**Summer to Your Heart**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M, M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James Bond/Q, Q &amp; Alec Trevelyan, Bill Tanner/Alec Trevelyan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>James Bond, Q (Bond - Craig movies), Female M (James Bond), Gareth Mallory, Eve Moneypenny, Bill Tanner, Madeline Swann, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Genderbending, Permanent Injury, Canon-Typical Violence, Angst, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Pining, Female Q, Q Whump, BAMF Q, BAMF Alec, BAMF James Bond, Hurt/Comfort, Non-Linear Narrative, Slow Burn, Work In Progress, My First Work in This Fandom, Friends to Lovers, Male-Female Friendship, Gay Male Character, referenced child death, Canonical Character Death, Panic Attacks, SPECTRE Fix-It, Medical Procedures, Survivor Guilt, Grief/Mourning, attack kittens, Felines with their own agendas, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Best Friends, Fanart, Physical Therapy, Graphic Description of Corpses, Physical Disability, Strong Female Characters, Age Discrimination, Gender Discrimination, Heavy Angst, Falling In Love, Injury Recovery, Mental Health Issues, Forgiveness, Expectations of Betrayal, Communication Failure, Eve Moneypenny is a Gossip, Character Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2016-08-30 Updated: 2020-05-03 Chapters: 11/? Words: 115402</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Summary**

Q is shot and permanently injured on the night of Blofeld's and Denbigh's attempted coup, but Bond walks away with Madeline knowing nothing about it. However, time and tide eventually return Bond to England's shores, and his reaction to the changes he finds upon his return will surprise them all.

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**Notes**
Please note that this is a gender swapped fiction. Q is female in this story. I mulled over this choice for some weeks before putting cursor to screen as I know that gender-swapped stories sometimes come with their own set of challenges and reader opinions. I am, myself, a dedicated M/M Bond/Q shipper, and this was quite the decision for me, but the plot bunny that took hold really insisted upon a female Q.

I do hope that even the die-hard M/M shippers will at least give this a shot.

This is also a non-linear narrative that will begin with jumping between three timelines, eventually trimming down to a single one. In order to make this story work, I intend to play around with the canonical timeline insofar as there will be nearly two years between the end of Skyfall and the beginning of SPECTRE.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Banner Art by ChestnutNOLA

Chapter 1: The End in the Beginning

"Summer to Your Heart"
I know I am but summer to your heart,
And not the full four seasons of the year;
And you must welcome from another part
Such noble moods as are not mine, my dear.
No gracious weight of golden fruits to sell
Have I, nor any wise and wintry thing;
And I have loved you all too long and well
To carry still the high sweet breast of Spring.
Wherefore I say: O love, as summer goes,
I must be gone, steal forth with silent drums,
That you may hail anew the bird and rose
When I come back to you, as summer comes.
Else will you seek, at some not distant time,
Even your summer in another clime.
~ Edna St. Vincent Millay

University College Hospital; National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, London, England: Mid-December 2013 (Three Weeks after Westminster Bridge)

Of all things, it was ultimately a crying baby in the hallway that tugged Q back to consciousness. As the plaintive wail of the quickly hushed infant faded, other things sought to push through the heavy veil that clung to Q’s awareness: the click and wheeze of automatic doors opening and then shutting several moments later; the rattle of a heavily laden cart with a dodgy wheel being pushed down the hall; a soft, rhythmic beeping that seemed to come from somewhere behind and to the left; the hiss of pressurised air and a tightening followed by a gradual release around Q’s right bicep; the sharp smell of disinfectant that lingered in the coarse bed linens.

The fact that she couldn’t breathe!

Q seized in panic, instinctively fighting against the loss of control of this most basic function. She clutched at the endotracheal tube at her mouth, but before she could pull it free from the tape that held it secure, strong fingers encircled her wrists and pulled her hands away.

“Easy, Q! Everything is fine. You’re safe. Relax. Let the machine do its work. Help is coming.”
The deep voice was familiar, comforting, but she couldn’t place it. Opening her eyes fully, Q searched blindly for the source, but without her glasses all she could make out was the blurry shape of a massive form at her side. The man released her wrists only to press her hands together atop her chest, holding them there with one large paw while the other cupped her chin, thumb caressing her cheek.

“Ugomonit’sya … settle down, myshka. Ty v poryadke. You’re okay, little mouse.”

It was the Russian that finally clicked.

Double-O Six!

Alec Trevelyan’s face suddenly filled Q’s myopic vision, his green eyes bright with concern. He continued to murmur reassurances and though he never let go of her hands, Q gradually stopped fighting against the ventilator and relaxed a bit against the pillows behind her.

Though Q couldn’t speak, the air between them was heavy with her questions and fear.

The shuffling of feet and the rattle of a cart through the doorway heralded the arrival of the medical team. “Let them do their job, Q,” Alec said, squeezing her hands one final time before stepping out of the way of the nurse who had advanced to Q’s beside. “I’ll explain everything when they’re done.”

It was then that Q began to take note of her surroundings, what little she could without her glasses. There were at least four other people in the room, but she recognized neither their voices nor the way in which the ‘blurs’ moved. She didn’t know these people! She grabbed for Alec’s hand, her tight grip staying his departure. Her eyes grew panicked once more as she looked from him to the unfamiliar people and back again, desperate that Alec might understand her meaning without the words themselves.

“Right,” Alec said with a curt nod of understanding. “No, you’re in hospital, not Medical. UCH London. They’ve been vetted and read-in,” the agent assured her. “You’re safe, myshka. I promise.” Alec gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze before letting go to stand next to the door, out of the way yet not out of Q’s line of sight.

The nurses were efficient and kind and incredibly informative for all that they said nothing of importance. Nothing that let Q know what had happened to her that was so severe that Medical – whose experienced staff and state-of-the-art facilities had pulled more than one critically injured agent back from the brink of death – was unable to care for her.

She was in surprisingly little pain, rather numb, truth be told, but Q attributed that to the morphine she was apparently on. Immediately after she’d been extubated – and wasn’t that an experience that never needed to be repeated … EVER! – Q had been given instruction on how to use the medication pump to manage her pain levels.

“Use it,” the head nurse, Liam, insisted. It took him another 10 minutes to finish up with Q’s vitals, but with a final check of the oxygen that now flowed through the cannula under her nose, he headed for the door of the private critical care room. Liam stopped long enough to tell Trevelyan that the surgeons had been notified that Q was awake. They had just finished up a long procedure in the operating theatre and would come to evaluate Q once they’d had the opportunity for a wash.

“She’ll be groggy. Drift in and out for a while, but if things get … difficult,” Liam said quietly, looking over his shoulder at where Q lay in the bed, “let us know and we can bring in a sedative.”
“The morphine?” Alec asked. He had crossed his arms over his broad chest and tried not to look like he’d rather be anywhere else. Moneypenny said he’d drawn the short straw, but there hadn’t been any straws, and Alec wouldn’t allow any of the rest to deliver this news.

“Yeah. That’ll work, too.” Liam’s voice was sad, but he held it low enough so as not to reach Q’s ears. He had been one of the young woman’s primary nurses since she had been admitted to the ITU and had grown to know the spies that considered her family quite well. He did not envy Alec the task that lay before him.

“You’re supposed to be in Sri Lanka,” Q said to Alec once they were alone. She was weary, and her throat felt raw and sounded painful even to her own ears. She had said little during the half hour the nurses had fussed over her, too overwhelmed by the entire situation to answer any but their most direct questions and muzzy-headed enough to be unable to form any of her own.

“Yes, well, mission parameters changed when you and the rest of the home team decided to blow up half of London,” Alec replied with a smirk.

For a moment Q had no idea what Alec was talking about, but a series of quick flashes in her mind’s eye – a tableau of fiery images – woke her memory. Ah. Yes.

“It was hardly half, and the blame for that can hardly be placed at our doorstep.”

“Tell that to the blokes pulling what’s left of Six out of the Thames.” Alec pulled a pair of black-rimmed spectacles from the inside pocket of his leather bomber jacket and slid them into place on Q’s face.

“Thank you,” she said, grateful more than she could say to have her sight again.

“Pozhaluysta.” Alec settled into the chair at Q’s bedside and propped his feet up on the edge of the mattress.

Nonchalance was 006’s hallmark, but there was an edge to it that even Q’s medication-numbed mind was able to pick up on. It was unsettling.

“And it’ll be another month at the earliest before Westminster Bridge is fully repaired. The detours have been murder on commuters to say nothing about holiday shopping traffic,” he continued.

Holiday traffic?

“How long have I been out?” Q asked, bewildered.

“Three weeks. Medically induced. They’ve been bringing you out of it the last day or so. It wasn’t surprising to any of us that you’re just as much a pain in the arse half dead as you are fully alive.”

Three weeks?!

“What happened? What’s wrong with me?”

“What do you remember?”

“Answer the question, Double-O Six,” she demanded in her Quartermaster tone.

“Answer mine first,” insisted Trevelyan, in that voice that brooked no argument. The stalemate
between them lingered for several, long moments before Alec added, “It’s important, myshka. What do you remember about that night?”

Q searched Alec’s face and acquiesced to the concern she saw there. Alec waited quietly and assessed the MI6 Quartermaster as she considered her response. While the dim light above her bed wouldn’t do anyone’s complexion any favours, Q’s was so pale and sallow that it was almost difficult to look at her. Her hair – normally a riot of long, dark curls, nearly impossible to tame no matter what she did with it – was lank and lifeless. The nurses had fashioned it into two plaits to keep it tidy and out of the way, but the plaits only served to make Q appear still younger than she already did. Even M had been taken aback at the sight when he had visited earlier in the week.

Q blinked slowly twice before closing her eyes, and Alec thought that the lingering medication in her system had pulled her under, but tired, hazel eyes opened again a few audible heartbeats later, and Trevelyan watched as her gaze slipped, unfocused, into the middle distance as it often did when Q was focused on solving a problem. This time it seemed as though injury and medication fogged the solution, keeping it hidden from her normally exactingly precise memory.

Alec dropped his feet to the floor, leaned forward, and after a moment’s hesitation, rested a hand on the top of her knee, moving his thumb back and forth in a soothing motion.

“Bond came back to London with that doctor from Austria in tow,” Q began, the images finally coalescing in her mind’s eye. “M, Moneypenny, Tanner, and I met them at one of M’s bolt holes near Trafalgar. Bond had learned Denbigh was working for Blofeld. All the intelligence streams would funnel directly to SPECTRE if we didn’t take out Nine Eyes before it came online. They’d control everything.” Q paused in her narrative. The normally posh enunciation of her speech slurred a bit with the effects of the morphine. She inhaled deeply through her nose, letting the oxygen saturate her system to revive her. “We left for the CNS building. The doctor …”

“Swann. Madeleine Swann,” Alec provided, and a single raised eyebrow told him everything Q thought about the other woman.

“Dr. Swann wouldn’t come. I’m uncertain as to why she walked away then, but Bond and M were going to keep Denbigh occupied while I hacked Nine Eyes. Our convoy was ambushed – ” Q looked hurriedly down at her right side. The side that had been closest to the SUV’s door. The side that –

“I was shot.”

“Yes.”

“But … three weeks, Alec?! It shouldn’t have – ” Though exhausted, Q was becoming agitated in her confusion, and the agent used his free hand to cup her face again, trying to focus her attention on him rather than the situation. It didn’t work. Q was too perceptive, and she instinctively knew there was more to it than just that.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Q continued, insistent. “Hurt like the bloody devil, but I kept the bleeding under control for all that woollen scarves make for rubbish tourniquets – that jumper’s likely ruined, too – but M wasn’t even aware … I had a job to do, so I didn’t say anything, but – “ Movement further down the bed drew Q’s notice for the first time, and her protests cut off abruptly when she saw Alec’s strong fingers etching patterns into her leg just above and then below her knee and then back again.

Patterns that she could not feel.
Oh.

Bugger.

It was fully five minutes before Q said anything else, and Alec waited patiently for her to sort through her thoughts, questions, and emotions. He moved his hand from her leg, resting it on the mattress next to her hip. No longer touching but close enough that she could grab it if she wanted.

“The bullet, then? Not the wound itself,” Q said at last, having reasoned out that where she had been shot was not sufficient to render her permanent injury. “Tell me,” she demanded, voice as toneless as Trevelyan had ever heard it.

Alec did.

Denbigh had not been the only traitor in Her Majesty’s Intelligence Services. In addition to a small army that Blofeld had amassed, eight agents in MI5 and another four in Six had been rooted out in the days following the attempted coup. Of those twelve, five had taken part in the ambush on Bond’s convoy to CNS but prior to that had broken into MI6’s Dead Armory where Q-branch housed weaponry and ammunition — most confiscated, but some of it created by R&D itself — that were slated for destruction. They had made off with countless crates of guns and ammunition they intended to use to secure Blofeld’s hold on London once Nine Eyes went live. The confusion surrounding the dismantling of the Double-O programme and the reassignment of its key support personnel had made such an infiltration easy, and it likely wouldn’t have come to light for some weeks had Q not been shot.

Until her collapse on Westminster Bridge, quite literally at M’s feet, none of Q’s colleagues had any inkling that she had been wounded, but the paramedics on scene could not reconcile her symptoms — a rapid but irregular heartbeat, vomiting, confusion, diaphoresis, and paralysis — with the seemingly shallow bullet wound they discovered, low behind her right shoulder blade. Blood tests in A&E revealed digitalis poisoning and a CT scan identified its method of delivery: the fragmented remains of a 9mm bullet coated in a highly concentrated dose of digitalis and designed to explode fully upon impact to maximize damage, or so R had informed them upon his arrival at UCH. Following established procedure, Q’s second-in-command had been unwilling to trust that comms had not been compromised and had reported the break-in to Mallory in person.

“Would have been faster if I had just shot myself,” Q said in a tight voice about the bullet that had taken her legs. One of 200 that she had crafted herself for testing before ultimately consigning the failed experiment to the Dead Armory for destruction.

Q then lay back against the pillows and trained her eyes on the ceiling. She said nothing more.

In 2010, Alec Trevelyan had set up a sniper’s nest on a rooftop in Kanchanaburi, Thailand where he’d had nothing but his own company and that of a couple of velvet-fronted nuthatches for the three days it had taken his quarry to finally show up. At the time Alec had thought it was the most agonisingly quiet mission of his MI6 career. In retrospect, however, it had nothing over those 20 minutes of silence he spent in hospital at Q’s bedside.

He could have kissed the surgeons when they finally arrived.

The neurosurgeons, one of whom was coincidently enough — or perhaps not so coincidently — a former SAS doctor who had served with Mallory, ran through a quick evaluation of Q’s physical state before delving into the specifics of her particular injury.

The fragmenting of the bullet that had taken its own sweet time detonating inside Q’s body had
done rather notable damage to her right lung, kidney, and liver and had even gone so far as to do
dough enough damage to her spleen that it had been removed, but it was the destruction done to her
uppermost lumbar vertebrae and the nerves thereabout that was the most devastating injury.

Her paralysis was what the surgeons termed “incomplete,” meaning that she would likely have
some sensation and possibly even limited use of her legs; now that Q was awake, they could more
accurately evaluate the extent of the damage and determine what she could do and feel.

“What about therapy?” This from Alec who had been asking all of the questions. Q’s contribution
had been limited to nodding or shaking her head in response to the direct “yes” or “no” questions
the doctors asked, choosing to remain mute as she processed the information.

Q could expect to see a series of therapists – physical, occupational, and psychological – as well as
a social worker over the next days to help her recover her strength and adjust to her new situation
with the eventual plan being to move her to a specialised rehabilitation clinic in the City until such
time as she was ready to return home and, eventually, work.

“Mr Trevelyan, if you could come with me for a few moments,” the senior surgeon said at the end
of the consultation. “There’s some paperwork that I’d like to share with you that outlines the
course of treatment.”

“Certainly,” Alec said, rising from his chair. He squeezed Q’s hand and laughed silently at the
flash of irritation Q shot his way at the doctor’s banal attempt at subterfuge. “Time to talk about
you in private,” he whispered in her ear before giving Q a quick peck on her forehead which earned
him yet another glare.

“Though she’s only just woken from sedation, I’m nevertheless concerned about the patient’s
mental state,” the doctor told Alec when they were alone in the hallway. “While people can react
in any number of ways to the news of such a life-altering injury, the fact that she seems unwilling
or unable to participate in her own treatment leads me to believe that the patient –”

“Q,” Alec interrupted, his voice low, tight, dangerous. It was his assassin’s tone, and it brooked
no argument from the surgeon. “Not ‘patient.’ Not ‘she.’ Not ‘her.’ Q.” Alec took a step closer
to the doctor, just enough to push the other man’s back to the wall next to the door to Q’s room.
Not to threaten but rather to … reinforce his point.

“You attained the rank of Major in the SAS when you served alongside Mallory, and one doesn’t
achieve the additional degrees and certifications you have attached to your name without a great
deal of hard work. Work and focus that we all owe you a debt of gratitude for in terms of saving
Q’s life. However, the reason you are able to continue to do the work you do in the way that you
have always done it is because three weeks ago the woman in that bed used her brilliant mind and
sacrificed her body to halt a terrorist attack that would have changed the face of Britain forever.
‘Q’ is the title that she has earned and the name she has chosen, and you’d do well to remember
that.”

The doctor opened his mouth to reply, more likely to renew his concerns about his “patient,” but
Alec forestalled his comments with a gesture. “I have heard and appreciate your concerns about
Q’s psychological state. There has been little of Q’s life that could be termed ‘easy,’ but she is the
strongest woman I have ever met and she will face this injury with the same determination and
fortitude that she always has.” He took a step back, signalling that the didactic portion of their chat
had come to an end. “Now if there is, indeed, paperwork to be had, please give it to me, and you
can be on your way. I’m sure that you’re quite exhausted from your time in the operating theatre.”

When Alec entered the room five minutes later, it was to a mostly darkened room. The nurses had
pulled the blinds on the exterior windows earlier in the day, and Q had switched off the light above her bed while he was gone. The only illumination came from the light in the small loo in the corner of the room.

Alec set the treatment plan and a fresh cup of ice chips on the tray table that was positioned next to Q’s bed and resumed his seat at her side. She lay quietly, eyes closed, though he was pretty certain she wasn’t asleep.

In spite of what he said to the surgeon, the truth of the matter was that Alec was deeply concerned about Q’s reaction – or, rather, lack thereof – to the news of her paralysis. Even more worrisome was that she hadn’t once asked for a tablet or laptop, or even a cuppa, for that matter. Items that were her life’s blood no matter the circumstance. But Alec would be twice damned if he ever shared that information with the doctor.

Best to tackle this head on, then.

“I know you’re not asleep. And I know you heard everything we said out there. You and that bat-like hearing of yours. Little wonder you’re always able to keep your minions in line. They never know if what they’re saying will come back to haunt them.”

Q opened her eyes and turned her head to face Alec, but she said nothing.

“You can talk to me, you know that. You have before, myshka. Ty doveryayesh’ mne, da? You trust me, yes?”

Q smiled softly and nodded her head. Alec tried not to notice that the smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“It’s the wrong question, I know, but … are you going to be okay, solnyshko?”

Q bit her lower lip and he could see that she was fighting back tears. “How are the others?” she asked after several deep, composing breaths. “I should have asked before now.”

“How are the others?!?”

“Mallory must have been concussed after they rammed his car,” she rushed on before Alec could redirect the conversation back to her. “Did anything happen to Moneypenny? Tanner?”

Alec sighed and tried not to let his exasperation be too obvious. Q: Master of computers, code, weaponry, minion management, and deflection. He rubbed his eyes before answering her question. “They’re fine. They’re all fine. M was concussed, but it was minor. Nothing wrong with Eve or Tanner that a little R&R and a lot of wine didn’t cure.”

“And Bond?” she asked softly, anxiously, after a moment. “He was already injured, from Marrakesh, but then, when is he not injured?”

Bozhe-moi! Alec’s stomach dropped with the question and the mention of his friend’s name. Of all the things for Q not to remember, it had to be this. They’d been told that Q would likely experience some memory loss of the minutes just prior to her collapse, but … bloody, buggering, fuck! There truly was no God to take pity on him. Moneypenny had been right. He had drawn the short straw. She should be here for this, not him. Not that Q and Eve were overly close, but … der’mo! Shit!

“Alec?” Worry had seeped into Q’s tone. Fear touched her expression.

“No,” Alec rushed to reassure her. “James … he walked away. He’s fine, but … well, he’s … he’s
gone, Q.”

Q released a breath she hadn’t known she had been holding, and Alec’s heart lurched in his chest at the smile that crossed her face. The first positive, carefree moment he had seen from her since she woke.

“Well that explains it,” Q said in a rush, her relief clear in her voice. “I’d have thought that he’d – well, never mind any of that, I suppose. So where’s he off to, then? Before all this craziness with SPECTRE, M mentioned possibly sending Double-O Seven off to Bulgaria. We’d received updated intelligence on those weapons traffickers in Sofia --”

“No. No, Q, you misunderstand me.” Alec clasped both of her hands – so small, they were – in one of his. “He’s not on a mission. When I say James walked away, I mean he walked away from all of it. From what Mallory told me when I got back, James refused to kill Blofeld. Instead he left the Bridge and walked away with Madeleine, hand-in-hand. No one’s seen him since the next morning when he popped into Q-branch and managed to wheedle the DB5 out of the minion on duty. He left his Walther, Six, all of us, even bloody England behind. He’s gone, Q.”

He’s left you. Her interpretation of Alec’s words lay unspoken between them.

The smile on Q’s face fell so quickly it was as though she had shuttered it behind iron and replaced it with a mask that was a facade of emotion.

“Did he …” Q struggled to find her voice, to keep it level in spite of the anguish roiling inside of her. “Did he know about this?” she asked, pointing with her chin at her legs.

“No. No, myshka . He couldn’t possibly have known. The minion in the garage hadn’t even heard about it yet.” For the third time that day, Alec cupped her face in his palm. “And for all that he’s a right bastard sometimes, James would never be cruel like that. Not to you.” James and Q were friends, extremely close friends by even Alec’s assessment, and Bond would never do Q such a disservice, no matter how badly he wanted to escape. Though why James had wanted to leave ...

Alec had had plenty of time to think about James and Q and their relationship, and all the evidence had once pointed to James wanting to strengthen his relationship with his Quartermaster, not sever all ties. Alec couldn’t begin to imagine what in the hell had happened while he was in Sri Lanka to make things go so wrong.

But even as he tried to reassure her, a series subtle expressions flashed so quickly across Q’s face that had Alec not been looking directly at her, he would have missed the grief, pain, and humiliation they conveyed. Alec could think of nothing that could humiliate his friend. She was one of the most competent, skilled, professional people he had ever known. Interpersonal relationships were more than a bit of a challenge for her at times, but she had long since started to grow in that regard, too. In fact, since James had become something of a fixture in her life, Q had even started to --

A sudden sense of dread filled the agent. Q and James had been dancing around each other for months, but Alec knew that the physical desire and the emotional connection had been there. Very much so, but the last he had known, Q and James hadn’t actually done anything with it. Or, perhaps they had.

“Q, what did you do? What did he do? God! You two finally did it. You slep –“

Q pulled a hand from his grip and pressed her fingers to Alec’s mouth. “Don’t. Don’t say it. Not now. Not ever! Bond is never to know about any of this, do you understand me, Alec Trevelyan? The world we work in is very small. Even if James never comes back to England, you’ll run into
him sometime … somewhere. He made his choice,” *and it wasn’t me* was left unsaid, but Q’s implication was clear to Alec. “And we both know that if he knew he’d come back to a life he didn’t want any more simply because of misplaced guilt.”

As her speech wound down, Q gasped suddenly in pain, and Alec felt guilt of his own fill his conscience. He should have paid more attention. Her body had barely begun to heal, and now to be faced with all of this …

Q fumbled through the bed clothes for a moment until she found the button for the medication pump she had been instructed to use. She pressed the button twice, letting the full dose of morphine slip through her veins, taking the pain away. Alec would never be completely certain which type of pain – physical or emotional – she sought to suppress at that moment, but he strongly suspected the latter.

“You’ll stay?” Q asked, eyes heavy and her voice slurring as the drug took full effect.

“Of course I will.” Alec tugged gently on one of her plaits before settling it back against her shoulder, letting it cover the ragged, near decade-old scar that peeked out from beneath the hospital gown. “You still love him, don’t you? In spite of it all.”

Q’s “hmmm” in confirmation didn’t surprise him, but her mumbled, “Rather pathetic, don’t you think?” did.

“No, *myshka*,” Alec affirmed, lifting her glasses from her face and setting them down on the table next to him. “Not in the least.”

“Thank you … for being here, Alec,” Q said as the medication finally pulled her under.

“Always, *mladshaya sestra*. Always.”

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**University of Oxford, February 2000**

The first time she met James Bond, Q – who was well over a decade from actually becoming Q – was sat at a table in a large conference room in one of the Engineering buildings at Oxford. For nearly a month, she had been anticipating her meeting with Major Boothroyd to discuss MI6 applications of the ideas she had researched and recently published in two separate monographs. However, only five minutes after Boothroyd’s arrival, news of an explosion in nearby Shipton-on-Cherwell had Bond, the Major’s bodyguard, anxious about his charge’s safety.

In retrospect, to say that she ‘met’ James Bond that day was initially a bit of an exaggeration. It would be more accurate to say that she was in the same room as James Bond. As stated, she was sat at the table, self-designed laptop open, fingers dancing over the keyboard hoping that the gentle click of keys would disguise the fact that she was hanging on every word of the argument between the junior agent – the recently recruited Commander Bond had only completed his MI6 training six weeks prior and was still years from earning his Double-O status – and Boothroyd.

“I’ve not come all the way up from London to simply turn around on a whim,” the Major insisted.
Though both men stood in the open doorway at the far end of the room, the acoustics of the space were such that she had no problem hearing the frustration in either man’s voice.

“It’s hardly a whim, Major,” Bond said. He tugged idly at the collar of his tailored — no, not yet bespoke— suit as if he was still getting used to the finely-milled cotton at his neck. Young though she was, even she could tell that he was ill at ease with both the clothing and the circumstances.

“There’s word that the explosion may have been triggered by an incendiary device —“

“It’s bloody Shipton-on-Cherwell, Bond, not Westminster! No terror agency worth its salt is going to waste resources to bomb that hamlet. It’s hardly a strategic asset —“

“No, but the London-Oxford airport nearby is.” Bond’s head bobbed once as if the gesture finalised his point. “So, if you’ll follow me back to the car, we can return to London where it’s far simpler to keep you safe.”

Her fingers faltered on the keyboard at the agent’s declaration. For all that the man’s voice was like listening to the whisper of sin itself — really must stop reading that romantic dribble Eustace keeps leaving all over the flat; his questionable tastes in fiction were perhaps not the best influence under the current circumstances — Bond’s words caused the bitter tang of disappointment to fill her mouth. The Major and she had been exchanging phone calls and, eventually, email, for years, and yet this was the first time they had met in person. There was so much to discuss now that they were in the same room, he couldn’t leave yet, it just wasn’t …

“I’m not leaving until I’ve had the conversation I’ve come all this way to have.” Boothroyd’s voice took on a steely edge that she had never heard in any of their phone conversations. “Now you can either accept that fact, Junior Agent Bond, or you are welcome to phone HQ and explain to M why you are disobeying a direct order from your Quartermaster. Given that there is no substantive evidence that the explosion was either a bomb or the work of terrorists thereby warranting my immediate removal to London, I think that we both know what M’s reaction to such high handedness would be.”

A giggle of surprise burst past her lips at the look of pained horror that spread across the young agent’s face, and she quickly began coughing in earnest to cover her gaffe. Clearly Bond knew all too well what M’s reaction would be. So, for that matter, did she. She risked a peek over the top of the laptop and caught the glower the agent sent her way. For some unexpected reason, and for all that she was 15 now, she stuck her tongue out at him in response.

“Sir, what could that slip of a girl possibly have to share that’s worth risking your life?” Though Bond managed to stem the true force of the glare that he really wanted to shoot the whelp’s way, he was wholly unable to keep the incredulity from his voice.

Instantly, her spine stiffened with indignation for she knew what he really meant by calling her a ‘slip of a girl.’ She’d heard enough of that from her so-called Uni ‘peers.’ Sodding bastard! She didn’t need his censure, too.

“That ‘slip of a girl,’ as you call her, is fifteen years old and has been an official recruit for nearly half her life. Far longer than you have been, Commander Bond,” Boothroyd said with more than a touch of pride in his voice, and Q felt some of her resentment ease with her mentor’s approval.

“She’s a child!” Bond pointed a finger at her, his incredulity palpable. “What could she possibly have to contribute to MI6?!”

“Only some of the most inventive thinking in the fields of cyber security and nano-technology, or are you suggesting that you could shed some light on ‘Correlation-Based Data Dissemination in
Cyber Security Monitoring Sensory Networks’ and ‘Lyotropic Liquid Crystal with Large Monodomains with Conjugated Polymer and Carbon Nanotube Dispersion’? I was unaware that you had completed your doctoral studies in the same two areas that she is currently pursuing.”

Bond looked at Boothroyd as if the Quartermaster was speaking in tongues. She hid her smirk behind her hand, though she now openly watched the evisceration taking place. If she took perverse pleasure in Bond’s sputtering, well then, could anyone really blame her? Shame they hadn’t chosen to meet in one of the rooms at John Radcliffe. Bond might need their A&E to stitch him together again by the time the Major was done.

Ignoring the young agent’s scepticism, Boothroyd turned a fond gaze toward her that she returned; she tried to remain as dispassionate as she could while the Quartermaster shared what little information about her Bond had security clearance to know. “That girl has one of the brightest and most innovative minds we have seen in over a generation; she has the potential to become the greatest asset any branch of the Intelligence Services has had since the War. To say that MI6 is fortunate to have her is a gross understatement, and with luck and hard work, one day it will be she that you guard as Quartermaster.”

“What’s her name?” Bond demanded, glaring at her, though his tone had started to shift from confused frustration to grudging neutrality.

“That, my boy, is far above your current security clearance,” Boothroyd chuckled. “But for today, if you need to call her anything, you may call her ‘Zed’.” The Major pointed Bond to a chair at the far end of the table closest to the door. “While she and I have our chat, I want you to sit down, shut the hell up, and pay attention. You’re rather intelligent in your own right, Bond; you might actually learn something.”

Boothroyd rounded the table to embrace Z, and after a few moments of polite conversation about her experiences at Uni – Fine, thank you, Major. No, nothing I haven’t handled before. People always feel threatened like that. It’s all fine – they quickly sat and began dissecting the conclusions Z had come to in her monographs and began outlining plans for the current denizens of Q-branch to begin implementing them.

Two hours in, they broke for tea, but even then, the conversation merely shifted from Research and Development at MI6 to a discussion of literature, history, and philosophy before eventually returning to cyber security and nano-tech once all but their cups and a fresh pot of Earl Grey had been cleared away.

Though he kept one ear on the hallway, alert for any threats, Bond, nonetheless, did as the Quartermaster had ordered; he shut up and paid attention. Bond had found the tea-time discussion enlightening. He didn’t participate but found it thoughtful and illuminating, and clearly the girl’s intelligence went beyond those subjects she was studying at Oxford. Admittedly, however, the science and technology were far beyond that which Bond would likely ever use and would certainly ever understand, so he chose to apply those skills that he would use as an agent of the SIS: observation and assessment. Even as a child Bond had read people accurately, and doing so had served him well in both his stint in Her Majesty’s Royal Navy and his tenure with MI6.

As the afternoon progressed, Bond found himself surprisingly impressed with Z’s confidence and knowledge in her chosen fields. Almost half his age, she was unlike any teenager Bond had ever met. Highly articulate and self-effacing, Z accepted the Quartermaster’s praise graciously and his criticisms with thoughtful introspection before scribbling out alternative theories for his inspection and consideration. Bond held to his earlier assessment, however. She was a little slip of a thing.

Z was also a study in contradictions. Though she was confident in her science, Bond could tell that
she lacked the self-confidence to go with it in other areas. Petite and willowy, with a cloud of curly dark hair that needed a pair of shears – or perhaps hedge clippers – taken to it, Bond was reminded of the bedtime stories his mother used to tell him of the Scottish Fair Folk, for in another lifetime, Z would have surely been seen as fae-born.

Her voice was a soft contralto, and though it would probably still change as she got older, the accent was posh in a way that her clothes were not. While clean and largely well-mended, the blue jumper she wore was several sizes too big, and the wool (definitely not cashmere) was worn thin at the cuffs and the stretched-out neckline. Thickly lashed, expressive hazel eyes were hidden behind a pair of frankly awful spectacles that did nothing for her appearance. James didn’t envy her the spots, but the underlying complexion was smooth though surprisingly pale.

No. Z would never be a true beauty, Bond determined, but with time, she might become rather pretty – in her own way – and that added to her striking intelligence was potentially a dangerous combination if she got past the self-consciousness. Bond silently pitied the future blokes unlucky enough to fall under her spell.

She wasn’t all sunshine and roses, however. As Bond listened to the Major and Z talk, he discovered that she had a biting sense of humour that could easily turn cutting if she didn’t curb her tongue. She was self-critical to a point that screamed ‘perfectionist’ and while kids her age were always awkward – Bond cringed whenever he remembered what he had been like at 15 – Z’s awkwardness was not driven simply by the unpredictability of teenage hormones.

Bond knew all too well the pain of loss, and he recognized in others the insecurity that developed when faced with growing up alone, without parents. Like Bond, Z was likely an orphan, but whereas James had spent many of his formative years with his aunt and, eventually, Hannes Oberhauser, if Z had been a recruit since the age of seven, she hadn’t had the benefit of even an extended family. Z had been raised by the SIS itself – God, what that must be like! – and Bond began to view her with the beginnings of respect and, to a lesser degree, sympathy.

It was late afternoon by the time the Quartermaster and his apprentice wound up their talk. They were by no means finished, but Boothroyd expressed his desire to return to London before full dark. They would continue outlining their plans via the telephone or secure email over the coming weeks. Bond radioed the driver to bring the car round while the Major and Z said their goodbyes.

Bond was escorting the Quartermaster out into the hallway when he felt Z touch the sleeve of his jacket. Bond turned and was struck again by how tiny she was. The top of her head barely came to his chin, and if she wasn’t quite as small as M, well it was a near thing.

“Thank you, Agent Bond,” she said, pushing her uncontrollable hair behind her ears so she could see him better. “I appreciate that babysitting a teenaged Uni student can’t possibly be the way an SIS agent would choose to spend his day.”

“I go where I am bid, Miss,” Bond replied seriously because it was true. Z’s forehead wrinkled at what she though was yet another dismissal. His hulking presence at the other end of the room had been a distraction for her all afternoon, but she’d tried to be polite. Insufferable man. Only the echo of Eustace’s oft repeated phrase, “Z, be nice,” kept her from unleashing a stinging quip in response. It likely wouldn’t have made an impact on the oaf anyway. Instead, she accepted his words with a nod and turned to gather her own things.

“That being said,” Bond continued, “while I didn’t think it initially possible, I enjoyed the day.” Z turned to face him, surprise clear in eyes that had grown wide behind her glasses. And it was then he noted another beguiling oddity: a large ‘freckle’ of pure gold amidst the hazel, positioned just to the left of the pupil of her right eye.
“You have a singular mind, Z, and I owe you an apology for thinking you anything but what you are.” Bond took one of her hands – finely boned and long-fingered; elegant in a way that belied the rest of her awkwardness – in his and lightly pressed his lips to the top, grinning at the blush that spread across her cheeks. “I look forward to escorting the Quartermaster to speak with you again.”

“Tone down the charm, Bond,” Boothroyd commented drily from the hallway. “She’s only fifteen.”

“Yes, sir,” Bond said with a final wink for Z. Turning smartly on his heel, Bond spoke into his radio. “We’re moving Callahan; two minutes to your location.”

“Goodbye, my dear. We’ll talk soon,” the Major said with a nod before striding off down the hallway to the lift, Bond at his heels.

As she watched the metal doors slide closed behind the agent and her mentor, Z managed to suppress an overly girlish sigh of infatuation, but nonetheless wondered just how long she could get away without washing her hand.

Chapter End Notes

I am neither a neurosurgeon nor of Russian descent, so my use of information in both arenas comes solely from what I can glean online. Also, I have done extensive research on people who suffer from spinal cord injuries in hopes of presenting as sensitive a light on the issue and their widely-varied experiences as possible. It is not my intent to offend in any manner.

Please, please, please know that feedback is LOVE! I'm a tentative writer for all that I've been doing it most of my life, and your constructive criticism is appreciated. I tend to write more when I know that people are actually reading it.
The Path to Paradise Begins in Hell

Chapter Summary

It would be over a decade after that Oxford meeting before she saw Bond again, at least with any degree of regularity.

Chapter Notes

In regard to this new chapter, you will find that I am using a profusion of feminine pronouns and general descriptions of our female protagonist rather than a proper name. This is a deliberate choice, and it speaks directly to issues playing out within the chapter. It is my hope that when things change for her, the impact on you, the reader, will be more significant. ~fingers crossed~

One final tidbit, the final section of this chapter is dialogue only. The majority of which comes directly from Skyfall.

Thank you so much to all of you who have commented and/or left kudos for this work. I can't begin to tell you how much this "nervous writer" appreciates it. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2: The Path to Paradise Begins in Hell

“Just because you didn’t put a name to something did not mean it wasn’t there.”  Jodi Picoult, Handle with Care


It would be over a decade after that Oxford meeting before she saw Bond again, at least with any degree of regularity. Though Major Boothroyd and she had continued to meet monthly during her
remaining time at Uni, Bond’s own career had quickly taken off and as a field agent, he was
assigned to several overseas postings: first to Tehran, then to the Balkans and Turkey before an
extended stay at Baghram. All highly classified, of course.

She finished her doctorates as well as two additional Masters’ degrees in Engineering and Physics
before heading off for a Gap Year that while reasonably timed for her chronological age was
severely late in coming for her intellect. She hadn’t used a single day of leave since Six started
giving them to her when she became a contracted employee at the age of 16; she had more than
earned an extended holiday. M, Boothroyd, and even her former SIS appointed guardian, Eustace,
had each put their foot down when she informed them of her intent to leave the country for a year
on her own.

Far too dangerous for such a valuable asset. No, they wouldn’t have it! So she saw little choice
but to deactivate the tracker she’d developed for Six – for which she had immediately become the
agency’s guinea pig – and sneak out of England under one of the several aliases she had crafted that
M knew nothing about. She was 22. Long since an adult. She could go where she wished.

