his shoes.

He still didn’t know what to do. If he said ‘no’, Bond might well accept it and stop whatever he had planned. But that wasn’t what Q wanted. He breathed deeply and stopped trying to prepare for the unknown. Instead, he sat on the edge of the bed and lay down, staying on one side.

Bond stood next to Q, staring down for a brief moment before moving to stand by the bedside table. He dropped the cuffs and the locks there. Then he copied Q’s actions, removing his own shoes and jumper.

Bond turned from Q long enough to retrieve the cuffs from the table. He knelt on the side of the of the bed, forcing Q to shuffle over. “Wrist,” he said quietly.

Q held out his hand, struggling to follow Bond’s lead. His training was almost useless, though. He had no idea what Bond expected or wanted; all he could do was fall back on compliance.

Quickly and efficiently, Bond buckled the cuff, pulling it tight enough to ensure that Q couldn’t escape from it without breaking a bone in his hand. He pulled Q’s arm up to snap a carabiner in
place around one of the metal headboard’s posts and through the cuff’s D-ring. He turned back to the table, but instead of reaching for a lock, he reached for the other cuff. “Other wrist.”

Being even partially helpless scrambled Q’s reactions. Arousal and fear twisted together inside him, and when he held out his other hand, he noted the slightest tremor.

“I would have killed him for you, if you had asked,” Bond said quietly as he secured the cuff. He pulled Q’s other arm up before he could think of a response, and snapped it onto another post only a handspan from the first. With his wrists that close, he knew without trying that he could reach the buckles and free himself.

Had Bond been anyone else — any other owner or, worse, a soft-world dominant — Q would have written it off as an amateurish mistake. With Bond, he knew better. But why? Was he supposed to try to escape? Or was this a backwards way of asking for consent?

Struggling to understand, Q watched Bond warily, realising only then that he’d allowed his sexual needs to come before his agreement with Bond. He was Bond’s slave in name only, not in truth, but twenty-four hours of fantastic sex — especially after having been without any owner for so long — had distracted Q just enough from their arrangement for him to grow complacent. He couldn’t be what he wanted to be without someone on the other side, someone to push back when he pulled, which was something Bond would probably never come to accept.

“He did nothing I didn’t allow, James,” Q said, his voice still tripwire-tight.

“I’m fully aware of that, Q,” Bond said. He pushed up onto his knees, then swung a leg over Q’s narrow hips. He didn’t sit on Q’s legs, but kept his weight balanced on his knees. “It’s curious, isn’t it, how many shades there are to the definition of mine?”

Mine? Q stared up at him, wondering what nuances Bond was seeing that he was missing. Bond didn’t want a slave — he’d made that clear — but after their intimacy today this could be the sort of possessiveness that happened even in vanilla relationships.

Very carefully, Q answered, “Until our contract is terminated, I belong only to you, James.”

“But that’s not exactly true, is it?” Bond said, leaning over Q. He brought his hands up to Q’s wrists, sliding one finger under each cuff to press at Q’s pulse points. “There is the sort of mine that comes from supposed ownership, like the one our contract details. But that isn’t good enough, is it? Not for you.”

He shook his head and swallowed. “No, James.”

“If I were giving you what you needed, you would never have allowed him touch you. You would have been mine in a way that has nothing to do with contractual obligation, but something stronger. Something much more fundamental.” Bond pressed his thumbs harder into Q’s pulse points, eyes locked on Q’s.

Q’s breath hitched. He nodded, closing his eyes guiltily. “You’re correct, James,” he said quietly.

Bond was silent for a long moment before he slipped his fingers out from under the cuffs, dragging his nails down Q’s arms. He scored lightly, drawing stinging lines that bordered on pain, until he reached Q’s shoulders. Then he slid his hands underneath Q’s body and gripped tightly, almost hard enough to bruise.

“Do you know why I consider the cuffs mere decoration, Q? Why I didn’t lock them?”
If another owner — one familiar with the training Q had undergone — had asked, he would’ve known the answer right away. Locks and even cuffs weren’t necessary. If ordered, Q would hold onto the headboard or just not move his hands, no matter what was done to him. But Bond had no idea, so Q shook his head. “No, James.”

Bond settled his weight — not all of it, but enough to be thoroughly felt — onto Q’s hips. He brought his hands back around and up, reaching until he was gripping Q’s upper arms. The position had the effect of bringing Bond’s body mere inches from Q’s, and he could feel it held in place with the incredible strength he’d seen but hadn’t yet actually experienced. He stared down at Q, gaze intense. “Do you think I need leather and buckles to hold you in place?”

Q opened his eyes. This time, he didn’t even have to think. “No, James,” he said, struggling to rein in the growing arousal that wasn’t displacing the fear, but merely adding to it.

Bond kept watching him as if calculating his next move. His eyes flickered to Q’s throat, and his hands drifted back down Q’s arms. Then he straightened up enough to pull off his T-shirt. He threw it to the floor and leaned back down.

“I could always order you, I suppose, but that only works with the lesser, inferior definition of possession. That’s mere training, not want.” He pulled Q’s T-shirt up over his head carefully enough that he didn’t dislodge Q’s glasses. He pushed the fabric all the way up to Q’s trapped wrists and left it tangled around the cuffs.

Q wanted to ask what definition Bond was using — he needed to ask — but he didn’t dare speak. This all felt too tenuous, too dangerous, too far outside anything Q had experienced in his seven years with the Marketplace. He wondered if he could still reach the buckles with the shirt in his way, but he knew that he couldn’t — certainly not quickly.

Bond stopped talking for a moment as he slipped off Q’s waist. He opened the button on Q’s jeans and pulled the zip down slowly. He tucked his fingers into Q’s waistband, catching his jeans and pants, and pulled them both down. He tossed them over the edge of the bed, knelt back, and undid his own flies, though he didn’t pull his jeans down. Then he bent back over Q.

“Where did he touch you, Q?”

The question froze Q’s voice in his throat. His only thought was that Bond would want to erase the memory of the green-eyed man’s touches with his own. “My hair. My throat.” He hesitated, fear spiking, because he could handle pain — he liked pain — but he needed his hands. He had to take a deep, shaky breath, before he added, “My hands.”

“I think you’re forgetting somewhere, Q. I can’t miss anything, now can I?”

Q stared up at him, throat going tight. He tried to remember, but pushing aside the dangerous, unpredictable reality of here and now was harder than it should have been. He stopped himself from biting his lip — a habit that Chris had helped him break, but one that reminded him...

“My mouth,” he said, remembering the touch on his lips.

Bond nodded. “Very good,” he said quietly before all but falling on top of Q. He braced himself just above Q’s body, arms holding him only centimetres away. He stared down, icy blue eyes locked ruthlessly on Q’s, as he reached one hand up to thread his fingers through one of Q’s hands. He shifted his hips, grinding into Q’s half-hard, traitorous cock, and he laid down on Q’s body so he could reach up and take Q’s other hand. Bond’s weight on Q’s chest was enough to make breathing more difficult — a thought Q only had a moment to process before Bond was kissing him roughly.
The cross-wired part of Q’s brain — the part he’d loathed growing up and in college, the part he’d come to understand since finding the Marketplace — lit up with sudden, brilliant sparks. He whimpered unselfconsciously, desperately, and surrendered to the kiss, fingers clenching around Bond’s hands.

Bond kissed ruthlessly, biting at Q’s mouth and lips without any of his usual restraint. He squeezed Q’s hands and rolled his hips as he kissed, pressing his bare skin against Q’s. He would back off every few minutes just to give Q a chance to draw short breaths before he came back demanding more. The weight and pressure added just enough roughness — even pain — for Q to know he was absolutely doing it on purpose.

Finally, after long, breathless minutes, Bond pulled back. “You wanted him,” he said before pressing his mouth onto Q’s neck, biting hard.

Q’s gasp was the only thing that kept him from actually shouting in surprise. He bucked his hips up against Bond’s body, and though he couldn’t move Bond at all, the contact made him whimper all the same. Bond’s grip on his hands had his fingers going numb — not that he wanted it to stop. Not that he wanted any of it to stop, even the fear and uncertainty, because he was already forgetting everything but Bond, sinking into that mental place where the world outside no longer existed.

Bond lifted his head free to stare down at Q, gaze considering. “Better,” he said. “But not there yet. Which place was the most intimate to you, Q?”

He never considered refusing to answer or even speculating why Bond was asking. His only hesitation was when his thoughts stumbled between answering his mouth or his throat. Then he remembered the pull on his collar, and he said, “My throat.”

Bond nodded thoughtfully. He pulled back and let go of Q just long enough to reach down and push his jeans and pants off his hips. He shuffled to kick them off and then returned quickly to Q once the denim was on the floor. With nothing between them any more, Bond ground into him brutally, groaning at the contact. But instead of threading his fingers back through Q’s, he brought one hand up to bury his fingers in Q’s hair. The other came to rest over Q’s throat, pressing slightly. He rolled his hips into Q’s again, tightening both hands at the same time.

Q swallowed reflexively, eyes snapping fully open. He stared up at Bond, trapped between his hands and his weight and the cuffs. For a moment, the fear surged ahead of his arousal, and he remembered what Bond did for MI6.

But before he could do more than struggle to gasp in a breath, Bond’s hands tightened a bit more, and the sting in his scalp and sudden thunder of his pulse, captured under Bond’s fingers, shattered the fear into pieces, leaving nothing but raw need. He went boneless under Bond, eyes falling closed as he surrendered.

Bond’s sigh was deep and satisfied. “That’s better. But you need to keep your eyes open, Q,” he said as he settled more comfortably against Q’s body. Q’s eyes opened, though it was more a matter of obedience than actual sight and focus, even with his glasses. His vision was flaring into bright white at the edges as his body struggled instinctively to take in air.

Bond’s thrusts against Q grew harder but slower and more rhythmic. He pressed close, thighs to chest, lips millimetres from Q’s to capture his sharp exhales. His eyes focused on Q’s and didn’t wander, though as the pleasure started to build between them, they fluttered shut for bare seconds before Bond forced them back open.

“Fuck, Q,” he ground out, hand tightening even further for a moment, breath hot on Q’s lips.
Q struggled to move. He scratched at the wall beyond the headboard, trying to brace himself against Bond’s thrusts. His gasps were thin, sharp wheezes, insufficient to keep him actually breathing. His body wanted to panic, but his mind subverted the fear into more arousal, leaving him painfully hard and desperate for more of the gorgeous, almost painful friction of Bond’s body. He couldn’t even beg, though — not that it was his place. Bond was finally taking what he wanted, not asking or coaxing or teasing or seducing, and all Q could do was try to give him everything.

Bond brushed his lips against Q’s mouth, dragged his tongue over Q’s teeth, tasted his gasping breaths with satisfaction. He moved further up Q’s jaw to his ear and bit, tugging at the sensitive skin before scraping his teeth sharply down. His hips started to speed up and lose their rhythm, and when Bond’s mouth landed back over Q’s, Q realised he wasn’t the only one gasping anymore.

“You’re going to come first,” Bond demanded breathlessly, “with one of my hands on your throat, and the other in your hair.”

Trained to the opposite — to self-denial — Q had no idea if he’d manage to obey or if he’d just lose consciousness first. Bond’s body felt incredible, all hard muscles and demanding, controlling, overwhelming power, and the rough drag and slide of their cocks, brushing and pressing together, felt better than it ever should have done. Q closed his eyes and searched for that last spark inside himself, but he couldn’t concentrate. He wasn’t focused on his own pleasure but on Bond’s. He lifted his hips, and the motion made him jerk against the cuffs binding him to the headboard and pull against the hand in his hair and press harder against the hand on his throat. The last thin trickle of air cut off, but he found enough strength to thrust up, clumsily, against Bond’s body.

“Oh god, oh fuck, Q,” Bond started to chant, thrusting harder. He loosened his hand to allow air to return — not much, but enough to keep Q from passing out. “Eyes open,” he demanded again.

Everything happened at once, as Q opened his eyes and saw Bond’s fierce, cold blue eyes looking down at him, and he breathed in air that seemed to slam into his bloodstream. He thrust up again, and the dizzying surge of sensation was too much for him to hold back the sudden, fast build of his orgasm. His shout was cut off when Bond’s fingers closed on his throat again and Bond’s other hand twisted painfully in his hair — not that any of that mattered under the pleasure that overwhelmed him, lightning along his nerves, stealing not just breath but his awareness of anything but his body and Bond’s.
Day Nine

Bond rolled out of bed as silently as possible in the pre-dawn light. He was well-practiced enough at the task that he managed to not even shift the duvet where it was bunched around the still-sleeping Q. He didn’t look back as he silently left the bedroom — he’d spent enough time staring at Q instead of sleeping that a backward glance wouldn’t have revealed anything new.

He’d unbound Q as soon as the haze of possessive lust had passed. Guiltily, he told Q to stay in bed while he went for warm, damp towels to clean up. He didn’t know what to expect — cold formality, perhaps, or even an accusation that he’d overstepped their agreement. But Q just watched Bond, eyes dark and not quite focused, and fell asleep curled up against Bond’s body almost as soon as Bond had turned off the lights.

Under the relentless heat of the shower, Bond stood silently, eyes closed, actively not trying to think about Q. All night the dilemma had worn a track in his mind, and Bond was no closer now to resolution than when Q had fallen asleep seven hours ago.

But the fact that today, finally, Bond had a very specific job to do helped. He had a task and an objective, and everything else had to wait until he was successful. It was a relief, and Bond pushed the complicated thoughts about Q away in favour of planning the next necessary steps in his mission.

The door opened; Bond looked out of the shower, surprised, and watched Q make his way across the bathroom. He stopped at the sink only long enough to brush his teeth. Then he pulled open the shower curtain and smiled softly at Bond — as if last night hadn’t happened at all — and said, “Good morning, James. Would you like help?”

Bond stared at Q for a moment, trying to parse his expression. He didn’t seem afraid or angry or even reserved. Bond reached out and traced the bruises he’d left on Q’s shoulders, and — even more unforgivably — on his throat. Instead of pulling away, Q closed his eyes and shivered, going very still.

With a light nod and a step back, Bond let Q into the shower. It was only with effort that he managed not to offer an apology that he knew wouldn’t be welcome; he kept his mouth shut instead and pushed Q under the spray.

Q tipped his head back and ran his hands over his hair, slicking it out of his eyes. Then he blinked the water out of his lashes and picked up the body soap, trying to step past Bond to let him back under the water.

Fortunately, Bond was used to this dance. He stepped under the spray, only to take another step to the side so he could rest his hands on the shower wall and let his head hang between his arms. It left his back and shoulders open for to Q to wash, and they’d both benefit from the heat of the water. Then Bond would trade when Q was satisfied with his efforts.

Q’s hands were slow and gentle on Bond’s back, fingers pressing in to dig at his muscles. He was meticulous, stepping close to run his hands over Bond’s arms with more lingering attention than was strictly necessary. He even went so far as to pull Bond’s hands off the wall and cleaned every finger. As he did, he brushed his cheek against Bond’s shoulder with the rough scrape of a day’s worth of stubble.
Bond felt himself relax under the attention, hating himself for enjoying Q’s affectionate care. If he’d known before, in some abstract way, that Q needed a ‘master’, he knew it in a much more concrete way now. He still found it difficult to accept psychologically; in fact, he felt something like an abusive lover the victims always returned to.

Except, of course, that Q wasn’t a victim.

Bond turned and pulled Q out from under the spray to switch places with him. His movements were gentle but unyielding, leaving no room for Q to object as Bond pushed his back against the wall. He took away the soap, pushed Q’s hands to the slick tile, and held them there by covering them with his own. He pressed his body into Q’s, and let his forehead rest at where Q’s shoulder met his neck.

“Do you require medical attention?” Bond asked softly.

Q took in a slightly shaky breath and shook his head, ending with his head tipped away, baring his throat. “No, James.”

Bond didn’t bother resisting the temptation to bite at Q’s Adam’s apple. He’d crossed a line last night that couldn’t be uncrossed simply by pretending it had never happened. Not only would it be a ridiculous lie; it would have the effect of damaging his relationship with Q which, at this point in the mission, was unacceptable. There was some tenuous connection between them now that simple sex hadn’t managed to create.

Under Bond’s fingertips, Q’s pulse jumped. He stopped breathing, eyes falling closed, and shifted his weight to spread his legs, encouraging Bond to crowd closer. Bond ducked his head and bit lower, and Q gasped, body going tense.

Realising he’d hit a fingertip-shaped bruise, Bond started to release the bite, just as Q whispered, “Please, James.”

Bond growled low in his throat, feeling his heart speed up at the thought that Q wanted this — Bond’s strength, his ability to hurt, his ability to control Q completely. He pushed Q’s wrists together; they were thin enough that Bond could effortlessly grasp them in one hand. He dropped the free hand to Q’s hair and pulled hard to fully reveal Q’s bruised throat. He immediately found the largest bruise and didn’t hesitate to bite it, letting his teeth sink in hard enough to mark.

Q whimpered, pulling his head back even more. His hips twitched forward in a way that felt unconscious, sliding his hot, hard cock over Bond’s wet hip. “Did — Should I get —” he stammered.

Bond crushed Q up against the wall, releasing Q’s wrists and hair to lift him by the hips, forcing Q to wrap his legs around Bond’s waist. The shift in movement caused Bond to accidentally drag his teeth over Q’s throat in a quick but brutal scrape that made Q yelp in surprise, though he pushed into the bite, rather than trying to pull away. He caught at Bond’s shoulders, hands skimming lightly up to his hair.

“Do you want me to stop long enough to get something?” Bond said quietly in Q’s ear once he’d released his throat.

“Anything you —” Q began, before he hitched in another breath. “If you want, condoms. Anything, James.” He ran his fingers through Bond’s wet hair, his touch light. “Please.”

Bond thought about it for a moment as he bent to start laying unforgiving bites on Q’s chest. He could release Q to get condoms and lubricant, though the thought of letting Q go, even for a few
minutes, was a distasteful one. But on the other hand, no condoms meant there were only two options, and neither was particularly attractive.

He lowered Q to the tub carefully, making sure he wouldn’t slip. “Two condoms.”

“Yes, James.” Q paused to take a deep, steadying breath before he opened the shower curtain just enough to slip out. Bond watched as he took down a towel and wrapped it around his legs, drying off enough that he wouldn’t soak the carpet. Then he left, closing the door before too much steam escaped.

Bond took the opportunity to wash his hair while he waited for Q — though as a distraction from his thoughts it failed miserably. He couldn’t help but be surprised and annoyed with himself for falling so easily into the power dynamic that he’d been protesting since before boarding the ship. There was something easy and addictive in giving Q what he wanted. Bond knew he could be a controlling bastard, too strong and strong-willed for his own good, and had always counted on the self-preservation instincts of his partner to tell him when to stop.

Q wouldn’t, Bond realised, and the thought was darkly intoxicating.

Q returned in just over a minute. He hung the towel as he passed, slipped into the shower, and dropped to his knees, looking up at Bond. He put one condom, still wrapped, on the edge of the tub.

Bond looked down at Q, fully aware that his expression was intense with lust and something more — a visual cue to how fucking hot it was to have Q on his knees, obediently waiting for Bond to tell him what to do. He adjusted his stance, leaning back against the tiles just enough to brace himself, and threaded a hand through Q’s hair to give him a suggestive tug.

Q rose with the sound of tearing plastic. He let Bond pull him up and forward, and he turned his head enough to rub the side of his face against Bond’s hip. He licked, hands coming up to tease over Bond’s balls and cock, fingers moving with such grace that Bond barely felt him roll the condom down.

Then he looked up questioningly, meeting Bond’s eyes before he pressed his tongue to the very bottom of the condom and licked up, slow and hard.

“You know what I like,” Bond said. It went against everything he so carefully controlled about himself, to purposely inflict pain, but he knew now not to back off. He twisted Q’s hair hard enough to sting, and tugged him forward. “No need to hesitate.”

Immediately, Q took Bond’s cock into his mouth, following the tight circle of his fingers all the way down. He pulled in a sharp breath before he shifted on his knees and swallowed, lips pressed to the base. His hand slid down, and as he started to move, he teased one fingertip over Bond’s balls and behind them. His other hand circled lightly to the back of Bond’s thigh, gently pressing.

Bond wanted to close his eyes, to lean back and enjoy it, but instinctively knew that wasn’t what he should do. Gentle and slow weren’t enough to keep Q flushed with arousal and want — Bond had to give him what he wanted in return. And being rough enough to please meant watching for signs that Q was responding favourably. Or not.

Keeping his eyes locked on Q’s, Bond let his hands slide up into Q’s wet and deliciously tangled hair. He gripped and twisted, knowing the pull would be painful, and carefully held Q still long enough to give an experimental thrust into Q’s mouth.

Q’s eyes closed. He didn’t pull away from Bond’s hand; he just pushed up with his tongue, trapping
Bond’s cock against the roof of his mouth, and swallowed again, taking him deep. His hands never stopped moving, touching and teasing and exploring Bond’s skin.

With Q kneeling on the bottom of the tub, Bond couldn’t see any physical proof of his arousal. He took Q’s closing his eyes as a good sign, but like last night, he found it distracting and unhelpful in trying to get a read on Q’s responses.

“Open your eyes,” he demanded again.

Q obeyed, and he looked up, never once breaking the rhythm of short, deep movements. Every few strokes, he’d back off just enough to inhale sharply through his nose before he swallowed Bond down again. He didn’t show any sign of needing to stop, though Bond could read the traces of effort in his eyes and flushed cheeks.

As tempted as he was to ask permission, Bond didn’t. He warned Q what he was about to do with the same grip and twist of his hair, watching him carefully, looking for a sign of what Q might want, but all he saw was submission and acceptance.

=Grievous bodily harm, Bond remembered. Permanent marks. Failure to use condoms. As he hesitated, Bond ran through the list of what was excluded in the contract he’d signed when he bought Q. It wasn’t much, and certainly not enough to stop him from using Q’s mouth however he saw fit.

He could do anything but risk permanent damage. More importantly, Q wanted him to do anything. Everything.

Bond took a shaky breath, eyes locked on Q’s still, and thrust forward hard. Q choked, hands pausing, but he swallowed and blinked and kept his tongue moving, never looking away from Bond’s eyes.

“God, Q,” Bond managed to groan, feeling arousal crashing over him in a flare of sudden captivation. He started to move more steadily, copying Q’s earlier technique of giving him time to breathe but not much else. He fucked Q’s mouth with steady and unrelenting strokes, giving in to a desire he’d never been in a position to chase before. Not once, despite the growing pleasure, did he look away from Q’s eyes.

Only when he came, hard and hot and viciously satisfying, did he close his eyes, thrusting deep and holding Q’s head in place. He felt Q’s nose buried against him and he knew Q couldn’t breathe, but he didn’t have the strength of will to let him go for long seconds as the tremors slowed and finally eased.

Finally, he forced his hands to relax — and he wondered if he’d later feel guilty for the strands of dark hair that came free, wrapped around his fingers. Q didn’t pull back. He kept up the gentle, encouraging rhythm of his tongue until the sensation threatened to become too painful, and he only stopped when Bond touched his face.

Q pulled back slowly, dragging in a deep breath and blinking furiously to clear his eyes. His hand followed his lips, and he unobtrusively stripped off the condom and set it on the corner of the tub, with the unused one.

Then, with absolute sincerity, he spoke in a raspy, dry voice: “Thank you, James.”

Bond didn’t care if it was what Q wanted or not — he needed to sit down in the bottom of the tub and pull Q as close to him as humanly possible. He needed to feel Q’s heartbeat, his breathing, and
the return of an embrace that would prove that he hadn’t just crashed through some tricky, invisible barrier between consensual kink and abuse.

He turned Q around so he could sit at the back of the tub, and Q didn’t fight when Bond pulled him close. He just settled between Bond’s legs, curled up against his chest, and rested his head on Bond’s shoulder without protest. Bond put his arms around Q’s slender, deceptively strong body and listened to how light and fast his breath came.

It actually took Bond a reprehensibly long time to realise Q was hard, because he wasn’t even hinting. No subtle touches, no suggestive movements of his hips. He just curled his legs up, as though trying to prevent his cock from touching Bond’s skin, and rested contentedly, their bodies fitted together under the spray of water.

The evidence of Q’s arousal was the final reassurance Bond needed. He tipped Q’s face up from where it rested on Bond’s shoulder and kissed him gratefully.

“Up,” he said quietly but firmly, placing steadying hands on Q’s hips to help him stand. When Q started to move towards the edge of the tub and reached for the shower curtain, Bond stopped him.

Q stared down at Bond, eyes wide and dark and just a little dazed, though Bond could see the effort he put into trying to decipher what Bond wanted — a little flicker of awareness that surfaced through the lust and submission.

Then he reached down, hand shaking just a bit as he touched Bond’s face. “Anything you want, James,” he said. “But only what you want.”

Bond reached for the second condom packet that Q had left sitting on the edge of the tub. He tore open the wrapper and threw it outside the tub, then rolled the condom on without hesitation. “You need to know, Q,” he said, smoothing the condom before rising to his knees, “I will always reciprocate.” He looked up, meeting Q’s gaze. “I have to. For me.”

Q leaned down, shielding Bond from the spray of water. He cupped Bond’s face in his hands and kissed him gently, with a soft press of lips and a slow, careful brush of his tongue. “No expectations, James. But I’ll always be grateful for anything you choose to give to me.”

Relief flooded through Bond — he knew damn well he wouldn’t have handled a rejection very well. It had nothing to do with ego and everything to do with give and take. Bond already held the power in the relationship, given more control than someone like him — someone too strong, too arrogant, and too bloody used to getting his way through violence or worse — should have. He needed to reassure himself that he could bring something other than dominance to the exchange.