M initially tried to force her back by shutting down her bank accounts. Painfully predictable.
Long before she reached her majority, Six had paid her a generous salary that she put into a
proper, Intelligence Services accountant-supervised, investment account, but she also had her own
income, separate from MI6. The advances she had made into medical applications for
nanotechnology in cell repair led to several inventions for which MI6 had no use, and so long as
she worked under strict conflict of interest guidelines and all projects were carefully
scrutinized by Six, she was welcome to sell her work on the open market.

She had made her first million pounds before she turned twenty.

As the years passed, and more and more banking was transacted online, she had subtly transferred
more and more of that money into a series of well-hidden off-shore and Swiss bank accounts. She
worked for a bloody spy agency. Did they really expect that she wouldn’t follow in their footsteps
when it came to subterfuge? With a lack of funds failing to develop into the issue she had hoped it
would become, M had to get a bit more creative in finding ways to lure her charge back to
England’s shores.

However, after the third time the boffin sent field agents packing back to England without their
quarry in tow, M decided to leave well enough alone and allowed the wayward genius the
opportunity to experience life on her own terms, with the occasional status report, of course. And
if M privately conveyed to her aging Quartermaster that the whole affair was more than a bit
humiliating from an agency training perspective, and that they’d bloody well better figure out a
way to fix the problem, the walls of her office certainly wouldn’t tell any tales.

The first 10 months of her travels were filled with varied locales and fascinating people. She
developed a long-term passion for exploring and savoured a handful of short-term love affairs. Her
first stop was Iceland where she hiked the trails of Gullfoss and Seljalandfoss and tried her eye with
photography at Jokulsarlon Lagoon, Fjadrangljufur Canyon, and Thingvellir National Park. She
had originally planned for her year away to be filled with learning and service, but it was in the
lagoon and steam baths at Mayvatn, when she felt herself begin to relax for the first time years, that
she vowed to indulge in hedonistic pursuits as well.

Eight weeks in Belgium introduced her to the joys of getting her hands dirty beneath the bonnets of
performance sports cars courtesy of Sigur and Reynard, 30-something brothers who worked as the
chief mechanics for a GT3 racing group. Finding her to be an adept learner, the men taught her
how to tweak the specs of engines, suspensions, and chassis to seduce every bit of power and
performance from the Porsche 911, the Jaguar XKR, and the Aston Martin DBRS9. At night, Sig and Rey taught her how to tweak various other things of high performance value, and she proved to them on many occasions just how clever she could be.

From there she bounced from country to country and continent to continent. She expanded her understanding of art in Vienna, Vatican City, and the Netherlands. She took up with a French improvisation troupe travelling through Spain and Morocco. In Phuket, she lazed on the beaches, learned to scuba dive, and discovered the benefits of meditation to help quiet her overactive mind. It didn’t always work, but it was something.

She played cat and mouse with MI6 field agents in Andorra and Istanbul, though it was the disappearing act she pulled in Cyprus of which she was the proudest.

She learned to surf and attained an even more exquisitely enjoyable ‘degree’ in oral sex whilst in Byron Bay and travelled still further south to see where Hobbits lived. She taught English in Tibet and volunteered for a relief organisation in South Africa. She didn’t need to work, but it was the best way to meet new people and experience their lives with them. And the children. Oh, the children, she loved best of all!

The circumstances of her own birth and her status as a ward of Her Majesty’s government as supervised by the SIS, plus the complication of her advanced intellect, meant that she had had few playmates her own age as a child. Her free time hadn’t included play dates or even much in the way of organised sport; she had been somewhat intrigued by rugby but had been deemed too small to participate. She spent the majority of her childhood with her computers, her nanotech, her books, her code, and her caretaker. Eustace, an actual retired Double-O of eccentric morals who served as her guardian, companion, and protection, was engaging enough for the most part, but she had always wondered if maybe there shouldn’t just be … more.

What that “more” was became clear when she spent time with the children in Lhasa and Munsieville. Weeks of playing, tending scraped knees, mediating disputes, cleaning dirty bottoms and noses, teaching and learning never palled. She was there when Rabten and Tashi read their first lines of a Shakespeare sonnet in English, and was sat in the middle of a dusty road with Liandri’s tiny hand in hers as the three-year old died in her mother’s arms having been hit by a speeding lorry whilst playing in front of her family’s shack. Too poor to even bury their only child, Dawie and Funani were understandably shocked to find out that everything had been paid for by a benefactor who wished to remain anonymous. If the young Englishwoman who had spent so much time teaching Liandri and her friends implied to the grieving parents that the donation likely came from the owner of the lorry company whose careless driver had killed the girl, who were they to argue?

She left Munsieville for Tierra del Fuego three weeks after they buried Liandri. Twelve days hiking through that gorgeously rugged country followed by an additional twenty days travelling by ship through the Drake Passage and the Weddell Sea, discovering the marvels of Elephant and the South Shetland Islands, did much to assuage her grief at the little girl’s death, but it was while watching Emperor Penguin fathers tending to their chicks that she recognised that for all the heartache and grief Liandri’s parents felt – would always feel – over the death of their daughter, the three short years they had her in their lives was the true blessing.

The Quark Expedition through Antarctica was the only organised tour she joined during the whole of her travels, but when the expedition ship finally docked in Ushuaia, Argentina, she parted ways with the rest of the passengers who would end their journey in Buenos Aires, taking instead a smaller, chartered flight to Santiago, where she hoped to catch another excursion to the Galapagos before finishing up her Year with a quick tour of the United States.
Her Byron Bay ‘tutor,’ Michael – 34, blond, muscled, and shockingly skilled in so many arenas – lived in Aspen, Colorado during the ski season and had invited her to spend some time with him before she headed home; she reckoned that she couldn’t go wrong with another advanced degree to take back to England. He really was a phenomenal instructor, after all.

She never made it.

What happened in the fortnight that followed her departure from Ushuaia would leave her with permanent scars, a near crippling fear of flying, and a lifelong friendship with Alec Trevelyan.

Four months of recuperation and rehabilitation from her injuries found Q returned to England and well enough to join the current training class of MI6 recruits. She was known to the others by the alias Emily Wilson, though only M, the Major, and Alec knew it to be an alias. She was not destined to be an active field agent, but M nevertheless insisted that ‘Emily’ undergo the rigorous training as though she would be.

“The world is changing, young woman, and so is intelligence gathering. That’s why we’ve invested so much effort and money in you over the years. It’s not like it was during your ill-advised jaunt around the world. Just because you’ll be a part of TSS, there’s no guarantee that you won’t be called upon to go out into the field, so it’s vital that you know how to complete the mission and defend yourself.”

The training class was small and included four other raw recruits plus two current field agents in for standard refresher training. As per usual, she was by far the youngest in the group. For all that she was reasonably fit, the instruction was rigorous and far more physically demanding than anything she had done before, and though she excelled with small and ranged firearms, her petite stature meant that she was absolute rubbish at hand-to-hand combat, and more than once found herself held face down on the mat, or in the mud or – on one particularly unpleasant afternoon – in the water.

A few hours after that particular event, she was approached by two of the other trainees: Danny Cabral and Ian Ronson, both of whom she had apparently impressed with the cool manner in which she handled the entire affair. As the men spoke, she tugged at the collar of the MI6-issued woollen jumper she wore; it was subconscious tick she had developed in attempt to ensure that the hideous scar of poorly healed flesh that encased her left shoulder was always covered, but she wasn’t about to tell them that nearly drowning at the hands of a colleague in a mere five centimetres of water was nothing when compared to facing death in a devastating plane crash in the wilds of Argentina.

Nevertheless, it was clear to each of them that traditional modes of hand-to-hand combat simply wouldn’t work for her. She was too small and would never be able to overpower an enemy. With the men’s help, they began devising alternative ways for her to escape, evade, and defend herself from a physical attack. By the end of the three-month basic training, she managed to hand their arses back to each of the other trainees as well as to Ronson’s fellow field agent, Eve Moneypenny.

In that same year, Bond had been recalled to England from Afghanistan to investigate a series of attacks on small but essential British intelligence resources around the world. A six-month mission eventually led him to Prague and MI6 Station Chief Dryden whom Bond had discovered turned traitor. Bond eliminated both Dryden and his terrorist accomplice, thereby achieving the two sanctioned kills necessary to become 007. By the time ‘Emily Wilson’ had finished her training, Bond had been to Montenegro, Venice, Bolivia, and Russia. Le Chiffre, Vesper Lynd, Rene Mathis, and Mr. Greene were dead; Yusef Kabira was in custody; and James Bond’s icy yet charming and seductive demeanour was indeed well on its way to becoming notorious within the intelligence community.
After basic training, she had spent the bulk of her initial years at HQ in Technical Support Services, doing what she had been educated and hired to do: drag MI6 into the 21st Century, kicking and screaming, if necessary.

As with M, the Quartermaster had long since known that MI6 must adapt to the changes of an increasingly technology-based world, or through its own obsolescence become a threat to the very country it was trying to defend. However, Boothroyd was keenly aware that he had neither the skills nor the inclination to lead that charge and had seen in his apprentice the future of MI6’s potential success. The Quartermaster still ruled the roost in R&D but had given her what amounted to carte blanche as far as TSS was concerned. It had been slow work, glacial at times, and more than once she despaired of ever making a difference. She had rarely ventured out of the TSS labs and offices and so was still relatively unknown among the denizens of Six – a ghost rather than an actual person – but after nearly seven long years, she could say that it had been worth it.

Recruiting some of the newer researchers and developers to her cause, reliable, researched, tested technology rather than gadgetry had become the order of the day. Equipment sent out into the field was streamlined, more reliable, and targeted for the specific needs of the assignment rather than to the personal whims of the agent. Much to Alec Trevelyan’s and James Bond’s disappointment, flamethrower-equipped wristwatches and Geiger counter cufflinks were simply no longer part of the kit unless deemed explicitly relevant to the mission parameters, which if she had her way about it would come to never. Pens didn’t explode and cigarettes didn’t expel knock out gas. She supposed a case could still be made for garrotes hidden in belt buckles and plastic explosives disguised as toothpaste, though.

One piece of technology that did go out regularly, however, was an earwig.

When in early 2012 Boothroyd’s number two decided to retire in order to spend more time with his grandchildren, the TSS boffin that nobody really knew became ‘R,’ and with her came a new pet programme that paired up Double-Os with skilled TSS agents to assist in the field by hacking into satellites, CCTV cameras, and other communication systems around the world, allowing them to finally update an agent on a situation in real time.

She was very careful not to use the term ‘handler’ in front of any agent with a license to kill, but it was really a matter of semantics. Eight of the current twelve Double-Os were now ‘online.’ Maximus Vo, her own second-in-command, ran missions with Two, Three, and Eleven; Alexandra Charles, a skilled techie she hired right out of Imperial College in 2010 was in the ears of Five and Nine with Eight coming on the next month. No one had been assigned yet to Four, Ten, or Twelve, but as all three of the agents were either on family or medical leave until after the first of the year, there was time. She herself handled the missions of One, Six, and, now for their second mission together, Double-O Seven.

According to years’-worth of data, these changes – subtle at first before becoming increasingly bolder, as with the Comm Programme – had yielded impressive results, no matter how much the corps of Double-Os wanted to whinge about it all.

Though not at first, technology had started to return regularly, often requiring only minimal repairs before being sent back into the field with its agent. This permitted the bulk of the budget to be allocated for improving and redesigning that technology, thereby keeping MI6 and its agents at the forefront of the industry. The intelligence gathered was more reliable and vetted more quickly which translated into more plots against the Crown being foiled and a substantial decrease in the number of agents seriously injured or killed in the line of duty.

Part of each handler’s – shhhh! – job was to go over the mission parameters with a fine-toothed
comb and appropriately kit out agents for their assignments. She was in the process of explaining to Sebastian Ronson – himself not yet a Double-O but paired up with Bond for this mission – recent modifications made to the radio transmitter he would carry to Istanbul when 007 pushed open the doors to TSS already mid-argument with Boothroyd. She looked up at the commotion and quickly schooled her reaction to the sight of a visibly frustrated James Bond. Apparently she hadn’t been quick enough. Ronson’s knowing chuckle pulled her attention back to the field agent whose radio transmitter she clutched in her closed fist.

“It’s like watching a lion in the wild, isn’t it, James Bond in a strop? All raw power, command, and grumpy majesty.”

“Oh, piss off, Ian,” she muttered through her grin. Releasing her death-grip on the delicate piece of tech, she tucked the transmitter into the case next to Ronson’s preferred weapon, a 9mm Sig-Sauer P226 SRT.

“How do the Americans like to put it? Ah, yes. ‘When are you going to tap that’?” Ronson asked, nodding his head in Bond’s direction where the issue with the Quartermaster seemed to have something to do with the limited tech 007 was taking into the field for this mission as well as the limited tech he had been taking into the field for the last several months.

“Always delightfully vulgar, the Americans,” She snapped the case closed and pushed it into Ronson’s hand, deliberately ignoring the man’s perceptive smile. “I shudder to think of the percentage of the staff that has, as you put it, ‘tapped’ that.”

“Oh, please do pull the other one. You know you’ve done the maths.”

“Perhaps,” she hedged, “but I’ll say only this. I have no intention of going where so many have gone before. I have more self-respect than that.”

Ronson laughed. “No you don’t.”

She felt herself blush. “Okay. You’re right. I don’t. So it’s just as well that Bond doesn’t even really know I exist. Might make things dreadfully awkward in future.”

The truth was that she had done the maths. She was induced to do so during a fit of boredom some months previously while waiting for 001 to check in after an 18-hour comm-silent stakeout, and had been quite surprised to find that the percentage of MI6 employees, female and male, that Bond had slept with – based solely on gossip and innuendo; it’s hard to find raw data on such things, after all – was shockingly small. While his conquests in the field were renowned, they were almost exclusively in pursuit of the mission’s objective and apparently in direct contrast to what he sought in his personal life, not that she had any idea what that actually was. Nonetheless, Bond was far from the lothario that people perceived him to be. Not that she would share that information with anyone. Bond had a legend to uphold, after all.

“Right you are, then, love,” Ronson said, interrupting her thoughts. “Wouldn’t want the future Quartermaster shagging Six’s best Double-O. Imagine the pillow talk. Horrid!” Ian sobered for a moment and took one of her hands in his. “But why he doesn’t see you is something I don’t begin to understand.”

Though her wardrobe choices left much to be desired – the ‘geek chic’ trousers and oversized cardigans she typically wore only served to disguise what Ronson was sure was still a comely figure – and her long, dark curls always managed to escape whatever methods she used to try to contain them, he’d always thought there was something undeniably lovely about the petite woman. Something that enhanced the unmatched intelligence and wit of the boffin whom he had come to
appreciate and rely upon since basic training. “You’re exquisite.”

“And you’re gay.” She pulled her hand from his with a quick squeeze of appreciation for his words and controlled her instinct to squirm at Ronson’s open appraisal of her appearance, channelling her embarrassment into adjusting her glasses as was her wont when people seemed to delve too deeply. “Maybe you should take your own advice. You’re pretty enough to capture his attent –“

“I do so hate to interrupt you two love birds,” said a deep baritone from behind her, “but we have a flight to catch, Ronson.” Bond had apparently wrapped up his tirade with Boothroyd and had come in search of his mission partner.

She closed her eyes and gave an imperceptible shake of her head. Lovely. Just lovely.

“Right,” she said, biting into the ‘t’ at the end of the word. Pulling another small case from the tray on the workbench, she turned to include 007 in the conversation though she had given him his kit an hour ago. “Your boarding passes have been uploaded to your mobile phones as have the mission details for you to further examine during the flight. There’s already an agent on the ground in Turkey. The location and time of that meet are included. We hope to have further information on the whereabouts of the hard drive by the time you land at Istanbul Atatürk, but reliable intel has been surprisingly hard to come by.” She opened the small case and showed the contents to both agents before snapping it shut and handing it deliberately to Ronson. “Two earwigs –“

“I already have mine. You kitted me out yourself or have you forgotten?” Bond interrupted with a huff. Arrogant arse! Why she continued to be attracted to him after all of these years …

“One for you, Ronson,” she said pointedly at Bond as though he hadn’t spoken, “and an extra for Double-O Seven, here, as his tend to go missing with little warning or explanation.”

“Is there anything else?” Bond demanded, attempting to cow her impertinence with an icy glare. Good luck with that, she thought.

“No, that’s –“ Bond interrupted her this time by stalking off for the double doors that led to the corridor.

“Let’s go, Ronson,” he said over his shoulder.

“Impatient git,” she muttered. “I’ll be in both your ears for this one, Ian. Do bring back all Her Majesty’s equipment in one piece, please. The whisky is lovely, but you still owe me that dinner for my birthday, after all.”

“RONSON!” Bond’s bellow echoed through TSS.

“Summoned by the lion’s roar. Gotta go, love,” Ronson said, jogging after the older agent. “Look forward to hearing you on comms.”

If only things had gone that way.

Within eight hours of their landing in Turkey, Ronson was dead, the hard drive was in the wind, and Bond had been shot off the top of a passenger train by Eve Moneypenny. He hadn’t been seen since.

In London, it rained.
M closed and locked the interior door of her flat, grateful, yet again, that her driver was an old-fashioned gentleman of manners who always insisted on holding the umbrella for her so she wouldn’t have to carry one of her own. It saved both time and water damage to the floors of her foyer. Flipping on the overhead light, M skimmed her fingers across the post that her housekeeper, Clara, always set on the table in the entryway. A few cards among the rest of the correspondence and bills. Belated condolences from those just hearing of Tom’s death, more than likely. She couldn’t deal with that just now. Not. No. Not just now.

She needed a drink.

Clara had left the table lamp atop the liquor cart burning, but the rest of the sitting room was cast in deep shadow. M pulled the stopper from the crystal decanter of whisky and poured.

“I’d invite you to share my bottle, but I don’t think you’ve really earned it.” The cut crystal glass in her hand crashed to the ground but did not shatter as M spun at the sound of the tired, slightly slurried posh voice behind her.

It took two pounding heartbeats for her to recognise the silhouette sitting in the window seat.

“You’ve got bloody cheek, breaking into my flat –”

“It’s hardly breaking in if you’re given a key.”

“Which was clearly a mistake, if this is how you intend to use it. I almost expect that behaviour from Double-O Seven, but not from my – ”

“Not anymore,” came the snapped retort.

“What are you nattering on about?” M turned back to pour herself a fresh glass of whisky. A double this time.

“You said you ‘almost expect that behaviour from Double-O Seven’. Not. Anymore.” M watched as the girl downed the rest of her drink and climbed out of the shadows. “You’ve been in emergency meetings since this afternoon’s cockup, so you mightn’t have heard. The local authorities in Istanbul have called off the search for Bond. As far as they’re concerned, he’s washed out to the Marmara. Wait. What am I talking about? Of course you’ve heard because the agents at Station T have also been told to suspend the search, which they wouldn’t have done except on your order.”

M appraised the young woman standing before her. They were of a height, so for once M didn’t need to strain her neck to accomplish the task. The girl’s red-rimmed eyes seemed even larger behind the magnification of her spectacles, and, if possible, that hair was even more out of control than usual. She’d likely been running her hands through it, wreaking even more havoc with the curls. Quite simply, the girl looked a fright. Shattered, really. The physical embodiment of what M herself felt but could not show. Not since her infancy had M seen her look so completely at sixes and sevens. She had always been a serious child, surprisingly in control of her emotions.

The clink of glass on glass drew M’s attention to the bottle of whisky the boffin had brought with her. Talisker 25, the 2008 bottling by the label. A fine choice. A whisky to savour. Though that didn’t seem to be the girl’s foremost concern based on the long swallow she took of the amber liquid.

“Ronson gave this to me,” she said, gesturing with the bottle, “in case you’re wondering. For my birthday. You remember Sebastian – Ian – don’t you? He died today, too. He wasn’t a Double-O like Bond, so you mightn’t have remembered him. Would’ve made a good one.”
“Of course I bloody well know Ronson. If you’re here to wreak incriminations upon me, you might as well leave now. There are things in play of which you have no understanding, so –“

“Why did you pull me off comms?”

“What?” M pulled her head back, completely at a loss at the change in direction the conversation seemed to be taking.

“Tanner’s a good man and an excellent Chief of Staff, but he has limited experience with the technology necessary to run an operation like that. My team has far more. As do I. I created the programme for pity’s sake. On your orders. Built it from the ground up to help save the lives of our assets and our agents in the field, increase their chances for success, but at its most critical moment, you pull me off. Have me escorted from the entire floor so I can’t even offer support. I want to know why.”

“The security clearance required –“

“Is the clearance you allotted me which is second only to your own, Tanner’s, and Boothroyd’s! Don’t lie to me!” She took several steps toward M.

M noted how the glass in the young woman’s hand shook and thought for a moment that she might throw it across the room, but rather than explode into violence, the girl took two, deep, steadying breaths and asked again in a voice that was barely audible, “Why? Why did you pull me off comms?”

“Because of Bond, and Ronson, if you must know. Ronson’s been your friend since you were in training together, and your continued infatuation with Bond was a significant contributory factor. Both of them on the same operation? Once things started going pear-shaped, I couldn’t take the chance that you’d become emotionally compromised and lose control of the situation.”

“Sentiment?!” She was incredulous. “You pulled me off the mission because I might become emotionally compromised?!”

“There is little room for such reactions in high-pressure scenarios.”

“Well, thank God you’re above all that.” She studied M’s face for several long moments, and though M’s countenance remained impassive, she nevertheless saw something there that – “Another lie.”

She set the glass down next to the other bottles and stepped away from M until she felt the edge of the wide doorway press into the space between her shoulder blades. She shook her head in disbelief. She had thought things bad enough, but this. “You don’t trust me. How is that even – Twenty-eight years, M. I’ve literally dedicated my entire life to Six, and you don’t trust me?!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Of course, I trust you.”

“How in the bloody hell – “ She closed her eyes and reined in the riot of emotions that swirled within her. “I will admit that the last few hours haven’t been my best,” she said evenly, “but when have I ever given you cause to think I would let my feelings, or anything else, compromise a mission? Take precedence over doing my duty!?”

“You haven’t, but the possibility –”

“Led you to make a rash decision based on no data whatsoever, and now Bond and Ronson are dead, and the hard drive is beyond our reach because Eve Moneypenny couldn’t hit the broadside
of a stationary bus with a laser-guided missile launcher let alone a moving target with a scoped
sniper rifle she hasn’t trained on in five years. I’ve always known that you’d never let me get too
close. Never let me know you too well. Not even when I desperately needed some sort of
connection, but I thought I had some idea —” She spun toward the hallway and then back again,
searching for something, some truth that she could cling to. Completely at sea over these
realisations.

“God! Who are you?! Alec Trevelyan’s name is on that NATO list. So is Double-O Two’s. How
many more of our colleagues – our friends – have to die needlessly because you’re unwilling to
trust me to do the job you’ve groomed me to do practically from the moment of my unfortunate
birth?”

“I don’t answer to you, girl.”

“Of course you don’t. I never said you did. Who am I that you would ever answer to me? I’m
nobody. Literally nobody. You made sure of that. But someday, someone out there is going to
demand that you answer to them. I’m afraid for you, M. Truly. Afraid that you’ll be expected to
answer to the dead. To James and Ian and God knows how many others.”

She reached into one of the pockets of her trousers and pulled out the cap to the Talisker, threading
it back onto the bottle as she looked around for her coat before remembering she’d left her anorak
at HQ. She’d waited so long in the dark of M’s flat that her hair and her clothes had long since
dried of the rain that had soaked them through. From the other pocket she removed the key to the
flat and set it very deliberately on the low table next to her. Her eyes flitted across the furnishings
of the well-appointed room that she knew almost as well as her own, but it was as though she was
seeing it all for the first time.

“I apologise for intruding on your privacy. It was poorly done of me.” She said, looking
everywhere but at M before turning for the door. “I’m heading back to Six. I’ll have gone through
the audio and visual recordings before you get in. See if I can’t find something to tell us where the
hard drive’s scarpered off to before I send the lot of it over to the analysts. Do let me know if you
need any help with the obituaries.”

“Cam …”

The sound of that name – one that both was and wasn’t hers – stayed her departure. “No. You
don’t get to do that.” She turned back to look at M. “I’d rather you didn’t use that name anymore.”

“It’s the one you were given.”

“No. No, it’s the one I was assigned by a set of nurses who couldn’t be arsed to think of anything
beyond their immediate geography. Just one more alias. Cam, Emily, Hannah, Nia, Z, R … my
personalised set of lifelong codenames.”

“What will you be called then?”

She laughed outright, but ultimately she just sounded sad. “You make it sound as if it actually
matters.” And with that, she left.

~~OOQ~~
M and Tanner were shown into yet another small treatment area inside the A&E at Royal London, checking on and visiting with those who had been injured in the bombing of MI6 Headquarters. It was time they could ill afford, given that things were a right mess, but MI5 had stepped up to the plate, and was assisting in the emergency relocation of their sister organisation, so some of M’s time and focus could be spared. It rallied the troops, if nothing else, and though she knew she had a reputation as a hard-arse – one she had worked damned hard to achieve, by the by – she did care about her people quite a lot.

Most of the injured had been working on the Executive Levels where the explosion had originated. However, most of the fatalities had been in TSS and Research and Development as the initial blast had set off a cascade of secondary explosions that ignited the many types of highly volatile components used in R&D projects. A strategic attack, hitting at the very heart of MI6. Scores had been injured, some critically, but they were all expected to survive. Eight others, however, would never return home to their families; their lives had been given in service to and protection of their country, though few would ever know the true nature of that service.

The room into which M and Tanner were escorted held the last of the wounded they were to see; the last to leave the scene; the last to be seen for treatment, insisting that others more seriously, and some not so, wounded go before, so the doctor was only just finishing up his initial care of the painful second degree burns his patient had suffered in the blast.

“We’ll move you to the ward in about an hour,” the doctor told his patient who sat with her legs dangling over the edge of the treatment bed as he secured the final bandages over the damaged flesh of her back and the nurse applied antibiotic ointment to the more superficial burns on her right ear and temple.

Her hair – a dark rat’s nest of dust and debris – was piled high on her head to keep it out of the way, and it appeared as though some had been burned off. A nurse gently tugged the gown back into place around her back then eased their patient into a comfortable position on her side on the bed.

“Your concussion is thankfully minor, and the pain medication won’t interfere with that.” The doctor gestured at the various IV lines to which she was hooked up, “But we’ll want to keep an eye on that as well as the burns. There will be some scarring, I’m afraid, but the majority of them will heal without issue.”

She nodded her understanding and pressed the button that would release the morphine into her system.

“When can she return to work?” M demanded, making her presence known and gesturing at the thick bandages that swathed a portion of the girl’s upper back and neck. Tanner shot an uncomfortable look at his boss at her blunt and direct question. Granted, M was always blunt and direct, but all of her previous encounters with the wounded these last hours had shown the care and positive regard with which she held their colleagues.

The boffin didn’t even spare a look over her shoulder for M, but she nodded at the doctor. “Tell her whatever she wants to know.” Her voice was weary and detached. She just wanted to sleep and escape the pain of the day, even if only for a little while.

The doctor knew who M was and understood the severity of the situation, but after he had explained the nature of his patient’s injuries, he concluded with the news that he couldn’t, in good conscience, even consider discharging her for at least three days.

M sighed. Clearly frustrated. “Thank you, Doctor. You may leave if you’re finished. Tanner, see
that we get any and all files transferred back to our medical personnel. They may not have anywhere to call home at the moment, but it’s best we keep everything together.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tanner said and indicated that the doctor and nurse should come with him. Guards stood outside the curtained cubicle, ensuring that no one would disturb the conversation that was to follow.

It had been nearly eight weeks since the two women had last spoken; there simply hadn’t been cause or opportunity for them to do so. The audio and visual data from Istanbul had been turned over to the agency’s analysts for evaluation, Boothroyd sat in on all the executive meetings as he had always done, and there were still missions to run, agents to kit out.

While the issue the girl had raised over the significance of a name had pricked at the back of M’s mind like a thorn in a panther’s paw, it had been of little immediate concern. There were far greater issues to attend to.

That situation had since changed, irrevocably.

“I am of course quite relieved that you are comparatively uninjured. Given the devastation I’ve seen this afternoon, it’s a miracle anyone survived the blasts. I am glad that you did.” M said softly as she made her way around the bed. The girl opened her eyes as M approached and blinked twice, sluggishly. The medication making it difficult for her to focus, and without her glasses ...


“I know.” M rested her hand on the mattress near the girl’s hip but didn’t seek to reach any further than that.

“Who?”

“We don’t yet know, but we will, rest assured.”

A nod and the hazel eyes closed again.

“The truth is that things are all a bit of a jumble at the moment. We’re setting up new digs in Churchill’s old bunkers, but we’re doing so with a skeleton staff. There are only so many places I’m willing to let those people from MI5 wander, after all, and I need TSS up and running. Until it is, we’re vulnerable.”

Eyes opened again, perhaps a touch clearer than before.

“I need you, Quartermaster.”

Q checked herself out of hospital 10 hours later.

New MI6 Headquarters, Churchill’s Bunkers, London,
“Shanghai.”

“I beg pardon?” Q continued to tap away at her laptop, working to debug several hundred lines of code that were currently keeping the automated cooling systems she had set up in Q-branch from working properly. Though she felt it was colder than a witch’s tit down in the rabbit warren of tunnels they’d been forced to inhabit, the servers clearly did not share the same opinion and had been going down all day. Just another item in a never-ending flood of problems that seemed to pop up on an hourly basis in their new home. And to her consternation, most of Q’s solutions were makeshift, improvised affairs but ones that, for the most part, seemed to be keeping things from flying apart. For now.

“Your analysis of the shrapnel Bond dug out of his shoulder led us to a hitman named Patrice. He’s the one with the hard drive. Been sighted in Shanghai. Herself’s sending him there,” Tanner said, dropping the file on Q’s desk.

Q picked up the folder, leafing through its contents as she leaned back in her chair and immediately regretted that decision. Tanner winced in sympathy at the pained gasp that escaped the Quartermaster’s lips. It had been five days since the bombing, three since Bond’s return, and Tanner wasn’t wholly sure that Q had left the tunnels since she arrived in them less than twelve hours after she had been rushed with the others to hospital.

He did know that she had spent a good portion of that time doing as the rest of her staff had done, crawling through duct work and some of the smaller tunnels, even under the exposed foundations of abandoned Tube platforms in order to run cables and wiring to get MI6 back up and running before “any of the bad guys can take advantage of the fact that we’re not at our best,” she had said.

It can’t have been easy. Tanner had seen some of the burns on her back when she was in hospital, and the pain must have been substantial. Nevertheless, Q tended her own wounds and had stayed the course, and if the scuttlebutt Tanner had heard was accurate, she had earned the undying admiration of nearly all those that served under her. Quite an accomplishment given that they were all still mourning the loss of Boothroyd.

In the days immediately following the bombing, it had quickly become apparent that TSS and Research and Development could no longer exist as separate entities. There simply wasn’t the space in the tunnels or, unfortunately, the personnel available to shoulder the double load. So one of Q’s first tasks as Quartermaster was to merge the two departments into what the minions – those geeks, nerds, and tech-gods who seemed to all but worship the ground Q walked on – almost immediately dubbed as ‘Q-Branch.’

Q stood from her chair, gingerly twisting the muscles in her back, and walked to the wall of windows that separated her small office from the rest of the branch. She preferred to be down on what they called ‘The Platform,’ but the coding combined with her current pain level necessitated a bit of quiet. She dug around in the pocket of her trousers, unearthing a pair of paracetamol tablets. Blowing off a couple of pieces of lint, she dry-swallowed the medication knowing that they would barely take the edge off.

She perused the file of information again and after a few minutes of quiet, raised her eyes to look at Tanner.
“There’s no way Bond passed any of these tests.”

“No.”

“So M’s hoping that a second go will keep him in the ground for good since Moneypenny managed to cock it up the first time?”

“It’s not like that, Q.”

“No. It’s worse. Come on, Tanner. You’ve seen him! In Istanbul, Bond was healthy. Fit. At his peak both mentally and physically, but now –”

“We need him.”

“What good is he going to do us if he gets himself killed because M let an agent with one foot still in the grave go after an international hitman?” Q gestured with the folder in the general direction of M’s office, some quarter-mile distant though the winding tunnels.

“He’s the best we have.” Tanner’s voice was quiet. Direct. Unequivocal.

Q sighed and rubbed her eyes beneath her glasses. Of course Tanner was right. Even now. Even beaten, bloodied, and half dead, Agent 007 was the best they had. He was always the best they had.

She shook her head, but now her frustration was born as much by her own situation as by Bond’s. “We won’t be able to offer him any real time support in the field. Not for at least another four days.”

“Four days? What’s the hold up?”

“What’s the –” Q fought with her temper, which in her exhausted state meant she was snappish at best and forced herself to remember that most people didn’t understand the complexity of establishing satellite uplinks, let alone ones that had to be reconstructed from scratch. “Re-establishing our network isn’t just a matter of laying cable and flipping a switch, and tasking a satellite is a processing-intensive procedure that can take 8-12 hours depending on factors like power, momentum, atmospheric corrections, weather conditions, as well as when it’s in line of sight of an uplink site here on Earth.”

“Eight to twelve hours doesn’t explain four days.”

“I have two techs who can do the work. Three, if I pull myself off everything else I’m doing.”

“But –“

“We have 23 satellites.”

“Oh.”

Q tipped her head to acknowledge Tanner’s epiphany. “Quite.”

“This is a fluid situation, Q. Any updates will need to be given to Bond in person on site, then. M’ll insist upon it.”

Q’s stomach dropped and she instantly felt faint. Apparently she looked like she would collapse for Tanner rushed to her side, and, gently slipping an arm around the small of her back, guided Q to sit on the futon some smart minion had installed in her office.
Tanner encouraged Q to drop her head between her knees and take several deep, steadying breaths. “In … out … in … out …” He repeated the soothing mantra for nearly two minutes before Q was finally able to ease back against the futon, careful of the burns that were still bandaged beneath her shirt and jumper.

“I’m sorry, Q. I didn’t mean to imply that M would send you to Shanghai. She won’t force you to fly anywhere. She’ll assign the task to a field agent,” he said once she was breathing normally and most of the colour had returned to her face. “Here, drink this.” He pressed the mug of tea she had been drinking as she coded into her hands. She grimaced with distaste at the now cold Earl Grey but drank it anyway.

“I-I don’t normally react so viscerally anymore. My apologies.” Q closed her eyes. “I’m just tired.”

“M wants Bond on the next direct flight which is in about … eight hours,” Tanner said, looking at his watch. “How about once you’re done kitting him out, I drive you home so you can get some real rest. You’ve trained your minions well enough that they can vet any new intel that comes our way that Bond may need to know about.”

Q opened her eyes and looked at Tanner through her peripheral vision. “My minions?” She hadn’t cocked an eyebrow at the moniker, but it was a near thing.

“*Their* term, not mine, but I’d say it fits,” Tanner chuckled. “C’mon. How much time do you need?”

She ran through a mental list of her easily accessible inventory and what she would need to make the final modifications to the Walther PPK she had started designing for Bond before his death.

“I need at least an hour to finish the coding on the cooling system. We won’t be any good to anyone let alone Double-O Seven if we lose the servers to overheating. Another three hours to assemble and modify his kit. I’ll have R make the flight and hotel arrangements and prep all the relevant mission details to upload to Bond’s mobile.”

She looked over her shoulder at the relative disorder that was Q-branch. “Tell Double-O Seven I’ll meet him at the National Gallery at half five. Things are too chaotic here, and I don’t want anything lost in transla – ”

She was cut off by a loud crash outside her office that was immediately followed with a shouted “I’m okay!”

Q sighed.

~~OOQ~~

*Double-O Seven, I’m your new Quartermaster.*

**You must be joking.**

*Why? Because I’ve got breasts?*
Because you still have spots.

My complexion is hardly relevant.

No, but your competence is.

Age is no guarantee of efficiency.

Youth is no guarantee of innovation.

…

Every now and then a trigger needs to be pulled.

Or not pulled. Hard to tell which in your pyjamas.

Q.

*Double-O Seven.*

…

Can you get past them?

*I invented them.*

Granborough Road. It’s an old Tube station on the Metropolitan Line.

Been closed for years.

Use that as a key.

*Oh shit! Oh shit, shit, shit! He hacked us.*

He’s gone.

…

*I hear you.*

*I’m looking for you.*

*I’m in the Tube.*

*Put your back into it.*

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

*Oh good. There’s a train coming.*

*Hmm. That's vexing.*

*I’m through.*

*Told you.*
Bond. Get on the train.

He’s going for M.

Tell Tanner.

Get her out of there!

Q, I need help.

I’m tracking the car.

Where are you going?

I’ve got M.

We’re about to disappear.

I need you to lay a trail of breadcrumbs.

So much for my promising career in espionage.

She’s dead, Q.

M is dead.

Silva?

Dead.

Are you injured, Double-O Seven?

Double-O Seven?

Bond?

Respond.

Yes.
Injured.

...  

Roger that. I have your GPS coordinates.

Search and Rescue mobilising from RAF Lossiemouth, Scotland.

ETA: 54 minutes.

SIS Emergency Response Team mobilising from RAF Northolt, London

ETA: 4 hours, 08 minutes.

...

Are you coming?

Bond.

I-I can’t.

...

Say you’re coming.

...

Q?

...

Q?

...

SIS Emergency Response Team mobilising from RAF Northolt, London ...

...

Q?

...

Please.

...

Revised ETA: 4 hours, 57 minutes.

...

I’m coming.
If you enjoyed this chapter, please do leave a comment or click the "kudos" button if you haven't yet. Like all fan fiction authors, I thrive on comments, and even a quick "loved it!" makes my day.

I work with high schoolers for a living. Sometimes I need all the positive feedback I can get. ;)

Ta!
Chapter Three: The Ones Worth Suffering For

“When you reach the end of what you should know, you will be at the beginning of what you should sense.”

— Kahlil Gibran, Sand and Foam


It was late afternoon by the time they were dropped off on the kerb in front of her home, and Q politely but firmly dismissed the MI6 driver and his offers to help her get Bond through the door. It was, perhaps, not her smartest move, but she could feel the tension between her shoulders threatening to spiral out of control, and she needed to be away from extraneous people before she lost the tenuous grip she had on her emotions. At this point, the driver would do more harm than good. In fact, had the man she was struggling to support been anyone but Bond, or Alec, she’d have long since left him to his own fate.
Q pressed Bond against the wall next to the door to the warehouse with one hand, no easy feat given that the man was nearly boneless with exhaustion and pain, and fought with the complex security features of her front door with the other. When her keys hit the ground for the third time, Q huffed a sigh of frustration. “Come on, Double-O Seven! Work with me a bit. Keep yourself vertical for two more minutes, and I promise you can collapse once I get you to bed.”