So he gratefully took Q’s cock into his mouth, and Q’s hand slapped against the wet shower wall as his whole body reacted with a hard, intense shiver. When Bond licked, pushing away thoughts of the flat taste of the latex, Q’s exhale turned into a moan. Bond dragged his head back and tipped his face up to see Q staring at him through wide eyes. His reddened lips were parted, and the heat of the shower and his arousal had brought a flush to his skin. The bruises were starkly visible above his collar — the chain that Bond had locked around his neck, bearing its tag with Bond’s false name.

Q panted out little huffs that stirred the steamy air. His right hand twitched against the shower wall, fingers curling to claw against the tile. His other hand, though, was behind his back, and Bond realised he’d been trained against uninvited touches.

So as Bond moved his head, using everything he’d learned about Q to build his pleasure hard and fast, he reached around Q’s body and took hold of his slender, bony wrist. Q allowed Bond to pull
his hand forward and lace their fingers together.

“James” slipped out, carried on Q’s next soft moan.

Encouraged, Bond licked and sucked and moved faster, listening to the rhythm of Q’s breathing. When he next opened his eyes, he saw Q was still watching, with an expression of desperate need, even longing.

Then Q’s hips twitched, and he gasped out, “James,” as Bond felt the first pulse of his orgasm. Q’s long fingers clenched, and his eyes closed for seconds longer than a blink, though he fought to open them again, never looking away, just as Bond had ordered last night and this morning.

Q bit his lip hard and swallowed, throat working under the bruises. As the orgasm ebbed, Bond gently drew back, thinking he would never stop being fascinated at how completely Q surrendered — to dominance, to pleasure. To Bond.

He peeled the condom off and left it on the edge of the tub with the other one. This time, however, he didn’t tug Q back into the tub, but pulled himself upright to take Q in his arms, standing under the miraculously still hot shower spray. He rubbed Q’s shoulders in gentle strokes, turning his head away long enough to use some of the shower water to rinse the taste of latex from his mouth.

“If this is going to be habit,” Bond said with quiet amusement, turning his head back to lick the shell of Q’s ear, “we really are going to have to find flavoured condoms.”

Bond had learned that an orgasm tended to make Q bonelessly pliant and affectionate. This held true now, as he cuddled close to rest his head on Bond’s shoulder, arms circling his waist. “You don’t need to use your mouth, James. Anything you want to do is fine — or I can, for you,” he said a little incoherently. Then he shifted closer, adding, “Well, my hand, anyway. Or you could find someone else to do it for you, if you’d rather watch.”

“Jesus Christ, Q,” Bond replied, amusement gone. “What exactly in our interactions so far has led you to think I’d be even remotely all right with that?” He reached for the shampoo, but stopped when he realised Q had gone tense. “What?”

“I’m sorry, James,” Q said, only a hint of tension straining at his voice. “I won’t — I wasn’t asking for anyone else. I thought... after, he might still be interested. He asked if I was going to renew my contract after five years, and who would handle my sale.”

As much as Bond tried not to react, he couldn’t help but let a few of his tells slip: his hands tightened in Q’s hair and he stopped moving. He told himself it was completely unfair to react so negatively to the thought of Q being with someone else, given that he hadn’t promised Q anything beyond ten
days. “All right,” he said slowly. He forced himself to release Q’s hair and reached for the soap.

“I should never have allowed him to touch me or to think he could have me without your consent. No matter what else, I still belong to you. I should never have allowed myself to think otherwise.”

Bond rubbed the soap over Q’s chest, not meeting his eyes. Vicious satisfaction coursed through him as he replayed Q’s words in his mind. *I still belong to you.*

Bond knew he should say something reassuring, that he should talk about their short-term agreement and again tell Q he understood needing to keep his options open for their inevitable parting of ways. But need and selfishness blazed fiercely inside him, and Bond couldn’t do it. Even just the mere thought of Q with Green Eyes caused rage to course through him, though he had no right to it.

Silently, Bond turned Q and dragged his soapy hands down Q’s spine, letting his knuckles hit every bump of bone. He thought about having this at home — having Q waiting for him, giving him everything he wanted and needed in between missions. Not just sex, spectacular as it was, but trust and obedience. Someone he could let his guard down around when he came back broken, someone who could hold him together just long enough for him to heal.

Bond leaned in, resting his forehead between Q’s shoulder blades as he selfishly allowed himself to imagine it.

Ultimately deciding that the mission came first, and nothing as silly as emotion or sentiment should get in the way of that, he mentally shook himself and leaned back. He needed time to consider his options, and he couldn’t do that pressed naked and wet against Q. “Thank you,” he said quietly, and finished washing.
Chapter 14

Day Nine

Q had been actively scanning local open wifi connections for twenty minutes, so when Kolya’s laptop appeared, he was able to immediately link up and start copying files. His program slipped past the laptop’s minimal defences, bypassing whatever encryption Kolya might have had.

He felt a thrill of excitement when he found not just emails but an entire Quickbooks database. The very thought seemed ridiculous, but there it was, and he pulled a raw copy of the files onto his laptop, thinking he could download a trial version so he could open it and export it to a spreadsheet.

By the time Bond returned, Q was already deep into sending relevant emails and other files over to Bond’s laptop — after scrubbing everything for malware, of course. Q’s instinct, especially after this morning, was to put aside his laptop and properly greet Bond, but he stopped himself before he could do more than pause in his typing. Despite how things had gone over the past day and a half, Bond wasn’t his owner.

So instead he looked over, and said, “It seems to have worked perfectly. I’m transferring the relevant data to your laptop now.” And if he was staring, well, he had every right. Instead of dressing in ominous, stealthy dark clothing, Bond was dressed like anyone else on the cruise — fashionable and elegantly casual and very, very attractive.

“Thank you,” Bond said as he walked over to the stand in front of the laptop as Q worked. “Is there anything of interest so far?”

“He’s been using the ship’s internet directly, rather than accessing their mobile phone relay system,” Q answered, shaking his head at the stupidity of people who shouldn’t be trusted with technology. He’d caught glimpses of Bond’s communications setup; while he did use the ship’s mobile relay sometimes, most of his communications were via satellite using a clever little fold-up dish. “I’m transferring his web history as well as his files. And he’s using Quickbooks,” he added incredulously. “Do criminals actually use Quickbooks?”

“Clever criminals always use the best tool for the job,” Bond replied. “Why bother coming up with something proprietary if you don’t have to? Budgets tend to look the same whether they’re for criminal activities or not.” He picked up his laptop from the coffee table next to Q, and sat down at the window seat with it balanced on his legs. “I think it’s common enough that TJ probably has it installed on my laptop.”

Suppressing a shudder, Q glanced at Bond’s laptop before he went back to transferring files. “That saves me the difficulty of downloading it to export the file to a spreadsheet. I always prefer working with raw data whenever possible. If I have time, I’m going to search his hard drive for fragmentary traces of deleted files...”

Then it occurred to him that they were done. With this evidence, Bond would be able to determine if Kolya was definitely his target or not. The whole issue would probably be wrapped by the end of the day. Bond could reveal himself to the ship’s captain and arrange transportation back to England for himself and Kolya, and Q would go back to Chris to see what his options were.

Bond looked up curiously. His expression shifted to one of concern when he took in Q’s facial expression. “What?” he asked, hands tightening on his laptop. “Did you find something?”
Q shook his head and focused on what he was doing. “No, James. I’ll mirror as much of the hard drive as possible. Your technical division should be able to find anything that might be of use.”

“My technical division,” Bond repeated flatly, looking back down at his laptop. His grip on the computer was white-knuckle tight. “Right. Tell me something, Q. Your last owner used you primarily for IT services, is that correct?”

“Yes. I ran the IT department for his company for four years.” A small part of Q regretted that he hadn’t been offered a second renewal on that contract, but he’d fixed the security holes in the department and improved efficiency. All his successor had to do was stay up-to-date with technology and keep Q’s processes in place — something definitely not worth what his contract must have cost.

“And how were you expected to act at his home?”

Q glanced up, baffled by the question. “He had other slaves. I rarely saw him, except for weekly status meetings. I spent most of my time writing or continuing my education.” Given Bond’s possessive, jealous streak, he felt it prudent to not mention the informal arrangements that often cropped up in a large Marketplace household.

Bond sat the laptop down, crossed his legs, and leaned back against the wall, watching Q for a long, quiet, assessing moment. Then he seemed to come some decision, and lifted his laptop again. “I require your continuing assistance, Q. No need to pass this off to TJ — you can do it yourself.”

For one moment, Q felt hopeful; last night had been perfect, and this morning, he’d awakened feeling as if everything was finally going right for a change. He wanted more — but not at the expense of losing a more permanent opportunity. “I need to make other arrangements, James. You know that,” Q reminded him. “The cruise is almost half-over.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary, do you?”

Q let out a breath, suppressing his irritation. “I understand that this is your priority, James, but I have to look past the ending of the cruise. If I don’t find a new owner, I don’t even have anywhere to live, much less anything more.”

Bond set the laptop down again and went over to the coffee machine, though he didn’t actually start to make coffee. Slowly, as though choosing his words carefully, he said, “I find myself disinclined to allow you to abrogate our contract. Five years is a good place to start.”

“Except that you don’t want a slave,” Q said, refusing to think that this could actually be real. What Q wanted went far beyond fantastic sex and computer consulting. It extended to every facet of his life and interaction with whoever his owner might one day be.

“I think I’m adapting quite well to your expectations. Not to mention, of course, that I’m already doing far better than your previous owner.” Bond turned and leaned against the counter, meeting Q’s gaze steadily. “We signed a contract, Q. You’re mine.”

With anyone else — any other owner — Q would have dropped to the floor to apologise for protesting. With Bond, though... He had no idea what to say or do, and suddenly it felt as if he were standing on the edge of a dark, crumbling cliff.

“I’m very good at what I do, but MI6 — “

“Who said anything about MI6?” Bond interrupted. “Even the money I used to pay for your contract isn’t from MI-bloody-Six. You’re mine.”
Heart pounding at the possessive declaration, Q took a deep breath and put his laptop aside, though he couldn’t bring himself to move. Not yet. “Is this because of the sex? Because it was incredible, James — really, it was — but I want — I need more than that.”

Bond huffed. “I’m certain you know damn well that I don’t need to purchase a slave for sex,” he said, raising his eyebrow. “I’m fully aware of what each of us needs from a partner.”

Q dug his fingers into the window seat cushion and studied Bond’s face and posture, trying to read any hint of his thoughts. He looked like he was actually serious, but was that even possible? He wanted to bluntly ask what the hell Bond was thinking, but he couldn’t bring himself to break his training that much — not to mention the potential for provoking what could well be absolutely terrifying anger.

“Then you’ve settled your concerns regarding consent?” he asked instead.

“Yes,” Bond replied evenly, expression and body language unchanging — which did nothing to help Q determine what was going on.

“What would you expect from me?” It was an unthinkable question normally, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking. He’d outlined his limits in his contract; with any other owner, an agreement to respect those limits would be enough.

“You will abide by the terms of our contract, though the stipulations I made our first day together still stand.” For the first time, Bond’s expression flickered, and Q saw what he thought may very well have been impatience cross his features before he settled back into his dispassionate expression.

“You want me?” Q asked before he could stop himself.

“Yes, though that’s not all of it,” Bond said. “I need you, Q. Though, to be fair, I think you realised it long before I did.”

Q refrained from pointing out that what Bond needed was a decent bloody hiring manager at MI6. He got to his feet slowly, though his fingers ached from how tightly he’d been clutching the seat cushion. “Please don’t take this personally, but are you certain?” he asked hesitantly, unable to bring himself to actually cross the tiny room just yet. “There’s very little that you need that couldn’t be handled by a competent personal assistant.”

“Come here, Q,” Bond said with quiet authority, straightening from his lean against the counter.

It was far easier for him to obey than to take those steps on his own and risk rejection or worse. He walked over and almost knelt, but Bond’s reminder of their first day together stopped him. As it was, he had to fight to keep from looking down.

Bond wrapped a firm hand around the back of Q’s neck and pulled him close. He tipped Q’s head to the side with a firm press of fingers, and covered the last few inches between them to lean close enough to speak into Q’s ear. “I’m certain,” he said firmly.

Q felt his heart rate jump. He didn’t pull away or even breathe. He just closed his eyes and let the mental shift happen, Bond’s hand — his owner’s hand — grounding him. The anxiety that had been lurking in the back of his mind for days started to fade.

Only when Q relaxed did Bond pull back enough to meet his gaze again. “Now, I need you to thoroughly analyse the data from the target’s laptop.”

He nodded and answered, “Yes, James.” It took a moment for him to remember what he was doing
with the data in the first place, and another moment to consider how best to recreate Kolya’s recent activities — none of which was helped by Bond’s hand, still on the back of his neck.

Bond nodded, still watching him, and he could feel some tension uncoiling from Bond’s body. “Excellent. I’m going to go for a walk while you work.” He held Q for a moment longer, unmoving, until he finally leaned in close for a kiss.