It was a testament to the reality of Bond’s condition that the man offered no salacious commentary on his Quartermaster’s promise. In fact, the only evidence that Bond had even heard Q was a brief, rough exhalation, but he managed to brace his legs beneath him and lean deliberately against the brick behind him just long enough for Q to work both the dermal and retinal scans and turn the key in the lock before wrestling the two of them through the heavy oak door.

Q kicked the door shut behind them, trusting that the security protocols would re-engage on their own, and slid a shoulder beneath the Double-O’s arm to help him across the ground floor to the refurbished lift. She had given thanks for this lift more than once over the years, but particularly now as she couldn’t imagine trying to haul the nearly dead weight of the spent agent up 17 stairs. “Just 28 more steps, Double-O Seven,” Q said, once the doors slid open upon reaching the first storey. She could have installed Bond in the guest room on the ground floor and made things initially easier on herself, but the bulk of what she would need was up here, and she didn’t much care for the idea of running up and down the stairs any more than she had to. She was exhausted.

She verbally counted off the steps to her own bedroom – for her benefit or his? – where she was finally able to ease Bond onto his back on the mattress of the large bed. Q discarded her anorak, scarf, and gloves in short order and flipped on the table lamp before turning her attention back to the Double-O on her bed.

Q knelt to unlace the heavy work boots on Bond’s feet, tossing them carelessly into the corner near the tall wardrobe. His woollen socks, still sodden with brackish water, quickly followed the damp leather. Q cursed under her breath. Bond wore the joggers, jumper, thermal vest, and jacket that his gamekeeper, Kincade, had bundled the agent into in an attempt to keep him warm after his plunge into the icy loch, but apparently the old man hadn’t considered Bond’s feet which were still ice cold and clammy hours later. If he contracted pneumonia …

Q divested Bond of jacket, jumper, and vest – a difficult affair more akin to wrestling with a jellyfish than disrobing a grown man – before turning a critical eye to his jogging trousers and deciding to leave them where they were.

Bond groaned with pain when Q lifted his legs onto the mattress but didn’t open his eyes. He really should be in hospital but had emphatically refused further treatment, leaving Q with little other choice than to bring him here. She reached across the bed to grab the far edge of the duvet and pulled it over Bond’s body, tucking the edges around him like the dough of a meat pasty. Q quickly made her way across the open floorplan of the living space to the kitchen where she flipped on the kettle and dug up a tin of soup that she poured into a large mug and set to warm in the microwave.

Q busied herself with meaningless tasks while things heated: rinsing dishes that were already clean and lining them up again in the drying rack, checking that the milk hadn’t gone off, inventorying her tea selection – she’d need more pu erh hazelberry soon – any mindless task to keep her from thinking too much.

She needed to sleep, maybe try to meditate, soon, and hope she could centre herself. Even if she discounted the effect of the helicopter flights, which she really couldn’t, the events of the last two weeks – Hell, the last two months – had pushed Q to her limit. She had barely managed to force
back the panic attacks that had threatened on the flights to and from Skyfall. Q felt just as fragile now but managed to choke back a surge of emotion. There wasn’t time for it. Instead, she pulled a hot water bottle from a drawer next to the hob, filling it from the kettle that was close to but not quite boiling.

Back in the bedroom, Q set the mug of hot soup and a bottle of cool water from the fridge next to the lamp before she pulled back the duvet to slip the warm bladder between Bond’s chilled feet.

The en suite for her medical kit was next, but she was stayed when Bond’s hand shot out from beneath the duvet and grabbed her wrist. “Where are we?” he asked. His voice was tense and his heavy-lidded eyes were clouded with pain. The medication he’d been given prior to the helicopter flight down from Scotland was clearly wearing off.

“Someplace safe,” Q assured him. “Do you want to sit up?”

Bond nodded but collapsed back against the mattress with a groan when he tried. “Maybe not.”

“In any other circumstance, I’d likely bring up this being a symptom of your increasing age, but in truth, I don’t think I’d hold up half as well.”

“A compliment, Q?” he almost sounded genuinely surprised. Almost.

“Oh, piss off, Double-O Seven.” Q nevertheless bent to assist him, biting off her own yelp of pain when he wrapped his arms around her back for support as she tugged him up the bed. Her burns were never going to heal at this rate, but she did feel that her anxiety had started to settle a bit with the banter. Strange that their word-play – a new development since Bond’s return from Asia – was already starting to feel familiar. Comfortable.

“God, you’re heavy,” she groaned, finally propping him against the headboard, and did her best not to think about how nice Bond’s bare skin felt beneath her hands.

“If you don’t like potato leek, there’s not much I can do. It’s all I’ve got in, apparently,” she said, pressing the mug into Bond’s hands once he looked settled. “You’ll need it if I’m to give you anything more for the pain.”

“It’s fine,” he whispered and sipped at the soup.

Q used that distraction to pop into the en suite. When she returned, she carried her medical kit with several clean flannels stacked on top and a plastic bowl filled with warm water. Bond appeared to be dozing, and the mug tilted dangerously in his grasp. Q dropped the kit and the flannels on the bed next to Bond and rescued the mug before the soup spilt on the duvet. Placing it next to the bowl on the table, she pulled her reading chair close to the bed and started tending Bond’s most obvious wounds.

“Your flat?” Bond asked after several minutes. Not asleep then, Q thought, though the man’s eyes remained closed.

“A singular lack of options, and even I cannot sew a silk purse from a sow’s ear.” Q used a cotton swab to daub ointment on the scrapes. “You’ve no flat of your own, and no hotel above one star in all the boroughs would take you looking as you do. You refused to go to Medical or be treated at
an A&E,” she tossed the swab into the bin next to the bed, “and though very tempting given the way you harangued the RAF medics who did try to treat you, I didn’t much fancy leaving you to rough it under Westminster Bridge, so … my place.”

“I’m … grateful.”

“You should be. I’m not in the habit of bringing work home if it doesn’t have a hard drive.”

Q unwrapped a pair of butterfly plasters and affixed them to Bond’s scalp before she set about removing the blood-stained bandages along his right ribcage. James opened his eyes and watched her work, seemingly impassive.

“And speaking of … why didn’t you at least let the paramedics stitch these up?” she asked with a pointed glare and a gesture at the twin bullet grazes that scored his torso.

“It’s fine. I’ve had worse.” Bond’s voice sounded even more ragged than usual, likely from loch water.

“We’re clearly going to have discuss your definition of ‘fine,’ Double-O Seven,” Q muttered and started digging around in the kit. In short order, she unearthed a pair of nitrile gloves, a suture kit, and a bottle containing the pain medication she had been given by the doctors at Royal London. She handed him two of the pills and the bottle of water. “Oxycodone. I know you’re not allergic to these.”

“Any chance of a whisky?”

“I rarely share my whisky on the best of days.”

“It can’t have escaped your notice that this has not been the best of days.” No amount of loch water could explain away the feeling held in his voice.

“As evidenced by the painkillers you are going to take, instead.” Q knew that Bond wouldn’t appreciate her drawing attention to his emotional response any more than she would have had he done the same, so she gestured at the water bottle. “Drink it all,” she told him, then slid from her chair onto the mattress next to Bond’s hip. Q unsealed the suture kit, careful not to touch the sterile contents within until she had slathered her hands with antibacterial gel – not her best option, but this needed done – let them dry, and slid on the nitrile gloves.

She was prepping the lidocaine when Bond spoke again. “I said it’s fine, Q. Just bandage them. I don’t need stitches.”

The ‘idiot’ in her expression was implied, but she pointedly let her gaze slip down his torso to the blood that oozed freely from the two deep bullet grazes. Clearly, their awkward journey down the hallway had reopened the wounds, and the blood had now started to soak through the flannel she had set on the mattress.

“When you’re bleeding on your own 600-thread count sheets, you can make your own health care choices. My sheets. My choice. And a couple of butterfly plasters won’t keep these closed.” She wiggled the syringe in her glove-clad fingers. “Roll this way so I can get a better angle, please.”

“Have you even done this before?” he demanded, refusing to budge.

Q stretched out her right arm until the cuff of the green and purple jumper pulled up enough to reveal the bottom edge of a jagged but neatly mended scar that ran across the top of her forearm. “I’ve another on my left calf and two more to the right of my navel. Star pupil, MI6 Advanced
It sufficed. The AFFA clinic was rigorous and those who passed the course knew what they were doing, so Bond’s answer was to gingerly scoot down the bed – far easier than going the opposite way had been – and shift to face her. He closed his eyes at the first prick of the needle, but otherwise didn’t react as she injected the lidocaine into his wounds.

“So, not a fan of Medical?” Bond asked several minutes later when he felt her set the syringe on the sterile drape that she had spread across his hip and along the mattress.

“Nope. Something we have in common, t’would seem.” He felt the cool dampness of the antiseptic solution she used to clean around the wounds. Not numb yet.

“Need to stitch yourself up often, then, do you?”

“No more than you. Research and development isn’t always an accident-free occupation. Plenty of ways to get cut, burnt, or lose a limb.” Her voice was detached; her attention focussed on the task. “Boothroyd very nearly managed to shoot me once. We stopped letting him test firearms after that.”

Bond managed a chuckle at that spectacularly unsurprising bit of news.

James felt the pain medication start to take hold as he heard more rustling, then a bit of pressure followed by the flow of liquid down his side as she irrigated the two bullet grazes. Saline soaked the edges of the drape and pooled in his navel. Q wiped the water away, the rough weave of the gauze dipping into the hollow of his belly button.

That did surprise him. He opened his eyes in time to watch as Q passed another square over his stomach to dry it. It was such a simple attention that he found himself breathless. James was so used to stitching himself up using dental floss or whatever was immediately at hand that he had almost forgotten there was more to it than just a needle and thread. That it didn’t always have to hurt. He began to relax in a way that had nothing to do with the medication.

Q began the first stitch. She bit her lower lip in concentration, and James noted that while the slump of Q’s shoulders and the way she cracked her neck indicated she was likely as tired as he felt, her focus never wavered.

As she worked, he couldn’t determine which was her dominant hand. The actions of each were practiced, exact, precise. Used to fine, detailed work, her economy of motion was as elegant as it was meticulous. James imagined that this was how Q designed and assembled the gadgets – he would always think of them as gadgets – that she sent out with agents into the field.

Q’s fingers, surprising long for her small stature, as well as the tops of her hands were peppered with nicks and cuts and burns in various stages of healing. Still older scars dwelt beneath the new, and James noted that two fingers on her right hand were a bit crooked, indicating bones that had been broken but not properly set before starting to heal. He had more than a few of those himself.

Q’s hands were far too damaged to ever be considered ‘pretty,’ but every scar, burn, and scab spoke volumes about who Q was, what she did, and how. James imagined that he would find slight callouses on the tips of her fingers from the endless keystrokes of the countless programs she had coded, the systems she had hacked, and he began to wonder what those callouses might feel like when pressed to skin instead of a computer.

James pushed back sudden stirrings of … not quite arousal, but definite interest. And for his new
Quartermaster, nonetheless. But now was not the time, nor was it the place.

“The AFFA clinic is for field agents,” James said after the second suture was secure.

“Is it?” Q started in on the third.

“You know it is.”

Q hummed.

“So you were a field agent.” Q seemed far too young.

“No. Never.” The snip of scissors cut through the surgical silk. “I thought we’d established that.”

She turned her attention to the second bullet graze.

It was then that James realised he was interrogating her. Granted, he was using the mildest techniques available to him, but even battered physically and emotionally as he was, there was something about her that –

“Who are you, Q?”

Q dropped the needle driver. Stared at it and then at him as though she had been bitten by one or the other. She stretched her fingers as though a cramp and not his question had caused her reaction.

Interesting.

“I though the medics managed to rule out a concussion before you ran them off.”

His stare didn’t waver.

And she didn’t flinch. “I’m your Quartermaster, Double-O Seven,” she sighed. Good girl. Evasive but steely, this one.

Q picked up the tool again, capturing the threaded compound curved needle in its jaws. She pushed up her glasses with the base of her wrist, and her brow furrowed with … something before she returned her attention to sewing him back together again.

“What’s your name?” James clarified.

“Q.”

“Before you were Q.”

“R.”

Bond huffed with frustration. “Before that. And don’t say ‘S’.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Double-O Seven. You know there’s no ‘S’.”

“Q!” James had been shooting for a growl of frustration, but he was fading fast, and he’d never admit that it ended up sounding more like a yip. Q looked at him steadily with a sideways glance before returning to her task.

“Q?” he prodded. She still hadn’t answered his question.

“Emily …. Emily Wilson,” Q said after several moments.
James thought about it. It was fine, but it didn’t fit her somehow. “Interesting. It’s –”

“An alias, Double-O Seven. And not one I particularly care for.”

Q knotted the final suture and cut the silk. She had his wounds coated with ointment and bandaged with sterile gauze within minutes, then stripped the gloves from her hands, gathered up the rubbish in the drape, and rolled it all into the bin.

“Q is who I am, Double-O Seven,” she said, tightly, “and I’d ask you not to worry about any other name but that.” In spite of her frustration, Q’s hands were surprisingly gentle as she eased him onto his back and pulled the duvet back up to his waist, but he noted that they shook as they did so. Nerves? Fear? Stress?

She pressed the back of her hand – not her fingertips – to his forehead and his cheek, searching, he supposed, for some sign of fever given his dip in the loch. James thought that he should be annoyed at the coddling. Indeed, would have been annoyed if it had felt like coddling. It didn’t. In fact, it felt … nice.

James watched silently as Q pottered about the space for several moments: disposing of the antiseptic wash and the saline in the sink in the en suite, refilling the bottle of water he had finished drinking, pulling the blackout curtains shut even though the late autumn afternoon sun was already starting to set. Yet with each action, the calm that had settled over the room while she tended him dissipated measurably as though she was brought closer to some something she didn’t –

“I’ll leave you to rest.” Q said, interrupting his thoughts. She switched off the lamp and pushed her reading chair back against the wall nearest the door.

“What about you?” James asked, fighting against the effects of the medication. Something wasn’t right. He needed to know more than he needed to rest.

“I need to contact HQ. Give them and get a status update.” She pulled the bedroom door closed behind her as she exited. “I’m good for a bit yet.” The lie fell easily from her lips, and she hoped Bond was out of it enough not to notice.

“Q.” Again James damned the medication. What had she given him again? It sounded like he was pleading with her.

“No. You get to use that tone of voice with me only once per crisis.”

Q’s mind fell once more to the helicopters and the risk she had taken because of that tone. The risks she feared she would always take because of that tone. Her anxiety which had largely settled ratcheted higher still. It was winning this time, and Q had no reserves left to use against it. She had to get out of here before she completely fell apart in front of him.

Even in the half-light that spilled into the room from the hallway, James could see the panicked look on Q’s face and how her fingers twisted and tugged at the loose end of the long plait that held her hair back. She practically vibrated with anxiety.

“S-sleep, Double-O Seven. You’re safe here.”

The door clicked shut behind her.

James struggled with the duvet, tried to get out of bed to follow her, but his limbs refused his commands as the medication finally worked in concert with his exhaustion, his pain, and the grief he had been holding at bay to keep him where he was.
Q was strong. James didn’t know her well, but he knew strength when he saw it; young though she was, Q had a core to her that rivalled M’s, yet that core seemed to be cracking.

No. Not again. Not like this. Not after M.

James’ last conscious thought was that Silva had got off far too easily, his death far too painless for all the devastation he had left behind. But James was confident he would see Silva again. Maybe not soon, or perhaps sooner than he thought. Nonetheless, James would find plenty of opportunity to ensure that the bastard truly atoned for what he had done.

Eternity could be an awfully long time in Hell.

~~OOQ~~

Somehow Q had managed to get back down the stairs and out onto her patio before the walls of her home closed around her. Her anxiety attack was – thankfully – a largely private affair, witnessed only by a pair of rather chubby house sparrows that alighted on the fence of her garden.

Air. Cold, crisp, heavy with the scent of coming rain. She dragged it into her lungs with ragged breaths. For several long moments, the panic had such a hold on her that she was doing little more than hyperventilating. Her vision began to close off, but just as she felt herself tipping over the edge, a lorry backfired in the street, pulling her back from that precipice. The sounds of the neighbourhood – the barking dogs from the small block of flats on the corner, the foot-traffic out front, a rubbish bin being knocked over in the alley – gave her focus, and with that she was able to find herself again.

Gradually, Q turned her concentration inward, tuning out those same daily, domestic sounds of the community to listen to that of her heartbeat, gradually slowing; her breathing, deeper and steadier; and her mind, no longer a frenetic spiral of things she could not control.

The sun had all but set and the mist that had held the promise of rain was rapidly thickening into fog by the time Q felt herself again. It was then that the disgust set in. It had been years since she’d last had a panic attack, and now she had experienced two in less than a week. If the lorry hadn’t backfired, she could easily have found herself completely incapacitated in a way that she hadn’t been since the attacks first started in hospital after the crash.

Q eased herself back into the garden chair, grateful at least that she had managed to collapse into it rather than into a trembling heap on the ground. She reached into the pocket of her trousers, and pulled out the small chunk of uncut ametrine she always kept there and rolled the violet stone around in the palm of her hand, letting her fingertips dance over the familiar sharp edges, grounding her further.

It had been four days since last she was home, the dust hadn’t even had a chance to build up like it had after the bombing, yet once again, nothing was the same.

As promised, after her meeting with Bond at the National Gallery, Tanner had driven her home to rest. Q vaguely remembered him helping her up the stairs and unlacing her trainers for her before she rolled over and passed out, face down on her bed. She had woken late the next morning tucked beneath the patterned, soft green duvet, drool-damp pillow beneath her cheek, still in the clothes she had been wearing for the last several days.
Q had showered and tended her injuries quickly, knowing full well that she could be called back at any time. As she dressed, Q had given serious consideration to burning her heavily soiled clothes – it would be simpler – but decided that any decision involving the application of flame should not be made before she’d had a cuppa, or three.

Tanner, bless the man, had set out a mug and tea, and the note he’d attached to the front of the kettle indicated that a small supply of groceries had been laid in. She honestly couldn’t remember the last time she had been to the shops. After a quick lunch of runny eggs, toast, and milky tea, Q had just started thinking about tackling the laundry when her mobile rang: R informed her that Moneypenny had arrived in Macau to update and assist Bond with a lead he had unearthed in Shanghai. Q was needed and a car had been sent to bring her back to Six.

Q had been needed, but what good had she done?

None.

Seeing the code unravel on the monitors in Q-branch had sent a thrill through her. She was quickly caught up in that ‘oddly flattered’ rush that coders experience when faced with a stimulating permutation of their own work as well as with the subtle challenge she had been issued, daring her to hack it. The fact that doing so would give her a chance to show Bond what she could really do had only fuelled that high, and Silva had counted on – indeed expected – her to do exactly what she had done: give his virus unfettered access to their system by failing to follow her own protocols.

She dropped her head into her hands. She wasn’t so naïve as to think she was to blame for M’s death – that was Silva’s doing – but Q’s actions were certainly a contributing factor.

M had been Silva’s final fatality, but Bond – injured and unconscious in the other room – Mallory, Tanner, the rest of Six, even Q herself, they were the continuing casualties.

Not such a clever girl. Indeed.

“Are you quite all right, Emily, dear?”

Mrs. Akinjide, her septuagenarian neighbour, had been asking Q that question in one form or another for the last five years, ever since the young woman Mrs. A knew as “Emily Wilson” purchased the larger unit of a converted warehouse near Paddington Station and moved in with little more than a bed, a 1969 Triumph Bonneville, half a dozen computer servers, and an extensive library that Alec Trevelyan had once described as ‘obscene; nobody needs this many books!’

“I’m fine, Mrs. A,” Q said, pulling off her glasses in order to rub at her eyes. When she was again properly bespectacled, Q smiled at her neighbour and approached the decorative hedgerow that separated their patio gardens, tucking the ametrine back into her pocket.

Mrs. Akinjide, a statuesque Nigerian woman who had moved to England with her husband -- a diplomat with the Foreign Office -- when she was just 19, was the only female friend Q felt she could claim.

It wasn’t that Q didn’t like other women, but she struggled to understand them. She and Moneypenny had a … complicated relationship. Their experiences together in Cyprus and again in training plus the fact that they were both intelligent women with strong personalities made things challenging. Friend ly was the full extent of how Q would classify that particular relationship. Her interactions with the other four female techs in Q-branch went easily enough, but when it came to actual friendship, Q had always got on better with men. Men were … well, they were just easier.
Tanner, Agent Danny Cabral, and Ronson, before he died, were her mates. Q didn’t go out often, but when she did, she could always count on the boys to help her unwind, at least for a little while. They drank at the local, pooled their collective intelligence for Quiz Nights, watched matches together, and didn’t complain that Q preferred rugby over football.

The conversations, such as there were -- they were men, after all -- were direct and honest, and the way in which they interacted with Q even more so. With women, there always seemed to be some hidden subtext to conversation that Q was never quite able to pick up on, would never be fluent in using or understanding, largely because not all Double-Os were as naturally suave and charming as Bond; her guardian, Eustace, had understood feminine subtleties about as well as a penguin would have understood heatstroke. Consequently, neither did Q.

The men didn’t treat her as ‘one of the guys;’ they treated her as who she was: Q. It was something she deeply appreciated, but for all that, it was Alec Trevelyan who was her confidante. Alec who knew her the best. Who took the time to get to know her the best.

It wasn’t an easy thing. Q knew that she was largely taciturn when it came to ‘sharing’ and used self-deprecation and sarcasm as a shield when things became too emotionally complicated. That she had failed to run him off because of all that said a great deal about Alec’s commitment to their friendship. Also, Double-Os were naturally solitary creatures, it being too dangerous to make too many personal connections that could be used against them. Alec risked far more than she with their friendship, and she treasured him greatly.

Q liked to remind him, much to his eternal embarrassment, that he had even plaited her hair once. Granted, it was to test out the camouflage and audio capabilities of a new listening wire she had developed – at only .15 micrometres in diameter, the goal was to smuggle the filament into sensitive locales via an agent’s chosen hairstyle or cut; it had worked brilliantly! – but there had been a fair amount of whisky consumed as well as conversations that may or may not have involved frustration over various emotional entanglements. It had been a turning point in their friendship, each letting their guard down, but later Alec swore that if she ever shared the events of that night with anyone – particularly Bond – he would personally drop her off in the middle of the Gobi desert without a single piece of tech and wish her luck on finding her way home again.

Though she was a woman, Mrs. A, now widowed, was more like Tanner and Alec than Moneypenny. Whether that was because she grew up the only daughter in a family with seven sons or because she was a daughterless mother of six boys of her own, Q always knew where she stood with the woman. She spoke plainly and to the point, had quickly picked up on the fact that her ‘Emily’ was a bit socially awkward at times, and never tried to make Q feel like an idiot because of that fact.

“Fine is not an adjective I would use to describe you right now, Emily,” Mrs. A said in her beautifully accented English, looking Q up and down with a critical eye. “You look like shite.”

Yep. Plain and to the point.

“I always look like shite compared to you.” It wasn’t an empty compliment. Even at 77, Mrs. A was one of the most beautiful women Q had ever known. She still stood straight and tall and few laugh lines dared to mar her otherwise smooth, coffee-coloured skin. Her eyes were bright and keen, and the only spectacles she needed were to read. “Is that a new gele?” she asked, gesturing at the artfully folded head wrap the grandmother wore. “I don’t recognize the fabric?”

“It is,” Mrs. A admitted, running the tips of her fingers along the edges of the rich gold-embroidered red fabric, “but don’t change the subject. You’ve hardly been home the last two weeks but not because you’ve been travelling.” Mrs. A knew that Q didn’t fly, but the
Quartermaster had frequently alluded to ‘work taking her to the Continent’ to explain those times when missions kept her at Six for days on end.

Q sighed. She knew Mrs. A would insist upon an answer, so Q did as she always had by keeping her lies as close to the truth as possible. “It’s been a rough few weeks. My boss died, rather unexpectedly,” she said, thinking of Boothroyd and the bombing at HQ; her feelings about M’s death were still new and too raw to examine closely, “things have been at sixes and sevens ever since.”

“Well, you certainly look it. I’d suggest sleeping through the weekend, but given that man I saw you bring home this afternoon, I don’t know that I’d use my bed for sleep no matter how exhausted I was.”

“Mrs. A!” Q sounded scandalized, though they both knew she was anything but.

“Rather virile, that one. Yes, very fit,” Mrs. A said with a knowing wink, and Q actually felt her face heat with a blush, not wanting to examine those feelings too closely, either. “Dangerous, too, going by the looks of him. Bruises and blood tend to do that, though.” The woman’s teasing tone had become more serious. “Is he dangerous, Em?”

*More than you can imagine,* Q thought. “No. Certainly not to me.” Or so she hoped.

“So … the blood? He could barely walk,” It wasn’t often that Mrs. A was compelled to mother her young neighbour, but Q always appreciated the concern.

“An even rougher week.” No lie needed to hide that particular truth. “He’s a colleague. Had a bit of a nasty encounter while on a business trip last night. I’m giving him a place to kip until he’s feeling better.”

“And your charming Mr. Trevelyan? Will he be concerned with you offering your colleague a place to kip?”

Q’s Mr. Trevelyan had ‘charmed’ the *gele* off of Mrs. Akinjide within an hour of moving in Q next door. “You know Alec and I are just friends.”

“And not even ones with ‘benefits,’ much to my long-standing confusion and disappointment. More’s the pity. You’re not a Catholic, so why you insist upon living like a nun is beyond me. No, he’s not a jealous man, your ‘friend’ Alec, but he may see – ”

“He sees James like a brother,” Q interrupted, needing to cut this off before Mrs. A worked up too great a head of steam on a topic they had discussed to death on more than one occasion. “Alec won’t have a problem with James staying with me.”

*Or at least not much of one.*

For the second time that night, Q found herself under the close scrutiny of Mrs. A’s assessing eyes. After several moments’ appraisal, the older woman raised an elegant eyebrow and nodded her head once, answering whatever internal question she had posed herself about Q’s conclusion. As she did so, the security light on Q’s patio switched on to chase away the deepening shadows.

“Then you’d best get back to James, Emily.” Mrs. A wrapped herself more tightly in the red woollen wrap she wore. “This fog is only going to get thicker tonight, mark my words. If your side has even half the draught as mine, I’d recommend a fire to lift your spirits and those of your colleague.”
It sounded like a good idea. Q needed to contact HQ and poke her head in on Bond, but after that and a shower, a fire might be just what she needed. “Good night, Mrs. A,” she said.

“Good night, my dear. I hope your friend heals quickly.”

Q knew that the physical wounds certainly would. As for the rest …

~~OOQ~~

Q slept on the long arm of the dark blue corner sofa in front of the fire, curled up into an impossibly tiny ball of boffin that reminded James more of his aunt’s ancient cat than of the Quartermaster of MI6. A hand-knitted lap rug in shades of blue, green, and cream was tangled about her legs as though she had given up an attempt to kick it free. In the lambent light of the fire, James could see that the tension in her face that had been so evident earlier had eased; however, a slight furrow remained etched in the skin between her brows, even in sleep. She had forgotten to take off her spectacles, but they somehow sat perfectly straight across the bridge of Q’s nose. James couldn’t help the smile that tugged at his mouth at the sight of her.

He stepped further into the open-style sitting room, but still she did not stir. James knew that he should leave, let Q rest as she had done for him, but when had James Bond ever done as he should?

He approached Q quietly, his intent neither to surveil nor surprise. It was dark, the small hours still in their infancy, and the fog in the street had managed to conquer even the brightest street lamp outside so that only the light from the fire illuminated the room.

Resurging pain from his miscellaneous wounds had pulled him from sleep, but for all that, James had woken with a peculiar calm about him that he had never experienced under similar circumstances. Finding himself in strange beds in unexpected locales – some benign, most not – was part and parcel of being a Double-O, yet Bond had never quite adjusted to that initial spike of apprehension that came with waking in a space that was not his own. However, the safety and security Q had wrapped around him lingered, even now.

He suppressed a grunt of pain and lowered himself onto the sturdy oak coffee table, positioning himself in front of Q with the flames to his back.

James would say that he’d never seen Q like this except that he didn’t think he had ever actually seen her to begin with. He knew she had been with MI6 for a couple of years; James had vague recollections of seeing her tucked away in the various cubicles and labs that had been nestled into the heart of Legoland, but those images were fleeting, ephemeral at best. He’d rarely paid much attention to the assorted boffins that scurried about whenever he had met with Boothroyd to pick up his kit. Nonetheless, there was something about Q that tugged more insistently at his memory. Some connection, a sense of familiarity, that hovered just beyond his grasp.

That the woman knew how to make a lasting impression was undeniable, but he sensed that the mark Q had left on him was not the result of the dire threat Silva had posed to England and to M, rather that it had been set long ago. How and when and where, James could not begin to guess, but his gut insisted upon the fact. Q had evaded the question before; it would be pointless to broach the subject again. No. He didn’t know his Quartermaster well, but he read people well enough to know that he’d have to suss out this answer on his own.
Q’s breathing remained deep and measured, so James watched silently as light and shadow from the flames played across her features. Q wasn’t classically beautiful. In fact, if taken separately, her features were actually an awkward hodgepodge of elements: high, elegant cheekbones sat in direct contrast with a thin nose that had clearly been broken at least twice; her right eyebrow was slightly higher than the left, but whether that was due to nature or was the result of frequent ‘cocking’ in derision was still up in the air; Q’s rich, dark brown curls were still contained in a loose plait that fell across her shoulder and rested atop the gentle swell of cotton-clad breasts. James was certain that those curls would feel as soft in his hands as they looked in the firelight, and he wanted to pull the plait apart so that he could run his fingers through them.

Suddenly, all the seemingly uncooperative bits of her countenance knit together into a semblance of harmony that made Q undeniably lovely.

Her full, red lips tempered the broken line of her nose; the natural flush of her cheek stole the starkness from her pale complexion which only enhanced the thick, dark fan of her lashes. And her eyes – concealed as ever from the world by the very glasses that revealed the world to her – he knew to be just as expressive and keen as her tongue and her intellect.

It was distressingly common that the women and men James most often had to seduce while on missions were neither clever nor wise. Beautiful and handsome, yes. Keen, most certainly. However, the ease with which he was usually able to extract information from them in their post-coital haze did not speak well for their insight or acumen. And James had always been attracted to intelligence, wit, and competence. Qualities that Q – for all she appeared painfully young – seemingly had in abundance.

As James studied her, the flicker of interest that he had felt earlier while she tended his wounds grew stronger, sparking into genuine attraction and, yes – he felt his cock stir in his pants – even arousal.

This – this could be a problem.

Contrary to popular belief, one he had carefully cultivated over the years through misinformation and innuendo, James Bond did not often ‘poach the local wildlife’ when it came to romantic entanglements. He wasn’t opposed to workplace affairs, but they were generally just too damn complicated, and his job was challenging enough without bringing that particular ‘complicated’ into his personal life as well.

The Security Services was, on the whole, an extremely effective mechanism in deterring threats to the UK and the Crown, and while he might not openly acknowledge it and frequently challenged it, James certainly did not want to break it. Not even now. Not after having been shot off of the top of a train by one of his own. Not after Silva. Not even after M. Unlike 003 and 008, James wasn’t so arrogant to think that shagging his way through Six would bring intelligence gathering to a screeching halt courtesy of broken hearts and broken promises, but why make things any more difficult than they already were.

There had been a few exceptions, mostly in his early years before he became a Double-O. Then there had been Vesper. Though not strictly an MI6 employee, it shouldn’t have mattered that Vesper had turned the tables and played him as he had played so many others before her. Vesper had been on the ‘preserve,’ and he should never have looked twice at her. But he had looked. He had touched. He had loved. And he had been burned. He’d more than learnt his lesson with Vesper. And Ms. Fields? Well, she had been a mistake, too, but in a different way. James, still off-kilter from Vesper’s betrayal and death, had foolishly thought that by being so far from home, it wouldn’t have mattered if Fields was Six or not.
It had mattered.

Q would be different. Q wasn’t a clerk or a P.A. or a junior field agent fresh out of training. She was essential not just to his success in the field but to the whole of MI6. She was technically his superior, second only to M in the executive hierarchy. If he had an ounce of self-preservation, James should thank her for her hospitality, grab what few things he still had, and leave before things got complic—

“I dare say you’ve likely been told once or twice that staring at people whilst they sleep is more than a bit unsettling, Double-O Seven.”

Bond didn’t jump, but she had caught him unawares. Dangerous business, that. He had slipped so deeply into his own musings that he hadn’t noticed Q had woken. She stared up at him from the sofa, her gaze unguarded and open. Still somewhat asleep, she hadn’t yet slipped into the protective armour they all wore when awake.

“Are you in pain?” Q asked. Her voice was softer than even her gaze, and James couldn’t help but reach out and brush the back of his fingers against the curve of her cheek.

“Yes, but it’s manageable … for now.” He had already taken two pills from a blister pack of paracetamol she had left on the bedside table.

“I’m-hungry then?” Q’s voice didn’t sound as steady as it had just moments before. Dare he hope that she was affected by his touch?

“After a fashion.” The tips of his fingers slid up into the curls at the nape of Q’s neck; they were even softer than he’d anticipated. His thumb hooked beneath the frame of her spectacles and tugged them from her face. James snagged them with his free hand and set them carefully on the coffee table while granting his thumb permission to trace the arch of that impossible eyebrow.

Q swallowed – not with nerves, never with nerves, this one – and thankfully didn’t ask the question that so many would have followed up with. The look in her eyes said she understood and, more importantly, hungered herself. James slid from the table onto the sofa next to her hip. He felt Q’s body unfold to make room for him, and he made use of it, stretching out on top of her, pressing her carefully into the soft cushions. The stitched together skin along his ribs protested, but James ignored the pain, his attention fully on the woman beneath him.

He brushed the tip of his nose along hers and pressed his lips to her brow, her temple, the sharp angle of her cheekbone. Each a surprisingly tender caress for a woman he hardly knew, yet somehow it felt more right than any intimate act he’d performed before. She smelled of lemongrass and ylang ylang, scents he recognized as having lingered in the still-damp shower of the en suite when he had used the loo after waking. Q smelled fresh and new as though a spring rain had washed her clean. James breathed in deeply of her and felt his cock harden further in response.

James pressed his groin into the cradle of her hips and smiled at her pleasured moan in his ear before sliding down her body to nibble lightly at her collarbone; he nosed aside the open collar of the blue button-down she wore and licked into the hollow at the base of her throat. Needing to feel her skin beneath his, James pulled his hand from her hair and slid it beneath the hem of the fine cotton shirt, skimming across the sensitive skin of her ribcage to curl around her back and dip down beneath the band of her sleep trousers. He recognized bespoke tailoring when he saw it, when he felt it. The shirt wasn’t hers. Q practically swam in the excess cotton, and James felt a sudden surge of jealousy at the shirt. At its owner. At the intimacy that Q must once have shared to wear this bloody shirt to sleep in now.
He shouldn’t do this.

He wanted her. But he was broken. Damaged.

He really, really Should. Not. Do. This.

But then Q wrapped a leg around his hip, pressed up against his body, and his jealousy and doubt evaporated.

*God, he feels so good*, Q thought. So long. She had waited for *so long* to feel this and never really dared hope that she ever would. Q had enough wit about her to avoid clutching Bond too desperately and aggravate his injuries, but scarred though he was, his hot flesh felt like silk beneath her hands. Her own injuries burned from being pressed into the sofa, but Q rode the endorphins of pleasure like a wave, letting Bond’s lips and hands wash over the pain.

Bond slipped several more buttons free from their holes and parted her shirt, baring first one small breast and then the other to his gaze. He pressed kisses to the top, each side, and finally the bottom of the left before slowly – *God help her, the patience of this insidious man!* – licking up the lower swell to her nipple. He flicked the tip of his tongue against the pebbled nub, rolling it around in his mouth for several moments before repeating the process on the other. Q bucked up against Bond in response, her moan of pleasure loud in the otherwise silent room, and her hands fell from his body to the sofa beneath her.

He nipped and suckled and caressed her skin with his lips and teeth wherever he could reach – her neck beneath her jawline, the jut of her chin, the feathering of her eyelashes, the shell of her ear – everywhere save the one place she was desperate to feel his lips, pressed against *hers*.

She should not do this.

It was a bad idea.


But if she could have one kiss. Just *one*, then –

Q slid her hands up into his hair and tugged gently but insistently, urging Bond from the love bite he had made at the base of her throat and was now laving with his tongue. With any other man Q would be irritated by such an obvious, coarse brand of possessiveness, but this mark burned straight to her heart.

At Q’s urging, James reluctantly pulled back from the warm flesh of her throat, but before fully obeying the commands her hands insisted he follow, he suckled again at a nipple and cupped her sex through her trousers, rejoicing at the damp fabric he discovered there.

His wicked smile was lost to the darkness, but her name was a murmur of desire on his lips. “Q …”

“Bond,” she sighed. Her fingers slid from his hair and down his torso to the small of his back where she traced sensual yet idle circles against his bare skin.

She shouldn’t do this. Too much had happened in too short a time. Too much raw emotion. She was broken. He was grieving. It was a bad idea.

James raised his head to meet her lust-drugged gaze with his own.
And stopped.

Q was biting her lower lip as she had done earlier when stitching him up, as he had seen her do two days ago when fighting with Silva’s code. It meant she was thinking. Puzzling out a problem. There was still passion in her eyes, need and desire, but there was something else there, too. An uncertainty that James recognized as an echo of his own worry.

“Q?”

“Bond, I- I’m not saying never …” Q began. Her brow had furrowed and a note of hesitation rang clear in her voice.

James realised with a shock that she was worried about his feelings. This was new. He couldn’t think of the last time someone had been concerned about his sensibilities. He pressed a kiss to the line of apprehension that marred Q’s forehead and pulled back to study her face again. He was more than a little concerned at the sudden tug in his chest that he knew had nothing to do with the desire for her that still surged within him.

“Not never … but not just now ,” James replied slowly, finishing her thought. Something he wouldn’t have been able to do if it hadn’t been inside his own head, too. He shifted his hips, drawing away until he was sitting alongside her again. As he did so, James drew his hand from beneath Q’s shirt, but left it resting on the jut of her hip, unwilling as of yet to let go of her completely.

Q steadied herself in the strength of that hand for several moments before she rolled to a sitting position and leaned against the back of the sofa. She pulled the two halves of her shirt around her, more due to the slight chill in the room than discomfort at their aborted seduction. Q kept herself pressed tightly to Bond’s side as they each stared into the dying flames of the fire. It was several minutes before either spoke again, and it was to the surprise of both of them that it was Bond who did first.