Q bit back on a soft sigh as he allowed himself to be pulled into the kiss. It was rough and demanding and utterly without any hint of hesitancy or even asking for Q’s permission, and Q gave in completely, wanting nothing more than this simple affirmation that Bond wanted him.

The hand on the back of his neck shifted, fingers dipping below the collar of his button-down shirt. One finger caught on his chain collar, and when Q gasped, Bond deliberately pulled the metal tight against his throat. A hint of pain flared when it touched the bruises, and Q leaned into Bond’s body until the tug on the collar stopped him. When Bond released him, he stepped back and looked down, trying to catch his breath.

Bond’s fingers brushed over his cheek. He closed his eyes for a moment before he remembered that twice he’d been ordered to keep his eyes open.

“Get to work,” Bond told him.

“Yes, James,” he said, and went back to their laptops as Bond let himself out of the suite to go for his walk, leaving Q to wonder if he’d really just agreed to be Bond’s slave for the next five years.

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Bond quietly let himself out of his (their?) suite, heading quickly for the upper deck. He didn’t bother to wait until he hit the open air to light a cigarette, knowing that anyone who saw his expression and body language, and who had any sense of self-preservation, wouldn’t dare stop him.

It was only when he took his third deep inhale of the calming smoke that Bond allowed himself to think about what had just happened. He’d committed to keeping Q, and keeping Q happy, for five years. He’d committed. Fuck.

The ridiculous reality was that Q really was perfect for him. Bond needed a partner he could trust, someone who could efficiently take care of both himself and his affairs while he was gone on mission, someone who wouldn’t question his actions while he was gone. And Q needed someone to need him, appreciate him, put him to use. It wasn’t just dominance he craved — it was someone to serve.

Bond flinched internally at the thought. Q wanted to serve him, and Bond was going to let him.

It was with effort that Bond reminded himself that what Q wanted was nothing more than what Bond himself wanted. Instead of England, Q wanted to serve an individual. As long as Bond could mentally step back from his instinctive reaction to the word servitude itself, divorce it from his culturally-trained disdain for the idea, it wasn’t a foreign concept at all.

Bond had never really learned what it was like to be cared for. Even when his parents were alive,
they were absent from his daily life. He was independent and self-directed out of habit and necessity, but he’d never had the opportunity to learn if he were also independent by nature. In fact, he found it somewhat soothing to think about Q carefully shaving him, dressing him, giving him lit cigarettes at exactly the moment he needed them.

More than that was the balance he’d started to feel developing between them and what it could mean for how Bond felt himself fraying at the edges. It was happening in slow but unstoppable degrees every time he burned down another building or shook hands with death in pursuit of a target. He’d meant what he’d told Vesper nearly five years ago: There wasn’t much left of him. His soul was slowly being broken apart and torn away under the weight of the many cold, dead eyes that were staring back at him from his past.

The way that Q touched him, reverently and always with a hint of gratitude, was unexpectedly restorative. It had been such a long time since someone who actually knew him, knew what he was, trusted him. He had Alec, but he and Alec were mirrors of one another. Two killers couldn’t find healing with each other, even if they were practically brothers. Q, though... Q was different. He knew Bond but still trusted him, even after how badly they’d started out. It showed in the way Q moved around Bond, without hesitation or fear of turning his back, and it made Bond feel like he could be something more than just 007.

The darkest times for Bond were right after the worst of his missions. Whether they exposed him to the worst cruelty the world had to offer, or required him to willingly sacrifice another piece of his soul in pursuit of his objective, sometimes his missions left him completely broken. He had methods of dealing with those dark days, but was under no illusion that they were healthy. He just needed to patch himself up enough not to play Russian Roulette on the nights between jobs.

And Q wouldn’t turn him away in those dark hours. Hell, it would probably be some of the few times Bond would be able to give Q everything he wanted, all at once. Not just dominance, but a razor’s edge of attention that would leave them both gasping but painfully aware that they were alive. Bond couldn’t bring himself to look forward to it, but knowing that Q would be there for him when he needed it... maybe through Q’s submission and trust, Bond would be able to cling to his own humanity by seeing it reflected in Q’s eyes.

Despite the cold, Bond didn’t shiver as he made his way to the railing, hair and jacket being mercilessly tugged by the arctic wind. The bite of cold was useful in keeping Bond focused on teasing out the deeper problem of having someone need him, and — perhaps more importantly — being needed in return.

It took him long, silent minutes to realise that the thought of actually having a reason to come home after each mission was a problem for him. In normal relationships, under normal circumstances, having someone waiting at home for him took away some of his freedom to be reckless. But it was with some relief that he realised it wasn’t actually going to be a problem for Q. He would only be with Bond for a limited period of time. Five years wasn’t forever, and there was an expectation that Q would leave at the end of it. Not only that, but Q wouldn’t have any trouble whatsoever finding another person to be with if their relationship ended earlier than expected due to Bond’s death. The thought was strangely comforting.

Bond finished his cigarette and lit another. Now that the decision was made, he could turn his thoughts to other matters. How would he explain this to M, who had been so interested in Q? Should he change his emergency contact from Alec to Q? Did Q have anything that would need to be moved into Bond’s flat? How much self-defence training would keep Q safe (or at least safer) from potential attack? Should he update his will to make sure Q would be the recipient of his things, his flat, in the event of his death? He didn’t know if Q would actually want to keep anything, but at least
it would give him the option to prevent it all from being sold or shoved into a storage unit.

The practical thoughts ran their course as Bond finished his second cigarette, and he found himself calming in the face of practical planning with easier, concrete answers. He checked his watch and realised he’d been gone thirty minutes already. He suspected that if there were something interesting to find, Q would probably have found it by now.

Bond made his way back to the suite, resolute and unapologetic about his decision. He gave himself over to planning the mission. And if he found a deeper satisfaction and pleasure at the idea that Q was going to be there for him as backup, he didn’t bother to hide his smile from passers-by.

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The rich smell of coffee greeted Bond as soon as he entered the suite. Q met him before he’d even left the foyer, and took his jacket in exchange for a mug. The coffee was hot and strong — not just coffee, Bond realised when he took a sip, but coffee laced with a shot of espresso and just a hint of sugar.

“Thank you,” he said gratefully, letting the hot liquid chase the arctic chill from his face and hands and lungs. He moved to his laptop, but instead of sitting back where he’d been by the window, he went to the couch. “Did you find anything interesting?” he asked, motioning to the space next to him.

Now that he knew what he was looking for, he was able to spot Q’s moment of decision before he sat on the couch, rather than the floor beside Bond. “I found three phone numbers to which he sent texts via the internet. I identified two of them. Well, one; the other looks like a prepaid mobile. The first, though, is a satellite device from a communications provider in Afghanistan — Lashkar Gah, specifically. I’m still trying to track the third, but the ship’s connection is regrettably slow.”

Bond set the coffee down and leaned back, tugging Q with him to sit between his legs. He pulled Q’s back flush to his front, slid one frozen hand under Q’s shirt, and the other into Q’s hair. Q flinched slightly at the cold touch but didn’t protest or pull away. Bond had always been sensual, and now that there was no reason to deny himself, he didn’t bother. “Lashkar Gah,” he said thoughtfully. “Camp Bastion. Is there any way to pinpoint the recipient of the call?”

“I have the satellite number. With a stronger connection, I could —” He stopped. Hesitantly, he asked, “A legal way?”

Bond huffed dismissively. “As long as you’re not going to get caught, I don’t care.” He started running his hand repetitively through Q’s hair, petting unapologetically. “You haven’t done anything to put yourself at risk, have you?”

“No, James,” he answered quietly, bowing his head to push up into Bond’s hand. “On this connection, I wouldn’t even try. I’m not very effective under these conditions. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. The circumstances are outside your control.” Bond closed his eyes, thinking. “I’d like to have you work more closely with TSS. M is already aware of your participation in this mission, so it should be easy to formalise the arrangements.”

Q didn’t comment immediately. Bond felt a hint of tension pass through him. “The contractual clause regarding my identity was never meant for this sort of circumstance,” he said quietly. “My
identification is good enough for a passport and standard background check, but I would — I would hope MI6 would be more thorough...” he added uncertainly.

“Relax,” Bond demanded immediately. He waited as Q took a deep breath and leaned back a bit more in Bond’s arms. Only the slight racing of his pulse betrayed the tension that still lingered. “What is it you’re afraid they’ll find?” he asked, worry creeping through his consciousness. Having already made his decision about Q — having already begun to plan their life together and having accepted the benefits of such a relationship — Bond found himself deeply concerned at the thought of someone trying to take Q away from him.

After another momentary hesitation, Q said, “My father’s in politics. He’s always objected to my lifestyle — before I found the Marketplace. I found it prudent to disappear.”

Bond breathed a deep sigh of relief. “MI6 is exceptionally good at dealing with ghosts. Their actions would not have alerted him of your current status. And even if they did, I can deal with it.” Then he tightened his grip in Q’s hair and pulled, forcing Q to look up at him. “Don’t scare me like that. I thought I was going to have to fight extradition or something equally ridiculous.”

Q went tense all over again. His voice was carefully controlled, very neutral, when he said, “He threatened me with counselling. That was when I arranged to disappear.”

By counselling, Bond assumed Q meant sectioning. “Is he British?” Bond asked carefully as he released his grip and resumed petting.

Q exhaled sharply, tightly. “He’s a member of the House of Commons. I’m not just an embarrassment to the family. I’m a political liability.”

“Well, there goes my offer to shoot him for you,” Bond said regretfully.

“He’s very well-connected, James,” Q said worriedly. “Please don’t put yourself at risk on my behalf. I can be just as effective working anonymously as I can openly, as a civilian contractor.”

“I never said anything about open, Q,” Bond pointed out. “And if I can assure you of anything, Q, let it be that I can — and will — keep you safe from any threat. Even if it takes political manoeuvring rather than my license to kill.”

Q started to turn, and Bond relaxed his tight grasp on Q’s body. But instead of just twisting around to face him, Q slid off the couch to his knees and bowed his head, resting one hand on Bond’s leg. “Please be careful, James,” he said quietly. “He’s been in politics for forty years. He’s very powerful.”

Bond’s instinctive reaction was to be dismissive; of all the things that had power over Bond, politicians were not one. M had protected him after the embassy incident, after all. She could shield him from any retribution Q’s father might attempt, as long as he gave her a reason — and his word would be enough. But Q would likely find no comfort in his dismissal, so he ran his hand through Q’s hair. “I won’t bother him if he doesn’t bother us,” he promised.

Q nodded, relaxing a bit. “If he does, would you please keep the Marketplace confidential? You can make any excuse you’d like for me being with you — or you can keep me entirely confidential.”

“I will keep the Marketplace and our contract confidential,” Bond assured him, secretly thinking that telling anyone the details of their arrangement wasn’t in either of their best interests. “Though MI6 is aware of the Marketplace, of course.”

Q nodded. “If you would allow, I could let Lord Southerby know that MI6 knows about us,” he
“I’m not sure that’s in the Marketplace’s best interest,” Bond confessed, feeling a slight pang of guilt. MI6, at present, assumed the operation was deeply tied with human trafficking.

Bond hadn’t thought much about how to present the situation — Q included — to M due to his recent distraction. Chances were that MI6 wouldn’t deal with the issue directly, but would pass it off on another, more appropriate agency if necessary. But M wouldn’t take action until hearing a full report from Bond; he had time to assess his options.

“Lord Southerby might take it as a sign that they’re being watched or monitored — which presently isn’t the case. He might decide to attempt even more discretion, which could lead to more illegal activity, which paradoxically might actually bring them under further scrutiny. As long as there is no actual human trafficking taking place, I think it’s best they attempt to ignore each other.”

Instead of protesting, Q simply said, “Yes, James. Would you like me to keep trying to find out more, on this connection? Or I can see if there’s a better option at our next port — a library or internet cafe.”

“I would prefer getting you authorisation through MI6 — not just because it would expedite our work on this particular mission, but because it would give you resources to be of assistance to me in the future,” Bond replied firmly. The thought of having Q’s support, in addition to TSS’s, was deeply attractive. “I could set you up from my” — he hesitated — “our flat so you wouldn’t have to fly anywhere. Do you have any objections?”

Q looked up and met Bond’s eyes, smiling very faintly. “You don’t have to ask, James. However I can help, I will. If there’s any way I can help with the arrangements, please let me know.”

“And here I thought you’d be over-enthusiastic to have a chance to keep me from getting into more trouble than absolutely necessary in the field.” Bond looked down at Q, returning the smile.

“I can do that without MI6 assistance, James,” Q promised, his smile turning sly. “I can do anything you require.”

“I am fully aware of that, Q. The point is to keep you from getting arrested for doing it,” Bond replied, ruffling his hair affectionately.

Q nodded, pushing into Bond’s touch. The hand on Bond’s leg flattened, fingers curving around his thigh as he shifted a bit closer. “Anything you want, James. I can give you my birth identification, if it’s necessary,” he offered, his voice turning subtly more controlled.

Bond shifted a little straighter so that he could run both hands through Q’s hair, suddenly stunned as he realised just how seriously Q was taking their contract. He was breaking the law without question, hacking international banks to get Bond the information he needed. He agreed to abide by Bond’s wish not to tell the Marketplace authorities anything, despite owing more loyalty to the Marketplace than to Bond. And now, he’d offered to hand over his birth identification — the last vestige of his privacy — for Bond to use as he saw fit.

Faith, loyalty, and trust. Bond was momentarily overwhelmed by it.

He cleared his throat, trying to push his emotions down for further considerations later. “I’ll only ask if it is necessary.”

Q nodded again, lowering his head almost to rest his cheek on Bond’s thigh, encouraging him to keep petting his hair. He finally settled fully against Bond, all the tension gone from his shoulders.
and back. His glasses forced him to turn his head to the side, and Bond saw his eyes had closed.

“My contract is open for renewal after two years,” he said quietly, “for another five.”

Awkwardly, Bond chuckled to hide his instinctive reaction, which was to blanch at the notion of making a ten-year commitment. As perfect as things seemed now, Q didn’t really know Bond yet. The fact was that Bond was gone much of the time, and when he was around he vacillated between recovering from post-mission stress and intense boredom. Some part of him knew that Q wouldn’t object to those sorts of issues, but Bond wanted to give him the chance.

Two years was a long way away, though, and Q needed to be assured that Bond would consider it — which, of course, he would. “Thank you for the warning. It may very well take that long, and a lot of dirty deeds, for me to save up for it,” he teased.

Q laughed softly, breath warm against Bond’s legs. “You should also know, it’s limited to five-and-five because of the auction rules here.” He paused for a moment before saying, with his eyes still closed, “I would have asked for a longer contract — a lifetime contract, if I could.”

Bond felt every part of him go still, though he quickly recovered, hoping Q wouldn’t notice. Lifetime. He swallowed, closing his eyes. He suppressed the urge to give a flippant response, or joke about how he couldn’t afford it, and took a deep breath. “Is that... common?”

“Not at all.” Abruptly, Q lifted his head to meet Bond’s eyes. “I’m not saying — That is, please don’t feel like I’m expecting anything from you, James. I’m only telling you this in the interest of full disclosure.”

“All right,” Bond said, feeling uncomfortably as if he’d been granted a reprieve. He forced a faint smile and said, “My work is hazardous, Q. I might not even make it for the first five years, much less any longer.”

Q’s hand tightened on his leg. “You have me now. I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe.”

“I believe you. That’s why I want to get you clearance. But it’s the nature of the work.” Bond reached down and pulled Q up with a firm grip on his upper arms, pulling him to kneel over Bond’s lap, then pushing him down to settle there.

“Anything you need, James,” Q said, lifting his fingers to trace along Bond’s jaw. “Just don’t ask me to shoot anyone until you teach me how, if you’d like.”

With a sigh, Bond wrapped his arms around Q’s waist and pulled him tight to his chest. “You will learn,” he said firmly. “And I’ll buy you your own gun, whatever you feel most comfortable with. And we’ll have a standing weekly or bi-weekly hand-to-hand combat training session every time I’m in town so you can properly defend yourself.” Bond nuzzled at Q’s neck, not bothering to keep the regret from his voice. “It’s not particularly safe, being the partner of an MI6 agent, I’m afraid.”

“If I wanted safe, I would have got a degree in maths and probably be married and living in Sussex now. I know you’ll protect me as best you can.” He shivered and turned to press his lips to Bond’s temple. “Please try not to sink the ship when you go after Kolya, James.”

“I’ll only promise to do my best because you’re on board,” Bond replied with a low chuckle. He slipped his hands, no longer quite so cold, under Q’s shirt to rest over his shoulder blades. “Besides, I tend to be at my most destructive when I’m bored. I don’t suppose you’d like to distract me?”

“Would you like me to distract you or finish analysing the data?” Q asked with another kiss. “Or I can call destination services and ask when the day-tours will be back so you can wait for Kolya, if
you need to follow him.”

Bond let his head fall back against the couch with an exaggerated groan. “Such practicality,” he joked. “Data analysis and day tour schedule it is. And order room service for lunch while you’re at it, please. Something not noodles or otherwise primarily starch.”

Q’s look wasn’t quite scolding, but it was close. “You prefer something light for lunch — chicken or fish, sometimes salad. You prefer to save room for dinner, because dinner is always extravagant. You don’t like dessert after lunch, but you take your afternoon coffee with more sugar than in the morning.”

Bond stared at him for a moment before standing, keeping Q’s legs wrapped around his waist, twisting, and depositing Q none-too-gently, face up, horizontally on the couch. He pressed a knee between Q’s legs — the couch wasn’t wide enough to kneel — and leaned over Q, resting his weight entirely on his hands. “I don’t know whether to be alarmed by your incredible attention to detail, or utterly turned on by it,” he said in a low voice, his mouth quirkng at the corner despite his attempt to keep his expression stoic.

Somewhat wide-eyed, Q said, “It’s why I trained with Chris. He specialises in seeing through walls — learning to anticipate. If I know what you need, then you don’t even have to tell me.” He moved his hands to Bond’s hips, spreading his legs a bit more. “Breakfast was late. You won’t want lunch for at least another hour.”

Bond leaned down, grinding his hips into Q’s, biting at his neck. “Turned on it is.”
Chapter 15

Day Twelve

“Weight issues, adult onset diabetes, shoulder surgery, knee surgery... Not exactly a former KGB assassin,” Bond muttered.

Q glanced up, though he refrained from asking precisely how many KGB assassins Bond had faced in his career. He had a feeling the number was distressingly high, despite the Soviet Union falling so long ago. When Bond kept his focus on his laptop, Q looked back down at his own computer. He was listing what he’d need for a proper workshop and office — everything from a soldering station to servers, divided into ‘want’ and ‘need’ so Bond could prioritise.

“I can’t help but think Kolya chose the Marketplace specifically for the...”

“Advantages?” Q supplied, hiding his amusement at Bond’s lingering discomfort with the concept. As an employee of Danberry & Ellis, with knowledge of the Marketplace, Kolya would have access not only to records and financial systems but to Danberry’s subsidiary, Kaleigh Castle, and its slaves.

He shifted the laptop, wishing he had a proper workstation and not the uncomfortable little built-in desk in the office off the bedroom. Then, realising that he hadn’t addressed furniture, he added two standing-height desks — one for computers, one for electronics — and a drafting chair. Indirect lighting. Task lighting. A magnifying lamp.

“You have to admit, it’s quite useful for an enterprising criminal.” Bond shifted and reached to grab his drink from the bedside table. “Do” — Bond paused and took a drink — “do slaves have clauses in their contracts that release them from their owners in the event of criminal activity?”

Surprised by the question, Q thought about his contract, wondering if Bond was concerned about him or about any slaves Kolya might own. “If an owner is unable to provide for his slaves — unemployment, loss of resources, and so on — the contract can be abrogated without issues or complications. I’d imagine being arrested would count as well, though I can’t think of a time it’s happened to anyone I know. Most Marketplace owners are extremely careful and generally law-abiding. I could contact Chris or one of the other regents if you want a more specific answer.”

“That’s not necessary,” Bond said, rolling on his side to face Q. “I’d imagine it comes down to loyalty. Choosing your owner over their less-than-ethical activity, or not.”

Resisting the urge to move Bond’s laptop from the bed to a hard surface that wouldn’t cause overheating issues, Q turned to set his laptop on the floor by his side of the bed. Then he turned back to Bond, saying, “Without your permission, no one will know you as anyone but Richard Sterling. No matter what happens, no matter what you do, you are my owner. You have my loyalty.”

Bond raised an eyebrow. “Thank you, Q. You have my complete trust, so I’m happy to hear you won’t abuse it. Of course, technically, by standards of British law and order, I don’t engage in much illegal activity. I’m authorised to do as I see fit in order to accomplish my mission.” He rolled back to take another slow, savouring drink. “I was wondering if Kolya would have slaves who were helping him.”

A bit hesitantly, Q shook his head. “You’re coming into the Marketplace in a unique position, James. Most anyone — slave, owner, or employee of the organisation — would break Marketplace rules to assist you because of your outside authority. But if ‘Richard Sterling’ had asked me to break into
Marketplace servers, I would have refused, unless there were other extraordinary circumstances,” he said honestly, thinking rather selfishly of a lifetime contract. “I don’t think Kolya would take the risk of trusting anyone and possibly being discovered.”

“That’s useful, then,” Bond replied, sitting up straight. “At least the fact that I’m not armed won’t be a problem. I won’t even need to bother stealing a knife from the kitchen for this. A weaselly accountant with no outside help shouldn’t present a problem at all.”

Q sat up as well, estimating the time. It was close to eleven at night, if not a bit after. Kolya’s communications had all ended before dinner, and he’d never once called for room service or used his computer after nine. Yesterday, Bond had made arrangements, through MI6, for an American Coast Guard ship to be nearby, waiting to pick up Kolya. Supposedly, someone from MI6 or the CIA would be there to take him into custody, though if not, the Coast Guard would at least hold him long enough for Bond to make other arrangements to get to shore and have Kolya returned to London for questioning.

Q tried not to think about the fact that he would be flying to London as well. He didn’t even have the reprieve of finishing out the cruise.

“Do you need me to do anything else?” he asked instead.

Bond stood and looked at down at Q, clearly contemplating what he should say next. “Something always goes wrong,” he finally settled on saying, “and I haven’t had the opportunity to make provisions for you.”

A little flicker of alarm crept through Q, but he resolutely ignored it. “Given what you’ve told me of your past, James, I have no doubt that you’ll be back before three,” he said confidently. He crawled over to the other side of the bed, swung his legs over, and stood, looking into Bond’s eyes. “Would you like me to have anything waiting for you?” he asked, already thinking Bond would probably want Irish coffee and a snack. He’d skipped lunch while meeting with the ship’s captain and discussing the covert rendezvous with the Coast Guard ship, though he’d had dinner.

“You should probably start packing,” Bond suggested, rolling his shoulders. “And if there is anything that should be wrapped with the Marketplace people before we leave, set that up or take care of it, please.”

Packing, Q thought, absolutely refusing to give in to panic. He nodded, falling back on his training. “Yes, James. Did you want to speak with Chris before we leave the ship? You can always call him, but if you have concerns that you’d like addressed, they might be better handled in person.”

“Chris? Oh, your trainer.” Bond’s look was speculative. “I’m not entirely certain I should meet with him in person. It was hard for me to watch him treat you as he did. Even knowing now what I do, I might... overreact.”

Q let that pass with a nod. “I’ll verify that you can instead speak with Chris’ owner, Sakai Tetsuo, or Imala Anderson in New York if you have any issues or concerns you’d like to address, or questions about my training. When will we be leaving the ship?”

Bond shrugged. “Assuming a successful extraction, within a few hours I expect. M won’t see any reason not to recall me right away, and there isn’t anywhere for me to hide from her on this little boat,” he said with a wry grin.

“Yes, James,” Q said, feeling the tension lock around his spine. He tried to stay calm, wondering what had happened to a few hours — even a full day. Were they in that much of a hurry to get on a
I’ll ensure we’re packed,” he added, feeling like he needed to fill the silence with some sort of reassurance.

Bond evidently picked up on his tension, and walked forward to stand just in front of Q. After a moment’s consideration, he threaded his hand through Q’s hair and tugged, forcing Q’s head to tip back just enough for Q to meet Bond’s calm gaze. “Just one plane ride, and you’ll be done. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Q nodded, trying to let the gentle hold help him focus, though it wasn’t quite enough. “Yes, James.”

Bond narrowed his eyes critically, dragging his free hand up Q’s neck to settle on his pulse, which was still racing. Bond frowned, then tightened his grip further, pulling Q’s hair hard enough to hurt. His other hand slid under the collar, twisted, and tugged, pulling it tight across Q’s throat. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” he said again, still keeping pressure on Q’s pulse.

Q stopped moving — stopped breathing — and let himself forget everything but Bond’s presence. The fear was still there, but pushed aside, kept at a distance. He relaxed, tension melting away, and remembered not to drop to his knees or close his eyes, though both instincts were there. A tiny corner of his mind wondered if he could convince Bond to delay his mission for even a half hour.

As soon as Bond’s hands relaxed, Q said, “I trust you, James.”

Bond leaned down and kissed Q, rough and quick, ending with a hard tug of his teeth on Q’s bottom lip before he pulled away. “I’ll be back in a few hours, if all goes well.”

Q followed. “I’ll message you if there’s any word from your office or the Coast Guard.” And then, because Bond wasn’t like any other owner Q had ever met, he put a hand on Bond’s arm to stop him. When Bond turned, Q leaned in to kiss him much more gently and said, “Be careful, James.”

“I’ll do my best,” Bond said with quiet confidence. Then he quietly pulled open the suite door, and left.