“I think …” again James paused, genuinely surprised at the realisation that had popped into his head.

“Not sure that’s wise.” Q hoped her sardonic reply would goad him into finishing what he had started to say or at least lighten the suddenly serious mood.

“That’s enough out of you,” James snapped, though it held no malice. Q chuckled in response, nudging his shoulder for him to continue.

“I can’t believe I’m actually going to say this, but … I think I may need a friend more than I need –”

“More than you need a fuck?” Q finished for him, a bit shocked by her own lewdness. Atypical, to be sure. She really was burnt to a crisp.

“A bit more alliterative than I would have gone for, but essentially correct.” Eyes still on the fire, James took up Q’s left hand and pressed a kiss to the centre of her palm before twining their fingers together.

She studied his profile, blurry at best with her spectacles sitting on the table, but she could still see the exhaustion and the sorrow that weighed heavily there. Bond looked far older than his years, and Q felt the need to reassure.

“I don’t have friends,” she began carefully and tightened her grip on his hand, rushing to continue
when she felt Bond stiffen and start to draw away, thinking she was rejecting him entirely. “At least not many of them. I have acquaintances, colleagues, and a few people I am friendly with. But I’m overly abrasive and blunt and more than a bit tone deaf when it comes to social niceties; not exactly highly sought after qualities in a friend.”

Q thought about the events of the last several weeks and let out a bit of the grief she had kept locked up out of necessity. “Boothroyd was my friend. So was Ronson.” Bond dropped his eyes to his lap at the mention of the murdered agents’ names. “Four others. Only one I trust unreservedly, but I think … I-I think I’d like for there to be a second. For you to be that second.” She already trusted Bond implicitly. Had since she was a girl -- foolish though it may be -- but they weren’t friends.

Not yet.

Again, it was some time before Bond reacted in any way to her confession, and had she looked away for even a moment, Q would have missed the barely perceptible nod and ghost of a smile that was his reply.

“I should probably get my things and go, though.”

“God, why?!”

“Q, I may have a reputation as a cold-hearted bastard, but there are some temptations even I would struggle to resist.” He gestured with his chin at her shirt that had started to fall open again. “Too dangerous.”

Q snorted with amusement. “You eat danger at tea, Bond.”

“Not like this. Not like … you.”

“You’ve ridden a motorbike over the top of the Grand Bazaar, the top, Bond! Fought with a hired hitman on the roof of a moving train, played chicken with a Tube carriage on the Metropolitan Line, blown up your ancestral home with improvised explosives, and played Whisky Pong with a bloody scorpion as the ball.”

“How did you know about the scorpion?”

“You muttered something about it on the flight back from Scotland. Quite proud you sounded at having got the better of a poisonous arachnid in a uni student’s drinking game.” Her shrug was dismissive. “The point is, this is not dangerous.”

She gestured between the two of them, but paused and reconsidered when he scoffed at her assessment. “Okay. You’re right. It is dangerous. An SIS agent with trust issues and a license to kill living with -- even in the short term, which is what I’m proposing -- his jaded and frequently stroppy Quartermaster who provides said agent with the tools to use that license could well be seen as one of the first signs of the Apocalypse. We’re just as likely to kill one another outright as plot world domination, but not five minutes ago you recognized yourself that you need something different from me. You’re not going to risk that. And Bond … I’m not going to risk it either.”

“Living with you?! That’s the most ridiculous idea --”

“Have you always been such a numpty or is this a recent affectation?” Irritation crept into her tone. Everything was clear cut enough to her, after all.

“Numpty!” Bond looked genuinely offended. “I think the last person to call me that was my
“mother.”

“So?”

“I was nine, Q.”

“Not much has changed then,” she groused. Q slipped from his side and settled on the table to face him, pausing long enough to slide her spectacles back on her face. Oh. Much better!

“Fine. Let’s look at this from a practical perspective, then. Your circumstances have not altered in the last 12 hours, Bond. You still don’t have your own flat, what little you do own – including your posh wardrobe – is in storage, and you’re still at least three days away from Medical releasing me as your carer. You were pretty out of it when we arrived, so you mightn’t have noticed that I have plenty of room here. I have three guest rooms, and I damn well expect you to use one until Medical clears you and you’re able to find a place of your own.”

Three guest rooms? Bond craned his head around to try to get a better look at the dark room. Now that his eyes were adjusted to the odd lighting created by the fire, he was able to see that it was significantly larger than he originally thought. In fact, he wasn’t in just a sitting room. The entire floor – at least the space not taken up with her bedroom – was a giant reception room that blended into a dining area with the kitchen beyond. He had a vague recollection of riding a lift up from an equally spacious ground floor; the staircase in the corner suggested that said lift rose up yet another level.

“Q … just how big is this place?”

“391.52 square metres. My two-thirds, anyway. Converted warehouse.”

“Your two-thirds …” James had more than a cursory grasp of real estate prices in the Greater London area, and though he had been, as Q said, ‘pretty out of it’ on the ride back from RAF Northolt, he knew they were still in the city. “And just where is this converted warehouse located?” he asked, though he was pretty sure he had a general idea.

“We’re three blocks from Paddington Station. Just east of Norfolk Square Gardens. Oh, relax, Bond,” she said when he glared at her blasé assessment of his surroundings. “I saw the price tag on your flat when Six sold it, so don’t get your knickers in a twist. Yes, I’ve sold some patents for a few pet projects over the years that provided me the means to buy this place …”

“Define ‘a few.”

“Fine. Fourteen of them, but the fact of the matter is that I have space and you need some. Use it.”

“You’re not much for polite requests are you, Q?”

“As I said, ‘socially tone deaf’. It’s also two in the bloody morning, and I’m running on about six hours of sleep over the last five days to say nothing of the fact that I’m still aroused in spite of the fact that we mutually agreed to, in essence, ‘cockblock’ ourselves. Please do forgive me if I’m not overly gracious at the moment.”

“Fine. Fine. I’ll stay, but don’t ever use the word ‘cockblock’ again. It’s – it’s just wrong coming out of your mouth.”

Q chuckled and rose. She held out her hand and waited for him to take it. James looked up at her and at the open, welcoming expression on her face, and he felt something in him – perhaps the
frayed tatters of his soul – start to knit back together again.

James’ fingers found the hem of her shirt rather than her hand, and with well-practiced skill, he buttoned the two halves of her shirt back together again, right up to the base of her throat.

“Better safe than sorry,” he murmured before finally taking her offered hand. He grunted with pain as Q helped him to his feet. Clearly the paracetamol just wasn’t going to do it.

“Look at you! Such progress already,” she smirked.

Q turned to the fire and used the shovel to spread ashes over the coals, banking it for the night. She replaced the fire screen and turned back to Bond, gesturing to the short hallway that led back to her bedroom. “Come on. Let’s get you back in bed, and then maybe I can get some more sleep, too.”

“It’ll be better if I take one of those guest rooms.”

“Not tonight. Nothing’s made up, and I’m too tired to dig through the airing cupboard. The sofa is horrible for my back, so it won’t do you any better with the way you are,” Q gestured vaguely with one hand to sum up his injuries. “You’ll sleep where you were. We’re both beyond exhausted. It’s a huge bed, Bond, and I’m just a little thing. You won’t even know I’m there.”

“Not bloody likely. I’m not a saint, Q.”

“No. You’re definitely the ‘sinner’ type.”

“What about you, then?”

“Keep me from sleep much longer, Bond, and you’ll discover that I’m the very Devil herself.” Q growled as she disappeared down the dark corridor to her room.

Chapter End Notes

My thanks to everyone who has posted a comment or clicked the "kudos" button for this story. I truly appreciate your support.

Comments are LOVE for a writer, and when we find them in our mailbox, it really makes our day. We do this as much for you as we do for ourselves, so any love we can get from you, the better. For my own part, comments cause me to write more frequently as the comments make me feel like a kitten having her ears scratched. It's a darn good thing!

Cheers, all! Thank you for reading!
Chapter Summary

Bond and Q recuperate from the devastation left behind by Silva and cultivate a friendship that's not completely without innuendo.

Chapter Notes

This chapter comes both too late and too early. It's not complete in terms of including the various timelines I wanted to incorporate, but the second and third parts of this chapter were causing me no end of grief, so rather than continue to plug away at it with no guarantee of it coming out before the end of the month, I decided to go with what was working and get it out sooner rather than later. It's still over 7500 words, so hopefully that's a good place to start. :) 

Again, all my thanks to Springbok7 for her brilliant bit of beta-reading. I couldn't do this without her help and insight. Thank you, my friend!

It is my hope that people are still reading (wanting to read) this tale of mine. Please keep in mind that comments and kudos feed the writer's soul. This writer's soul, in particular, has been running ragged of late, and any support you can provide would be very much appreciated. Even a handful of words make my day and spur the desire to create, create, and create!

P.S. Time travel is a PITA on verb tenses.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Four:

“At times, we are the bridge that allows another to re-enter the world after a loss.”

— Danielle Pierre

St. Michael’s Street, City of Westminster, London, England: Late November 2012 - Late March 2013
James activated the digital controls for the shower and stripped off the blood-stained grey trousers and white button-down he wore, tossing them in the bin just inside the door of the en suite. He had lost the jacket to the Tom Ford suit somewhere in the urban wilds of Copenhagen two days ago, and he really didn’t feel it was worth the effort to salvage the remainder given that the suit didn’t even fit him as it had before.

Months of injury, subsequent illness, and eventual rehabilitation had changed the very shape and structure of his body, and for the longest time James couldn’t have been arsed to care about going to see his tailor. *Time for that to change,* he thought, climbing under the hot spray of the shower to scrub off his first mission since truly requalifying for active duty.

James leaned his forearms against the warm tile and let the beat of the water hammer on the muscles of his upper back. Tight, tense, and sore, he slowly unwound under the forceful tattoo, grateful yet again for the time and money Q had spent upgrading her home which was as much a technological marvel as a welcoming sanctuary.

His months ‘enjoying death’ had left their mark in more ways than one. Q had eventually disclosed to him what James had suspected from the beginning. He had failed the requalification tests necessary to go after Silva. Hadn’t come within a mile of passing them, in fact. M had needed 007 in the field and had manipulated whatever she deemed necessary to get him there. James couldn’t blame her, and passed tests or no, he’d have gone anyway.

Unfortunately, the cumulative damage done to James’ body had eventually caught up with him. In spite of his best efforts -- thanks to Moneypenny’s bullet and the subsequent plunge into the river combined with self-neglect during his alcohol-fueled ‘recovery’ and the battles with Silva and his henchmen -- James landed in Medical anyway two days after he’d returned from Skyfall when he was wrenched from an uneasy sleep, struggling to breathe.

Q had called Six for emergency medical transport, and within 30 minutes James had found himself tucked away in a treatment room with an oxygen mask strapped to his face and an IV cannulae in his hand. The next six hours had consisted of him being poked and prodded while the doctors and their henchmen ran a distressingly long list of tests to diagnose him with the pneumonia Q had initially feared as well as an endless host of other ailments brought on by his most recent missions that led the chief physician to label Bond ‘a train wreck of infirmity.”

“Is that the *official* diagnosis?” Q had asked the doctor, voice tinged with a degree of sarcasm at the less than accurate phrasing.

The Quartermaster had popped off to her branch once James had been settled in Medical, leaving him in the hands of the bloodsuckers. She had made some obscure reference to knowing all too well how Double-Os -- You in particular, Seven! -- behaved whilst at the mercy of the medical team, and she had enough drama to contend with without adding an obstreperous secret agent to the mix. When the test results had finally come back, so had she. Though, had Q stayed, she would have been surprised to find James strangely docile. Well, docile for *him*, anyway. For all that James hated every moment he lay within the uncomfortably sterile confines of Medical, he had been so exhausted and in so much pain from coughing that he had largely kept his complaints to himself.

“In this idiot’s case, yes,” Dr. Turner had snapped. “How you’re even alive,” she’d muttered after looking at the various results before rattling off the seemingly endless list of lacerations, contusions, bruised internal organs, ligament and tendon damage, exhaustion, and extreme stress symptoms.

When Turner had finally finished lecturing him and outlining his course of treatment, she
immediately turned to Q, grabbed the Quartermaster by the upper arm, and directed her into the curtained cubicle next to James’. Q’s squawks of protest had been met with an equal amount of derision by the physician who indicated that she was fully aware of Q’s physically suspect antics in setting up her Branch to say nothing of what trouble she might have got into pulling Bond out of Scotland.

“You never should have been released from hospital,” James heard through the curtain. “Were already flirting with infection for those burns, but you had to go haring off after M and then a Double-O, didn’t you?”

For the next 30 minutes, what should have been the relative silence of the treatment room was punctuated with more than a few grunts and yelps of discomfort from Q, all of which were met with unsympathetic responses from a doctor who had clearly missed the course of study that focused on establishing a supportive bedside manner.

James and Q were eventually released back to the St. Michael’s Street warehouse. She with another kit of supplies to tend her burns. He with a bottle of painkillers that he probably wouldn’t take, a bottle of antibiotics that he would, blisters in his ears from the bollocking the doctor had given him, and mandatory leave for a minimum of six weeks. No exceptions! “It will get worse before it gets better, Double-O Seven,” Dr. Turner warned as James left.

“Any wonder why I hate Medical,” James groused once Q had him settled in the back of a black cab and they were on their way back toward Paddington.

“No. I think that point’s rather been driven home,” Q agreed. She twisted uncomfortably against the seat of the cab, searching for a position that wouldn’t aggravate her newly treated wounds. Injuries that James had every intention of asking her about later.

Sadly, Dr. Turner’s warning came to pass, and for the next week, James had struggled to remember a time when he had been laid so low with illness rather than injury. The fever, chills, and coughing …

Since becoming a Double-O, Bond had experienced so many cracked and broken ribs that his X-rays looked like a bloody mosaic, but he’d managed to avoid any of the same throughout the entire Silva affair, until the coughing had started.

Q had also been placed on mandatory leave until it had been decided that there would not be an in-depth inquiry into the events of Operation: Skyfall and Olivia Mansfield’s death. Even James Bond - ‘He Who Eschewed Help Readily Offered’ -- couldn’t deny that the timing had been fortuitous as Q’s suspension coincided with the worst of his illness. In retrospect, there would have been no way James could have gone through those days alone -- ill, feeling exposed and defenseless -- without landing himself back in Medical.

He had barely moved out of Q’s bedroom before she moved him back in to make it easier for her to care for him. Where she had slept -- if she had slept -- James wasn’t sure, but more than once he had woken from his delirium to find her curled up on a chair at the side of the bed reading a book or coding on her laptop.

“How?” James had finally asked on the second night.

The clock on the table told him that it was just before half two in the morning. He’d been awake for several minutes, watching Q from beneath the comforting weight of the duvet that at some point had been pulled up to just below his chin. As had become her habit, she was sat in her overstuffed chair, reading from a thick hardbound book she had propped up against her knees with
a book lamp clipped to the front cover so as not to disturb his rest with too much light. Q wore an oversized blue jumper with her sleep trousers, and James couldn’t help but wonder if the garment belonged to the same person -- same man -- as the bespoke shirt that had looked so tempting hanging unbuttoned on her slight form several nights earlier. The large neckline exposed her collarbone and a fair portion of her right shoulder, and even in the half-light, James could see the white strips of medical paper tape that clung to the gentle curve of her neck. Q had just taken a sip of tea from a black, spherical mug that looked suspiciously like the Death Star when he’d asked his question.

“How what, Bond?” she asked once she had swallowed. She had turned from the book to look at him, but her eyes had been hidden by the glare from the light reflected on her glasses.

“Your burns.”

Q inhaled sharply and after a moment took another sip from her mug before setting it on the table next to the clock and the stack of books she had been steadily making her way through.

“The bombing?” The question was largely redundant. James had been able to infer the answer from the suddenly stiff set to her shoulders and the air of sadness that had settled upon her.

She nodded. “There weren’t many of us in TSS or E-Branch who walked away without injuries.”

“Yours?”

“More extensive than some, not as severe as a few.” I lived, the tilt to her head told him. Boothroyd didn’t.

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” She had reached out and checked his fever by hand rather than by tech. It had felt good, Her cool flesh pressed to his flushed cheek, and James had wanted to grasp her hand in his but couldn’t find the strength.

“Q…”

“Get some sleep, Bond.” She had said, easing back into her chair. She readjusted the angle of the book lamp, and had picked up where she had left off in her reading. James had noted that this time it was the glare of tears -- not the light -- that obscured Q’s eyes from his.

He wanted to say something … comforting, but he could barely handle his own grief let alone another’s so he let the pull of the fever tug him back under. He slept.

While James had been largely unconscious during those days, he’d been lucid enough when he was awake to see the stress and frustration that being away from Six caused the Quartermaster. The days at home had been punctuated by muttered curses about debugging and writing new code to protect the system and her worry about the NATO agents left out in the cold. Her phone conversations with R were epic in length and largely one-sided as she worked with the man to ensure that the British agents on the NATO List -- 10 others in addition to 002 and Alec Trevelyan -- had been contacted and were safe.

Stretching a final time under the now stingingly hot water of the shower, James reached for his soap and, quickly working up a lather, set to scrubbing off the bits of dried blood and bomb-maker that had been his first mission back. As he considered the last several weeks, he was left with the impression that Q was a bizarre combination of honey badger, mother bear, and technological wizard. She did not suffer fools, but would go to great lengths to see her agents safely home.
“I don’t care what the protocol guide says, Max,” she’d said to R during one particularly heated phone call about a mission that had gone awry, “She’s my agent -- No. Every last one of them is my agent. It doesn’t matter to me who the handler is -- and I want her home. Stick with my plan and Double-O Three comes home on a plane; go with the protocol, and she comes home in a box.” Q never raised her voice, but it did take on a disturbingly icy tone that had left even Bond squirming a bit. Two days later 003 disembarked from her British Airways flight at Heathrow with a broken arm and only a few, minor facial lacerations to suggest she’d been anywhere at all.

Likewise, Q had been efficient but not cloying in her care of him. To a great degree, she had left James alone to sleep and to cough, but she always made sure he woke to eat and take his medication.

“Take-away, eggs and soldiers, and tea; that’s the sum total of my culinary skills, so if you don’t want it, get better so you can cook for yourself,” Q explained, handing him a mokuto bowl of miso soup she’d picked up from the sushi shop down the street.

The words were brusque, and her manner officious, but Q’s actions consistently belied the put-upon manner she tried to project; the thermos of hot honeyed tea that always sat on the table beside the bed, ready to ease his cough, only served to reinforce a compassionate nature she was woefully inept at disguising.

After five long weeks, two rounds of antibiotics, and a general lack of patience on both their parts, his lungs cleared just as Q’s burns healed, and James was finally cleared for requalification training. He celebrated by commandeering Q’s largely unused kitchen to make placek zbonjnicki. He’d learnt to make it from Hannes; the potato and onion pancakes topped with pork goulash were hearty and perfect for the late December chill as well as for feeding up overly slender Quartermasters … and their recuperating agents.

Q had just come off a 48-hour shift in which she had been guiding 004 through a complex infiltration in Belgrade. Once Caleb was safely aboard a flight back to Heathrow, James sat her down, rather insistently, at the table where Q ate more in that one meal than James had seen her eat nearly all week.

They finished off their evening quietly in front of the fire: Q on the corner sofa with a book on Churchill’s determination not to negotiate with Hitler, and James in a worn leather chair to her right with his tablet, planning out his exercise and rehabilitation scheme for the upcoming weeks. If either of them found it frighteningly domestic, they said nothing but enjoyed their whiskies and the quiet. Wishing her goodnight, James climbed the stairs to his room around midnight; Q was already gone to Six by the time he woke five hours later.

Pulling his thoughts once again to the present, Bond rinsed quickly under the spray and tapped the pad at the back of the spacious shower stall to stop the flow of water. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he briefly used a second on his hair before swiping it over the fogged surface of the large mirror above the sink. A half-smile turned up the corners of Bond’s mouth at what he saw. Even through the steam and condensation, James finally recognized the man who stared back at him, again. He still felt every moment of his 42 years, but he no longer looked like the broken shell he had been in those long weeks after Moneypenny took that bloody shot. There was more grey amongst the gold, yes. The lines and wrinkles at his eyes and mouth were deeper, and he’d only added to his collection of scars, but he no longer looked drawn and empty.

Or purposeless.

The MI6 fitness facility, along with the rest of HQ, lay in dust and rubble across the Thames, but James had nevertheless tackled his rehabilitation with Olympian-like focus. He had swum in the
local pool Six had secured for its use. He had run through the streets and parks of London. He had lifted weights and worked through a regimen of calisthenics, ramping up each activity as his body grew stronger until his workouts lasted longer than the work day itself. Once both Medical and Psych had been appeased (such as was possible), James had turned his attention to requalifying with the tools of his trade: hand-to-hand and blunt weapons with Cha Xing-Chi; small firearms with R; and, finally, his ranged firearms qualification with Q.

They had met at Bisley Range in Surrey, the closest ranged firing facility to London, where MI6 had long-since held its LR rifle qualifications. Q had already arrived and was leaning against the boot of her car, arms crossed and fingers tapping at the sleeve of her coat by the time Bond drove up in his hired Jaguar F-type -- no Astons to be had from Six’s fleet, much to his disappointment. They were dressed similarly, each in khaki trousers and ankle boots, warm woollen jumpers and black shooting jackets. He knew her hair to be plaited and secured to the back of her head today, but it was largely hidden beneath the dark blue and purple knitted watch cap she wore.

“You’re 30 minutes late, Bond,” Q had said the moment the Jag’s alarm engaged. She never bothered to hide when she was irritated, with him or anyone else for that matter. “Should have insisted that we drive together. We left at the same time!”

“I stopped for some coffee.” James had smiled as he approached and set his duffel on the ground next to her car.

Q had raised that damned eyebrow and took a step closer, eyes narrowing as she looked more closely at him. “I thought you took your coffee black?”

“I do.”

“Then what’s with the sugar?” she had asked. Without breaking with his gaze, Q pulled a handkerchief from one of her many pockets and brought it to his lips where she wiped at the corner of his mouth. When Q pulled back the linen, James could see it was smeared with rich pink lipstick.

Oh. James had shrugged. “I tip well. My barista was just rather enthusiastic in her appreciation.”

Q had stifled the chuckle that shone in her eyes. “Thank God not all of your tips are appreciated quite as enthusiastically; you’d never get anything done otherwise.”

“Come now, Q. That’s not true,” Bond had drawled, his deep, gravelly voice dipped a few notes lower and he leaned in closely to whisper in her ear, lips just brushing the shell. “You’ve commented more than once these last weeks of my ability to … multi-task.”

James had lingered there at her ear long enough to see her pulse quicken, hear her sudden inhalation of arousal and had grinned. Given that first night on her sofa in front of the fire, it would have been foolish for either of them to deny the physical attraction between them, so they didn’t deny it. Neither did they pursue it. They kept on as they had discussed, as friends. That certainly didn’t mean that James was going to abandon innuendo altogether. And he quite fancied the idea that Q would have been disappointed in him if he had.

They hadn't said never, after all.

His Quartermaster had swallowed audibly yet glared at him from the corner of her eyes. The edges of her lenses fogging lightly with the combined heat of their proximity. “You’re a complete tit, Double-O Seven. But then you know that.”
“I do,” James had chuckled as he pulled away, barely restraining himself from nuzzling her temple before reaching down to pick up the duffel again.

Q took two steadying breaths then nodded at the two weapons cases that sat on the ground next to her car. “We’ll be using the L115a3 for your qualification. I know you’re more than passing familiar with it.”

“I’ve used it a time or two.”

“You weren’t asked to requalify for long range prior to Silva due to the obvious time constraints and M’s belief that it wouldn’t be a mission critical concern. Things are different now.”

“Naturally.”

“You’ll be evaluated both as the shooter and as the spotter. As the shooter you will be scored at 275 metres, 460 metres, and 920 metres. As the spotter, your score will be based on how effectively you acquire the target, calculate distance, wind speed and other atmospheric conditions as well as impact detection, and providing security for your shooter.”

“Who will I be spotting for?” he had asked, his tone turning more, but not entirely, business-like. And there was the eyebrow again. “Twice in five minutes, Q?” Bond reached out and ran his index finger along the curve of that brow. “You’ll run out of ammunition at this rate.”

“Most men your age tend to avoid conversations that involve the topic of shooting blanks, Bond. How very open-minded of you,” Q had said, and Bond couldn’t help but laugh. Damn, she was quick, his Quartermaster. “However, since you are still fully … caffeinated, you will shoot first while I act as your spotter. Then I’ll show you how it’s really done.”

James had chuckled at her boast, but he couldn’t help but feel a surge of his own enthusiasm to see just what the young Quartermaster could do.

James had exaggerated the situation with the barista. Not that Q needed to know that, of course. The young Uni student had bussed his mouth, but only because his quick reflexes had saved her from spilling an entire tray of Cafe Americanos she was delivering to a table of dull, entitled banking executives. “Thanks, luv! They’re in here every morning,” she’d whispered to Bond after the kiss. “Think they bloody own the place. Probably do. Would’ve given me a bollocking if I’d dropped that tray.”

James could have pulled her, the barista, but the truth of it was that just as he hadn’t found the time or desire in the months of his recuperation to hunt for a new flat of his own, neither had he had found much interest in hunting around for someone to take to a flat once he did have one of his own.

He’d blame it on age, as Q had teased, except that morning wood was in no way a problem. Neither was afternoon, evening, or midnight wood for that matter. He would toss off in the shower or in bed as was his wont. James would take his time, drawing out his pleasure, savouring each electric sensation or go for a hard and fast wank, whichever satisfied his needs at the time.

James didn’t worry about what Q might or mightn’t hear as the rooms (plural) she’d given him were on the second storey, and Q was highly respectful of other people’s space. Once she’d indicated that the bedroom and small office were his to do with as he pleased, she’d never even ventured past the threshold of the staircase without calling up for permission.

He had felt this way -- this vague disinterest -- after Vesper, too, when both his body and her
betrayal had necessitated a break of sorts, so James wasn’t overly concerned about it at the moment. Besides, his developing friendship with Q was engaging enough that he didn’t feel he was missing anything by not looking for a bird or a bloke to pull.

There had been, of course, that slightly awkward conversation with Mallory regarding their unique living arrangements.

“File the appropriate paperwork with HR,” M had said before pinning Bond with a sharp look. “And know that if you bugger this up, Double-O Seven, I’ll send you to the farthest, most uncomfortable posting I can devise. I’m not training up another Quartermaster.”

“With all respect, sir, Bond is sharing my home, not my bed.”

“Yes, and this isn’t MI6, it’s the Marylebone neighbourhood watch group, and I’m the single father of two obtuse teenagers who’s running it.”

Q’s shoulders had tensed, and James had heard that sharp intake of breath that he was becoming all too familiar with.

James had recently found himself at the other end of one of Q’s ‘instructive lectures’ when, in her presence, he had waxed nostalgic over exploding pens and other gadgets of old. She had never raised her voice -- in fact, in the time he had come to know her, James couldn’t think of an occasion that the Quartermaster had shouted or yelled at anyone, even when she had cause -- but shouting would have been preferable. The hard, level, icy tone her voice took on had a disturbingly effective way of making its target feel like a sixth former being put into place by his teacher.

In spite of this, Bond had found Q’s heated, overly rational, impressively elocuted lecture rather amusing, and her wild, frustration-driven gesticulations and emotive expressions irrepressibly adorable, but he doubted Mallory would think the same.

"It won’t be a problem, sir," James had interjected in an attempt to forestall the tongue-lashing Q was about to unleash on the spymaster. He'd pressed his hand to the small of her back and steered Q out of M’s office.

“See that it isn’t, Double-O Seven!” Mallory had dismissed them with a flutter of his hand and turned his attention back to the files on his desk.

James had ushered her through the outer office, his Quartermaster grumbling the entire way about ‘integrity’ and ‘the insult of their word not being taken at face value,’ and ‘to say nothing about the fact that Double-O agents were not expendable’ no matter what Mallory seemed to think on the subject.

Moneypenny had paused in the middle of unpacking one of several boxes stacked against the walls near her new desk -- Mallory and Tanner, as well as a handful of smaller departments, had only just moved into slightly less temporary digs above ground in Whitehall -- and raised an elegant eyebrow at the pair as they passed, but James merely shrugged his shoulders and raised his own brows in a ‘Quartermasters-what-are-you-going-to-do?’ expression that left Eve giggling into her shoulder.

James and Q had been halfway to HR when he suddenly realised she was no longer walking next to him. James had turned and found Q standing stock still in the middle of the corridor behind him. Agents and other governmental employees, intent on their own destinations, dodged around the seemingly immovable Quartermaster who stared off into the middle distance in front of her.
“Q?” Striding back to her, James had grasped her elbow lightly, concerned at the look of utter confusion he saw in her eyes. James decided that he really didn’t like the thought of the preternaturally perceptive Quartermaster being confused by anything.

“Bond? What happened back there in Mallory’s office …” Q had gestured over her shoulder even as she sought for her words, “In what universe does it make sense that you are suddenly the more rational one between us?”

James’ bark of laughter had echoed through the hallway, startling a passing drone from one Ministry or another. “It’s a brave new world, my dear Quartermaster.” He smiled down at her, the anxiety that had tightened in his gut easing in light of the self-deprecating grin that tugged at the corners of her mouth. “A brave new world, indeed.”

“Quoting Shakespeare to me, Double-O Seven?” Q had groused, marching off again in the direction of HR, her mumbled recitation of “I prithee, Bond, remember I have done thee worthy service; told thee no lies, made thee no mistakings, served without or grudge or grumblings: thou didst promise to bade me a full year,” had done little to diffuse the sylph-like air of her countenance.

The spritely Ariel in the flesh.

She always does worthy service, James had realised as he watched her pick up one of the rifle cases next to her car. No lies. No mistakes. No grudges, though there were frequent grumblings. He had smiled at the thought and at the sight of his Quartermaster bouncing on the balls of her feet, clearly eager to begin his requalification. “Shall we?”

“She trounced him.

In spite of it all, the day after Q had forced James to leave a bit of his ego at Bisley Range -- over four months after Skyfall -- 007 was officially back on active duty, his scores more than adequate to requalify. The day after that, Moneypenny had placed M’s gift of that bloody bulldog in his hands. Five hours after he had set the bulldog on the mantle of the fireplace in his bedroom, James had met with Mallory, been given a new assignment, and was being kitted out by Q in her branch. She gave him a new Walther PPK 9mm short with the latest biometric grip and, again, two earwigs.

“Really, Q? Two? Surely, I’ve demonstrated that --”

“No, Bond. You really haven’t. When you can come back from five missions in a row without having lost, damaged, or destroyed both earwigs, then maybe I’ll consider sending you out into the field with only one.”

“So, sometime around your 40th birthday, then?” R had commented as he walked past Q’s station toward her office, his arms filled with the minions’ proposals for the upcoming Q-Branch Tech Challenge. The current quarter’s theme: ammunition.

“An optimistic estimate, to be sure,” Q had called after her second before turning back to her agent and handing him the two earwigs, one which James immediately slid into his ear while the other went into the pocket of his trousers. “R’s clearly a fan, Bond. I was thinking more around my
“Nice, Q.” Bond had grumbled but focused on the rest of the tech on the tray that Q detailed for him.

The Omega watch he had strapped around his wrist also functioned as a remote web interface that when activated within two metres of a computer or tablet would upload its data (and hopefully identify the target’s clients) to a secure ‘cloud’ that Q had set up. The handcrafted pen in his breast pocket -- while not of the exploding variety -- contained the poison James was expected to use on his target. The death needed to appear natural if at all possible.

“And one final item, Double-O Seven,” Q had said. She had slipped her fingers beneath his dark gray silk tie and deftly unfastened the tie tack. The etched titanium pin -- a gift from 003 -- was set on the equipment tray on the table next to them before Q took a new tack from a jeweller’s box she pulled from the pocket of her cardigan. “Rather delicate work this. A prototype. More of a personal project, but it might be useful for the field. Took hours to put together.” The pin was a tulip bloom inlaid with amethyst and accented with platinum leaves. He was going to the Netherlands, after all.

“Is this what you’ve been tinkering on at home, then?” James had asked.

With the exception of a mid-sized bedroom, small bath, and an office nook, the entire ground floor of Q’s warehouse was taken up with a substantial workshop where Q tinkered on small and large projects of all kinds. In addition to six separate computer servers, it housed workbenches and shelving containing all manner of supplies, machinery for her to manufacture parts of her own creation, and even a well-equipped garage where she housed her beloved ‘69 Triumph Bonneville and most recently, the burnt, bullet-riddled, hollowed out corpse of an Aston Martin DB5 that she had paid to have shipped down from Scotland to effect repairs upon when she had the time.

“Flabbergasted is a new look for you.” Q had teased him about the astonished look on his face as he watched the lorry driver and his mate unload the Aston into Q’s garage. James was still stunned by her gesture.

Q had merely hummed an affirmative in response to his query about the tie tack, choosing instead to focus his attention on the accessory itself. “Press the tabs on the pin back twice for video and audio surveillance; it transmits directly to my station. Pulling the chain from it altogether will activate an emergency GPS tracker should you have need of it.”

James had watched silently as Q’s fingers returned to his tie and secured the new pin in place. She had slipped the button of the shirt that lay directly beneath the pin from its hole and threaded the bar and chain within. But before she buttoned him up again, Q slid the tip of her finger between the open folds of his shirt and surreptitiously caressed the warm flesh she found there. The act was wholly unexpected, and for that intensely erotic. James knew Q would never have risked it if she felt for even a moment it would be observed by the others in the Branch, and so James only just held back a gasp at the jolt of pleasure that illicit touch sent through him.

Q’s face had remained impassive as she slipped the button back into place and readjusted his tie, but when her eyes met his again, he saw pure wickedness reflected from behind her spectacles. James had tipped his head to her.  *Touche*.

“I’ll be in your ear when you land in Amsterdam,” Q had said, all business, moving to place the work table between them again. “Latest intel places Holdst in a compound on the outskirts of Groningen, but he may be on the move in the next 36 hours. It’s a short flight, but we’ll send any
updates to your tablet and mobile. A car for your use will be waiting at Schiphol.” Q had handed him his travel documents. “Do return all Her Majesty’s equipment in one piece, Double-O Seven. Some things are irreplaceable.”

James had let his eyes linger on her for a moment longer. “I do believe you are correct, Quartermaster,” he had replied, and then he left.

Bond’s pursuit of Eran Holdst had taken him through four countries in fifteen days, and ended in a rather physical struggle at an abandoned airstrip outside Copenhagen. Holdst had secured his bomb with its payload of biological toxins into a small, twin-engine turboprop that he’d rigged to take off remotely before its intended detonation in the skies above Frankfurt.

The kill hadn’t been clean -- one of the propellers had seen to that -- but the airstrip had been isolated, so Six’s Germany-based After Action Response Team would have plenty of uninterrupted time to process and disarm the bomb and tidy the scene. During the op, it had been a point of some frustration to Q that Holdst apparently never used laptops or tablets, choosing instead to run his entire bomb-making empire from his mobile phone.

In Holdst’s final minutes, Bond had been more than within the distance necessary for his watch to activate its programming and grab the data from the mobile, but it hadn’t completed its upload to Q’s cloud before the mobile -- like Holdst -- had been sliced and diced beyond retrieval or repair. Consequently, MI6 was as much in the dark as to the identity of the man’s clients as ever.

“His Raiders of the Lost Ark demise notwithstanding, some data is better than none, Double-O Seven,” Q had said in his ear while he drove back into Copenhagen to catch his flight to London. “My people will process the information and get it sent over to the analysts.”

“Breadcrumbs, then,” James had said as he pulled onto the Hillerødsmotorvejen, shifting gears and speeding past the much slower traffic in his way.

“Indeed. Bond, I’m even better at finding such a trail than I am at laying one. I promise.”

Q’s assurances that they’d find a scrap of useful intel should have made Bond feel better about it all than he did. It had been an appropriately challenging assignment for his first mission back after Skyfall. The bomb had been secured and the bomb-maker was dead, but though Mallory classified the mission as a success, James didn’t. The more he had investigated and pursued Holdst, the more James hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that there was something far bigger going on, and that the details on that mobile held the key to what that ‘bigger’ was. In James’ mind, getting that data had been mission critical, and, instead, it had been destroyed. He would have to hope that Q, her minions, and the MI6 analysts could find that breadcrumb Q felt certain existed.

But he was back in London again. Back at St. Michael’s Street, and already James felt his frustration and irritation over the unsatisfying conclusion to the mission start to fade.

Foregoing a shave in favour of food, James grabbed a comfortable pair of sleep trousers and an old, tatty Royal Navy sweatshirt from the cupboard in his room, wondering if there was anything in other than the endless containers of leftover take-away Q was certain to have ordered and forgotten to eat whilst he was away.

He needn’t worry about feeding Q; with his mission complete, she had needed to turn her attention to 0012 whose assignment in Chisinau had gone horrifically pear-shaped an hour before Bond arrived back at Headquarters. Q had been on The Platform, back to the rest of the Branch, furiously typing and clicking between three different laptops at her station. James hadn’t been able to hear the conversation between Q and Twelve, but the slope and tension in Q’s shoulders
combined with the speed with which she worked spoke to the gravity of the situation.

Other than those few minutes when Q and he had worked together to decrypt the key to Silva’s programming, James had never experienced a mission from the HQ side of things before. At least not in the way Q and her team ran a mission. James had watched from the back of the Branch for several minutes as Q worked the problem, directing her minions through their tasks just as a conductor directs an orchestra through the music. However, in this case, the detailed precision that unfolded before him did not result in a beautiful composition meant to exhort tears from the listener. Rather, the success or failure of this oeuvre would determine the fate of the mission and that of Arabella’s life.

“I’ll be happy to check in your kit, Commander Bond,” a soft voice at his side had said. He had turned to face Brisa -- he’d made a bit more of an effort to learn the techies’ names since coming back -- Q’s lead boffin on the third shift.

“Twelve’s in it deep this time,” the spindly tech with bright blue hair had continued. “Q’ll be at this for hours yet.” James nodded and followed the minion to her station where she inventoried what he had returned. On the whole, he felt he had done rather well this time: Walther, undamaged; Omega, working perfectly though slightly scuffed; and two … well, one and a quarter earwigs. The pen had been in his suit jacket, abandoned in an alley somewhere in Copenhagen. He’d almost gone back to retrieve the poisonous pen, until Q assured him that there was no way anyone who didn’t know the exact manner to manipulate the pen could accidently inject themselves with the poison which would break down to inert compounds after another two days anyway.

“And the tie tack?” Brisa had asked, stylus poised over the appropriate inventory box on her tablet.

“Lost, I’m afraid.”