Q closed the door and left it unbolted. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, taking a few deep, steadying breaths. It was just a bit surreal how quickly and easily he’d transitioned from sysadmin to running an espionage operation, but the skillsets didn’t feel all that different to him.

Almost everything was already done. Bond would get into Kolya’s room and quietly question him to verify that he was working alone. When the Coast Guard vessel arrived, *Le Nautille* would stop; if anyone asked, the officers would explain that they’d stopped to check a minor malfunction of the ship’s navigation system. Bond would bring Kolya aft on deck three, where the captain would have ordered the marina doors opened. Kolya would be transferred to the Coast Guard, and Bond would return, all of which should be completed swiftly and without any issues, in theory.

The problem, Q reflected as he went to pack Bond’s suitcases, was that theory and practice were all too often two very different things.

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It wasn’t even midnight when Q heard a knock at the door. He frowned, set his laptop on the coffee table, and went to answer it, wondering if it was someone who was lost. Bond wouldn’t have sent someone for him, nor would he be knocking on his own door, unless his keycard had malfunctioned.
Q glanced through the peephole, then opened the door, curiosity turning to alarm. It was one of the ship’s officers, dressed in a neat black suit with just enough gold braid to give his jacket a military feel.

“Q? You belong to Richard Sterling?”

Oh, fucking hell, Q thought, feeling his heart skip. “Yes, sir,” he said, keeping his voice calm. Something had gone wrong. Bond had been caught. Someone had intervened, thinking Bond was breaking into Kolya’s room — true as that was.

“Mr Sterling’s been shot. He’s in the ship’s infirmary.”

Shot?

Q took a breath. “Is he —” He stopped before he could ask something inane. “Is it serious?”

“He’s stable. Fortunately, there’s a Coast Guard ship close by. They’re responding to our distress call. They’ll be here in a couple of hours.”

Q’s thoughts came unstuck, and he nodded. Bond would live. And that meant he still needed Q’s help. “Who shot him?”

The officer hesitated. “The shooter’s been taken into custody.”

Q thought quickly. Bond had implied that MI6 had a good working relationship with the American government, though how they felt about Bond working on American soil — or American water, as it were — Q had no idea. Still, better to have Kolya in American hands than to sweep everything aside in the name of Marketplace discretion.

“To be turned over to the Coast Guard, I hope,” Q said firmly, wondering if he’d have to find a way to contact someone on the Coast Guard ship. Best not to take chances.

“The Captain has the situation under control,” the officer said, his voice going stern, clearly expecting Q to give in. The officer was either Marketplace or Marketplace-aware; most slaves would buckle before him.

Evidently, he’d never dealt with anyone from Anderson’s training lineage.

Q stared at him and said, just as sternly, “I expect to be notified of all further developments, and to have a copy of all reports for Mr Sterling to review. Marketplace ship or not, given that we’re in United States territorial waters, I expect this to be handled according to American law. Mr Sterling will want to see justice done.”

Stiffly, the officer said, “I’ll have to speak to the Captain.”

“Very well. I’ll bring my concerns directly to Lord Southerby,” Q countered, hoping like hell that it didn’t come to that.

The officer blanched. “Do nothing until someone comes for you,” he said, as if assuming he had the right to give Q orders.

“I’ll do whatever is necessary to ensure Mr Sterling’s satisfaction in how this tragedy is handled,” Q said, not bothering to hide the threat from his voice. He made a show of studying the man’s name tag, though he’d already memorised it, his appearance, and the stripes on his sleeve — assuming that they meant something, that is, and weren’t just for decoration. “Speak to the Captain. Let me know if
I need to wake Lord Southerby now or if we can allow him to sleep until morning.”

Rudely, he closed the suite door on whatever objection or argument the officer might have made. Then he allowed himself one moment to panic, mind running in little circles, because of all things, *this* wasn’t supposed to have happened. Bond had been *certain* the mission was safe, so who the *hell* had shot him? Kolya? An ally?

What a complete fucking cock-up.

Q barred the door; the last thing he needed was some officious arse trying to take over, thinking that ‘Richard Sterling’ would want his slave handled like his luggage. Then he went right for Bond’s computer, privately glad that he had his own way into the operating system.

Ten minutes later, he was on the balcony, wrapped in a warm coat, satellite transceiver lashed in place to the railing. He tried not to count how many laws he was probably breaking as he opened Bond’s MI6 email and looked at his inbox. A dozen messages from ATREV006 and just as many from TJONES191TS. The second had to be TJ.

He opened one and found Kolya’s file. Good enough.

He hit reply, and then he paused to consider his response. He was tempted to arrange communications with ‘M’ directly, but he had a sneaking suspicion that M wasn’t just Bond’s boss but ran all of MI6; Bond seemed to speak of her as some fierce, mercurial deity, benevolent one moment, bloodthirsty the next.

TJ was aware of the mission as well as Q’s peripheral involvement. He’d know who needed to be advised. Quickly, Q typed up what little he’d learned from the ship’s officer, flagged the message as a priority, and hit Send before he could change his mind.

Once the email was sent, he broke down everything and packed Bond’s gear, hiding the satellite transceiver in its umbrella housing. It took him ten minutes to square everything away and pile their luggage in the foyer.

Praying he wasn’t going to end up on an emergency helicopter, he verified that he had his room card and then went out into the hall, thinking that he’d need to find a ship’s officer and make arrangements to travel to the hospital with Bond.

Then it hit him.

*Bond had been shot.*

“Fucking hell,” he muttered, and walked quickly to the atrium, where he spotted one of the ship’s slaves. “Where is the infirmary?” he demanded, relieved that English was a near-universal language among Marketplace slaves.

“Deck four, forward, port side,” he said, startled. “Are you injured —”

Deck four forward was practically under the suite. Cursing silently, Q turned and went back the way he’d come, refraining from jogging through training alone. But he didn’t make it a half dozen steps before the thought of Bond, vulnerable to anyone who wanted to finish what they’d started, made him break into a run.

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Day Thirteen

Q sat in the little curtained room, eyeing the spot where the bed had been, wishing he could get any
sort of decent reception on his mobile. The signal was probably stronger in the waiting room or the
hallway, but he didn’t want to leave the cubicle. Bond had been gone for almost four hours, and
while Q had been allowed to wait here instead of in the waiting room, no one had told him anything
about Bond’s condition.

Or, actually, Richard Sterling’s condition. Painfully aware that Kolya might not have been working
alone after all, Q had been very, very careful to maintain Bond’s cover story. When he’d gone back
to the suite onboard Le Nautille to fetch the laptops, he’d taken the time to send one last message to
TJ, letting him know they were being transported to a hospital, though he didn’t know which one,
and that he’d be checking Bond in under his cover identity.

He’d hoped that he’d be able to reestablish communications, but now, he didn’t dare take that risk.
He was exhausted, nerves strung wire-taut from the helicopter flight — an experience he never
wanted to repeat — and he knew he was in no condition to secure a connection to MI6. He needed
sleep. That or a post-helicopter tranquiliser offset with a lot of caffeine.

He put away his mobile and rested his elbows on his knees, lowering his head and closing his eyes.
The ship’s staff had assured him that their luggage would be forwarded to the hospital, but Q had
brought his laptop bag and Bond’s, not trusting anyone else with their tech. The bags were under his
chair now, and he itched to get out his own laptop and go poking around on the hospital’s internal
network to get a status update.

Abruptly, the curtain was yanked open. Q looked up and saw not a doctor but a rugged, fierce-
looking man, tall and broad-shouldered, ominously dressed in all black, from his boots to his jacket.
Sharp green eyes went from Q to the numbered sign just outside the cubicle before he demanded,
“Who the hell are you?”

The man’s British accent wasn’t comforting; quite the opposite. The thought had occurred to Q that
Bond’s plans might have been uncovered because of someone untrustworthy at MI6.

Q rose, putting himself in front of the laptops, conscious that he had no idea how to protect himself
— especially not against someone who looked so dangerous. Under any other circumstances, he
would’ve been thrilled to encounter this man, whoever he was. He radiated a dominant, powerful
confidence that would have normally made Q’s imagination catch fire, if not for the fact that he was
exhausted, had just been on a helicopter, and knew absolutely nothing about his owner’s medical
condition.

“I could ask you the same,” Q countered steadily, too tired and frustrated to be particularly afraid. He
hardly even cared if this was an assassin come to finish the job started on the ship. Bond was safe,
and at this point, Q would take death over the medical emergency flight that the staff had mentioned
might be necessary. Especially if he didn’t get a damned cup of coffee or tea very, very soon.

The man advanced two long steps, growling, “You could, if you didn’t have any sense of self-
preservation. Who let you in here? Where is James?”

The fact that he knew Bond’s real name was also less than comforting. No one would possibly want
to kill Richard Sterling, international salesman; James Bond, MI6 agent, was another matter entirely.

He didn’t bother trying to act, but fell back on training instead, letting absolutely nothing show in his
expression or voice. He couldn’t entirely fool Bond, but that was an anomaly; he could easily handle this man. “I believe you’re in the wrong cubicle. Perhaps the nurse on duty could better assist?” he suggested.

The man’s expression turned even darker, which Q was frankly impressed to find possible, and he advanced on Q. “James was shot during what should have been a very simple job. I suggest you explain yourself right the fuck now before I have to get insistent.”

Q stepped back out of reach, all too aware of the laptops under the chair. He had two feet more before he bumped into the rolling bedside table full of medical supplies and patient advisory pamphlets. A foot to the left or right would give him another step before he hit the wall with its monitoring systems and oxygen delivery lines. The side walls were half-brick, half curtains, but naturally he was already past where the brick started.

Reminding himself that there were people within shouting distance — though not many — he answered, “You haven’t identified yourself. You’re clearly not hospital personnel. Leave now, before I call security.”

The man tried to crowd Q again, his hand twitching at his side in a gesture Q was now familiar with thanks to James’ similar habit. “By what authority will you call security? You’re not his family or his spouse.”

“Nor are you,” Q answered, slipping sideways, away from the closer corner. His instincts were telling him to run, but he wouldn’t leave the laptops — not unless he had no choice. He should’ve found the time to move everything from Bond’s laptop to secure cloud storage; then he could’ve left without a second thought, and simply disabled the laptop’s access, but he hadn’t insisted, and Bond had been all too happy to indulge in far more pleasurable diversions.

The man’s look when he turned to Q again was frustrated and angry, and perhaps even a bit surprised that Q kept slipping away from him so effectively. “If you had anything to do with him being here in the first place, being kicked out will be the least of your worries.”

Heart pounding, Q backed up another two steps, relieved that the man was no longer facing where the laptops were. Q didn’t think he was fast enough to duck past him, grab Bond’s laptop bag, and run, but he’d at least try.

“I didn’t. You’re the one behaving in a threatening manner,” he pointed out, making certain his next step was to the side. He couldn’t risk backing into the wall and getting trapped. “You still haven’t even told me your name.”

The man stared at Q as if evaluating, then cast a quick look at the entry curtain, then one at the bags under the chair. His look shifted from murderously angry to something a bit less volatile. “Trevelyan,” he said, turning towards the laptops.

The name meant nothing. “Don’t,” Q warned, taking a nervous step forward.

Trevelyan laughed, but the sound had nothing to do with humour. “Your turn.” He turned from Q to walk towards the chair, and the gesture felt dismissive.

Bracing himself, Q rushed across the cubicle, crossing the place where the wheeled bed had been, and reached for Trevelyan’s arm. “I said —”

In an oddly dance-like move, Trevelyan spun, twisted Q’s arm behind his back, and shoved him face-first into the wall. “I love it when they give me excuses,” he muttered before wrenching Q’s arm
A distant corner of Q’s mind found it fascinating that he wasn’t in the least bit aroused. Apparently, he did have some limits — though that was little comfort now. He dragged in a deep breath, not at all shy about screaming for help, but before he could get that far, Trevelyan’s rough hand clapped over his mouth.

“Fucking annoying —” was as far as he got before Q’s teeth sank into his hand. The bite wasn’t deep, but it was hard, and he hung on tenaciously. To his surprise, Trevelyan laughed as he crowded Q against the wall, using his greater size and weight to trap him there.

“Slippery little weasel,” Trevelyan said conversationally. He wrapped his free hand around Q’s jaw, pressing near the hinge, forcing Q to let go or have his jaw broken.

He didn’t fear pain, but actual damage was something else altogether. He released the bite and got out the first fraction of a second of his scream before he felt the cool muzzle of a gun press to his temple.

Q froze as panic and stress and absolute terror won out over loyalty and training. He nearly blurted out the truth, but he suspected that declaring himself Bond’s slave would only make the situation worse, not better. He tried to take deep, calming breaths, but his heart was racing and he could barely pull in little gasps of air.

“TJ,” he said suddenly, in a flash of inspiration. If Trevelyan really was Bond’s ally, then surely he’d know TJ; and if not, the name wasn’t anything suspicious. Q wouldn’t be revealing confidential information. “TJ in Technical Services. He knows me.”

Trevelyan made a considering noise. “Well,” he huffed with what almost sounded like amusement, were it not for the tension and anger still clear in his voice. “Why didn’t you just say so.” Without allowing the muzzle of the gun to move even a fraction of a millimetre, he straightened. Q heard the rustle of cloth, followed by the rapid beeps of speed dialling.

“Danielle, love. 006 here. Have you got TJ lurking there somewhere? I need the little bastard,” he said cheerfully. Then he said, “Sorry, ma’am. I — No, yes. I’m — I’m in a hospital. No, not for me!” followed by muttering in an unfamiliar language. Russian, Q thought.

It was two minutes — two full, painfully slow minutes of the gun never leaving Q’s temple, just below the slightly skewed arm of his glasses. Two minutes of Q barely daring to breathe. God, of all the dangers he could’ve met in his admittedly unsafe lifestyle, getting shot by one MI6 agent for protecting another was never even a possibility until now.

And then he heard Trevelyan say, “TJ? About bloody time. I’ve got someone here, says he knows you.” Then the muzzle twitched, pressing hard enough that Q flinched away from it. “Name?”

He had to swallow before he could say, “Q.”

“Q? What the fuck kind —” Trevelyan asked, before he cut off. Then, sounding almost disappointed, he said, “You do? Oh.”

And then the gun was gone, and Trevelyan released his wrist and stepped back. Q managed to turn around, and he stayed on his feet for at least two seconds, maybe even three, before he sat down hard on the floor. Trembling, he pulled up his knees to rest his head on them and tried to remember how to breathe.

He half-listened to Trevelyan talking to TJ, presumably, and he saw Trevelyan go for Bond’s laptop.
It wasn’t worth protesting, though, and Q just watched, a little dizzily, as Trevelyan took out the laptop, sat down, and set it on his knees.

“It won’t —” Q cut off and cleared his throat. “It won’t work. The wireless signal isn’t very strong.”

“Phone works fine,” Trevelyan said without looking up from the laptop. He had his mobile trapped between his shoulder and his ear.

“Different frequency. Different technology.” But instead of trying to stop Trevelyan, Q just put his head back down on his knees and went back to breathing. Now that someone official was here, Q could —

His head came up as he realised that he didn’t know Trevelyan was official. He’d heard one side of a conversation. He hadn’t actually heard TJ’s voice; he had no way of knowing if Trevelyan had called TJ or if he’d faked the entire conversation.

Q licked his lips and looked up at Trevelyan, mind racing. Now that he had access to Bond’s laptop, he had dismissed Q from his thoughts. Q couldn’t see any sign of his gun, but judging by Bond’s subtle tells — mirrored by Trevelyan — he guessed it was a left-side shoulder holster, under his jacket and over his shirt. He had the mobile between his right shoulder and ear, and he was using the touchpad with his right hand. His left was holding up the laptop by the screen, leaving the jacket gapped open just a couple of critical inches.

He could run. He could go for help. Leave the laptop in the hands of someone who might be MI6 or who might not be.

Or he could try to do something incredibly stupid.

Not that he hadn’t been accused of stupidity many times before, most often by his own father. He stood, keeping his motions subtle and smooth — being invisible, just as he’d been taught.

Time to be stupid.
Chapter 16

Day Thirteen

Q walked to the chair, careful to stay out of line-of-sight of the laptop screen. Bond had always been aware of such things, and he wanted Trevelyan to pay as little attention to him as possible. “Pardon,” he murmured, and knelt down on Trevelyan’s left side, reaching under the chair for his bag. Trevelyan barely gave him a glance; from his muttered answers on the phone, it sounded like someone — possibly TJ, possibly someone else — was talking him through searching for wireless networks, pointless as that was.

Briefly, Q considered the possibilities of a makeshift weapon. His own laptop was very light and thin and probably would crack in half if he tried to swat a fly, but he’d packed the fake umbrella with the satellite transceiver in Bond’s bag, which was open and in reach. But there was no point in trying to stab Trevelyan with an umbrella. If he was MI6, Q had already angered him enough. He needed a threat, and that required a weapon that could actually do more than just irritate Trevelyan.

Q closed his laptop bag and exhaled as though sighing. He took a quiet breath, visualising how he’d need to move. It was second nature, whether it was sex or dancing or a tea service. Disarming someone who was either a trained secret agent or possibly an assassin-for-hire couldn’t be that different.

He didn’t actually manage to convince himself of that truth, but he somehow found the courage to move. He turned and started to rise, using the natural upwards motion of his body to hide how his hand came up a little faster. He was close to Trevelyan — what would have been distractingly close, had Trevelyan been interested — and Q’s fingertips cleared the edge of his jacket. He took a step, moving his hand with his body, and he felt the rough, patterned grip of the handgun under his fingertips —

Followed by the clatter of Trevelyan’s mobile as it hit the floor an instant before the laptop, which bounced and cracked just as Trevelyan’s hand closed on Q’s wrist.

“Now, now,” Trevelyan said in the same cheery voice he’d used on the phone, which was completely at odds with his quick and brutal movements. He was up and out of the chair in an instant, and Q found himself once again thrown into the wall.

“Prove who you are,” Q demanded breathlessly, before he lost what little courage remained. God, he was fast. This was like that first night with Bond all over again.

Not that that memory helped. If Trevelyan was an ally — possibly a friend — then he wasn’t a threat, and a confused, exhausted part of Q’s mind pointed out that Trevelyan was most definitely Q’s type, just as much as Bond was.

“Huh,” Trevelyan huffed, and this time his amusement didn’t carry the same deadly edge of anger that it had before. “I thought you were his type. That’s an impressive protective streak for someone who has only known him a week.” Trevelyan stepped back and picked up the laptop, frowning at the cracked screen. “Damn.”

Q leaned his forehead against the wall, closing his eyes. However accidentally, he’d achieved his goal of stopping Trevelyan from getting access to Bond’s data. He turned, bit down on the first question that came to mind — his type? — and instead said, “I still have no idea if you’re actually who you say you are. I couldn’t allow...” He faltered as the second near-miss of the morning hit, and
he wordlessly flopped his hand in the direction of the laptop.

“Only a temporary setback,” Trevelyan said in what was obviously meant to be a reassuring voice. He thumped Q on the shoulder, set the laptop on his chair, and retrieved his mobile. “Impressively stupid move, though. Think about it this way. If you don’t think it will work on James, it won’t work on me.” He stuck a hand in his jacket pocket and retrieved something that he tossed to Q.

He ungracefully fumbled the catch but managed not to drop the wallet. He opened it and found identification for William Sterling, employee of Universal Exports. It was identical to Bond’s false identification.

Relieved, he pushed away from the wall and offered the wallet back. “I apologise, Mr Trevelyan,” he said, biting back a ‘sir’ at the last moment. After the horror of last night, the unexpected reprieve had him just as scrambled as the fear had.

Trevelyan shoved the wallet back into his pocket before he looked down at the laptop. “Not a problem.”

“What were you looking for?”

“Anything and everything,” Trevelyan said, voice again going dark. “James usually manages to avoid getting shot badly enough to be in hours-long surgery — can’t stand the enforced downtime afterwards, you know? Too bloody boring.” He looked thoughtfully at the phone. “I want to know how the hell he managed to get caught off guard by an accountant.”

“I assume that’s how,” Q answered honestly. He sat down on the floor, leaning back against the hard wall; he wouldn’t have managed to stand for another minute anyway, and there was only one chair. “Kolya was working alone. James didn’t bring a weapon, because he was concerned with security and privacy. He must have assumed Kolya had done the same.”

“He went in unarmed?” Trevelyan asked, shocked.

“Yes. He said he wouldn’t even need to steal a steak knife from the kitchen.” Q closed his eyes, trying to remember Bond’s precise wording. “Kolya was overweight and ill. Diabetic, joint problems. James was certain he’d be a non-combatant.”

Trevelyan looked down at Q critically. “He told you this? Who exactly are you, again? TJ was too busy being reassuring about your overwhelming importance to be helpful with the details.”

Q couldn’t quite hide his flinch. “I can imagine,” he said softly. As much as he missed England, he was secretly dreading meeting TJ in person. He hesitated only because he was tired, nerves scrambled, and he and Bond hadn’t discussed any sort of cover story at all. Normally, he would’ve claimed to be a personal assistant, but he doubted that MI6 agents required PAs. “James hired me as a technical consultant.”

“Uh huh,” Trevelyan said in a tone that was clearly disbelieving. “That explains why you were so eager to get yourself shot trying to protect him. And why he’d share mission critical details with you.” His expression was stern for a moment before some sort of realisation seemed to occur to him, and his gaze softened with pity. “Ah. Nevermind.”

Q let out an irritated sigh and closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the wall. “It’s not what you think,” he said, trying to hide his exasperation. “There was no human trafficking or any other criminal activity beyond Kolya. Must everyone assume otherwise?”

“It’s not an assumption, from what I can tell. It —"
Q reached up to unbutton his shirt before he thought better of it. “It is,” he said instead. “Entirely consensual, between adults who —” He shook his head and let his hand fall back into his lap. “James can explain it. Or not.”

Trevelyan’s eyes narrowed again. He crouched in front of him, lifted his hand, and then hesitated for a moment. “May I?” he asked, gesturing to Q’s neck.

“The last time someone did, James offered to ensure his body would never be found, even if it washed ashore,” Q warned.

“Don’t worry, I’m practically his brother. He likes me,” Trevelyan said with a crooked grin.

“His brother?”

“Practically. He’s never mentioned me? Alec?” he asked, reaching for Q’s collar again.

“You don’t learn, do — Alec,” he said, suddenly remembering. He let out a sigh and closed his eyes, muttering, “Now I’m not surprised at all.”

“Hmmm?” Trevelyan asked, looking back down at his mobile.

Belatedly remembering Bond’s instruction not to tell Trevelyan that he now knew the story of the poppy fields, Q shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

With a little huff of laughter, Trevelyan reached forward to undo the top button of Q’s shirt so he could tug the chain free. He lifted the tag to examine the name. “I’ll be damned. Oh, he is never going to live this down.”

Ignoring the way his pulse had picked up, Q looked directly at Trevelyan and said, “You made one mistake.”

“Only one? That’s an improvement over my usual statistics. Ask Danielle.” Trevelyan released the tag and rocked back on his heels, watching Q with amusement.

“I have your name, now,” Q warned, matching Trevelyan’s amused smile precisely. “I can make it so you never existed — not even at MI6.”

Trevelyan shook his head and laughed. “You’re just too fucking adorable, Q. I think I like you.” He stood and offered Q a hand.

Q raised a brow and kept his distance as he rose. “Please don’t touch me,” he said instead, circling around Trevelyan to pick up the broken laptop. He dragged his bag out and sat down on the floor again, to root through his bag for his tools.

Trevelyan glanced at Q. “Maybe TJ can do something. Connect to it remotely and send the data to my phone.”

“You’re looking for Kolya’s financials?” Q asked as he started unscrewing the underside of the laptop. Without waiting for an answer, he asked, “Did you really want to read a spreadsheet on your mobile?”

“I don’t know enough about James’ mission to know what I’m looking for,” Trevelyan said defensively. “I’ve been in San Pedro Sula for almost a month. I’d only been back in London for twelve hours before I was sent on a flight back here.” He tucked the phone into his pocket and watched Q, irritation still obvious in his expression and the taut lines of his body. “Do you have any
idea how much more convenient it would have been to get the call a couple days ago? Honduras to Alaska would have been much more preferable than Honduras to London to Alaska.”

“Ah. If you have no information, you won’t find anything we haven’t already found,” Q said confidently. He pried the back cover off and stared at the hard drive. “Samsung. Samsung?” he asked incredulously, looking up at Trevelyan. Shaking his head, he pried it out, thinking he wouldn’t be surprised if it couldn’t access the data at all. He might well have to disassemble it completely just to get it in working order.

“And you can explain everything to me, but I need to check on James,” Trevelyan said. “Kolya is, unfortunately, in the custody of the Americans, so I won’t be able to get to him for a while.”

“Would you like me to arrange otherwise?” Q offered distractedly. He’d test the hard drive with his own laptop, much as he loathed the idea. He set Bond’s hard drive aside and took his laptop from his bag.

“Explain,” Trevelyan replied, his sharp focus now entirely trained on Q. It would have been intimidating, if Q hadn’t spent the last ten days with Bond.

“It’s not a difficult concept.” The words slipped out — ten days’ worth of snarking at Bond had brought back all of Q’s bad habits. He winced and said, much more politely, “I can arrange visitor’s authorisation, or get you an American military identity, or probably just order him transferred to your custody, if I can get a decent internet connection.”

“Adorable and useful,” Trevelyan said with admiration, giving Q that crooked grin again. “Did James suspect there were others on the boat that needed to be identified and dealt with?”

“No. Kolya was working alone.” Q looked up from unscrewing the laptop plate to meet Trevelyan’s eyes. “There’s nothing of interest on the boat, sir.”