Brisa had frowned, and James had noted that she only just kept herself from looking over her shoulder at the Quartermaster. “Q will not be pleased to hear that. It was a prototype.”

“Then let me be the one to tell her as I’m the one who lost it.”

The techie had chuckled in response. “If you’re willing to take that on, who am I to dissuade you, Commander.” Brisa then noted the condition of the dark woollen overcoat he wore. “We can arrange to have that cleaned for you, if you want to leave it here.”

James looked down at the smears of blood and human tissue that dotted his coat. He’d thought he managed to get most of it cleaned off in the loo at Kastrup before he’d boarded his flight. Apparently not. The unsettled looks the flight attendants had shot his way suddenly made sense.

“I’ll bring it in tomorrow. It’s rather chilly outside tonight.” It had been well past midnight when he’d arrived at HQ from Heathrow, and that had been several hours ago.

“Of course, sir. We’ll expect it. Welcome home, Commander.” Brisa had collected the tray of tech and her tablet and left.

James had followed suit not long after, confident that Q would see ‘Bella safely through her mission. As he had made his way out to his car, he slipped his right hand into the pocket of his coat and rolled the platinum and amethyst tie tack around between his fingertips, humming as he walked.

He’d placed the tack in the bottom of the drawer of the table next to his bed. With a trip to his
tailor now in his immediate future, James would bring his accessories -- tacks, cufflinks, watches, and the like -- out of storage and place the tulip with the rest of them. Once again clean, dressed, and comfortable, James was about to head downstairs, his thoughts filled with images of omelettes and bacon buttys, when he heard it.

The Sig Sauer he kept secured behind the headboard was in his hand before James had even fully processed anything beyond, ‘That’s not Q!’

The footfalls that sounded across the hardwood floor below were too heavy and long in stride to belong to the tiny Quartermaster. Nearly six foot, approximately 15 stone, James thought as he cross-stepped barefoot down the darkened half-flight of stairs to the landing, carefully avoiding the third step from the top that creaked and thankful for the carpet that muffled his own footfalls from the intruder.

James rounded the landing, Sig at the ready. Only the light over the hob shone in the darkness of the main level. The intruder rustled through drawers and cupboards in the kitchen for his treasure, but just as Bond was ready to press the muzzle of his weapon to the back of the man’s knit cap-clad head, the intruder spun around, kitchen knife in hand and slashed at 007’s chest.

Bond spun and curved his torso inward to evade the knife, quickly sweeping out with his foot to knock the legs from underneath his foe. James brought his gun to bear again, but the weapon was suddenly kicked out of his hands and his own legs pulled out from under him. The next thing James knew, he and the man were grappling on the floor of the kitchen, banging into fridge, and hob, and dishwasher. The man got his hands around James’ neck, pulling him up to his feet again in a choke hold. James stomped on the man’s foot and dug into the firm stomach behind him with a quick jab of his elbow, loosening the hold long enough for James to get his legs underneath him again and throw the intruder over his shoulder and the kitchen island onto the dining table beyond, scattering to the floor the plethora of computer components Q always seemed to have about.

A bellow of rage erupted from the intruder as he rolled from the cracked table top back to his feet. There was no time for James to hunt for the Sig. The weapon had landed somewhere to the left of the kitchen, but the solid bear of a man -- be he thief or assassin -- was advancing upon Bond again. James couldn’t see his enemy’s face for the darkness, but every inch of his body spoke of the damage he would do to James if given the chance.

Best not to give him that opportunity, then.

Circling the side of the island and heedless of the components underfoot, James launched himself at his enemy, slamming him back into Q’s sofa and over the top to the floor in front of the fireplace where they continued to grapple, and punch, and choke, and gouge until finally James managed to reach the small metal bowl that had fallen to the ground from the side table during the scuffle: Q’s Tibetan singing bowl. James’ fingers grasped the curved lip of the surprisingly heavy bowl and he swung, cracking it against the side of the other man’s head once … twice … thrice until the man collapsed beneath him with a grunt that was muffled by the echoing tone of the still vibrating bowl.

Tossing the vessel into the corner, breathing hard, Bond slumped back onto the other man’s knees and searched for something with which to restrain him. James spied his red winter scarf still clinging to the back of the sofa and leaned back to snap it with one hand. Turning back to the intruder who was starting to come around again, James quickly began tying the man’s hands. It was a shite job, but it was better than nothing.

“James?”
What?! Startled by the slightly slurred sound of his name, Bond looked down into the face of the man below him, squinting in the darkness to focus on the features, and found himself looking into a face he knew all too well.

_Bloody hell!_

“Alec?!”

“James?!!”

“What in the bloody, buggering fuck are you doing here?!” They shouted at each other.

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Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you thought about this chapter by either commenting or clicking that "kudos" button.

I have a long, long week of professional challenges ahead, so positive/constructive feedback here in my personal bit of escapism will help pull me through. Truly!

I hope you had an enjoyable read, and I'll catch you on the next update! Hugs!
“No stars gleam as brightly as those which glisten in the polar sky”

Chapter Summary

Alec returns to London, James and Q grow closer, but the shadows of SPECTRE begin to grow more substantial.

Chapter Notes

Well, I certainly didn't anticipate it taking me quite this long to get this chapter up. I promise that this story will not be abandoned (if nothing else, my beta won't allow that to happen), I'm just having too much fun with it, but writing is SO damn hard sometimes. I've been plugging away at this chapter for quite some time, but time has been at a premium. I actually have most of the next chapter written, so I hope that my next update is just a few weeks away as opposed to a few months away.

I hope, however, that you all find this chapter worth the wait. It's nearly 12k worth of fun, and I'm rather pleased with it.

My thanks again to my lovely beta, Springbok7, who has been just as swamped with real life as I have been, but managed to find time to help me out with this despite the craziness. All my love, my friend!

I hope you all enjoy!

Please, pay close attention to the time frame established at the beginning at each section of the chapter. This is a non-linear narrative and bounces backwards and forwards from points both before and after the events of SPECTRE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five: “No stars gleam as brightly as those which glisten in the polar sky”

“A best friend is the only one that walks into your life when the world has walked out.”

— Shannon L. Alder
The moment Bill Tanner stepped off the lift onto the fourth floor that housed the Intensive Treatment Unit, he knew that Alec Trevelyan had returned to London.

The shouting in Russian-punctuated English clued him in.

It had been three days since the 15 hour surgery where the surgeons had slaved to repair what damage they could from the bullet Q had been shot with while sitting in the back of Tanner’s SUV; she had been in the ITU ever since.

Though Q’s room was guarded by trusted MI6 agents, Mallory had requested that someone close to Q be at her side whenever possible. Thankfully, Q had had the foresight to list several of the senior staff as kin and Tanner as her medical proxy -- a role he shared with the man he heard currently shouting from down the corridor -- so Bill had spent most of the late afternoon and early evening sitting at Q’s beside, but he had taken the opportunity to step down to the canteen for some dinner during shift change when the oncoming nursing staff performed a comprehensive evaluation of the Quartermaster’s condition. Tanner had already put in a full day at Six, working with Mallory, R and their MI5 counterparts to put out the still-burning embers from Blofeld’s and Denbigh’s attempted attack on London. Moneypenny had been here earlier and was now at Six taking over for Tanner as he had done for Eve.

Of course Trevelyan had chosen to arrive when no one from MI6 was there to meet him.

Tanner sighed and took a swig of his coffee, letting it burn down his throat, before tossing it reluctantly in the bin. Best not to have anything hot in hand when confronting an agitated Double-O. Especially that Double-O.

Bill had hoped to spend the next few hours enjoying his coffee and reading aloud to the comatose Q from Dan Brown’s latest that he had downloaded onto his Kindle. Q hated Dan Brown. Thought him horribly predictable whereas Tanner found the best-selling author an engaging way to escape for awhile. Predictable, yes, but entertainingly so, at least in terms of the heated-yet-friendly debates he and Q ultimately got into over the man’s works.

Well, so much for that plan, Tanner thought, walking down the corridor to the family waiting room outside the double doors to ITU where Trevelyan continued to rage.

“Chto takoye yeye sostoyaniye?! I will not ask again. What is her condition?!”

Tanner pushed open the door and was immediately impressed by the security guards’ restraint. It was probably the only thing that saved their lives. Well, that and Agents Tourer and Andres who stood between hospital security, Q’s attending physician, and 006.

“Mr. Trevelyan, you must calm down,” insisted the physician who, though he gestured in a pleading way, didn’t seem at all intimidated by the bear-like, blond agent. “Next of kin or not, we
will remove you from this facility if you cannot --”

Alec snarled. Quite literally snarled. “Try it and it’ll be --”

“Trevelyan, ustupat! Stand down!”

Alec’s green eyes shot to Tanner, and Bill could see they were filled with worry rather than anger. Not that any of the others would know that. Still, he needed to get control of the situation.

“Tanner, tell these fools to --” the agent gesticulated pointedly at the ‘fools.’

Bill pushed his way through the small crowd of men in the room until he stood toe to toe with his colleague. “Agent Trevelyan, you will sit down, shut up, and calm yourself now. If you cannot, I promise you that I will physically aid in your removal from this hospital, and the only way you will get any status reports on the Quartermaster’s condition is from inside a holding cell at HQ. Nod if you understand what I am telling you.”

Alec started. He had never heard the mild-mannered Chief of Staff exert such dominance. Bill hadn’t raised his voice above a conversational level, but the threat was there. Alec knew he could take Tanner down easily, but he found himself submitting instead. Willingly! Not understanding the way in which that tone buzzed across his nerves, Alec plopped down in the padded chair behind him, and after a moment, nodded his understanding, his eyes never once leaving Tanner’s.

“Now apologize to these men.”

“Der’mo! You can’t be ser --”

“Keep arguing, and you will find out just how serious I can be, Trevelyan. Doctor Shah is part of the team keeping Q alive. Tourer and Andres are guarding that life against further threats. And I think you know the role of hospital security. All of these men, including myself, have one goal in mind and that is to keep Q safe until she wakes and to aid in her recovery once she has. You are out of line, Agent. Now, I will say this one more time. Apologize to these men. Make it good.”

Five seconds passed. Then ten. Finally, Alec raised an eyebrow at Bill in query, and Tanner granted tacit permission for the other man to stand.

“Ya proshu proshcheniya. I am sorry for my … overly zealous reaction to your initial explanation of my friend’s condition. I have no excuse save my worry,” Alec said. Two things were instantly clear to everyone in the room: firstly, that Trevelyan truly meant what he said; secondly, that it nearly killed him to say it. Alec was a proud man, Tanner knew, but he believed Trevelyan to be a good one, especially where the Quartermaster was concerned.

Bill schooled his own surprise at the embarrassed contrition that flashed across Trevelyan’s face. He honestly hadn’t expected Alec to respond to his orders. It felt … good.

That done, Tanner turned back to the others. “Andres, Tourer, return to your posts. Thank you for your assistance, but Q should never be left unguarded.” The men each snapped a ‘Yes, sir,’ and left the room hurriedly. Bill turned to the physician. “Dr. Shah, I’m familiar enough with the Quartermaster’s condition to brief Mr. Trevelyan. If we have any additional questions, will you be available?”

“I’ll be on the floor for another hour or so, but the nurses can ring me up if need be.” Shah turned his attention back to Alec. “Your friend is in the best care this city can provide.” Alec nodded curtly, and the doctor and guards left.
The room empty, Tanner pointed to the small grouping of comfortable chairs, and the two men sat down. “We’ll forgo the lecture on appropriate behavior in public situations as I am sure you will never do that again.”

Alec gave Bill a long, assessing look. “You sure you didn’t depose Mallory while I was in Sri Lanka?”

“No as of yet,” Tanner chuckled, “but if things don’t start to calm down, M may decide to abdicate.” He slumped into the back of the chair, legs splayed out in front of him, and lifted a hand to scrub at his closely cropped hair before letting it drop into his lap.

“You look like shite, Bill.”

“It’s been a shite couple of days. Bugger. A shite couple of months, truth be told.” Tanner cocked his head, and his voice took on the wearied tone of someone on their last reserves of energy. “So why the blow up with the doctor, Alec? Surely M briefed you on Q’s condition.”

“Haven’t been to HQ,” Alec admitted. “Heard about what happened to Westminster Bridge once I got back to Colombo after the mission finalized, and took the first flight back. My sodding luggage didn’t make it, and it’s bloody freezing here.” He gestured at what he was wearing. The lightweight khakis and loose-fitting shirt were definitely not a defense against the damp, autumn London weather -- and it had been bollocks-shrinking cold for days -- even for an Englishman of Russian extraction.

“I took the Express to Paddington. Was going to change at the warehouse before heading in. Ran into Mrs. Akinjide, and she told me what happened. Came straight here.” Alec gestured helplessly out toward the corridor and ITU. “Shah told me Q’s paralyzed. Bozhe-moi, Tanner! What in the hell happened?! Does James know? She’s comatose. On a bloody ventilator, for Christ’s sake!”

Tanner pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes and he slumped a bit further before snapping his spine straight and setting his jaw, no longer an exhausted government official or a worried friend but the Chief of Staff of MI6 about to give a briefing. “I’ll give you everything I have on Q: what happened to her, what led up to it, and what her prognosis is. As for Bond … well, that’s actually the more complicated issue.”

Alec leaned toward the CoS, not threatening but insistent.

“Tell me.”

MI6 Headquarters, London, England: April 2013 (Seven months before Westminster Bridge)

Alec dropped his face into his hands before looking back up at his friend who was chewing thoughtfully on a samosa. “Chert voz’mi, I don’t know what else to do, James. I knew Q’d be
upset that I didn’t check in once things wrapped up in Albania. *Eto bylo neobkhodimo*. It was necessary, but I never expected *this.*”

No. Alec probably hadn’t, James thought. But he doubtless should have done.

Alec Trevelyan, MI6’s Agent 006, had been eight months on assignment, infiltrating a syndicate that had started trafficking in chemical weapons with other organisations hostile to the British Government, when Raoul Silva started releasing operative names off of the NATO List. MI6’s new Quartermaster and her team had immediately sent out a coded, emergency message blast to all operatives in the field alerting them to the danger and urging them to take necessary precautions. Thankfully, Trevelyan’s cover had been deep enough to offer him protection until James had managed to retrieve the list from Silva’s abandoned island stronghold in the East China Sea; Alec’s true identity was never brought to light, and he continued his mission.

The nature of the Albanian operation had precluded 006’s contact with HQ except for emergency evacuation, should the op be blown, or for retrieval upon its successful completion; even with the added stressor of Silva’s vile use of the NATO List to lure out M and kill her, neither Mallory nor Q expected to hear from 006 outside of those conditions.

Seven weeks after Skyfall, just two days after Bond had been medically cleared to begin his re-qualification for the field, word reached Six through a third party that the head of the Meidani Cabal along with her two adult sons and eight lieutenants had been killed in an explosion on the country estate outside Sarandë, and that the group’s remaining infrastructure had been left in shambles, so both Mallory and Q expected to hear from 006 in short order.

After one week of hearing nothing from Trevelyan, Q began a close examination of any activity from his more commonly used aliases, searching for any sign of the agent.

After two weeks of comm silence, she accessed Alec’s three deep cover identities and spent hours combing through communiques from Eastern Europe and South America -- 006’s two most frequent playgrounds -- for word of his location and movements.

After four weeks, Mallory listed the agent Missing in Action; Q had already been in direct contact with her personal sources and informants around the globe.

James had seen -- and experienced -- the lengths to which Q would go for her agents, but the attention she was giving Alec’s disappearance seemed different somehow. It had quickly become apparent that finding Alec was just as personal for her as it had been for him. Though he had genuinely appreciated everything she was doing to find the man James loved like a brother, Bond had been somewhat puzzled by her diligence and said as much.

“He’s my best friend,” Q had clipped, not bothering to look up from the screens of the three laptops she had been using in her search for relevant data. James had barely been able to keep up with the pace at which the Quartermaster had flipped from tab to tab and screen to screen -- saving some bits of information, deleting others -- so quick were her keystrokes and commands. “Something I think you can understand.”

Of course *he* could; James just hadn’t been aware that anyone else did. Certainly not Q, of all people. James had started to realise that as much as he knew he knew about Alec after nearly two decades of a friendship that transcended most pedestrian definitions of the word, there were apparently things James hadn’t known. Clearly, a close friendship with the Quartermaster was one of them.

“How’d that come about, anyway?”
The eyebrow twitched, not a full assault, but she glanced away from her screens long enough to pin him with a sharp, green glare from behind her spectacles, and James had seen that Q was measuring not so much the words of his question as the tone in which he had asked it. Decision made, she responded.

“He saved my life.” She had returned her attention to her computers. Clearly a story for another time.

Well, there was something to be said for consistency. “Yeah, he does that.” James sighed, thinking back to his own, similar, introduction to Alec Trevelyan.

He had then pulled a tablet from a row of its fellows in a charging station across from The Platform and sat down at an empty workstation. Twenty minutes later, he encrypted the email under the tightest security Q-Branch had to offer its electronic correspondence, and sent it off to his Quartermaster. He heard it ‘ding’ its arrival in her mailbox.

“I’ve sent you details on how to get in touch with my sources and contacts in Eastern Europe. Anyone who might be able to pin down a lead on Alec,” James had told Q once he’d returned the tablet to its station. “I’m off to check in with a few local contacts I’ve had doing the same.”

“I’ll be discreet,” Q had promised. Agents -- Double-Os in particular -- were understandably reluctant to share their informants as far too often those relationships could make the difference between the success of a mission or the death of an agent in the field. Nothing could put that at risk.

“There was never any doubt, Q.” James had pulled up the hood of the sweatshirt he still wore from his workout and dismissed the idea of changing into something more suitable for an MI6 agent. Where he was going, it would make more sense to ‘blend in.’

“I’ll find him, Bond,” Q had said as he strode out of her Branch.

“*We’ll* find him.”

Three weeks later, Alec Trevelyan was declared Killed in Action. The fires from the Sarandë explosion had burned so hot that several bodies matching 006’s height and mass had been destroyed beyond any possible hope of identification. Bond, with Tanner’s assistance, had forcibly removed Q from her office after she had worked 52 hours straight running three ops and scrutinizing any and all information that might have been remotely tied to 006’s true fate.

Nothing short of a positive identification of a body would convince either of them that the agent was dead, but hope was starting to wane.

Bond and Q had skipped Alec’s memorial service. They spent the day at the warehouse. He in the ground floor office poring over the schematics for three new pieces of surveillance tech developed by R&D that all Double-Os needed to familiarize themselves with. She just on the other side of the door in her workshop armed with an orbital sander and three different grits of paper to ensure the recently patched bullet holes in the chassis of Bond’s DB5 would never be noticed once the relic was finally painted. They said nothing directly of Trevelyan but drank freely from the bottles of vodka 006 had kept stored in the freezer of the small kitchenette next to his room while AC/DC, Metallica, Prince, Rush, and Stravinsky had blasted from the sound system.

At ten weeks, Q and Six’s coroner, Dr Pendry, met the plane at RAF Northolt and finally received the three bodies ‘destroyed beyond any possible hope of identification.’
At eleven weeks, Bond had finally finished his requalification and was sent to the Netherlands. The results of Dr Pendry’s autopsies were as inconclusive as the ones conducted by the Albanians. Q purchased boxes to pack up the clothes and few personal items Alec kept in the cupboards of the spare bedroom on the ground floor of her warehouse.

Instead, she had sat on his bed until three in the morning drinking Russian Standard and reading the copy of Turgenev’s *A Month in the Country* that she had found open on the bedside table. She was back on her platform in Q-Branch by seven a.m. running 007’s op as planned. Q blamed her headache on the vodka because Quartermasters didn’t cry and used the boxes she had purchased to store computer components in a cupboard in R&D.

“How did he save your life? Alec, I mean,” James had asked Q over comms from his hotel room in Groningen late one night as he was surveilling Holdst who had holed up with a rent boy in his suite across the courtyard. The terrorist was a twisted fuck in more ways than one, and Q’s voice was always a pleasant distraction even when James wasn’t desperate for one as he was now.

“Bond, I don’t think that --”

“Come now, Quartermaster. Alec loves to tell stories, so I’m sure he’s regaled you with a few of our tales. Perhaps even some of our shore leave adventures? A few were quite … salacious.”

Q had chuckled in spite of herself and leaned back in her desk chair. She had been running comms from her office that night, finishing up some paperwork and reports during the relative lull of Bond’s reconnaissance. “He has, and if I didn’t know what each of you was capable of on your own, I’d think his stories made up of whole cloth, but I hardly see how any of that demands a *quid pro quo* betwixt you and me.”

James had noted that they both still spoke of Alec in the present tense. He continued to peer through his scope at the room across the way. “I’m undecided as to whether or not it’s a good thing that Holdst is an exhibitionist.”

“Blackout curtains are open, I take it.” James hummed an affirmative.

“Makes recon easier.” Q typed in a few comments to the personnel report on her laptop.

“True, but some things I’ll *never* unsee.”

Q snorted. “You’re hardly a prude, Double-O Seven, but you didn’t answer my question. *Quid pro quo*?”

The familiar sound of liquid pouring into a short glass filtered to her ears through the link. “You know each of us. If I’m right, you’re probably the only other person who might know Alec as well as I do, but the things you know about him, I probably don’t. And right now …”

“Right now … it would be a comfort.”

Silence hung between them. “Something like that,” James finally said, his voice so quiet that Q had barely been able to hear him over the link.

“And *that’s* the story you want? How he saved my life.”

“Seems as good a place as any to start.”
“It’s … it’s not an easy memory for me, Bond.”

He heard the tension in her voice that hadn’t been there before. “Look, Q, nevermind. I don’t want to make --”

“No. No, Bond, it’ll be … fine. Friendship forged through trauma is the stuff of legend, after all.”

After some initial false starts, Q had been rather surprised at how well Bond respected her emotional boundaries, pushing only as far as she would let him and backing off when told to do so. Broken recognized broken, she reckoned, and he so rarely asked anything personal of her that she was willing to share this story of Alec with him, triggering nightmares and all.

“Just -- please just don’t interrupt until I’m done.”

“I understand.”

Q took off her glasses and pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes for a moment before she spun her chair to face the window that overlooked the Q-Branch bullpen. The large space was running in night-mode, lights dimmed for the third shift in deference to the late hour. She’d been on duty for nearly 24 hours.

“Alec pulled me from a plane wreck in Argentina.” If possible, the other end of the comm link grew even more silent.

“I’d been travelling and took a small charter from Ushuaia to Santiago. Planned some time in the Galapagos, then a quick bit of sightseeing in the States before heading home. There was a storm. Lightning struck the plane and blew the electrical systems. Went down in the foothills about 100 kilometres outside of Malargüe. There were two others on board in addition to me and the pilot. Matías, the pilot, managed to get the plane relatively level so we could glide in, but just before impact something pushed us down. Like a giant hand reaching out to bat the plane around. Wind shear, most likely. The plane flipped, instead.”

Though Q looked with her blurry sight through the window out onto the Branch, it was a desolate, arid mountainside that filled her vision. No point in closing her eyes. The vision rarely left as easily as it came, even now, years later. “Matías died on impact. Broken neck. His fiance, Julieta … a few hours later. I think she bled out. Stephen kept saying how badly his tum hurt. Probably internal injuries. An expat from Cornwall of all places. Nice man. School teacher. Not exactly sure when he died. Only that he did. Things were a bit hazy for me for the first days. Concussion.”

Bond blinked and pulled back from the surveillance scope. “First days ?!”

“The radio fried when the electrical system did,” James heard the shrug in her voice as Q continued in spite of the ‘no interruptions’ interruption, “so there was no opportunity to sound a mayday. No emergency beacon, either. This was six years ago, Bond. Civilian global positioning was still in the Dark Ages. The first iPhone had only been on the market for about six months: no apps, no video recording, and certainly no GPS. Argentinean and Chilean authorities searched for us once we were overdue, but they had no idea where to look.”

Bond activated the visual recording device on the scope and scooted his chair back from the window ledge to lurk even deeper in the shadows of his darkened room. He’d evaluate the recording later. He was sickened at the thought of watching Holdst and his paramour while Q shared something that was clearly traumatic.
“Then how --”

“I wasn’t a civilian. Already on Six’s payroll with my very own experimental GPS tracker, but it wasn’t working properly. Entirely my fault, of course. I’d … well, I’d disabled the programming a few months prior. But the short version of the rest of the story is that I had to cut the tracker out of my arm and activate it manually. No tech geek worth her code ever dresses without putting her multitool in her pocket. It worked. TSS picked up the emergency alert, and M sent Alec. He’d been in deep cover somewhere in Venezuela and guided a small Search and Rescue team to the site. They had to hike in the last four hours. Damn place was too remote for a vehicle extraction.”

“How long were you out there?” James drank deeply from his whisky.

“Five days.” Q’s tea had long since gone cold, but her throat was so dry that she choked it back anyway then lay her head on her desk atop her crossed arms. She pushed at a corrupted memory stick with her finger, watching it skid across the smooth surface of her desk before pulling it back long enough to send it skidding again.

“I shouldn’t have survived,” she admitted. “I was in the last row of seats, closest to the luggage. When the plane flipped … I don’t know if luggage protected me or what, but my injuries were minor in the beginning: cuts and bruises, a concussion, and a pair of sprained ankles. Something in the seating broke and pinned my legs, so I was trapped until someone found me.”

Q spun the memory stick in a circle.

Again.

And again.

“As disastrous as the whole flight became, suddenly I found that there were a few bottles of water I could reach, some granola and a bag of beef jerky in my duffle that landed next to me. The pilot’s heavy coat to keep me warm at night. My multitool in my pocket. Things didn’t get really bad until after I cut out the tracker and the wound got infected. I don’t remember hearing the rescue team arrive. Fever had set in by that time. I just remember waking up to this bear of a man looming over me, swearing in Russian. I remember, too, he was a bit shocked at what I told him, in Russian.”

James chuckled lightly. “What did you say?”

“According to Alec? ‘Either get busy getting me out of here or bugger off! I’ve got a headache and my arm hurts, you arrogant twat.’”

James’ chuckle turned to a laugh.

“I’ve no clear memory of that moment, more’s the pity,” Q said.

Finally, the memory stick balanced on its edge.

“After that, he didn’t leave my side. Even when some rocks gave way during the descent down the mountain and he blew out his knee, Alec was there. In hospital, even when we got back to London and spent another two weeks in Medical. I’ve no idea why. I wasn’t exactly the most pleasant person to be around at that time. We … we learned a lot about each other.”

Q pressed her eyes into the side of her arm, embarrassed and overwhelmed and suddenly needing the bit of darkness the weave of her cardigan provided. The memory stick was tight in her grasp.
“Definitely the stuff of legend,” James murmured, making sure that she would hear in his tone how impressed he truly was. “Moneypenny said you hated to fly. Now I understand. How can you even bear to get on a plane?”

“I don’t. I don’t fly. I was in hospital in Buenos Aires for 10 days recuperating, but when we tried to board a commercial flight home, I had the worst panic attack Alec said he’d ever seen. I had to be sedated for two days afterwards and then again on the private flight back to London.”

“But you flew to Skyfall. Q, you got on a bloody helo to come get me in Scotland.”

“And I can barely think of that without panic, so please don’t mention it, and don’t expect me to do something like that again. I don’t fly. Ever.” The memory stick snapped in half.

Q’s stress rang clearly through the link, but James knew there was little comfort he could bring her though he wanted to. And in that moment, it shook him how much he really did want to bring her comfort. He just wasn’t sure how. Would it even be welcome? James let the silence hang between them again.

“The worst part … it wasn’t the crash,” Q said. God, why am I telling him all of this? She couldn’t seem to stop, however.

James knew that tone. It was one he personally hated and tried never to use himself. Confessional. James could hear in her voice that Q was going to share something with him she had never shared with anyone else, not even Alec.

Am I deserving?

James doubted it.

“What was the worst part, Q?” He owed her that much, at least.

“Being alone. I was cold. The nights were endless. I hurt so much. Stephen … well, he and I talked for hours until he couldn’t anymore. I told him about my gap year, and he was flying to back to Santiago to propose to his girlfriend.” Q slumped back in her chair and ran her fingers over the trackpad of her laptop. “She was pregnant, you see. They were going to finish up the school term, and then fly back to Cornwall for the summer. He wanted their child to be born in the family’s cottage like he had been. After he died, I was completely alone. I expected to die alone. Lonely … lonely I can handle. That’s transitory; I don’t ever want to feel the way I did on that mountainside again. I think that would be enough to break me.”

“You’re unbreakable, Q.”

Q’s laugh was filled with bitterness. “I shatter into a million pieces at least once a week, Double-O Seven. I just don’t let anyone see it.”

A small crash from the bullpen pulled Q from her mood. She straightened and slid her glasses back into place. “I’m sorry, Bond. This got more maudlin than even I expected. You wanted a story to bring you comfort, and I gave you enough angst to fill a teenage RomCom.”

“No, I wanted a story that told me of your friendship with Alec, and you gave me that. You said you didn’t know why he stayed with you back then? I do.”

“Do you intend to share with the class?”

“Because even when you’re in pain, or scared, or stroppy, you’re still brilliant.”
James closed his eyes and imagined Q’s self-deprecating eyeroll. “And you’re still an incorrigible flirt.” A heartbeat later, her voice resumed its arid, professional tone. “Please tell me that Holdst is going to run out of energy sometime this millennium.”

“He ‘finished up’ about 10 minutes ago, thank God,” James lied.

“Good. Then I have a date with a futon. Oh, and Bond. If you take my admission of having disabled my own tracker as permission -- tacit or explicit -- to do the same to your own, remember that I have access to where you sleep.”

“I make no promises,” he chuckled.

“Of course not, Double-O Seven.”

“Good night, Q.”

“I’ll be back with you in 9 hours. Per usual, my end will remain active but muted should you need me. Get some sleep, Bond.”

With what he had learned of his Quartermaster, sleep was slow in coming to James.

When Q had told him that Alec had saved her life, James had expected a story similar to how Alec had pulled him -- a stupid, 20 year-old midshipman with more bollocks than brains -- out of a knife fight outside a pub in a Devonian alleyway. Granted James couldn’t envision Q ever getting into a knife fight -- God, she’d be vicious, though -- but he thought that maybe Alec had saved her from a mugger. She was outrageously tiny, and Alec definitely had a chivalrous streak, or perhaps he had pulled her out of an exploding R&D lab. Never could James have imagined the story that Q had told him.

What must Q have gone through to get on that helicopter to Scotland? He’d barely known her prior to Silva’s rampage, thought her one of Boothroyd’s many spaniels -- occasionally necessary yet easily ignored -- but she had risked her career and, in some ways, her life to get him to Skyfall and back again. All because he’d asked her to. He’d lodged with Q for months now, called her a friend, considered what it would be like to call her more than a friend, and yet how little he knew her.

James would have been the first to admit that he was not given to periods of introspection. It was risky for agents and assassins to think overlong about their choices and actions. Guilt was a dangerous road that led nowhere good.

Nevertheless, Q had left him with much to think about.

Bond wasn’t the only one who fought for sleep that night. Q had tossed and turned on her office futon for two hours before surrendering, thinking as much about Bond and Alec as she had the crash. There were no nightmares, but too many memories and fears to allow her mind to settle enough for sleep, so she had wandered down to the deserted R&D labs to tinker on her submission for the Q-Branch Tech Challenge.

Her contributions were always exercises in pure ridiculousness with virtually no intent of ever being used in the field. She liked to think of it all as a form of creative expression, albeit a rather lethal form of such expression.

Q expected the exact opposite from her technicians, however. Q had started the quarterly challenges when she had been promoted to ‘R’ as a nonthreatening way to learn the skills and talents of the others in the Branch. Participation was not required, but, as techies are known for
being an insanely competitive species, everyone did.

Q encouraged creativity, thinking outside of the box, creating an entirely new box that wasn’t even boxlike, but always with an eye toward the product eventually being used in the field, whether in whole, in part, or in a modified form from its original design and intent.

Three of the R&D minions had become patent holders as a result of their inventions (Q had worked out a special deal with the previous M to ensure that they reaped some of the reward for their hard work) and a fourth patent was pending for Q-Branch as a whole. Last year’s “Fixative Challenge” had resulted in a medical grade adhesive that was about to revolutionize the way in which sutures held together wounds.

Jealous of Bond, whom she figured was probably sleeping as peacefully as was possible for a Double-O on a mission, Q had unboxed a case of 9mm cartridges and set them next to the design schematics she had printed out. The exploding bullet Q had developed for this quarter’s “Ammunition Challenge” wasn’t anything revolutionary -- a variation on a theme -- but the coating of highly concentrated digitalis had the potential to add an additional bit of ‘zing’ to the competition, which is what the other participants had come to expect from their Quartermaster.

Once the challenge was over, the remaining bullets would get sent to the Dead Armoury until they could be scheduled for destruction.

During the 15 days of Bond’s mission to the Low Countries, Q tinkered and coded, filed reports and designed tech, ran missions and mentored techies, attended meetings and snarked with Bond over comms. All the while, facial recognition and a software programme she had coded herself ran on a spare laptop in her office, searching for any sign, physical or digital, of Alec Trevelyan. At first Q checked it every night as she had done for weeks, but three demanding missions in addition to Bond’s pushed that back to every other night, and then only once more.

At thirteen weeks, one day, and eight hours after 006’s Albanian mission had ended in a fiery explosion, Holdst was dead and Bond had returned to London.

At thirteen weeks, two days, and thirty minutes, so had Alec.

Seven minutes later, Alec and James had destroyed Q’s dining room table and left the bulk of the first storey of her warehouse in shambles as well as a little bit bloody. James had fresh lacerations on the bottom of each foot -- bugger, computer components were sharp! -- his cheek, and knuckles as well as two bruised ribs. Alec had a mild concussion and a rather nasty cut above his right eye.

Three hours and twelve minutes after that, Q returned to the warehouse having finally managed to safely extricate 0012 from her assignment in Chisinau and found 006 and 007 in relaxed conversation amidst the debris of her home.

Two minutes later, Alec Trevelyan had been crumpled to his knees, struggling to breathe, eyes watering as he stared blindly at the area rug beneath him, wondering if he’d ever manage to achieve an erection again.

James wisely said nothing as Q growled at him before disappearing into her own room. He looked a long time at the closed door between them, furrowed his brow, and then brought Alec two bags of frozen peas. They ordered Thai take-away from the 24-hour place on the next block, eating it in silence in Alec’s ground floor bedroom as each man contemplated the long-term effects of Q’s anger. James ultimately had been ostracized only for as long as it took for him to clean up the mess, to replace her damaged furniture, and to arrange for twice weekly tea and biscuits to be delivered to the minions of Q-Branch for the next six months.
Q hadn’t spoken directly to Alec since.

Oh, she engaged with him in a professional capacity. She had been present for Alec’s debriefing, asking appropriate questions about the original mission as well as particularly pointed and detailed ones about the informant who had sent Alec haring off after the promised new intel and going so far off the grid to try to get it that everyone thought he was dead.

When at every turn, the threads that Alec had thought he had gathered on an international terrorist cartel unraveled before he could do anything with them, he decided to return to London. The organisation was out there -- had been operating in the shadows for decades from what he had been able to determine -- Alec was certain of it; the ghosts of the organisation were everywhere once he’d started to look, but he had found no proof, no footprints, no direct connections, and no one willing or able to confide in him.

“And throughout all of this, you found it best to stay in deep cover? There was no point at which you felt it safe or reasonable to contact HQ to keep us informed so that we might possibly lend you assistance?” Mallory asked toward the end of the meeting. It was a standard question asked of agents who went dark on their own, but Mallory purposefully kept from looking at Q when he asked it.

“I didn’t think it prudent to check in until I had something a bit more substantial to report. Unfortunately, I never reached the threshold where I felt the information was viable,” Alec replied.

“So you could have checked in but chose not to do so.”

“Yes.”

“I think I’ve heard just about everything I need to from Double-O Six.” Q stood abruptly, tablet in hand, and Mallory only just managed not to wince at the sudden decrease in temperature in the room brought on by her voice alone. “I’ll have my people look into what little tech evidence he has provided while the agents in Analysis go over the raw data. He’s right. It’s not much, but we’ve worked with less. I’ll let you know when the reports are complete. I’m already late for a staff meeting with my R&D developers. Good day, M.” The sharp nod she gave Mallory was unfailingly polite. She didn’t spare so much as a glance for 006.

Q didn’t slam the door when she left, it wouldn’t have been professional, but the quiet click of the door latch sliding home echoed forebodingly through Mallory’s office nonetheless.

M reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a bottle and a pair of cut-crystal glasses. He poured two fingers into each and passed one to Alec.

“And there’s absolutely no romantic relationship between the two of you?”

“Never, sir.” Alec sat stiffly in his chair in front of Mallory’s desk. He held the glass balanced on its arm.

“She’s a friend? Like a sister, you said.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mallory stared at the amber liquid in the glass, took a meditative sip, and said without looking at Trevelyan, “You realise you’re quite fucked anyway, don’t you?”

“Absolutely, sir,” replied Alec, downing both fingers in one swallow.
Nevertheless, Q was, as ever, the consummate professional.

Even after that meeting Q assisted 006 with the relevant bits of the reports and even set him up with necessary training to acquaint himself with the newest technological advancements that had been developed in the 10 months he had been in deep cover.

But every time Alec tried to engage her in conversation on any topic not directly related to work, Q walked away, shut her office door, or otherwise turned her attention back to her work, dismissing him without so much as a nod. Q had the unsettling ability to work around a person as if they weren’t even in the room, to stare through them as if they were a ghost, and to engage in conversation with others without seeming to even hear what the ostracised person might have to say.

It was one of the most disheartening things Bond had ever witnessed, and he hoped like Hell that he never did anything to find himself on the receiving end of Q’s dismissive ire. Two weeks back in London, and Alec was no closer to making amends with Q. James had offered every suggestion he could think of, to no avail, and both men were starting to get desperate.

They were sat at a table in a small Indian restaurant in Southwark trying to brainstorm ideas that might urge Q into at least listening to Alec. James had attempted to intervene directly: once. He wasn’t willing to risk his credit rating like that again.

“How about chocolate? She loves mint,” James said around a mouthful of naan he had dipped in Tikka Masala sauce. He was starving and wasn’t concerned about table manners. It was just Alec.

“Tried that. Tanner appreciated the After Eights.” Alec scooped more Saag Paneer onto his plate.

The sound of cutlery on china filled the space between them as they ate and theorized.

“Flowers?”

Alec swallowed and shook his head. “Target practice. R was impressed by the ‘vivid palette of colour’ Gerbera daisies create when blown up by experimental liquid explosives.”

“What about the tea? Was Demming able to suggest an appropriate leaf?”

“He did. Narcissus Wuyi Oolong Fo Guo Yan.”

“I’ve had it. Flavourful. Expensive.”

“Seven hundred quid for a hundred grams.” Alec nodded his thanks to the server who brought him another glass of aam panna.

“Yep, expensive. And?”

“She gave it to Anderson.”

“Anderson? Wait,” James pointed his momentarily empty fork at his friend, “That pasty-faced fellow in HR? Brings his tea in a paper Sainsbury’s take-away cup each morning?”

“The same.”

“I really don’t know what to say to that.” So James snagged the last lamb kabob instead.

“Oh, it gets better … or worse, I suppose,” Alec stabbed his knife through two pieces of lamb on
James’ plate which Bond tried to defend. “I was able to get a bottle of Macallan M --”

James’ eyes snapped to Alec’s, lamb forgotten. “No -- I’m really not going to like this, am I? What did she do with it?”

“Popped down to Westminster Pier last night and poured it into the Thames.”

It was only decades’ worth of training and practice that kept James from gasping aloud, rather he carefully set his knife and fork crossways on his plate, his appetite suddenly gone. The thought of such a rare single malt being disposed of in such a callous manner left him cold. “That’s … that’s just cruel.”

Alec abandoned his meal, too, and pressed his fingertips against his right temple and rubbed at the back of his neck. The headache he had been fighting off and on since returning to London was definitely on again. “I’m out of ideas. Thing is, I can’t say she’s being unreasonable.”

Neither could James. “Q’s lost a lot these last few months: Boothroyd, her other friends killed in the explosion … M. She thought she lost you, too, Alec. We both did. She knows there’s no guarantee that any of us will ever come back, but --”

“But I screwed up.”

“Yep.”

James let Alec chew on that idea for a minute while he finished his ginger tea. James reached across the table and picked up their cheque. The men rose, grabbed their overcoats from the backs of their chairs, and walked to the front of the restaurant. James unfolded several notes from his wallet and passed them to the hostess. “You heading back to Six?” he asked Alec, tucking his wallet back into the interior breast pocket of his navy bespoke jacket before sliding on his wool overcoat.

“No, think I’ll head over to Harrods. See if I can’t find … oh, I don’t know. Inspiration.” Alec saw James’ trepidation. “No. You’ve done enough. I’ll go alone.”

The men stepped to the side of the door to make way for two elderly couples entering the restaurant. It was raining outside again, and James could see that it was starting to turn to sleet, hinting at the forecast for the evening. The fliers on the advertisement board next to Bond fluttered in the breeze from the approaching, atypical April snow storm. The board was a hodgepodge of commercial adverts and community notices, but one in particular suddenly caught James’ attention. He pulled it from the panel and smiled.

‘Alone.’ Alec’s last word echoed in James’ mind but it did so in that tense, scared tone James had heard in Q’s voice while on comms last month. I was completely alone. That might be enough to break me.

That was the real issue.

“Sod Harrods,” James said, turning to his friend. He held up the handbill in front of Alec’s face. “I have a better idea.”

A smile slowly spread across Alec’s face as he read the advertisement. “You’re brilliant, you know that?”

“That goes without saying. Think it’ll work?”
“Well, it certainly won’t hurt.”

James pulled his mobile from the inside pocket of his overcoat and dialled the number on the handwritten leaflet as they stepped out into the rain and slid into Alec’s silver Audi R8. “Head for Bankside,” he told Alec. He pressed the phone to his ear and waited for the call to connect. “Ah, yes, hello … okay, Kirstie,” James said when it finally did. From his friend’s tone, it was clear to Alec that Kirstie couldn’t be much more than five or six. “Is your mum available? Well, my name is James. No, no, she doesn’t. I’m ringing about the advert she posted at Mango Indian …”

Trevelyan navigated his way through the congested streets of the South Bank while James and wee Kirstie and, eventually, wee Kirstie’s mum negotiated a deal that might just get Alec out of the proverbial doghouse.

“Bozhe-moi, this better work.”

~~OOQ~~

Seven hours and two-hundred quid later, Alec leaned comfortably against the back of the sofa, legs propped up on the coffee table watching two balls of fluff attack Q’s woollen socks. The Quartermaster herself was sat on the floor in front of the fire with a slightly bemused smile on her face as the kittens toyed with her covered toes.

James popped out of the guest loo off the kitchen where he’d been setting up the self-cleaning, automatic litter box. Food and water dishes were at the ready on the tile at the end of the kitchen island, and he’d even assembled a pair of scratching posts. The kits’ soft bed was positioned in the corner of Q’s bedroom near her reading chair, not that there was any guarantee they’d use it, and he’d ensured that a variety of kitten toys were scattered in just the right places throughout the first storey. None of them were tasks James would eagerly volunteer for as a matter of course, but doing so had given Alec and Q some of the privacy they needed to talk through their issues.

It hadn’t taken them long. It was quiet. It was honest. James hadn’t deliberately listened in, but as he’d been crossing through the kitchen with a bag of clumping kitty litter slung over his shoulder, really trying not to notice how tiny Q looked in Alec’s embrace or the tug of something -- not jealousy; Alec had made it quite clear that was not the way of things between him and Q -- that James felt in his own heart, he heard her say to Alec, “I wasn’t ready to lose you, you idiot.”

James tossed several empty wrappers into the bin under the kitchen sink. “That should do them well until they’re big enough for you to move their litter downstairs to the laundry room.” James said as he rinsed his hands under the faucet. He then grabbed two beers and a bottle of water from the fridge before joining his friends. He handed a bottle to Alec as he passed the sofa, but chose to settle next to the adorable little things on the floor, only two of which were kittens. He gave the water to Q who uncapped it and drank deeply.

Q glanced at him from the corner of her eyes. “Thank you, Bond,” she said softly, almost shyly, and James knew that she didn’t mean for the water. He was a bit surprised at the warmth that filled him at her words. That heat was as unsettling as it was fulfilling, and James wasn’t sure what to do with the sensation, so he settled on neutral ground.

“You’re welcome, Q.” He pulled at his beer.
A ball of fluff, tuxedo black and white, pounced on Bond’s knee. “Hello there, little one,” James said congenially, carefully extracting tiny claws from the wool of his trouser leg. He set his bottle on the coffee table behind him and picked up the kit in one large hand. Bond held her up in front of his face, and the kitten head-butted the base of his thumb and began to purr loudly.

“Vocal thing.” James rubbed at the kitten’s ears. “You’re in the company of spies now, lil’ bit. You’ll have the cat-like tread down, but no sense giving your position away by being too loud.”

“They’re young yet. Plenty of time to train them up right,” Alec commented from the sofa before he burst out laughing at the sight of the other kitten scaling the length of Q’s long French plait as though Q was Rapunzel in the flesh.

“Bloody hell,” Q yelped. The kit’s claws had dug into the back of Q’s neck in his climb. She twisted around to try to pull the kitten away, but the animal had managed to fully cling to her hair and the back of her navy jumper like a sticky burr.

James passed the tuxedo to Alec and began to disentangle her sibling from Q. It was but the matter of a few moments and James was able to hand the white kitten with his caramel tipped ears and tail to his Quartermaster who snuggled it against the side of her neck. James lifted the tail of her plait to check the tender flesh of the graceful length for anything deeper than a light scratch. She smelled of jasmine and the winter wind and he found himself wanting to nuzzle her nape and tangle his fingers in her hair as the kit had done. He fought back a pleased smile when Q started to lean into his touch, quite subconsciously, he was sure, but James basked in the sudden surge of warmth flowed through him at the notion that Q felt secure enough in his presence to do so.

A small stuffed mouse bounced off the back of his head, and James dropped the plait to glare over his shoulder at Alec whose pointed look served as a reminder of the ‘chat’ the two men had shared the week before after Alec had caught James staring at Q ‘in that way.’

“What way is that?” James had demanded, hands braced on his thighs as he pulled air into his lungs. They had been jogging through Green and St. James’ Parks and were catching their breath after their race to the top of the Clive Steps ended in another bloody tie.

Alec had been just as worn, their ‘jogging’ having been anything but, and only managed to get his words out between pants. “The look that says you don’t know whether to kiss her or kill her. The look that says you’re either going to pull her in as close as you can or push her as far away as possible. The look that tells me that you, James Bond, are half a step away from falling arse over tit for the woman I consider my sister.”

James’ spine had snapped straight at Alec’s words, but he didn’t deny what Alec had said. There was no point. “Are you seriously about to give me the shovel talk?” he had asked, stepping closer to get out of the way of trio of bureaucrats rushing down King Charles Street.

“Nyet, moy brat.” Alec had gripped James’ shoulder with one of his big paws. Brotherly. Supportively. “But I need to know that you will think this through, da? For both your sakes.” It hadn’t mattered that Q wasn’t even speaking to Alec, he was going to have his say. Truthfully, James hadn’t expected anything else.

For all that he hadn’t wanted to have the conversation at all -- Englishmen will be Englishmen -- let alone on the pavement in the middle of the lunch rush, James had waited patiently for his friend to search out the rest of what he wanted to say. Alec had just as hard a time expressing his thoughts and feelings as James did, but when the man did share they were always some of the most
introspective, emotive, and heartfelt words James ever heard. It was Alec’s Russian soul exposed, and James had learned to listen.

“Love is … risky for those who have suffered in life as we three have,” Alec finally continued. “We’ve each chosen to avoid love and compensate for its lack in different ways, but it hasn’t kept any of us from getting hurt further. We’re getting old, James, you and I, and in some ways she’s older than either of us.”

“What are you saying, Alec?”

“I’m saying that when you’re ready to stop running, Q’s what you should stop for.”

“And if I’m not? Ready, that is.”

“You know the answer to that.” Alec’s tone had grown cold but lost none of its honesty, and James nodded his understanding. Q didn’t need anyone to champion her, but that didn’t mean that Alec wouldn’t.

“C’mon. Let’s get cleaned up and grab some lunch,” James had said. They had walked the rest of the way to HQ, side by side, shoulders bumping occasionally, as each silently considered the implications of Alec’s words.

“You’re going to have to think of names for them, myshka,” Alec said, interrupting James’ memory. He inspected the black and white female in his hands. He lifted up one front paw to inspect the tiny paw pads and laughed when the kit swiped at him in response.

“No. That’s already been done.” Q folded the white one against her chest and untucked her legs, rising gracefully from the floor. “Bond, would you please grab three of those whisky glasses Mallory gave me for Christmas?” she asked over her shoulder, padding toward the lift where she had dropped her messenger bag earlier that night.

The promise of homemade fish and chips -- a James Bond speciality -- had lured Q from her tech cave at the official end of her shift for the first time in months. Things had been hectic at Six since Skyfall, but she had made it a point to make it home most nights ... eventually. Since Alec’s return, however, she’d been largely avoiding the warehouse altogether. Angry though she had been, Q wouldn’t kick Alec out of the only home he had, but neither could she just potter about the place with Alec below stairs as though there weren’t such serious issues between them. The intelligence that both Bond and Alec had returned with from their missions had left the analysts with more questions than answers, so Q had offered her assistance, staying well into the early morning hours as much as to help make sense of the insensible as to give herself the needed distance.

Q had been fully aware that Bond’s promise of a home-cooked meal was designed solely to get her back home; a culinary bribe to get Alec and her into the same room long enough to force the conversation that Q had thus far refused to have. She had missed them, though -- her pair of Double-Os -- and had decided earlier that day things had gone on long enough and had left the sanctuary of Q-Branch prepared for a long, potentially draining conversation.

Q didn’t normally take the lift, but she was tired, anxious, and feeling more than a little out of sorts. When she pulled back the decorative doors, the pair of kittens staring up at her from inside their basket on the floor in front of the lift changed all that. Q had dropped her bag next to the basket and hadn’t given it a second thought until Alec mentioned naming the kits.

Bond was setting three cut crystal glasses on the coffee table -- one with two ice cubes in it for her -- by the time Q returned. She handed Bond the white kitten as she set her bag on the floor. Q
kneled next to the table, tucking her legs underneath her, and pulled first one item and then another from the leather satchel, setting them -- quite pointedly -- on the table.

Alec’s eyes grew wide and he shot to his feet when he saw them. “Bloody, buggering, fuck!” He gestured lamely at the items, at James, and then at her before slumping back against the sofa in defeat. “You are one serious piece of work, you know that, myshka?” Alec glared at Bond who had been laughing since Q had pulled the items from her bag.

“I was angry, Alec, not insane,” Q scoffed, cracking open the bottle of Macallan M that Brisa had ‘let slip’ to 006 that Q had ‘spilled into the Thames.’ “I know what this is worth.” She poured them each a finger of the single malt and set the elegant, faceted decanter next to a decorative velvet pouch that James would just bet was filled with Narcissus Wuyi Oolong Fo Guo Yan tea leaves.

Q smiled gently and held up her glass, waiting for the men to do the same. “To those returned safely home and to those gone before their time,” she said quietly.

The three friends sipped the amber liquid in their glasses, letting the meditative silence linger until a loud squawk from the female tuxedo broke the mood.

“You said they were already named?” James asked. He pulled the white kitten away from the glass in his other hand. The tom had thought to dip his paw in the whisky.

“Yes.” Q gestured first to the kitten in Alec’s hand and then to the one in Bond’s. “Gentlemen, I’d like to introduce you to Wuyi and Macallan.” The Double-Os each snorted in response and gave one another a look that indicated they couldn’t think of anything more fitting.

“Now,” Q demanded, “am I going to get fish and chips or not?”

Four hours later and all the residents of the warehouse, well-fed and content, had settled in for the night. Q had not even tried to contain her laughter when Alec and Bond insisted on seeing the kittens to bed before departing for their own rooms. Alec pressed a kiss to Q’s cheek with a whispered, “I missed you, too, myshka,” before he went below stairs. It was an early night for three people used to keeping impossibly late hours, but each agent had separate meetings with Mallory in the morning that could well lead to them being sent on assignment, and Q was all in.

In spite of her exhaustion, Q was fidgety. Eventually, she wrapped her favourite winter dressing gown -- a worn, purple thing more threadbare than it should be -- over her cotton chemise and slipped past the sleeping kittens in their bed. Once in the kitchen, she flipped on the kettle, settling on a blood orange tea with valerian root that she hoped would help her settle her mind enough to sleep.

Q had lost track of how long she stood before the windows drinking her tea, watching the snow as it fell in the puddle of light from the street lamp. It wouldn’t stick. It rarely did in London. The heat of the city itself wouldn’t allow it. She took another sip from her mug and grimaced. Cold. She set the mug on the high ledge of the window sill and wrapped her arms around her torso against the chill in the room.

“Q?”

Bond’s voice was quiet, low, but the baritone vibrated through her blood and made it sing. He had descended the stairs silently, anticipating an intruder, she thought. A hypothesis confirmed when she heard the hollow thunk of his weapon as he set it on the dining room table as he passed. She’d turned off the light over the hob once her tea had steeped, throwing the large room into darkness.
The only light came from that lonely street lamp outside in the snow, but she caught Bond’s shadow approaching from the corner of her eye.

“I’m fine,” she said, answering the question implicit in his tone. “Just restless. Too much going on in here.” Q touched her temple with her fingertips, not turning away from the window to face him. Bond settled in behind her, so close that she was sure that if she listened carefully she could hear his heart beating, and it was all she could do not to lean back into the heat of his body.

“Q,” Bond’s voice was ragged in her ear, and just like that, she stopped trying.

Bond’s arms wrapped around her, and he dropped his face into the crook of her neck as he pulled her back against his chest. Q reached behind her and threaded her fingers through Bond’s closely-cropped hair, urging him on as he licked and nipped at the tender flesh beneath her ear. His fingers deftly untied the sash of her dressing down, and Q moaned needfully as one large hand slipped beneath the neckline of her chemise to cup her breast, teasing the nipple to hardness while the other skimmed her waist then lower to caress her hip and outer thigh, fingers catching at the hem of her shift and drawing it upward to press his warm palm against the flat of her belly.

Dear God but Q tasted as good as James remembered. It had been months since that night on her sofa when they were both raw with grief and a quick tumble had seemed like the best of all possible solutions until they both had realised that it wasn’t. Friends first: an agreement that had been fulfilled; they had still flirted and teased but almost always at a distance, as if they had an unspoken accord to not get too close.

James hadn’t intended this when he saw it was his Quartermaster and not an intruder who had woken him, but he had quickly learned that he had a weakness for said Quartermaster when viewed in darkness.

Not just in darkness, he thought.

James was reluctant to pull his hands from Q’s skin, but it just wasn’t enough. He let go long enough to spin her around to face him and push the dressing gown from her shoulders. Q’s eyes granted him tacit permission from behind her glasses, and James slipped his fingers under the thin straps of her cotton nightgown and slid them off her shoulders until they caught in the crooks of her elbows. James lifted her then, pressed her up against the wide panel of wall between the two windows and groaned against her collarbone when she wrapped her legs around his waist. His cock had been firming steadily since he first took Q in his arms but surged to full hardness at the sensation of her damp heat pressing into the top of his groin. James smiled wickedly, then dropped his head to feast on her flesh.

Q nearly came the moment Bond’s mouth latched onto her nipple, his tongue and teeth pulling sensations from her that she hadn’t experienced in far too long. She clutched his head, pressing his mouth to her while with her other hand she fumbled at the waistband of his sleep trousers, desperate to feel him in her bare hand. He caressed her arse, fingertips dipping under the edge of her knickers in kind to tease before he began rubbing steadily at her sex, caressing that sensitive skin yet never dipping fully into her. She ground down against him, but each time she did, Bond’s fingers evaded, only to tease again.

Q thought she might kill him.

James couldn’t think of a sound as sweetly maddening as the huffs of need that escaped Q’s lips. She was glorious. As he switched attentions to her other breast, James thought just a few more minutes here. He wanted Q on her bed. In her sheets. Beneath him. On top of him. It didn’t matter. As arousing and primal as the thought of it was, James wouldn’t take her here against the
wall, though. She deserved better. James wanted to give her so much more. James would --

James didn’t quite scream in pain, but the strangled yelp that caught in his throat was quite distinctive. Quick reflexes kept him from dropping Q altogether, but James barely kept her fall controlled when the pin prick of kitten claws that scaled up the thin fabric of his sleep trousers dug deeply into the bare flesh of his back and neck. James caught a quick flash of white fur from the corner of his eye before Macallan leapt from his shoulder down to the window ledge to look out at the snow falling much as his mum had been doing just minutes before.

“Oh my God, Bond! Are you okay?”

He wasn’t. He really wasn’t.

Once clothing had been set to rights, the next fifteen minutes were spent with James sat at the cracked remains of the dining room table while Q cleaned several deep scratches on his back before coating them in antiseptic cream and applying a few necessary plasters. Macallan watched the entire affair from his spot in James’ lap -- blissfully unaware that at that moment it was only 007’s affection for his Quartermaster that kept the kit alive -- occasionally reaching out to bat at loose plaster wrappers on the table top. James sipped at the whisky Q had poured for him before setting to work on his back.

Once she had packed up her first aid kit, Q pressed her lips to one of the plasters high up on Bond’s shoulder blade. “We won’t tell Alec you were cockblocked by a kitten,” she said in his ear and reached down to pluck Macallan from his lap. James turned in the chair to look up at her, and she cupped his face in the palm of her free hand.

“I thought you promised not to use that word again?” He reached up and ran his thumb across her lower lip.

“Which word?”

“Cockblock.”

Q chuckled at the memory of their previous discussion of that word. “Accurate, though.” She sobered and kissed the pad of his thumb. “Still not our time, it seems.” Her tone was equal parts frustration and relief. Oh, but she wanted him. Desperately. Had for as long as she could remember. But there was such a difference between wanting and having and keeping.

James had turned to glare at the kitten, but he felt no real malice toward him. Alec’s words came back to James as they had done earlier that night. Think this through. For both your sakes. James couldn’t honestly say that he was there yet. He wanted her, yes. But love? James wasn’t sure he was ready to stop running. And though it had never been explicitly stated, he knew Q wouldn’t do casual.

“Apparently not.” He stood and caught his fingers in the hair at the base of her neck. It was still in its plait, and James couldn’t think of a time when he had seen it loose. He imagined Q naked in his bed, pale and rosy tipped against the dark sheets with only her unbound hair hiding her from his eyes. It was a sight worth waiting for.

“Good night, Bond,” Q said. She turned toward her room, Macallan pressed against her chest but James caught her trailing hand in his, stilling her departure.

“Do you think there’ll ever be a time when you call me James?” he asked softly.

Q bit her bottom lip and he was surprised at the conflicted look that crossed her face at his
question. “Names are … a difficult area for me, Bond. I promise to explain it to you some day, but not tonight. It’s not just you, though. It was two years before I called Alec by his first name.”

“So it’s possible.” James massaged the palm of her small hand with the pad of his thumb.

“More than.” Q pressed a kiss to his cheek and disappeared around the corner of the kitchen to her bedroom.

It was only then that James realised that, once again, he’d never got around to kissing her.

“Bugger me,” he muttered then downed the rest of his whisky in one swallow.

James did not sleep well that night.

Macallan, however, slept like the dead.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are love!

I know I’ve written that before, but they really do help with the creative process. It provides me with support through the knowledge that what I’m working on has meaning for more than just me. Even if it’s just a few words, they do mean the world. Yes, I know I’m begging. I’m shameless, that way. LOL!

Many of you wrote such positive things after the last chapter went up, and I appreciate those words more than I can say. Thank you so much!

Thanks for reading, though. I appreciate your support and your interest!
Mallory is an unexpected source of support, the Quartermaster and James track down a bioterrorist, Denbigh has an unsettling proposition, and Q works off some tension but not in the way she would prefer.

Chapter Notes

Oh, good Lord, I'm a mess. Five and a half months?! Seriously?! Well, I've not been idle by any means. I will admit to having been distracted by a fabulous Reverse Bang challenge (feel free to check out "How Much Love Can the Weight of Water Carry" if you're wanting some M/M 00Q love), and this teaching gig that is my day job definitely takes away from my writing life. And, of course, life in general just gets in the bloody way, but still ... five and a half months. Oi! I'm so very sorry for that epic delay. I wonder if anyone is still following this story. I hope so. I will say that I have no intention of abandoning this story. I really enjoy it, many of you seem to as well, and goodness knows my beta will not let me drop the ball with this one.

I do feel badly about how long it took me to get this out to you. :(  

Because of the long hiatus (at least it hasn't been as long as a BBC Sherlock hiatus), I have a nice, long chapter (12.4k) for you to hopefully enjoy. As always, I must thank my brilliant beta, Springbok7. Without her help and support, this chapter would not be coming to you now. She has a masterful way of keeping me focused and on task when I am actually able to find time to write. :)  

A REMINDER: This is a non-linear narrative, so I have started each section of the chapter with a date that indicates if it is pre- or post-Westminster Bridge (aka: ending of SPECTRE). We will eventually get to a singular timeline that is all post-SPECTRE, but we are a few chapters away from that yet.

I'm cautiously excited about this chapter, so please let me know what you think about it. Comments are such a huge source of support. They make my day, truly!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Six: “Swallowing the Syllables of
“Love is simple. You fall and that’s it. You’ll work the other stuff out. You just gotta let yourself fall and have faith that someone will be there to catch you.’

I didn't want to do any falling. Falling usually led to meeting a hard surface in an unpleasant way.”

— Chelsea M. Cameron, My Favorite Mistake

(Six weeks after Westminster Bridge)

“I appreciate you being here, sir, but surely there are other things you’d rather be doing today,” Q said around the lip of the steaming cup of Earl Grey Mallory had brought her. He had smuggled in a thermos of the brew, Alec having told him how one of Q’s chief complaints of her ‘incarceration’ in the High Dependency Unit was the deplorable quality of the tea.

As they took tea together, Mallory had been briefing Q on the pertinent details of their post-SPECTRE reality: co-conspirators who had been rounded up, the death of the plans for the Joint Intelligence Service, Q-Branch’s steady dismantling of the core components of Nine Eyes and the strengthening of the UK’s cyber security in light of their cyber security expert’s incapacitation had all been chief topics of conversation.

“Q, spending time with you is hardly a chore, and truthfully I should have been ‘round long before now,” he said. Gareth returned the file folder he had been reading from to his soft-sided briefcase, leaned back in his chair, and simply took a moment to assess his Quartermaster. He had last been by when Q was still comatose, and while she looked about as well as one could under the circumstances, it was still a far cry from the healthy, vibrant, prickly-natured woman she had been only a month ago; Mallory mourned the change.

Q had been moved from the Intensive Treatment Unit three days earlier, just shy of a fortnight after she woke from her medically induced coma to discover that her life would never be the same. She had since met with therapists of all kinds and been subjected to countless medical tests to determine the range, function, and sensation remaining in her legs. Her level of injury had been reclassified to T-11/T-12, but she still had the full use of her upper body and full sensation to about the level of her pubic bone. Solid trunk and abdominal muscle control meant that Q’s sitting balance was excellent for her condition and was why she sat with Mallory in a small atrium at the end of the corridor of the HDU.

Though still weak, she was strengthening daily, and Gareth knew that her doctors wanted Q out of bed and in a wheelchair as often as she could do so with some degree of comfort, but Tanner had
told Mallory that ‘comfort’ was very much a relative term. The incomplete nature of her paralysis meant that there was a great deal of pain Q was working through, only some of which would be resolved as her body continued to heal.

Alec, Tanner, and even Eve had continued to spend time with Q as she recovered, but muscle spasms and lightning flashes of pain through her legs meant that she spent fair portions of each day medicated. Q was apparently as stubborn as ever, eschewing the medication until she simply couldn’t deal with the pain anymore. It frustrated her doctors and drove her nurses spare, but thus far no one had been able to dissuade her from her course. Q was desperately afraid of developing a dependency; however, the bigger issue was the way in which the drugs apparently clouded her mind.

“Because I can’t bloody think,” was Q’s answer when Alec had asked her why she wouldn’t make use of what was available to ease her pain. Bored with inactivity and all but slept out from the day before, Q had spent several hours designing tech and coding on the laptop a minion had been coerced into bringing her, but as the day progressed so had her pain level until she finally relented and activated the PCA pump that pushed the morphine through her system. When Alec carefully suggested that her focus might be better spent on her recovery than on anything she might design for Six, Q’s response had left the Double-O shaken.

“My body is already broken, Alec. What value will I have to anyone if my mind doesn’t work either?” she said as the morphine did its job, dulling the pain and her senses so quickly that she fell asleep before Alec could say anything to contradict her so very incorrect assessment of her worth.

When Mallory arrived late the next afternoon, Q told him that her pain was manageable today, so at the urging of her nurses, the two had moved down the corridor to the solarium to enjoy the sun of an atypically bright December day. Her bodyguards and his stood nearby, ensuring that their conversation would not be overheard by ears not cleared for such classified information. Each sat in their own chair. M’s was stiff-backed and lightly padded. Q’s had wheels.

Q had readily shared with Mallory that the results of her tests demonstrated that she had the ability to move each leg to some degree, though her right was significantly more impaired than her left. She also had some sensation in each leg. In her ‘good’ left leg, Q retained approximately 65 percent of normal pressure, pain, and temperature sensation with the exception of her outside three toes which she couldn’t feel at all. Her right leg was something of a hodge podge, however. Q could sense changes in pressure along the inside of her thigh to her knee and then along the outside of her calf all the way to her foot to various degrees, but on the whole, only about 35 percent of normal feeling remained. There was a spot on the outside of her right knee that felt like it was on fire half of the time, and temperature sensation was sometimes there, sometimes not.

She had only a minimal ability to stand on her own, but Q was young and strong and was recuperating well from the other injuries caused by the bullet, so with the right therapies, her doctors felt that things could improve, but it was unlikely that she would ever walk unsupported again. She would be transferred to a long-term rehabilitation clinic as soon as she passed certain benchmark goals established by her medical team -- which knowing Q would be in significantly less time than average -- and then the true work of reclaiming her life would begin.

Q noted the evaluative way in which Mallory looked at her now, and before she could stop herself, she brought up a subject -- one of countless -- that had been weighing on her mind for days.

“Sir, I’ll understand if you expect me to retire from the SIS. There will be only so much that I can --”

“Who in the bloody hell said anything about me expecting you to retire?” demanded Mallory in a
loud voice that attracted the attention of each of their guards.

“I -- I just assumed that --”

Mallory interrupted her again. “Well if you can stop doing that, Quartermaster, we’ll all get through the coming months and years far more smoothly.”

As she had told him of her physical condition, Gareth had been left with the feeling that she wasn’t sharing the news with him because she felt he was someone who genuinely wanted to know. The way in which she gestured animatedly to emphasise the positive aspects of her health and vocally downplayed the negatives had reminded Mallory of the estate agent he had nearly used to find his current flat.

*Here! Mr. Mallory, look at the gorgeous crown mouldings throughout the interior, but don’t look at the pervasive mold that the building superintendent hasn’t been able to eradicate in the last decade. The flat is centrally located and only a block away from the nearest Tube station as well as near three drugs dens that the Met raids every fortnight or so.*

Gareth had left halfway through the showing and, as he should have done from the beginning, had used an agency that did frequent business with members of the intelligence community. The circumstances were different -- a flat to purchase versus a paralyzed Quartermaster -- but each salesperson had the same goal.

The estate agent had tried to sell Gareth Mallory something he didn’t want.

Q felt that she had to do the same.

“Retire,” he muttered, looking up through the skylight as if seeking help from above. “The very idea!”

When he dropped his eyes again three deep breaths later, it was to Q’s completely baffled expression. Well, at least he assumed it was baffled as he had never seen that particular look on the genius’ face before. He sighed once and modulated his tone before continuing.

“You saved *nine* bloody nations with that bit of hacking. Likely more than that when the potential long-term effects are taken into account,” Mallory muttered in that soft, offhand way he used when he was trying to be nonchalant about his own emotions. “Fine lot we would be if we sacked you because we couldn’t find the moles in our own house before they went on a rampage and caught you in the crossfire. Her Majesty *and* the PM have made it abundantly clear that my head would be served up like John the Baptist’s if even the idea of dismissing you crossed my mind, not that it *ever* has or ever will. We’re already hard-pressed doing without you as it is, and I know nothing good would come from your permanent absence. I’m afraid you’re stuck with us, Quartermaster.” Gareth paused when a suddenly horrifying idea popped into his head. “That is unless you want to leave us?!”

Q looked at him blankly for five full seconds before her face crumbled and she burst into tears. No, not tears, deep, heaving sobs that Mallory was certain were being pulled from the deepest part of her soul. From the first hiccuping explosion of breath, Q had clapped her hand over her mouth, clearly mortified at her lack of control over her emotion, but control it she could not. Mallory sat frozen for only a moment -- this response, while probably the healthiest one Q had experienced all week, was nonetheless unexpected -- then gestured for the guards to stay where they were. He had this.

Mallory slid from his chair across from Q and into the one next to her wheelchair. He pulled the
mug of tea from her hands and set it safely out of the way and then did the same with her glasses. Q stiffened when Gareth slipped his arm around her shoulder, but he did not pull away. Rather, he tugged gently once, and Q all but collapsed into his side, gripping the lapel of his jacket as she sobbed into his chest. He caught only snippets of what she was trying to say through her tears, repeated words about her legs and her mobility, but the phrase that came through the clearest was that she wouldn’t leave Six the way that Bond had. She didn’t understand how he could leave them, leave her, without apparently a backwards glance.

Mallory didn’t even try to answer her pleading questions. He simply brushed her hair back, tucked her head beneath his chin, and held her as closely as he could, murmuring comforting words -- sounds, really -- that he knew from experience wouldn’t solve anything but would at least soothe her.

It should have been awkward, but it wasn’t. At least not yet.

It wasn’t long before Q came back to herself. Such bursts of grief never lasted long, but they were overwhelmingly powerful as Gareth knew all too well.

Mallory’s physical and emotional recovery from his three months as a hostage in the hands of the IRA had come along in due course, though at the time psychological therapy was minimal at best. Gareth had done the best he could with the resources he had, but it hadn’t been enough, ultimately costing him his marriage. Eventually, the effects of the host of cognitive, emotional, and social issues he had wrestled with became more ‘acceptable’ to discuss openly without ridicule or censure, and as such, were better treated. Nevertheless, it had taken Gareth years to find a therapist who could explain to him why he could go along for months at a time without feeling any ill effects but suddenly, and without apparent trigger, he would be overwhelmed with the memories, not of the physical effects of his torture and captivity, but of the helplessness and anger and guilt and loneliness he had felt.

The emotional bursts would hit hard and fast and without remorse, leaving Mallory stunned in their wake and wondering what in the hell had happened. It was during a surge of these bursts, just six months before Skyfall, that he finally found Dr. Goddard, a private psychiatrist specializing in trauma and grief who did more for him in a handful of sessions than he managed to get in years of therapy courtesy of the British Army. He had feared that he was losing his mind, but Dr. Goddard not only gave name to what he was experiencing -- grief bursts -- but helped Mallory understand that they were completely normal.

It’s just another type of grieving, Gareth, she had told him. And make no mistake, you are grieving from your experience and may do so for years to come.

He explained all this to Q as she composed herself. Mallory left nothing out -- though he glossed over some aspects of his captivity and torture -- sharing with her things few others knew because he wanted her, no, needed her, to understand that she was not alone in this. ‘Stiff upper lip’ may be a Brit’s default setting from birth, but in Q it seemed to be even more so, and Mallory knew it would do her little good in her emotional recovery if she kept it all bottled up to herself.

When she finally pulled away from him -- glasses back on her face, the handkerchief he had given her a creased mess in her hands -- and settled herself more securely in her chair, he added something he rightly guessed she needed to hear. “I hope you know me well enough to understand that I don’t see any point in saying things I don’t believe, so here it is: you are one of the strongest most irritatingly tenacious people I have ever met, and no one who knows you is likely to think any differently. But you are grieving, Q. You shouldn’t ever feel that you need anyone’s permission to do that.”
Gareth could see the fatigue and pain in her face and resolved to get her back to her room as quickly as possible, but he continued a moment more to explain. “You’re grieving the loss of your legs. Your mobility.” He paused. “Bond.”

She turned her face away at the last comment but not before Gareth saw a flash of humiliation flicker in her eyes. Wholly undeserved in his opinion, but that was not his place to help her understand. He was angered on her behalf, nonetheless.

Q had always been something of a puzzle to Mallory for all that their relationship had been a bit more informal than was typical of his interactions with those he supervised. It probably had something to do with the fact that the first time he’d met the Quartermaster, she’d been neck deep in at least three illegal and potentially treasonous acts to keep Olivia Mansfield safe. Rather than pull the plug on her activities as he should have done, he’d trusted her, instinctively and without reservation, and had let Q run with her plan. And though the outcome had not been the one they’d hoped for, Gareth had never regretted going with what his gut told him was right in trusting Q.

The young woman was always brilliant, frequently abrasive, and Mallory would have called her arrogant if she hadn’t always been able to back up her promises with practical and ingenious solutions, but Q was also one of the most loyal and humane people he had ever met -- a hard thing to find in the espionage business -- and it left her vulnerable. Was it little wonder, then, that most people at Six both feared yet wanted to protect her?

There was no protecting her from this, though. All any of them could do was support her.

A gesture from Alan, his primary guard, caught Mallory’s attention, and he could see Q’s nurse in the hallway beyond. It was time to head back. Though she had managed to wheel herself -- awkwardly -- to the solarium, Q was emotionally and physically drained and did not complain when Mallory pushed her back to her room. He waited outside until the nurses had settled her back in bed but returned to Q’s side at her request. She again tried to apologize for her emotional outburst, but Mallory would have none of it.

“Still, it’s a bit awkward doing that in front of your boss,” Q said, looking up at him from her partially reclined bed. She was again hooked up to her PCA and -- based on the increasing glassy appearance of her eyes behind her spectacles -- had already hit the button to administer the pain medication she had probably needed for quite some time, stubborn bit of goods that she was. He was glad of it.

“Not just your boss, I hope,” he said frankly.

“Sir?” Q’s puzzlement was clear on her face.

“Q, that night at the CNS building and everything leading up to it, that was us on the front lines of the battlefield. I may not be in the army anymore and you may have never served in the military, but that was combat, and a shared experience like that -- knowing what was on the line if we failed -- does something to people. It changes relationships. While I may still be your boss, it’s much the same as when I was in command of my SAS mobility troop. There’s a chain of command, yes, but we are now brother and sister in arms, and that is not a bond I take lightly.”

Q thought about it for a moment before responding, and though what she said was quite serious, a whisper of a smile had touched her lips. “Olivia Mansfield was the only M I ever knew, 28 years of her. Even before she was M, she was M. She was really the only mother -- maternal figure I had, yet I never knew if she even liked me. Did she see me as a person or merely as a tool?”

A small spasm wracked her body, and Q let out a sharp huff of pain, pressing the button on the
PCA again. After a moment, once the morphine began to settle the pain, she continued, almost rushing to get the words out before the medication sent her under completely. “You’ve been M for all of … 13 months. When we met, I was hacking into global positioning systems, committing more cyber crimes … than you know about, and toeing the line of committing treason that you … did know about, all to leave a false trail for … Silva to follow, but for all that … I’ve always known where I stand with you. You have no … no idea how important that is. What it means.”

If pressed by others, they would each attribute Q’s earnest comments to the morphine, but for now they understood one another and no more words were needed.

With a short nod, Mallory headed for the door, briefcase in hand, but turned back again before leaving. “While Dr. Goddard isn’t taking new patients, I’m fairly sure she would be willing to speak with you if you’re amenable. I would be happy to contact her on your behalf.”

Q hesitated, still uncomfortable at the thought of sharing the complete mess that was going on inside her head, but the earnest look on Mallory’s face reminded her of what he had said before. She didn’t have to do this alone.

“I think that … would be a good idea. Thank you, M.”

They said their goodbyes, Q already halfway to sleep by the time he left the room. Once his driver had them back on the road to his Mayfair flat, Mallory thumbed open his mobile and called the second number in his favorites list.

“Hello, love,” he said when the call connected.

“All done at hospital then?”

“I am.”

Gareth had been skimming through a handful of files he needed to prep for a morning meeting but based on the speed at which rush hour traffic was not moving, he’d have plenty of time to do so before he got home. He took a moment to look out the window at the pedestrians on the pavement all busily going through their daily lives, completely oblivious to the fact that they owed their continued freedoms largely to a 29 year-old wisp of a woman who had sacrificed nearly all to ensure that the Commonwealth would not be torn apart from within. Bond may have stopped Blofeld, and that was no small thing, to be sure, but had Nine Eyes gone live … the thought of those consequences still had Mallory up most nights.

“I was right though,” he continued. “She’ll need you, Kate. Probably even more than I did.”