“Right.” Trevelyan took the chair again, not looking away from where Q was working as he settled. “Well, if there isn’t any reason to interrogate Kolya immediately, I should probably leave him alone. If James’ condition isn’t too serious, I’m sure he’ll want that pleasure himself. Wouldn’t want to piss him off by snapping the target’s neck for him before he’s had the opportunity to do it himself.”

“Please refrain from killing him. He’ll have information James needs. Otherwise, this was all for nothing,” Q pointed out as he pulled the last tiny screw free. He set them carefully in his shirt pocket and removed the bottom plate. “The doctors did say his situation wasn’t critical.”

“How on earth did he manage to find you?” Trevelyan leaned forward, forearms on his knees, watching. “I’m impressed.”

“Would you like me to find out when the next auction will be?” Q asked innocently, turning to dig through his bag again. He’d need to modify cables, which would be difficult without a proper soldering iron, though not impossible.

“I’ve never been very good with pets,” Trevelyan said. “Food, water, attention, affection... far too much maintenance for me.” He stood again and started pacing. “If someone isn’t in here in three minutes, I’m going to have to get my gun out again, aren’t I?”

“No one’s been here for almost four hours.” Q looked rather mournfully at his micro-USB cable and headphones, wondering which to sacrifice. He finally chose the micro-USB only because the headphones were noise-cancelling, which could be critical on the flight home, if Bond allowed it.

“Fuck,” Trevelyan grated out. “Fine. I’m going to go get an update. I’ll be back when I know
“Thank you, sir,” he said automatically, and then looked up. “Excuse me. Do you have a knife I can use?”

Trevelyan absently reached into his boot and pulled out a small black titanium dagger that looked absurdly lethal. “It’s sharp,” he warned, watching the entryway. “Sheath is built into my boot, so you’ll just have to be careful.”

Q stared at him and knelt forward, extending a hand in something like disbelief. “I’ll endeavour not to stab myself more than two or three times,” he said flatly, before he could catch himself.

“Excellent. Though being in a hospital, it’s better done here than elsewhere.” Then Trevelyan was gone, and Q sighed again, wondering if he’d botched that all or if anything had gone right. Now he’d have to explain everything to Bond, from Trevelyan touching him to the destruction of the laptop.

Hopefully he could time it well. Twenty minutes or so after a dose of strong painkillers sounded about right.

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Somehow, even without knowing where he was or what had happened, Bond wasn’t surprised to open his eyes and see Alec looming by the side of the bed like one of Death’s minions. He turned to face Bond, studying him critically before he said, “You got shot by an accountant.”

“Fucking hell,” Bond groaned, hurting everywhere. He closed his eyes and tried not to breathe. His body had other plans, of course, and he ended up gasping in a breath that was probably more painful than the second of regular breathing would have been. “Aren’t you supposed to be in the murder capital of the world?”

“I won.” Alec shook his head. “You got shot by a bloody accountant and you bought a slave? I’m assuming that’s what we’re all calling it these days. ‘Sub’ doesn’t seem quite descriptive enough.”

“It wasn’t on purpose, at first,” Bond defended. Then he tried to look critically at Alec, realising what he’d just said. “What the hell am I on?”

“Oxycodone. Aren’t American hospitals fun?”

“There aren’t any butterflies yet,” Bond said thankfully. “Where is Kolya? Where’s Q?”

“Kolya’s with the Americans, unless your minion’s had him shipped off to London. Q is performing emergency surgery on your laptop. I’m afraid it’s a casualty of his attempt to steal my bloody gun,” Alec said, grinning viciously now.

“That had better be the only casualty,” Bond warned. “Why did he try to steal your gun?”

Alec shrugged. “Because I went for your laptop. So, do I need to list the security risks and ethics violations, or should I just skip to that whole pesky law thing?”

“Since when do you care about any of that?” Bond tried to shift to face Alec better, lighting off nerve
endings in places too far apart for Bond to be happy with. “How many times did I get shot?”

“Once, but it was a frangible round. And I don’t. He’s bloody adorable. You should get a dozen and turn them loose at MI6. He offered to hack the Pentagon for me and get me in to interrogate Kolya.”

Frangible round? At least those wounds tended to be shallow, if impressively widespread. “Bloody fucking accountant,” he ground out angrily. “You’d better not. I think I want a crack at Kolya first, as soon as I leave.”

“That’s fair. You well enough to get out of bed now, or did you want to wait for the whole bag to get into your system?” Alec asked, nodding at the IV bags hanging nearby. “It’s not like they can reuse the leftovers.”

Bond looked up at the bags, then at the wall behind it — which was an actual, solid, vertical wall. “We’re not on the boat,” he said, looking back at Alec. “Where are we? And you know more than I do. How bad am I?”

“We’re at a civilian hospital in Anchorage, Alaska, which is another place to check off my bucket list of ‘never fucking wanted to go there to begin with’, so thanks for that. You’ll be fine. They’ve run you through X-ray a couple of times to make certain they got all the extra bits out. Would you like to see the films?”

“Not in the mood for connect-the-dots,” Bond said. “I hope they did, though. Don’t want to give Medical an excuse for digging around in there, under the guise of not wanting me to set off metal detectors.”

“Just bring your pet. He’ll keep them away from you.” Alec raised a brow at Bond. “He attacked me, James. I mean, it was entirely ineffective. And he bit me. Did you get him his shots? Look!” He stuck out his hand, showing a faint red imprint of teeth with a sharp little bruise in the middle, already turning an angry purplish-black.

Bond laughed, until it occurred to him that they had fought. Alec and Q had fought. An uncomfortable jealousy rose in him, and he had a vicious moment of doubt when he wondered if Q would attack Alec just for the thrill of being subdued.

Don’t be ridiculous, he told himself.

“When do we fly back to London?” he asked, deliberately changing the subject.

“Seeing butterflies yet?” Alec grinned. “I assume TJ is working on getting Kolya into our custody, so we can leave whenever you’d like. I have an RAF transport. Lovely thing. World War I vintage, I think. You have to get out and push it to get it started, like that Zil we stole in Moscow.”

“Wonderful,” Bond said with a sigh. “ Might need to wait awhile, in that case. Even less up for that than a rousing game of connect-the-dots.” He took a deep breath and struggled to sit up. “Let’s get out of here. Can you get Q?”

“I can.” Alec didn’t move, though. “You want me to get clothes? I’ve got spares in my bag.”

“It’s probably too cold out there to protest, isn’t it?” Bond said with a tired grin. “I’ll need meds, too.”

Alec grinned. “Ten minutes. I’ll see what I can steal. Stay under the covers. It’s embarrassing when a Double O dies of the flu,” he advised, walking out of the room.
It took fifteen minutes only because Alec’s inquiries alerted a nurse to Bond’s impending escape, which meant paperwork to sign acknowledging that Bond’s self-discharge was against physician’s orders. At least he had clothes, which was a comfort. Alec was two inches taller and a stone heavier, but they were close enough that Bond managed, with the help of a belt.

He refrained from asking about Q, only because he knew Alec had gained access as William Sterling, Richard Sterling’s brother. It was a convenient fiction. Only when the nurse left, with Alec accompanying her to ensure that she went right to the pharmacy for painkillers, did Q enter the room.

An odd sense of relief washed over Bond when he spotted Q. It wasn’t necessarily that he was glad to see Q safe and unharmed — though there was certainly an element of that. It was more the sense of having two people around who seemed to care about him unconditionally. Well, unconditionally wasn’t the right word, he decided. But there was too much pain to bother thinking about it further. Cared about him was good enough for now.

“Are you all right?” he asked Q, remembering Alec’s mention of an altercation.

“Despite the best efforts of the American Coast Guard, yes, James,” Q said as he walked over, studying him critically.

Bond raised an eyebrow, straightening from trying to tie his shoes. He winced, and Q knelt down to take care of the shoes for him. He didn’t scold Bond; his look was enough.

“Do I need to go to war with the Coast Guard, then?” Bond asked. “Or is there someone in particular who requires my special attention?”

“They airlifted you from the Coast Guard boat to the hospital,” Q said in that tone of absolute neutrality that betrayed far more than any emotional declaration would have. An airlift meant a helicopter, and Q was afraid of perfectly smooth, stable, large airplanes with comfortable seats.

“You came with me?” Bond asked, surprised and amazed, and, above all else, grateful. Q’s panic at even thinking about stepping foot on an aircraft had been obvious yesterday. Bond knew it wasn’t affection or plain loyalty or any one of a dozen simple emotions that would have compelled him on the helicopter. Even love wouldn’t have been enough to conquer that sort of phobia. Bond wondered what it was, though he didn’t dare ask.

Q nodded, moving to tie the other shoe for him. “I brought your laptop as well — all of your secure electronics. The captain of the cruise ship said the rest of your bags would be sent over as soon as possible.” He looked up at Bond a bit hesitantly. “I used your email to contact TJ and let him know you’d been injured.”

“Good thinking. It got Alec here, which will get us out of here much faster.” Bond waited for Q to finish tying his shoe, then tugged him up to stand. “A bloody fucking accountant, Q,” he groaned, closing his eyes and letting his head rest on Q’s stomach. Immediately, Q’s hands went to his back, touching him very carefully through his borrowed jumper.

“The ship’s doctor had you stabilised very quickly. I’m told there will be no lasting damage, and only a few scars,” he said reassuringly. “There was a misunderstanding with Mr Trevelyans, though.”
“I heard you bit him and tried to take his gun,” Bond said, trying not to laugh. Laughing hurt. “I’m impressed.”

Q’s sigh was a bit tense, though his touch remained gentle. “I couldn’t stop him at all. I’m sorry. And he knows what I am.”

“I know. He called you my minion. I think I like that.” Bond relaxed under Q’s comforting touch, forehead pressing a little harder on Q. “I’ll teach you self-defence. But you’ll never get past someone like Alec. It’s fine.”

“I disrupted his effort to search the laptop by making him drop it. I wouldn’t have, except he hadn’t proven his identity to me. I’m sorry, James. I should have pressed to see his ID sooner,” he said uncomfortably.

“What’s the matter?” Bond asked, though his voice was muffled by Q’s shirt. Q had been tense and uncertain since he walked in, and it left Bond uneasy. “Is this about the helicopter? Alec is at the pharmacy now with the nurse. Should I have him pick up something for you?”

Q flinched but shook his head. “No, thank you.” He moved one hand up to comb his fingers through Bond’s hair. “Even after I warned Mr Trevelyan, he didn’t keep his distance.”

Bond only kept himself from shifting uncomfortably with the knowledge that it would hurt like hell. He wanted to ask Q if Alec hurt him — but the question wasn’t straightforward like it would have been with other people. Q liked pain. “What happened?” he asked instead.

“He insisted on looking at your collar. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop him,” he added a bit flatly.

“Okay...” Bond thought about the collar, worn like a tight necklace under the clothing. How had Alec seen it at all, if Q’s shirt was buttoned up, like it always was?

“I did warn him off,” Q said. “And I implied that I could cause complications for him if necessary.”

“Credit rating? Getting him evicted from his flat? Or only finding coach available to him from now on?” Bond asked with a chuckle. He could imagine Alec’s less-than-impressed reaction to any of those threats.

“Deletion from every database on the planet, starting with MI6,” Q said, sounding embarrassed. “I’m sorry. He didn’t take my warning about you seriously.”

“About me?” Bond asked, finally straightening to look up at Q. He took in Q’s discomfort, only subtly expressed in the tense line of his shoulders and the way his breathing was carefully paced, at odds with the rapid heartbeat Bond had been hearing. Q was upset, and it wasn’t about the helicopter ride, or the upcoming plane flight.

Bond closed his eyes and pulled Q close again, trying to muddle through the facts that were made hazy by the opiates and the aftermath of getting shot.

Q had fought with Alec — attacked him, even, when he thought Alec might be trying to access Bond’s files. He’d bitten him, threatened him, tried to steal his gun. He’d somehow managed to clue Alec into their arrangement, despite Bond’s wishes.

He’d also tried to warn Alec off, with a threat ‘about Bond’ — something having to do with the collar. It took Bond long, silent moments to realise it was probably because that required Alec to touch Q and the collar. Which, if Q didn’t know Alec, was also against Bond’s wishes.
Bond’s laptop got broken in the process, to boot.

There was nothing Bond could do to stop the laughter from coiling up in his injured gut. Wondering if there was any possible better way for Alec and Q to meet and come to terms with each other, Bond laughed. He couldn’t have arranged a better introduction if he’d tried.

Q twitched at the laugh, but he kept petting Bond’s hair and gently running a hand over his back. “I promised I wouldn’t let anyone touch me without your permission,” he said, sounding puzzled.

“Let?” Bond managed to get out. “You threatened Alec. And tried to take his gun. And bit him.” The words were choked off and breathless through the laughter, but he hoped they made sense. He tightened his arms around Q, desperately glad they’d somehow managed to find each other. “You’re bloody perfect.”

Q laughed softly, the tension finally leaving his body. “Teach me to defend myself,” he said, leaning down to brush his face against Bond’s hair. “Then I will be, for you.”