“I thought that might be the case, so I cleared my schedule for tomorrow.” Mallory could hear the sound of her pottering about in their kitchen. Kate had said something that morning about making roasted pork with mushroom and onion gravy if she managed to get home early enough.

“I love you,” Mallory said, smiling.

“I know you do,” Kate said. He could hear the smile in her own voice, and as always, it soothed him, made him feel far lighter than the weight of his responsibilities would otherwise permit him to feel. She was his godsend and his salvation. Thankfully his Dr. Goddard had had enough professional contacts that it had been an easy enough task to find someone to replace her once it became clear to both doctor and patient that their mutual attraction would not allow for her to continue to treat him.

Within six weeks of Mallory’s first appointment, they had already ceased their professional
relationship, started their personal one, and two weeks after that, Kate had moved into his flat. She
had already known who he was and what he did for a living -- she typically treated patients in the
highest levels of the government, including people in the MoD and Foreign Office, and had signed
Official Secrets Act paperwork long before she had ever met him -- so it had been an easy enough
transition for them both once he was made head of the SIS. Two days after Westminster Bridge,
when he had finally been able to return home for the first time, Gareth had directed his driver to
first stop at the HSBC branch on Regent’s Street.

Gareth had been greeted at the door with a kiss of desperate gratitude and a hug that would have
gone on for eons had he not pulled himself from Kate’s grasp, slowly dropped to one knee --
arthritis was a sodding bitch -- slipped his Gran’s ring onto her finger, and asked Kate to marry
him.

The wedding would be in the Autumn.

Kate’s soft, warm voice, tinny through the mobile, pulled him from his musings and what she said
reminded him again of why he loved her so desperately.

“I’ll call her attending tonight and plan to pop ‘round to see her once visiting hours start in the
morning,” she said. “Q will be okay, Gareth. We’ll make sure of it.”

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**MI6 Headquarters, London, England: May 2013 (Six months before Westminster Bridge)**

“Ida Darmali, aged 52. British national of Javanese descent. Research scientist. Read chemistry
at Cambridge where she earned her PhD in Biological Chemistry,” Q said of the woman whose
image currently appeared on the main screen of Q-branch courtesy of the video camera embedded
into Bond’s sunglasses. Their current topic of conversation was in the process of stepping from the
sea, warm water cascading down her mostly bare body in rivulets that only served to enhance her
toned flesh.

“You’re sure she’s 52?” Tall and elegant, the woman’s black hair was pulled back into a tight
chignon at the base of her skull. Her face was relatively unlined, and only a gossamer dusting of
silver hair at her widow’s peak indicated that she was anything over the age of 40. The bikini she
wore certainly didn’t suggest it. “She’s extremely fit.” Bond’s baritone -- confident and
deceptively lazy -- rumbled through the earwig Q wore in deference to the early hour in London.

MI6 never closed, but typically only a skeleton staff manned the third shift in Q-Branch, and as it
was just past three in the morning, the lights were dim and Q’s techs largely spoke in whispers
when they spoke at all. Comparatively, the HD feed from Bali showed sunlight spilling from
behind a smattering of white clouds in an otherwise blue sky as a gentle breeze rustled the palms
and the raffia fringe that edged the roof of one of the resort’s bars in which Bond sat, surveilling
his target from behind his sunglasses and a mimosa.
“As ever, you excel at focussing on the truly critical aspects of the mission, Double-O Seven.” Q pulled up another screen of data that she then fed directly into Bond’s tablet “According to the journals of her advisors and colleagues, Dr. Darmali showed great promise from the outset with her research in developing vaccines and other treatments for a variety of pathogens.”

“Which would make her invaluable to an organisation like Médecins sans Frontières,” Bond said, perusing the doctor’s CV that appeared in front of him.

“Indeed. Except that the not-so-good doctor seems to have been branching out in the last decade.” Q fed Bond still more data, charts, and a precis that had been compiled by the analysts upstairs. “She’s been using the activities of MSF to camouflage additional research that has nothing to do with eradicating anything.”

Bond skimmed efficiently through the materials on his tablet for several minutes, intelligence that indicated Ida had been a very bad girl, indeed, dabbling in the weaponization of viral and bacterial infections. He looked up, and Ida Darmali’s statuesque figure again filled Q’s screen. “She was Holdst’s client. Our bioterrorist,” he said.

“Our bioterrorist. Or at least one of them,” Q confirmed tightly.

“What’s wrong, Q?”

“I’m fine, Double-O Seven” Q snapped.

“Well, that response was certainly comforting.”

Q took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes behind her glasses; she was exhausted from running four agents on missions in two different hemispheres, but that wasn’t the source of her irritation. “My apologies, Double-O Seven. I didn’t mean to bite your head off.”

Q watched through Bond’s eyes as his fingertips danced across the surface of his tablet, opening a new app that caused a small window with a live feed of Q’s face to appear in the bottom left-hand corner of his screen. He had activated the new remote video conferencing programme – basically a souped-up, highly secure version of Skype – that Q had installed on his tablet for field testing on this mission. It allowed Bond to see and be seen by the person he was talking to, and he could switch between multiple feeds and choose which windows to maximize or minimize depending on the importance of the conversation. The application and video feed could also be transferred to a pair of smart glasses equipped with a miniature webcam allowing an agent to, in some circumstances, literally see what was going on behind him or her.

Q was grateful to see that Bond kept the primary window focussed on the mission parameters and that the window that held her feed from Q-Branch dropped in and out of view as the agent split his attention between his Quartermaster who was 7500 miles away and his mark who slithered past only 10 metres in front of him.

A few quick keystrokes activated the application on her end, and a similar window containing Bond’s face appeared larger than life on the main screen -- a recently installed holographic model developed by R&D -- in the heart of Q-Branch. Of the three earwigs she had included with his kit -- he really was never going to return even one to her in working order -- Bond currently wore the one that resembled a bluetooth clip so that it appeared as if he was talking to someone on his mobile, negating the need to be more physically covert about the conversation that he was really having.

“You’ve been tense about this mission from the start,” Bond observed. “Why?”
“And here I thought I was hiding it all reasonably well,” Q groused. She took a sip of her tea. Still hot, thank the minions.

Bond nodded his thanks to the server who set down his breakfast on the table in front of him, and said, still elegantly, around a bite of expertly baked croissant, “To everyone else, I’m sure you are. I know you better than that.”

He did. Damn the man.

“Kincade would be appalled, Bond,” she said, taking a moment to chastise him for talking with his mouth full even as she considered how it had come to pass that Bond did, in fact, know her better than … well, just about anyone except Alec, and she wasn’t entirely convinced of that anymore, really.

She drummed her nails on the worktop absently. Q wished that she could chalk up such familiarity to the fact that Bond was the most perceptive Double-O in the SIS -- sorry, Alec, dear -- or that it had been born from their having shared rooms for the last several months, but Q knew better than that. James Bond simply understood her in a way that no one else did. He was becoming skilled at interpreting her moods from the briefest look or through the slightest variation in the tone of her voice, and Q really wasn’t certain how she felt about that.

On one hand it was refreshing not to always have to prevaricate in the ways that social niceties -- those unwritten rules at which she didn’t always excel -- so often demanded, but on the other, the reality was that Bond’s perception frequently scared the living Hell out of her.

She felt more intimately connected to Bond than anyone else of her acquaintance -- had from their first meeting all those years ago -- and while she knew that such an affinity was part and parcel with the kind of profound friendship -- relationship? -- they were forming, it forced her to realise that her thoughts and her emotions were not always her own. That they could and often would impact him as well. This connection she had with Bond was so different than the one she shared with Alec, and she often felt wrong-footed and self-conscious even as she revelled in the charged energy that flowed through her due to his notice of her disposition.

“Q,” Bond prodded.

“She disgusts me,” Q blurted out, in complete contrast to her typical unflappable demeanour. “This whole situation does. I know I’m supposed to remain aloof … impartial … professional,” she admitted a heartbeat later, “but I’ve seen what Médecins sans Frontières can do, the great good they’re capable of …”

“Liandri,” Bond acknowledged. It wasn’t a question.

Once Q had shared with Bond the story of the plane crash it was of little consequence to share with him the rest of the events of her year abroad. She had laughed at his barely concealed surprise when she told him a few of the salacious details of her affair with the Belgian brothers, Sigur and Reynard, and their performance sports cars.

“Why everyone automatically assumes I’m some sort of blushing virgin, I’ll never begin to understand.” Q had said, brushing a few crumbs from her bright pink jumper as she had leaned against the iron fence that ran along The Thames in front of Jubilee Gardens. Initially, Bond had been too busy choking on one of the lamb and mint Cornish pasties he had picked up for them from Waterloo Station to respond. She had known there was no point in pounding on his back, so Q had let him cough up the savoury crumbs on his own much to his consternation and that of the others trying to enjoy their al fresco lunch on that surprisingly temperate London winter day.
“In fact, I’d wager they probably taught me a thing or two that even you -- O Great Seducer of the European Union -- have never thought to try,” she had added once Bond’s coughing subsided. Admittedly, she had taken a great deal of perverse pleasure in the second coughing fit that had ensued and had wondered if she’d ever have the chance to prove her assertion.

Far more seriously, however, Q had shared with him the story of Liandri’s tragic death and the impact it continued to have on her well over a decade later. The relief organisation she had volunteered with in South Africa had worked hand-in-hand with Médecins sans Frontières, and the tasks -- no, the miracles -- those doctors, nurses, and support staff performed on a daily basis nearly had Q rethinking her career at the time.

“It sickens me to think that this bitc --” Q cut herself off, fighting for her professionalism in spite of her contempt, “ -- excuse me, Bond, this bioterrorist is using MSF as a cover to destroy the very lives Médecins sans Frontières are trying to save.”

The information she had sent to Bond’s tablet included the evidence that MI6 had in hand that indicated Darmali was using the sick and injured to which MSF tended as test subjects for her bioweapons. Had been doing so for years, in fact. It would be easy enough to arrest Darmali based solely on what they already had, but what little data Bond’s Omega Seamaster had managed to upload from Holdst’s mobile before the terrorist -- and the phone -- had been chopped into just so many bits also hinted at further bioweapons being constructed by other ‘doctors’ as well as a connection to the nameless organisation funding the Mengelesque experiments. Darmali was in Bali on holiday before she took up her next MSF posting in Mozambique to help ‘treat’ cholera, but intel suggested a meet with her handlers before she moved on to Africa. Bond had been dispatched to the The Legian Bali in Denpasar to obtain further information and, if possible, capture said handlers.

James assessed the alluring doctor from behind his dark sunglasses, but he didn’t try to be covert about it. Based on the way Darmali had draped herself artfully on an umbrella-shaded chaise lounge, she expected open appraisal from those around her. More than once she had looked pointedly over her shoulder to ensure that she had Bond’s attention.

Empirically, Ida Darmali was a beautiful woman. She had a trim body with a narrow waist that spoke of a fitness regimen that went beyond that of the average scientist. Her cinnamon brown skin appeared smooth and was probably supple to the touch. Her breasts were full, barely contained by the damp fabric of her navy blue bikini top, but much like the absence of lines on her face, their pertness was solely due to the intervention of a surgeon -- a good one. One that would cost far more than the average research scientist associated with a volunteer organisation could reasonably afford.

He watched as the older woman flirted shamelessly with the 20-something cabana boy who had brought her a fresh drink, cajoling him into reapplying her sunscreen irrespective of the umbrella under which she sat, and James, surprisingly, found himself rather disappointed that his mission parameters included a likely honey trap, his first since being cleared for duty after Skyfall.

Yes, the woman was lovely, but she was like the autumn crocuses that dotted the moors of Skyfall; Colchicum autumnale were delicate, purple flowers that Kincaid had made very clear were highly toxic, fatally so, in spite of their beauty. James had seduced more than one deadly, ‘naked lady’ in his years as a Double-O and had usually enjoyed the physical task. He liked sex, after all, and though his own libido was finally resurfing after so many months lying relatively dormant as he recuperated -- particularly so when it came to his Quartermaster -- this was one bee James didn’t particularly care to lure to the honey.
That he would do his job was never in question, but the Double-O in him credited his distaste of the physical with the nature of Darmali’s crimes. James Bond the man, however, had only to look down at the screen of his iPad, at the tired, wan, but infinitely more lovely face of his resolute Quartermaster to know the real reason why he was repelled by the doctor.

“We’ll get them, Q,” James said firmly.

His Quartermaster snorted. “Oh, please, Bond. Like there was any doubt of that.” Then she rolled her eyes in what James had come to recognize as self-exasperation. “Apologies … again. Petulance has the better of me tonight, it seems.”

James was pretty sure she didn’t realise that her outburst had actually complimented him, affirming her belief that James could always get the job done. “I think there’s more to it than that, Q.”

The image of her on his screen fell still, even the rapid clicking of Q at her keyboard was frozen in time, and for several long moments James thought that he had, in fact, lost the feed. But then Q pulled her glasses from her face and pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes, leaning over her elbows that she’d propped against the surface of her workstation. Despite the distance that separated them, the HD quality of the video feed worked perfectly -- far better than Skype could ever hope to achieve -- and James could see that the exhaustion in Q’s face was not just based in the physical. He was suddenly quite appreciative of the new app that allowed him the opportunity to see her distress rather than just infer it from her tone over comms.

“Talk to me, Q,” he said softly as though he were gentling a young foal ready to bolt rather than be tamed.

“So many threads …” She looked into the webcam from between her fingers for a moment before he saw her plop down on the tall stool that was always at the ready at her station but that she hardly ever actually used.

“Threads of what?”

“Information. Data. Intelligence. The analysts can’t make sense of it beyond a surface level, the data that you’ve all been bring back the last few months.” She ran her hands through her already tousled hair and viciously yanked the elastic from her ponytail causing the mass of espresso brown curls to fall about her shoulders. James tensed at the sight. He had never seen Q’s hair loose before, and doing so now felt more erotic than when he’d had her naked flesh beneath his hands and mouth. The low-level arousal that was always present whenever he was in Q’s company ratcheted up a few notches. He was thousands of miles away, but still his fingers itched to dance along the edges of those waves and whorls, to bury themselves in the dark tresses … perhaps the HD video conferencing app wasn’t such a great idea after all.

James coughed, very subtly adjusted himself, and deliberately turned his attention to the view of his mark and the beach and the sea beyond. He needed to get himself under control if he was to interact with Darmali. “What do you mean?”

Suddenly all the frustration that had been building up in Q for weeks broke free.

“Something’s going on, Bond. Something big. I can sense it, and if we can’t figure it out, I fear -- whatever this global terrorist organisation is that’s lurking in the shadows, this bloody wraith … Holdst, of course. Darmali, too, she’s a part of it. But directly? Tangentially? Someone has to have hired her. And then there’s all that information that had Alec scuttling around Eastern Europe for those months we thought he was dead. Hell, I’m certain that the human trafficking ring One is chasing down in Japan is involved. All the pieces are there. I can see them. But nothing ties
together, links... It’s so bloody like coding that Analysis tossed it back to TSS, but I can’t get ahead of it …”

Out of the corner of his eye, James saw Q sweep her hair back on top of her head and secure it with a pair of lacquered chopsticks 008 had brought her back from Thailand last month, and he immediately breathed a little easier, finally able to look back at her image. Q continued to gesticulate wildly, however, and he was certain that if it hadn’t been the night shift, she’d be stalking around her platform workstation and shouting through the comms in spite of the fact that her innate sense of propriety wouldn’t normally permit such severe lack of control in front of her staff.

“… the key is there,” she continued without pause, pointing at some random spot beyond the view of the webcam, “but it’s like someone’s hiding it. Dangling it like a carrot on a string only to yank it out of my grasp right before I’m about to latch on so we can’t see or understand the whole thing, and whatever it is, it’s massive, Bond, and old … decades at least. Someone’s playing games with us, and we don’t have the Rosetta Stone, and … damn it, yes, I know I’m mixing my metaphors, so don’t even go there! It’s like the ghost stories Eustace used to tell me when I was a child: spectres that created mischief and even terror for those they ‘fancied’ but always hiding in darkness at the periphery of one’s sight. Spectres that -- come morning -- vanish into the ether like mist touched by the dawn, abiding only long enough to see the effect of the damage they have wrought.”

Undeniable. Lingering.

Q knew she was doing a horrible job explaining what was spinning around in her head, but she couldn’t just hold onto it anymore. Someone else had to know that something big, something deadly, was lurking just over the next hill and MI6 was currently powerless to stop it.

James’ eyes widened with surprise behind his dark glasses when Q suddenly slammed her palms flat on the surface of her desk -- startling a pair of minions at their stations behind her -- blinked twice, and took three deep, calming breaths. Q seemed to have spun herself out which was as well because James knew there was no way he would have been able to reel her back in, not all the way from Denpasar.

“At risk of repeating myself a third time … my apologies, Bond.” She sighed and rubbed absently at her eyebrow. It was actually the fourth time she had apologised during their conversation, but he wasn’t going to be the one to point that out. James hadn’t survived this long as a Double-O by being that stupid. Besides, he could see she was embarrassed by her rambling outburst as it stood. “As you can see, this all has me a bit on edge.”

“When’s the last time you slept, Q?” James asked, his voice just as gentle as it had been at the outset of her rant.

“What day is it?” She seemed genuinely puzzled by his question and even more so by hers.

“Monday, love.” James stiffened at the endearment that slipped from his mouth, but his Quartermaster was either so tired or so focussed on trying to suss out her answer that she seemed to have missed it as she continued on without pause.

“Let’s see, I kitted you out on Saturday morning, had already sent Nine out a few hours before … oh, bugger.” He could see her blush from Bali. “Thursday night.”

James noted another glance in his direction from Darmali -- the doctor would make her move in under five minutes -- so he needed to wrap up his conversation with his Quartermaster quickly which was the only reason James managed to contain his sigh of frustration. It was not unusual,
but neither was it healthy, this habit Q had of working herself into a zone of concentration so focussed that she lost track of time and then failed to eat or sleep as she should. Part of it was the nature of Q’s job, the rest of it was just Q’s nature.

She glanced at the digital clock over the centre screen and quickly calculated the time she had before she had to log on for 009 in Tucson and then again for Bond when the honey trap portion of his mission was likely to move forward.

“I should probably do that, then. Sleep,” Q said, shoulders slumping with finally acknowledged weariness. They had covered all the information that they needed to for now. The rest was up to Bond. “I’ll be with you tonight unless you feel that you’ll need me at your back before then.”

James studied the face on his screen for a moment before answering. “I’m starting to think I’ll always need you at my back, Q, but I’ve got this for now.”

“Very well, then. Fiore will have passive monitoring of your comm link until day shift arrives in three hours, then you’ll be in Benji’s care. Oh, and before I forget, she’s drinking a Bali Nenas, not a Singapore Sling. It wouldn’t do to mistake the two.” She continued on despite Bond’s chuckle. “Be safe, Double-O Seven. I’ll be back with you in eleven hours. Q out.”

“He’d never had a problem pulling a bird in his --

*Oh, Q, are we ever going to have a chat when I get back.*

“A man such as yourself should never have cause to wear a frown like that.”

James looked up from his tablet. Four minutes and seventeen seconds. Ida Darmali stood in front of him, drink in hand, a flowered sarong tied low along the curve of her hips, wearing a smile that oozed want and need as well as the intent to have those desires met.

James rose smoothly to his feet and stepped around the side of the table to stand closely at her side.

“With a woman such as yourself to draw my attention to that fact, I’m left to think that such a frown will never mar my face again.” He let his most disarming smile light his face and noted how her pupils dilated with hunger. “May I get you another drink? A Bali Nenas, isn’t it?” He gestured at her mostly empty glass.

She nodded, and James caught the attention of a passing server, setting the glass on the table.

“Very perceptive of you, Mister …”

“Bond,” he said. “But I would much prefer it if you called me James.”

“James.” Darmali smiled approvingly as he took her hand in his, kissed the top of it, and eased her into the empty chair at the table. “I’m Ida,” she continued, looking up at him over her shoulder.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, lovely Ida?” James took his seat again, pulling the chair closer to hers.
Ida ran one perfectly manicured fingernail along the side of his hand that rested between them on the tabletop and looked into his eyes. “I think there may be many things you can do for me, James. And perhaps even a few that I can do for you.”

“Of that I have no doubt, my dear,” James said with a knowing smile, trying not to let his stomach twist as he pushed his gaze to drift from her eyes to her mouth to her breasts and back again. “None at all.”

~~OOQ~~

It was but the work of a few minutes for Q to brief Diego Fiore on Bond’s status and, in turn, Fiore assured his Quartermaster that he would ensure -- barring any major international incidents -- she would be left undisturbed in her office until one hour before she was scheduled to be on comms with 009.

With the hope of five hours of uninterrupted sleep, Q made her way to her office where she activated a series of commands on the biometric pad just inside the door. The large window that overlooked the Q-Branch bullpen grew opaque, the door locked, and the lights dimmed to 15 percent.

One of the minions had kindly opened the futon and pulled out the pillow and quilt Q kept in the cupboard next to the door of the small en suite at the back of the room. She toed off her shoes, stripped off her bra from beneath her jumper -- bloody torture device, the thing was -- slipped out of her skirt and tights and into a pair of sleep trousers that had been on top of the quilt, and plugged her mobile in to charge. Ensuring that her spectacles were secure on the bookshelf next to her makeshift bed, she pulled the sticks from her hair and quickly plaited it to keep from tangling and finally slid beneath the quilt, wriggling down into the mattress. Not more than ten heart beats later, she heard a soft rustle from behind her desk, followed by twin mewls and the gentle susurrus of her bedclothes as the two kittens joined her; Wuyi settled in at the bottom corner of the futon -- near Q’s feet but well out of the range of restless, tossing and turning humans -- while Macallan curled up in his customary place between Q’s right shoulder and her neck. Q nuzzled Mac’s warm body, sighed with pleasure, and closed her eyes.

As usual, sleep did not come quickly. For all that Q’s brain functioned like a hard drive, it didn’t turn off as easily as one. It had to shut down in stages, a kind of system’s maintenance during which she mentally reviewed her day from a variety of angles.

Q had been correct in her assessment weeks ago that an uptick in nefarious activity around the globe would see more of her agents in the field, and the morning after a fur ball had kept his new mum from getting off with James Bond, MI6 had started to send out its people in surprising numbers. In addition to three Double-Os and a handful of seniors already active in the field, Bond, Alec, and Double-Os Three and Nine, as well as an additional four senior agents had been dispatched to the four corners tasked with protecting the Commonwealth against all manner of enemies.

Q-Branch’s normal level of chaos had quickly reached levels they hadn’t seen since the destruction of the River House, and Q and her three active handlers had rushed to ready the tech and provide the support their agents would need in the field.
The fact of the matter, however, was that Q-Branch had long been woefully understaffed when it came to trained handlers, and while Q had approached Mallory to approve a budget increase to improve the situation, she had known from the start that it would be a tough sell.

It was held that, in light of the Silva affair, there was a strong push to bring MI5 and MI6 into the same fold, a Joint Intelligence Service, shepherded by Max Denbigh, a mid-level bureaucrat who had gained significant notice after a dossier he wrote on the obsolescence of the Double-O program caught the attention of the PM. It was utter rubbish, and Q knew for a fact that Denbigh hadn’t spent so much as 15 minutes speaking with anyone at MI6 about the face of modern counterintelligence. He had, instead, relied on data older than Q herself and when that information was insufficient, Denbigh crafted his claims out of whole cloth by twisting the truth of what the Double-Os contributed to Britain's safety and security.

Denbigh and his dossier had popped up just over six months ago, right after the Olympic Games. However, Q suspected that the man had stuck his dirty fingers into the espionage pie long before that, when the budget of the SIS started taking significant hits that had nothing to do with austerity measures.

There had been the anticipated uptick in threats against the UK in the months leading up to the London Games, but the surge had continued unabated afterwards, necessitating more senior agents and Double-Os in the field, straining and damn near exceeding the resources of the Q-Branch handlers. Q had wanted to secure funding for training additional handlers from the existing TSS pool of personnel, especially if, as Mallory seemed to think, there would continue to be such an increase in active threats against the United Kingdom, but she had been denied each time.

With the threat of a JIS looming over them, the MI6 Chief was having to fight for every last penny to keep things running as it stood, and there simply weren’t the resources necessary for formal handler training. Q knew that Mallory was doing the best that he could under the circumstances, and while she couldn’t fault him for his inability to help, it didn’t change what could easily become a dangerous situation. With so many operatives in the field at the same time, the Q-Branch personnel had been stretched thin, and Q worried about the mistakes that could be made simply due to exhaustion and overwork. She felt, at times, that she was on the front lines of a war of attrition, and that it was only a matter of time before the casualty reports started trickling in again.

But that wasn’t the only source of Q’s increasing fears and frustrations.

In addition to his maligning MI6 and the Double-Os and hamstringing Q-Branch’s abilities to assist them in the field, Denbigh had organised a cadre of computer engineers, coders, and hackers to create an intelligence gathering programme that he claimed would bring the Intelligence Services into the 21st century and beyond. He had so far attempted to recruit Q to his cause no fewer than three times.

The first time Q had politely declined his invitation to tea.

The second time, Denbigh had sent his missive directly to Mallory, so Q had had little choice but to accept. Q had left Denbigh’s office in Whitehall three hours after she had arrived, and had gone immediately home where she took the hottest shower she could stand to cleanse herself of the man’s oily megalomania. So unsettled had Q been by Denbigh’s vision of intelligence acted upon by machines rather than human beings that it continued to shape her nightmares weeks later. For all that she embraced technology, mastered it, found solace in it, Q knew that ultimately technology needed to be checked, balanced, and tempered by human logic, intuition, and most especially compassion.

Denbigh’s vision accounted for none of that.
A fortnight later, the man had waylaid Q in a corridor of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as she had been on her way to a meeting.

“I really do hate having to ask for something twice, and yet here I am asking for a third time,” Denbigh had oozed, startling her. Q had been digging through her messenger bag on a bench outside the second storey women’s toilet when he had approached her from behind. Q hadn’t been trapped, precisely, but it had been quite late in the evening and only a few politicos had been burning the midnight oil.

“This would all be so much more pleasant and efficient if you just joined me, my dear Quartermaster.”

Q had stiffened at his proprietary used of her title, her name -- I’m not your Quartermaster, you pompous, power-mad arse! -- but had managed to maintain an equable tone when she replied, “You have plenty of coders already, Max. You don’t need me.”

“You’re right. I don’t need you.” Q had wondered at the time why a grown man would ever affect such a sing-song cadence in his voice. “Want you? Desperately.”

“And why would you possibly want me?” As soon as she had asked the question Q wanted to kick herself for asking. Don’t feed the man’s ego!

“Because you’re the best there is. Anywhere. The best.”

Denbigh had taken a step closer to her, his eyes ranging up and down her form lasciviously as if she stood naked before him. Q had casually pulled the taser-equipped pen she’d developed last year from its pocket on the strap of her messenger bag. One more step and the device would receive additional field testing.

“And I deserve the best, my dear. Britain deserves the best.”

“I currently serve the UK in that capacity.”

“Please,” he had scoffed. “Soon that will be naught but a memory. You know it as well as I do. The Double-Os are facing extinction, and so is your little Q-Branch. Is that what they call it? How quaint. Don’t you want a chance to make a real difference?”

“I already do.” Q had zipped up her bag and looped the strap over her head to settle it across her torso. The hand holding the pen had rested at her side, but she had hooked the fingers of the other through the strap, affecting a degree of nonchalance that she had not felt, but she’d be damned if she let him believe otherwise. “Tell me, does this ‘Doctor Evil’ approach really work on people? If so, I weep for the future of the Intelligence Services.” The truth was, however, that she had to get out of there. The man was dangerous and keeping up with his shifting moods was likely to give her whiplash, to say nothing of the impact on her blood pressure.

“I could always have you transferred to my team without your consent.” Denbigh had snapped, eyes flashing with anger for a moment before he returned to the wide-eyed flirt, suddenly rolling back and forth on the balls of his feet like a 10 year-old child who had finally figured out a way to wheedle a pony out of his parents for his birthday. “The PM is very keen on having the best minds on this project, and he’s willing to give me whatever … whom ever I want to make it happen.”

The tension that had been steadily building inside Q had eased instantly, and her bark of laughter echoed through the old building. She had pressed her fingertips to her mouth, suddenly embarrassed for him. “Oh, Max, you’ve quite shown your hand there now, I’m afraid,” She had
smiled at the puzzled look that passed through his reptilian eyes. “You’re right. You could insist upon my transfer, but I would immediately resign. You see, I don’t have to work for MI6 or anyone else for that matter. I choose to work for the SIS because there is no better organisation when it comes to keeping the UK safe and secure, and they’ve decided that I’m the best there is to help them do just that. The moment I feel I’ve become a liability to that end, I will walk out the door, and I’m pretty sure that my working for you would make me a liability to more than just MI6.”

Q had taken a deliberate step around his body and beamed a smile up at him. As she wouldn’t be needing it, she had tucked the taser pen back in its pocket. She had privately admitted to taking a great deal of pleasure at the barely concealed anger on his face. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting for which I am almost tardy.”

“We’ll discuss this again,” Denbigh had called after her, his tone minatory.

“No, we won’t,” Q had called over her shoulder in her own mocking, sing-song tone.

Mallory had been furious at her when Q had informed him of the encounter the next day. Not because she had made Denbigh look like a fool but because in doing so, M feared his Quartermaster had made herself a target.

“I meant what I said, M,” Q had told her boss when he called her to his office. “If Denbigh tries to force me into anything to do with that programme, I will resign immediately and leave the country to get as far from it as possible. I won’t be a party to that kind of Skynet oversight.”

Thankfully, Mallory was culturally literate enough to catch the allusion, and he had promised to intercept any further requests from Denbigh. “He’s right, though, Q. You are the best there is, and I’ll watch your back for as long as I can.”

With both Alec and Bond out of the country, she found herself greatly comforted by Mallory’s support and assurances. She was, of course, completely capable and able to take care of herself, but there was just something about the man …

That had been a week ago, and thus far she had heard nothing further from the realm of Max Denbigh. Unfortunately, she was reasonably sure that it was just a matter of time before she did, but in the meantime she had more important things to worry about. Providing her agents with appropriate and competent support in the field, for example.

Granted, agents had successfully gone into the field for decades before the advent of real-time support from Headquarters and Q-Branch, but modern terrorism had fundamentally changed counterintelligence, and up-to-date intel and live support were as key to the success or failure of a mission and to the very life of an agent as were that agent’s weapons and instinct.

Q had been meticulous in setting and reviewing the work schedules to ensure that none of the handlers went too long without an appropriate amount of downtime. With Sean Cupp working only part-time until he returned from paternity leave at the end of the month, she had assigned Diego Fiore from R&D to assist Brisa on comms. He was still largely inexperienced in running missions, but he was the only other person in TSS who had started training before the funding had run out. Benjamini Kopala, also snagged from R&D, had been tapped as a potential trainee back when Q was still known as R and the Comm Programme was still in its infancy. Benji had shown intuitive skill when it came to the fundamentals of agent wrangling and worked well with R, Brisa, and Sean. Q might not be able to provide Fiore and Benji with formal training anymore, but there was something to be said for learning on the job.
In spite of it all, there had been little sleep to be had in Q-Branch these last few weeks. While she had been able to see to the needs of her handlers, Q’s additional commitments as a department head meant that she had found herself at home so infrequently that she finally started bringing Wuyi and Macallan with her to work when she knew that it might be days before she could return to the warehouse. Eventually, Q decided just to move into her office for the duration. She and the kits had made the best of a difficult situation, however, and the presence of two balls of fluff in the Branch had gone a long way in reviving exhausted spirits.

Upon their arrival, the denizens of the Bunkers had immediately christened the two kittens the official mascots of Q-Branch, and they were additionally thankful when the young cats proved themselves to be quite excellent mousers.

Wuyi was about as independent a cat as Q had ever seen, content to explore the twisting maze-like bunkers on her own, returning to Q-Branch when she was hungry for food other than mice and human attention. Macallan, on the other hand, was almost dog-like in his devotion to Q and seldom left her side unless there was a mouse to chase. He curled up next to her on the futon at night and sat atop the empty corner of her workstation on The Platform whenever she ran comms.

“Mac with you today?” Alec had asked early one morning from Brălia where he was on assignment with Danny Cabral.

“He is,” Q had confirmed. “And if you transmit the information you promised me, I might even send you a picture of the beggar.”

It was a rare thing to send an agent back out into the field so soon after emerging from deep cover, but Cabral had been tasked with locating a man with ties to two bombings against British interests in Romania. Danny, whom Q had known since their days together in MI6 basic training, spoke the language but didn’t have the ‘right’ contacts, so Mallory had paired him up with 006, who had both. It also wasn’t common for Double-Os to go out in tandem with a regular field agent, but neither was it unheard of. The last time had been when Bond and Ian Ronson were sent to Istanbul to find and retrieve the hard drive containing the NATO List.

The intelligence Alec had sent from Brălia had been encouraging, and Q had quickly forwarded the hard data to the analysts, promising to have updated mission parameters to Alec within 12 hours. She had urged them to lay low in the meantime. “Rest up, Double-O Six. Who knows if you’ll have the time later,” she had said before signing off. The pair had been out three weeks already, but if the intel stayed local, Trevelyan and Cabral might be back in London sometime in the next five days. If the leads took them out of Romania, it was anyone’s best guess as to when they’d return.

In addition to 009 in the American Southwest, Q had been running 001 in Tokyo. Malcolm Jenkins had been following the threads of a suspected human trafficking ring with suggested ties throughout most of Europe. He had been on assignment since shortly after 006’s return to London, but his leads had taken him nowhere. Similar to the data Alec had come back with from his ‘extended assignment’ and the intel Bond had extracted during the Holdst mission, the footprints of the ring seemed to have been everywhere, but it was if they had been washed over by an incoming tide, leaving only a faint impression behind to suggest they had ever been there at all. Jenkins had exhausted all of his leads and had returned home two days ago largely empty-handed and definitely frustrated by his lack of progress.

Then there had been Bond. He had been out and back three times in the weeks since that passionate encounter in Q’s sitting room, but the three scattered days he had been on British soil in that time had been filled with briefings, debriefings, and kitting out before going right back out
again, and all of it within the confines of HQ, so there had been no time or opportunity for a
discussion of that night let alone the potential for a redo.

British diplomats were apparently ‘in season,’ but Bond’s missions to Malawi and Burkina Faso
had both ended with the attachés safe and their would-be kidnappers very much dead. He had then
been dispatched to Bali to gather additional intel from Ida Darmali before taking her into custody
for her intended bioterror attack on Frankfurt.

“The woman has contacts, suppliers, a laboratory to develop these weapons somewhere. Get the
information by any means, Double-O Seven,” Mallory had told the agent during the short briefing
Bond had attended with Q. Bond had been given a very brief turnaround between Burkina Faso
and his dispatch to Bali, fewer than six hours total in London -- including a brief stint in Medical to
have a bullet wound to his thigh properly stitched up -- so Q had needed to provide him with the
details of the mission once he arrived at The Legian Bali resort, but it had been apparent to the both
of them before he left that a honey trap would likely be necessary.

Though Q had run comm support on several honey traps with other agents in the past, this would
be the first with 007, and while she had no doubts that she could separate her personal feelings for
Bond from her professional responsibilities, it nevertheless left her feeling a bit scattered. She felt
no jealousy about Bond’s impending liaison with Ida Darmali. If anything, she felt more than a
little bit repulsed for Bond’s sake. Would she always feel an absence of jealousy? More than
likely. Honey traps were part of a field agent’s arsenal of weapons to get the job done, after all.

Q pressed her cheek against Mac’s warm body as the kitten started purring in her ear. Bond and
she had made no promises to one another. She didn’t expect any. Hell, they hadn’t even kissed,
yet Q really didn’t know what to do about the feelings she was developing for the man. Her
youthful infatuation with James Bond had left lingering effects. It had become clear to her rather
quickly after their first meeting that she had a type: blonde, muscular, tall but solidly built, a quick
wit and an even quicker tongue. David from her uni cohort, the Belgians Sig and Rey, Michael in
Byron Bay, Crispian from the MoD, each of her previous lovers -- save one -- fit that type.
Though none had come even close to having a pair of those fabulous, impossibly erotic ears. Ears
that she wanted kiss and lick and nibble until Bond groaned with pleasure. Ears that she wanted to
cling to while he pleasured her. Heady images that had fueled her dreams for years and now might
become more than mere fantasy. Macallan mewed loudly in her ear, as if to remind Q of his part in
why she hadn’t got a leg over with James Bond that night, before he wandered down to the bottom
corner of the futon to curl up with his sister.

As if she could forget.

Q cracked open one eye to see the blurry numbers of the digital clock above the series of its time-
zone-specific peers that hung on the far wall. It was as she thought. She’d wasted nearly 30
minutes of her precious 5 hour window to gather wool, and yet she felt no closer to sleep than she
had before. Her mind was still too active in spite of her exhaustion.

She considered her options. Though occasionally necessary, Q, nevertheless, hated taking sleeping
pills, and she absolutely refused to use them whenever she was scheduled to be on comms during
an active mission.

So … option two, it was.

She would erase the surveillance footage of her office in the morning.

Q turned her thoughts back to Bond as he had appeared on the video feed: white linen shirt open at
the neck, showcasing the ever-burnished length of his throat and the strong line of his jaw; dark
sunglasses hiding his wicked blue eyes but emphasizing the sensual curve of his lips; the slightly spiked strands of his short golden hair, just tousled enough to suggest that he’d rolled out of bed only moments before when he’d actually done nothing of the sort.

With that mental picture in mind, her memories took her further back. Need and desire pooled low in Q’s belly at the recollection of that night when Bond had lifted her effortlessly and pressed her against the wall and proceeded to take her apart.

Beneath the thick quilt, Q let one hand slip past the waistband of her sleep trousers and into her knickers. Spreading her legs slightly, she dusted her fingertips across the curls there, then slid them between the folds, already slick with want and the memory of Bond’s fingers on her, in her as he had suckled first at one nipple and then the other.

An eidetic memory combined with a creative mind and extremely perceptive senses had always served Q well in her masturbatory fantasies in the past, but now, actually knowing what it felt like to have Bond’s hands and mouth on her body, she felt the tension build in her far more quickly than it ever had before. Slicking the fingers of her free hand with her tongue, Q slipped it back beneath the quilt and under the hem of her loose jumper to roll a nipple tightly between her thumb and forefinger, digging in with her fingernails slightly to bite at the sensitive flesh as Bond had done with his teeth. Q bent her knees, bearing down against the pressure of her hand, the muscles in her calves and thighs tensing as her fingers flew across her clit.

Her fingers became his, flicking, stroking, and teasing her nub, pushing her toward completion.

Bond slid first one finger and then a second into her core, thrusting into her. His sultry baritone whispered nonsense in her ear as he urged her closer, higher, until he sensed she was there, knew that she was ready to tip over the edge. “Come, Q. Come now!” he ordered, and Q obeyed. The tension in her body shattered at his command and she spun off into ecstasy with a soft whimper. “So good for me,” Bond murmured as he pulled his fingers from her body, pressing tender kisses to her temple and her jaw, but not to her lips. “So lovely.”

Q had just enough energy to pull her hand from her knickers and snuggle more deeply beneath the quilt before the heavy lassitude she had been seeking seeped into her limbs and the needed torpor enveloped her mind.

“James,” she mumbled once before she slept.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope that you enjoyed the chapter. Please do make use of that comment box down there, even if it's just to type out a few words of support. If you've not clicked the Kudos button yet, that's an option, too. Yes, I am shameless when it comes to asking for feedback.

Thanks so much for taking the time out of your day to read this. :)
Chapter Summary

“There is that awful moment when you realize that you’re falling in love. That should be the most joyful moment, and actually it’s not. It’s always a moment that’s full of fear because you know, as night follows day, the joy is going to rapidly be followed by some pain or other. All the angst of a relationship.”

— Helen Mirren

Alec was right. James couldn’t continue to live in limbo when it came to his feelings for Q. It wasn’t fair to either of them. He could either take that final step and allow himself to risk everything to be with her exclusively (she deserved nothing less), or he would follow the path that led solely to friendship. James knew which way he wanted to go -- accidentally calling her ‘love’ earlier was a pretty strong indicator even he couldn’t ignore -- but he honestly didn’t know if he had it in him to go that way.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone!

It's been since June since I posted Chapter Six, but amazingly enough, I'm only two weeks behind my planned release for Chapter Seven. That's a far sight better than the five months between Chapters Five and Six. Oi! I still feel badly about that.

In addition to the chapter, there's now gorgeous FAN ART created by the incomparable Springbok7 and an absolutely lovely BANNER from the Photoshop-gifted ChestnutNOLA! I'm very excited about each piece. I so wish I had the artistic talent that these two have. I cannot draw my way out of a wet paper bag with a machete and a guide, unfortunately. The fan art will be at the end of the chapter as kind of a lovely aperitif, and I'll put the banner at the top of this chapter as well as back on Chapter One so that it's truly a "banner."

A brief reminder that this continues to be a non-linear story that focuses on the time period between Skyfall and Spectre and the aftermath of what happens at Westminster Bridge (end of Spectre). I mark the time period shifts within each chapter, so pay attention to the section headings. Eventually (though not anytime in the next four chapters) we will get down to one timeline that is just about what happens after Spectre.

Please let me know what you think of this chapter. A lot of work has gone into it not only on my part, but from my beta/muse/and (in this chapter) co-writer, Springbok7, whose creative contributions are beyond measure. Damn but she's good! If you've not checked out her work, I highly encourage you to do so. She has some lovely things written in both the James Bond and Marvel universes.
Chapter Seven - “In Whose Eyes You See Your Soul”

“There is that awful moment when you realize that you’re falling in love. That should be the most joyful moment, and actually it’s not. It’s always a moment that’s full of fear because you know, as night follows day, the joy is going to rapidly be followed by some pain or other. All the angst of a relationship.”
It was late, going on ten o’clock, but the familiarity of the welcome footfalls on the staircase was such that Alec didn’t even bother to reach for the Sig he kept secured under the dining table in Q’s warehouse. Nor did he look up from the schematics on the screen of the laptop in front of him; he did, however, reach out with a hand to push aside some of the paper blueprints that were scattered over the table’s surface in order to make room for the meal that his unscheduled, though not unexpected, visitor was certain to have brought along.

“I won’t ask if you like Greek,” Tanner said as he passed by the table to the open kitchen, setting down a large, two-handled brown paper bag on the island worktop before he began rummaging through cupboards and drawers. “You’ve been raving about the moussaka from The Four Lanterns for as long as I’ve known you.”

“’Bout bloody time, then,” Alec groused. The portion of his brain that was ever vigilant registered the momentary cessation of movement from the kitchen and conjured a fleeting image of Tanner’s eyebrow drily quirked at the rejoinder, but the rest of the agent’s attention was still focussed on the details of the renovation plans he had been presented with the day before.

A few months ago, the schematics on the table would have been for whatever fantastical bit of tech or munitions or firearms Q was designing for her agents, but now they were for sodding accommodations, for the reconstruction of the warehouse in preparation for Q’s eventual return home. He grunted in frustration and resisted the urge to tear the sheets to shreds or to throw the laptop against the wall. There was something about these drafts that caused his gut to twist and knot in a way that even seeing Q in her wheelchair didn’t do. They made it all real, brought it all home, and he hated them. Hated what they represented for his friend, and Alec really didn’t know what to do with them. Though he had learned with painful clarity what Q wanted to do with them, but he still wasn’t convinced that --

The edge of an empty wine bottle clinked against the marble worktop behind him, disrupting his thoughts.

“Argentinian malbec,” Bill hummed appreciatively. He poured two glasses from the decanter next to the bottle and then rounded the worktop to bring one to the table for Alec. “I won’t ask how you guessed red tonight.”

Alec snorted. Tanner had brought chicken last night and sea bass the night before, of course it’d be something heartier tonight. Hence, red.

“They’d hardly have allowed me to become a field agent let alone a Double-O if I wasn’t able to anticipate something as basic as what wine to drink with dinner.” So intent was Alec on the plans
in front of him that this time he failed to notice the way Tanner’s posture stiffened at his petulant, scornful response.

Alec stifled the desire to shove his hands into his hair with the frustration he felt sizzling along his nerves at what was on the computer screen before him and instead shut the lid of the laptop and pushed it to the end of the table with controlled care. Despite his irritation there were still changes to be made, however, so he snagged one of the blueprints he had pushed aside and affixed a self-stick note to one of the corners then referred to a pad of paper that held the notations he had made from his rather disastrous meeting with Q earlier that afternoon.

Alec was hunting around under the other prints for a biro to jot down Q’s requests and changes on the square of brightly coloured paper as Tanner set a glass of the malbec at Alec’s elbow. He barely registered Tanner’s presence at his side, at least not until the man reached over the Alec’s shoulder to pluck the blueprint from his grasp, rolled it up along with four others on the table before sliding the whole lot into the thick cardboard tube from whence they had come. Tanner took it with him back into the kitchen and set the tube on top of the fridge.

“What the everlasting fuck, Tanner?!?” Alec growled. He stood so quickly that his chair skidded back across the wooden floor as he rounded on the Chief of Staff, managing only by deeply ingrained body awareness to avoid knocking over the filled wineglass. “I was working on that.”

“And it’s turning you into a right bastard in the process, so clearly you need a break. Sit down, relax, drink your wine, and I’ll have dinner ready in a mo.’” Bill’s voice was calm and level as he pulled several insulated containers from the brown paper bag.

“Sod that!” Alec growled, his frustration from the afternoon boiling over. “I’m not done with those!”

“Alec Trevelyan, you will get out of this kitchen, sit back down, and Drink. Your. Wine.” Bill wasn’t in the least bit intimidated by the angry Double-O who was stalking toward the refrigerator and the tube of blueprints with the momentum of a runaway lorry.

It was the same tone of voice that Tanner had used on Alec nearly two months ago when the agent was terrorizing Q’s doctors upon his initial arrival at UCH, and it had the same immediate, bizarre, and downright visceral effect. The forceful tone -- one that, again, didn’t rise above a conversational level -- might have had Alec actually skidding to a stop on the hardwood floor if he were wearing socks instead of being barefoot. His brow furrowed in confusion at his own response, and he was about to let loose with an angry retort and resume his course when Tanner looked up at him from the meal he was plating.

Gone was the amused kindness that so often shone from Tanner’s blue eyes. His face was blandly neutral, but those eyes!

They were steely and insistent, a flat and implacable coolness filling them that all at once, and quite inexplicably, reminded Alec of the eerie hyperfocus James used to exhibit when a mission cut rather too close to home. Those times when Alec had worried he'd be bringing his friend home in a box. Just as inexplicably, Tanner’s eyes suddenly resembled the stark, turbid surface of the sea whilst caught in the eye of a hurricane. Alec looked away, feeling strangely unsettled for all that he still itched with a righteous fury and frustration that roiled beneath his skin.

“Now, Trevelyan.”

There was a heartbeat’s pause .... followed by another. Three angry strides later, however, Alec was banging his chair back to the table, positioning it at an angle to the kitchen where Tanner was
working, and dropped down into it, his arms crossed in front of his chest like a sulking six-year-old. Bill would have laughed at the absurdity of the stroppy agent, if not for the very real point he was trying to drive home.

He waited fifteen seconds more for Alec to complete the order he had been given. He didn’t.

“You realise all this goes with me if I leave.” Bill gestured at the containers -- dolmades, king prawns with garlic sauce, and the much-touted moussaka served with potatoes crispy on the outside but tender and as light as air inside -- with the serving spoon in his hand. When Alec’s only response was to continue to glare at him like a child, Bill sighed and began packing the food back into their boxes.

Alec huffed out a breath and grudgingly put out a hand to bring the glass of wine to his lips and take a swallow, maintaining his glare throughout.

Tanner resumed his plating as Alec broke eye contact, swiveling in his seat to face the table. He did, however, continue to sip from the glass and seemed to release some of the sharp tension from his shoulders, slumping down into the chair just a little.

Bill froze in the midst of fishing the last prawn from its container as the phrase 'Good boy!' floated into his awareness. His eyes widened and his breath caught in surprise. Where on God's green earth had that thought from from?!

Thankfully, Alec appeared oblivious to Tanner's no doubt shocked expression, and the same iron control that had served the Chief of Staff so well as a senior field agent now allowed him to muster some semblance of command over his reaction, though not, apparently, over the fond smile that curved his lips as he finally completed serving the food he'd brought to share with his friend.

Twenty minutes later, both men were largely finished with their meals and only the remains were scattered on their plates. They had eaten in a silence oddly companionable in spite of Alec’s moodiness.

“So do you want to tell me what’s got you in such a strop, then?” Bill asked when Alec finally pushed his plate away. Bill took up the decanter from the centre of the table and topped off each of their glasses with the last of the malbec.

“I’m fine.”

Tanner scoffed outright. “Alec, that display of misdirected anger just now is the very definition of ‘not fine’. Try again.”

When Alec pushed back from the table this time, it was with an air of resignation rather than anger. He carried his wine glass by the top of the bowl rather than the stem and walked to the long row of windows that faced St. Michael’s Street below. He took a swallow of his wine followed by another and looked out at the dark street below. He did not reply.

Bill didn’t press the issue. Yet. He could tell that Alec was trying to determine how best to answer the question he had been asked, so he’d give the man some time. Bill was accustomed to dealing with touchy Double-Os. Oh, maybe not with the frequency of Mallory or the Quartermaster, but Bill was far from a novice, and he felt he was starting to learn the tells of this particular Double-O quite well.

He took up his own glass and settled on the long arm of Q’s blue corner sofa. Macallan had been sleeping on the far end, opened an eye as Bill sat down, and now that there was a human close at
hand, decided a warm lap was a far better place to nap. He circled twice before nesting in and was soon a purring white and caramel ball of contentment. Bill had long given up on the state of his suit trousers whenever he found himself in Macallan’s domain. The little beggar was infamously needy, but particularly so since neither he nor Wuyi understood what had happened to Q, so Bill was only too happy to oblige. He gently rubbed behind the cat’s ears with one hand and propped the elbow of his other arm casually on the back of the sofa as he observed his … yes -- Bill confirmed his earlier but fleeting assessment -- his friend.

Prior to the Quartermaster’s injury, Bill’s interactions with Alec Trevelyan had been exclusively in the professional realm, and even those, given the amount of time 006 spent on deep cover missions, were few and far between. That had changed substantially since Westminster Bridge, and especially so once Q roused from her coma and gave Alec the verbal boot out of the chair at her bedside three days later to go ‘do something to help clean up this bloody mess’ that Blofeld -- and Bond -- had left behind.

Even though it put Six down two Double-Os in the field, Mallory had conditionally approved Trevelyan’s request for indefinite leave, at least as far as field work was concerned. Alec refused to leave London so long as Q was in hospital -- had threatened to resign from the service altogether if he was denied -- so in return, he had made himself available, and ultimately invaluable, to both the Executive and Q-Branches as an advisor and liaison between the two branches and the Double-Os and senior agents tasked with bringing down the Nine Eyes infrastructure and the rest of Spectre.

Only Bond had a longevity similar to Alec’s, who had been in the field twice as long as any of the other Double-Os; Mallory had quickly realised that having Trevelyan’s experience and knowledge in a centralised location, able to be disseminated to agents around the world, was an unprecedented asset, and became, in large part, the reason why, within a month of Alec taking on that role, the remnants of Nine Eyes had been completely destroyed and Spectre seemed not far behind.

As Mallory’s Chief of Staff, it had been Tanner’s job to liaise with the liaison, and the two had spent the bulk of their days with one another, piecing together what amounted to a counterintelligence quilt of overlapping and complementary missions all designed to eliminate the Blofeld threat once and for all. It was not uncommon for their work to spill over into or well past the dinner hour, and while Alec was more than used to going long stretches between meals, Tanner no longer was.

“See what happens when you’re out of the field too long, Tanner?” Alec had mocked goodnaturedly the first time the CoS had brought Thai take-away to the warehouse. Between their long hours working against Blofeld, their shared dinners -- which had quickly increased from once a week to practically nightly -- and their continued focus on the Quartermaster’s recovery and rehabilitation, Bill Tanner and Alec Trevelyan spent more time in each other’s company than not. It was to be expected, then, that the lines between the professional and the personal had started to blur, and their mealtime conversations had drifted beyond MI6 business. Bill’s own stories were not very entertaining and largely from his childhood or those years when he was still an agent, before permanent damage to his heart from an assassin’s toxin left him unable to continue in the field, but Alec had seemed interested in them. He listened attentively, asked questions, laughed in the funny moments, and sobered in the serious ones. He even brought Bill two cases of Jelly Babies the morning after Tanner had admitted to a long-standing addiction to the sweet, but sadly never seemed to find the time to pop to the corner shop and buy a bag.

Alec’s personality, however, made him a gifted storyteller, and while Bill learned little truly personal about Trevelyan -- who, understandably, clung to the private details of his life as if they
were a phial of water to a man dying of thirst in the desert -- he had still gained a better sense of the man behind the agent and liked what he had discovered.

Jelly Babies notwithstanding, by reading between the lines, Bill uncovered that Alec Trevelyan the Man was a thoughtful, kind, and trustworthy person who was fiercely loyal to the things and people he held dear, among them: the United Kingdom, James Bond, the Quartermaster, and Leicester Tigers rugby. The first three Bill could understand. The last … well, there’s always something.

Bill tried not to spend too much time thinking about the why of it -- very little … good could come of that degree of introspection -- but he enjoyed spending time with Alec and had seen that the man was growing increasingly tense and short-tempered. It had started shortly after the Quartermaster had been transferred out of London to the Shea Spinal Cord Injury Centre in Windsor a fortnight ago to begin her rehabilitation.

Alec continued to stare out the window, apparently content to gather more wool than a shepherd at shearing time, but the tension in his frame had not eased. Tanner could even see it in Trevelyan’s bare feet, the toes of which tensed and flexed repeatedly against the hardwood floor.

Bill decided it was time to push.

“Things didn’t go well with Q today, did they?”

“Understatement,” Alec snorted and finished his wine in two deep swallows. He set the glass down on the sill lest he accidentally crush it in his grip. “She called me an idiot.”

“Not unheard of for her … or for you.” Bill wasn’t being flippant. He was stating facts as far as their Quartermaster was concerned.

“She threw me out and told me not to come back until I ‘stop acting like a sodding, insensitive prick.’”

Bill’s eyebrows rose in surprise. While it was rather common for Q to toss people out of her office or Q-Branch entirely when they annoyed her overly much, Tanner was surprised to hear of her doing it in this instance, and it was … unsettling. Not even during that horrible time after Trevelyan’s return from deep cover when she had refused to even speak with Alec outside of a professional context had Q thrown him out of the rooms he kept downstairs. There was more to the story than Bill was currently getting, and he did not need his experience in counterintelligence to tell him so.

“And were you? A ‘sodding insensitive prick?’” Alec stiffened and shot Tanner a sharp look over his shoulder. “Think about it. Objectively, Alec. Sure, Q’s moods can be … mercurial. She’s caustic. Snappish. But rarely without cause and never maliciously.”

Careful not to disturb the wine glass, Alec turned and propped his arse against the window sill. As he began to speak, he gestured to illustrate his points or to indicate the parts of the warehouse about which he was speaking. Tanner’s eyes were drawn to the graceful movements and elegant lines of the agent’s hands before he shook off the momentary distraction to pay closer attention to Alec’s words. He must be more tired than he’d realised.

“We’d been going over the renovation plans for the warehouse with Lina, her occupational therapist. A good meeting, all-in-all. Least I thought so. She’d offered some suggestions for the kitchen and the second storey. A way to make the garden accessible that I certainly hadn’t considered. Q and I went off to the canteen after, have a bite, talk about it all. I’d been asking her
about some of the ideas Lina had when Q blew up and threw me out.”

Generic terms. Not helpful. “What did you say, specifically, Alec, right before she ‘blew up’ at you?”

“What is this, Tanner? A sodding debrief?”

If that’s what Alec needed it to be. Familiar territory. Fewer emotions to get tangled up, he hoped. “Yes, so answer the question, agent,” Bill ordered.

It seemed to work as Alec quickly found clarity in the details. “She had dismissed some of Lina’s suggestions, seemingly out of hand. I told her that I didn’t think she should just ignore them entirely. I told her that I didn’t think she was anticipating some of the challenges she might be facing. I told her that I didn’t think she’d be able to easily access some of the things she’d need to if --”

“Wait, Alec. You told her these things or you suggested that she consider the situation before she made any final plans?”

The confusion was obvious in Alec’s face.

“Told her. Why?”

Tanner resisted the urge to groan aloud, but only just. “What did Q say to you, exactly, before she threw you out?”

Alec scowled at Tanner like he didn’t see what this had to do with anything, but Bill just stared back until Alec finally replied. Like most agents, Trevelyan’s memory tended to be exactlying precise, and Tanner had no doubt that Alec was quoting Q’s words directly when he said, “She told me, ‘Don’t speak to me as if I haven’t considered the ramifications of my choices or that I don’t know my own mind! It’s my legs that don’t work any more, you idiot, not my brain! I’m not a project for you to take on or a bloody mission for you to complete. I need your support, not to be treated like a bloody child who can’t make her own decisions. Until you remember that, just get the fuck out and don’t bother showing your face again until you’re ready to treat me the way you always have, you sodding, insensitive prick!’ She stormed off before I could say anything. I’d have gone after her but --”

It wouldn’t have changed anything.

Yep. Bill was pretty sure that those words were verbatim, and if Q, who rarely swore, was cursing like that, things were bad, indeed. This time he did not check his sigh.

“What?” Alec demanded.

“Look. I’m not saying that Q handled the situation gracefully, but I do understand it.”

Alec shook his head, no less confused. “Explain.”

It was then that Bill realised it hadn’t only been Trevelyan who had been circumspect with the personal details these last few months. Bill finished his wine and set the empty glass on the narrow table behind the sofa, resisting the urge to pick at a seam in the seat’s fabric. He’d never shared this with anyone before, and already he could feel his stomach twist at the notion of doing so now, particularly with this man, but if it helped...

“When Medical told me that the damage to my heart was going to pull me out of the field...
permanently, I thought those were the worst words I could ever hear. They weren’t. Turned out that the real poison wasn’t what had been injected into me. It was what people said afterwards. Friends who I know cared, were worried about me. Wanted to be helpful, supportive, and accommodating. ‘You shouldn’t run five miles a day anymore, Bill. Your heart,’ or ‘Really? A fry up? Aren’t you supposed to be more careful now?’ and then there was my personal favourite, ‘I really want you to fuck me, Billy, but what if you collapse in the middle of it and die of a heart attack?’”

“You’re kidding!” The look on Alec’s face was incredulous.

“That was the last time I ever tried to get a leg over with someone from Six. With anyone who knows about my ‘poor heart.’” Suddenly thirsty, Bill reached for the wine glass before remembering it was empty. He clenched his fist and set it in his lap next to Mac’s head, instead.

Alec huffed and rolled his eyes at the stupidity of others. “Field agents have higher fitness standards, for Pete’s sake! M would have retired you completely if you weren’t healthy enough by typical standards. You’re hardly an invalid.”

“No. I’m not. And the point is, neither is Q.”

Alec stilled, muscles taut and tense, his very breath seeming to freeze in his lungs.

Bill continued, his eyes never leaving Alec’s. “Being in the field, going on missions, defined me. I knew who I was, what I was supposed to, and how I needed to live my life. But suddenly the very parameters by which I lived my life were gone. A snap of the fingers and everything I’d relied on was in shambles. It took a bit, but I was able find my way again. You’re right. M could have sacked me on the spot, but she made me Deputy Chief of Staff instead, and when Robinson retired, she pointed at me and said, ‘You’ll do. Just don’t bollocks it up.’ She made a place for me in E-Branch, and that gave me a purpose again. Q will still have her purpose. She’s still Quartermaster. But the poison will still be there, waiting to seep in, to taint everything. The unsolicited comments and pieces of advice that are meant kindly. Helpfully. They undermine and eat away at one’s sense of self. Worse yet, one can’t even get properly angry with those people, since most of them don’t even realise how what they’re saying is affecting the person they are only trying to help. Alec, you know that she’s already terrified of what the medications do to her mind. To her ability to think and process and analyse. She’ll be on some of those medications for years, possibly the rest of her life.”

“She’s always believed her sole value is in what her genius has to offer. I’ve never been able to convince her otherwise. For a while I thought that James would be --” Alec sighed, his shoulders sagging under the weight of the dawning realisation of what his words had likely done to Q.

“So don’t make it worse by questioning the choices she makes. Listen to her. Listen to what she says she needs, not what you think she needs. She’s still Q. The only difference now is that she’ll use a wheelchair instead of her legs to chase you down to beat your arse when you’re being an idiot.”

Alec rubbed his face with his hand, and when it came away, his eyes were downcast. Bill couldn’t remember a time when the agent looked so disheartened. “She was right. I’m a sodding, insensitive prick. I didn’t mean to --”

“Of course you didn’t mean it, Alec. I know that, and when she calms down, Q will know it, too. You love her, and you’re scared for her. We all are. Just don’t lose sight of who she is in the process. Listen to her fears, tell her yours. Celebrate her triumphs. Share how impressed Mallory is with your liaison work. She’ll be thrilled for you. Be her friend. Just as always. Whether she
realises it yet or not, she’s going to need all of us. Not to put too fine a point on it, but her rehabilitation isn’t just about what her body can and can’t do anymore. It’s the whole package: physical and psychological. The fact that there are … other mitigating stressors tangentially associated with Q’s injury can’t be ignored, either.”

James. Alec appreciated Tanner’s tactful way of addressing the other elephant that took up so much space in their lives right now.

“What it all boils down to is this: be what you’ve always been to her, her friend. It’s no more complicated than that.”

And Alec finally realised that that was what Q had been trying to tell him all along.

“What do I do to make this right?” Alec had raised his eyes to Tanner’s. For a man who always seemed to know what decision to make, what direction to head in, he looked so lost, and Bill had the sudden impression that all Alec’s hopes for the future of his friendship with the Quartermaster hung on his next words. Where was the wine when he needed it?

“Give it a few days,” he finally said. “Let her calm down, have a chance to talk and work with her therapists a bit more. She’s only been at Shea a fortnight and things are bound to still be stressful from that alone. Then send her a few texts, call her, plan on going up again at the week’s end with your tail firmly between your legs. After Eights and some of that expensive tea you turned her on to would be a good idea, too. I hear the tea’s shite up there.”

Macallan woke at the sound of Wuyi’s plaintive meow that sounded from Q’s vacant bedroom, gave Bill’s hand a quick head butt and then was gone to answer his sister’s summons.

“Take the lil beggars up to Shea with you, too,” he continued, gesturing at Mac’s white tail as it disappeared around the corner. “They haven’t seen her since before the accident and can’t understand what happened. All they know is that she’s been gone an awfully long time. They miss her, and I’m sure she does them. And now that she's at Shea, we won't have to worry about claws catching on lines, or worse. Just for God's sake clear it with the duty nurse first. The last thing we need is one or both of the little terrors getting lost and then hurt in a strange environment, and a bit of warning should make certain that's one disaster we can nip in the bud.”

Bill could tell from Alec’s expression and slight smile that he thought it was a good plan, but after a moment the agent’s eyes grew distant again.

“What?” Bill asked. Alec was clearly hurting, and after everything he’d just shared about himself, Bill felt more than a little untethered himself. He wanted to help. Wanted Alec to know that he mattered, but dared not reveal how much he mattered, not when he’d barely had a chance to acknowledge it to himself.

Alec didn’t know how to explain what he was feeling to himself let alone to someone else. He was shite at emotions but overly proficient at mental self-flagellation. There were so many questions for which there were no answers. The guilt he felt -- mission in Sri Lanka or not -- at not having been here when everything went to shite at Westminster Bridge. Wondering whether or not Q would still have been shot. Would his presence have kept Blofeld or Denbigh from putting them all in such an untenable position? Then there was his anger at James for walking away with Madeleine Swann. The uncertainty of whether or not Alec’s presence would have kept his friend -- his brother -- from abandoning Q, the woman James had finally admitted to loving. Alec had believed him. Believed that James believed it. It wasn’t just lip service. James loved Q. Full stop. So how had it all gone to shite?
“I won’t tell you to stop feeling guilty, Alec,” Tanner said, interrupting his thoughts, and Alec started at the man’s perception. “Oh don’t give me that look, you Double-Os aren’t the only ones in Six who can read people. I’d be a shite Chief of Staff if I couldn’t see past people’s poker faces, but I understand the guilt. You have no idea the number of times I’ve found myself wondering that if I’d just been a little bit faster, if I’d thrown the four-by-four into reverse just a hair sooner, whether or not Q would still have been shot. Whether or not she’d still be able to walk. There are enough guilty feelings to go around, but the blame belongs only to Blofeld. Try not to lose sight of that.”

All Alec could do was nod. Tanner was right, of course. It didn’t make it any easier to accept, though. But then, that was his point.

That comfortable silence hung in the room between them again as they each considered what they had shared and discussed.

“Right! Well, I’m for home,” Bill eventually said. He stood and grabbed his suit jacket from the back of the arm chair where he had dropped both it and his coat when he’d arrived. “M’s got me off to Paris in the morning, as you know,” he said, slipping into the jacket. “Two bloody days of meetings with the DGSE for long-term strategic planning and cooperation to help ensure that something like Nine Eyes doesn’t happen again.” He looked around for his blue scarf, and finding it underneath the chair, bent over to grab it. “Necessary, of course, but …”

Alec who had been watching silently as Tanner gathered his belongings found himself appreciative of the fact that that Bill hadn’t yet put on his overcoat. The man’s arse was magnificent bent over like that in those trous -- wait! Where in the hell had that come from?!

Bill rose, but the scarf snagged on the underside of the chair and fell from his grasp. “Oh, for Christ’s --” He bent over again, this time for much longer as he worked to unhook the cashmere from whatever it had caught on. Alec scooted off the sill where he had been sitting, ready to upend the chair if need be.

“Ugh! Bugger me,” Tanner huffed as he wrestled with the length of wool, and Alec came to a sudden halt as his mind filled with images of just that. His cock twitched in his jeans at the mental picture of it sliding slowly in and out of Tanner’s -- Good God! Stop it!

It wasn’t because Tanner was a man that made Alec’s primal response so surprising -- his own sexuality was fluid; common and frequently necessary among field agents and Double-Os -- as it was the fact that it was Bill Tanner. The Security Service’s bloody Chief of Staff.

His colleague. His friend.

A man he’d come to trust.

A man who kept calm and carried on no matter how many different directions he was pulled in. Whose voice and presence Alec found surprisingly soothing in the most stressful of moments.

Whose smile was infectious when he let it be seen.

Whose eyes were like the shadows in the cracked blue ice of Lake Baikal and --

Oh.

Bugger.

“As I was saying,” Tanner had finally successfully retrieved his scarf, “I’d rather have Medical
lance a boil on my arse than spend even an afternoon with de Mangoux and his CoS, but we can’t always have what we -- Alec? Are you okay?” He stepped closer to Alec and grasped his elbow, steadying the man who suddenly looked a bit weak in the knees. “You look a bit pale.”

“Yes … I’m fine,” Alec said, though his voice sounded distant even to his own ears. In that moment, he thanked multiple deities for his training and his ability to keep his physical response to Bill’s touch from showing on his face, but for the first time in his life, Alec understood the cliche phrase ‘a burning touch of arousal.’ Never before had the crook of his elbow, where Tanner’s thumb now rested, been an erogenous zone, but it now apparently had a direct line of communication to his cock. What had been merely a twitch before was rapidly becoming a raging hard-on. Alec took the scarf from Tanner’s hand and gestured toward the entryway. He cleared his throat roughly. “Don’t forget your briefcase,” he said.

“Oh. Yes. Right you are.” Tanner turned and snagged his overcoat from the chair, shrugging it on as he passed and picked up his case where it sat propped against a low, partitioned bookcase that housed Q’s collection of science fiction and fantasy classics. Alec allowed himself a silent exhalation of relief once Tanner’s back was turned, took the opportunity to adjust himself, and followed him to the stairs.

“I think you owe me dinner out after all this tonight,” Bill said with a soft chuckle. “I’m not much of a psychotherapist, but if I helped at all --”


“It’s a date.”

Alec’s heart thumped hard in his chest. “A date,” he echoed.

Tanner didn’t move. “Alec?”

“Yes?”

“My scarf?”

“Oh!” Alec looked down at the scarf in his hands; he wasn’t entirely certain why he had taken it in the first place. “My apologies.” But rather than hand it back to Tanner as any sane man would have done, Alec found himself reaching out to link the length of wool around Bill’s neck. As he pulled the tail though the loop, the back of his fingers slid along the curve Tanner’s jaw, unintentionally caressing the tender and sensitive flesh.

Both men inhaled sharply at the contact.

Alec watched, amazed, as Bill’s eyes grew dark, felt the pulse in his carotid begin to thunder under his fingers. Wha -- could -- did he?

The Chief of Staff closed his eyes and tried to take a steadying breath as desire and need sparked and surged within him. He’d been working, so hard, not to let this happen. Not to feel what he had been increasingly feeling for the Double-O. Clearly he had been woefully unsuccessful.

Bill pressed his free hand flat against the other man’s chest, felt the rapid beat of Alec’s heart beneath his palm even as Alec wrapped an arm around his waist beneath his coat to pull him closer. They were of a height, and Bill felt the nudge of Alec’s nose against his followed by a gentle brush of his lips along the shell of Bill’s ear.

Not a kiss. A hello.
“Alec,” Bill sighed, fingers curling into the ribbed collar of the snug navy blue t-shirt the agent was wearing.

“You have to go,” Alec said roughly in his ear, though his words even more of a whisper than the skim of his lips against Bill’s flesh. “But when you get back --”

Bill nodded and pressed his temple to Alec’s. “Dinner and a really long talk,” he said, unable to keep the rueful chuckle from his tone, resigned to the fact that his two days in France had just gone from long to interminable. Bill’s lips brushed a goodbye against Alec’s cheek, opened his eyes, pulled away. “Thursday night. Dinner.”

“Yes.” Alec wondered if his own eyes held the same bewildered daze that he saw in Bill’s.

Probably.

A ghost of a smile flirted with the corners of Bill’s mouth before he turned and descended the stairs. He did not look back.

When he finally heard the front door close and the security system engage, Alec slumped against the wall next to the bookcase, his head dropping until his chin hit his chest. “Idiotas kusok! What are you thinking?!” he chastised himself, fisting his hands in his hair. This was either going to be brilliant or a complete disaster.

But, yebat-kopat, he wanted him. Every last part of him. It had taken nearly all Alec’s self control just now not to push Tanner to the wall to --

Or shag him bent over the --

But -- n-no?

No.

It wouldn’t have been right. There was something about Bill that was --

“Meerp.”

Alec opened his eyes to the sight of Macallan and Wuyi sitting primly on the hardwood at his feet, tails curled around their paws. Feline bookends that looked up at him with identical expressions that all but shouted, “Are you out of your mind?!”

“Don’t look at me in that tone of voice,” he grumbled, using one of Q’s favourite expressions. He pushed off the bookcase and stalked across the living area to collect the wine glasses so he could do the washing up and go to bed. “I know what I’m doing.”

Wuyi’s meow was a clear, “Yeah, sure you do!” that was immediately followed up with Macallan’s, “Bollocks!”

Sodding cats.
Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia and MI6, Q-Branch, London, England: May 2013 (Six months before Westminster Bridge)

Bond finished tying the half-Windsor knot by rote, slid into the jacket of the suit with practiced ease, and shot his cuffs. Only then did James look at his reflection in the mirror of his hotel room. The pink jacquard silk tie with its mini circular pattern was the perfect accessory for his new navy Italian linen suit and the plain white Sea Island cotton shirt with point collar. Part of James wondered if perhaps his sartorial choices might not be a bit of overkill given that Dr. Darmali seemed far more interested in getting James out of his clothes -- if their rather pointed snogging session in the beachside cabana before lunch was any indication -- but the Tom Ford suit was the most basic in his current wardrobe, and the one most fitting his current alias as a historian of independent means -- Darmali's profile indicates she prefers brains and brawn, Bond -- on a brief holiday before beginning his research on the Japanese occupation of East Timor during World War II. He sure as hell wasn’t going to go faffing about wearing tweed, that’s for bloody certain. Erudite didn’t have to equate to poor fashion sense, no matter what Q had to say on the matter.

James reached into the interior pocket of the jacket for the slim case within. He popped it open, pulled out the spectacles, and settled the wire-rims onto his face again. He turned his head first one way and then the other, assessing their appearance. Not half bad, James thought. Q might have more fashion sense than I gave her credit for.

As good as the spectacles looked, James was still grateful that the lenses held no prescription. His distance vision was as good as ever, though during his most recent medical recuperation, he had grudgingly accepted the fact that he needed readers, and then only because Q had made it a point to harass him every time he picked up a book, a journal, or his tablet and found that he had to practically bury his face in the words to see them clearly.

It was when he opened a gaily-wrapped gift box Q had left him on the kitchen worktop one evening and found nestled in tissue paper beneath the lid a magnifying glass so large that that consulting detective in Baker Street everyone was on about would have been embarrassed to carry it around that James finally took the not-so-subtle hint. He bought three pairs of reading spectacles the next day.

These glasses, however, were not a cheap pair of Foster-Grants bought at the corner Boots; they were a marvel of modern Q-Branch technology. In addition to allowing him access to the video conferencing application Q designed, a simple tap to a well-disguised button in the temple bar activated a software programme embedded within the lenses that would scan data from any piece of paper, view screen, or monitor and transmit it digitally to the same cloud-based server Q had set up for him months ago for the Holdst mission, via the heavily encrypted link provided by the agent's mobile.

“No USB or external hard drives to worry about. So simple, even a Double-O can handle it,” Q had said with a mischievous grin as she had quickly kitted him out for this mission. The rest of his kit was fairly standard: his palm-print encoded Walther, an Omega Seamaster, his recently upgraded mobile and tablet, and, yes, two earwigs. Though tempting, James knew better than to complain about that last line item within Q’s hearing.

“Cheeky.” His grumble had been loud enough for the minions closest to Q’s workstation to grin approvingly, but James had then leaned in closely to his Quartermaster so that his next words were for her ears only. “Keep that up, and when I get back from Bali, I’ll show you exactly what it is of
yours that I can handle.”

It had been with careful yet deliberate movements that Q slipped the glasses case into the interior pocket of James’ suit. “So you keep telling me, Bond,” she had whispered in kind. “Perhaps one of these days you’ll actually get around to being more action than talk.” She had then clasped her hands behind her back and said with a professional smile, “Good luck out there in the field, Double-O Seven. Please do return all the equipment in one piece.”

Had he only her words to go by, James would have thought Q unaffected by his flirting. Had he not stood so closely, James would have missed the slight hitch in Q’s breathing before she offered up her standard farewell and the dilation of her pupils behind her own glasses. But he had caught those tells. And she knew he had. Their eyes lingered on the other’s for several more heartbeats.

*I told you!* Eye-fucking!* one nearby minion had mouthed behind his hand to the others before Q reached out her hand to thwack him on the top of his head without so much as breaking eye contact with Bond.

James eventually took one step back from Q and then another. “I’ll catch you on comms, Quartermaster,” he had said with a wink, turned, and left the Branch. Though he longed to do so, he did not look back.

James knew that things were coming to a head in his relationship with Q. He wanted her. No. He craved her, but not just physically.

Q was easily the most extraordinary person he had ever met, and James wanted to know every last thing about her.

What made her happy? What did she fear? Long for?

Why did she hate green peppers but had no problem with orange or yellow or red ones?

How could she solve complex maths problems in her head in a heartbeat yet couldn’t play Scrabble to save her life?

If her migraines were -- as she said -- the result of not being able to quiet her brain for an extended period of time, would her mind finally go silent if he kissed her long enough?

Did she really only have a string of aliases rather than a name of her own?

Was she struck by the same sense of *deja vu* he sometimes was when they spent time together?

What would Q sound like when she came with him buried deep inside her. Would it sound differently than when he only used his tongue?

It was alluring, seductive, the thought of learning so many intimacies about Q. It would surely take a lifetime to discover all that there was to know about her. A lifetime well spent, he was certain, but James … well, yes, he was afraid.

There.

He’d admitted it ...

… in his head.

James would also admit -- in his head -- that he already loved Q.
It was hard not to. She was, in a word -- one that he would never use in her presence if he expected to live long -- adorable.

And magnificent.

And frustrating.

And opinionated. And brilliant. And … yeah, he was fucked.

James loved Q even when he didn’t understand 99 percent of the things that she said when she discussed nanotechnology with her minions.

James loved Q even when she was at her stroppiest because she had to fix someone else’s ‘idiocy’.

James loved Q even when he would rather strap a piece of gaffer tape over her mouth than listen to another lecture about bringing all his equipment back in one piece.

James Bond loved Q when she stumbled out of her bedroom to the kitchen wearing a tatty dressing gown over her Doctor Who pyjamas and took three, fumbling tries to activate the kettle because she was still half asleep until halfway through her second cuppa.

James loved Q when she dragged Eve Moneypenny out into the cold and wet of Bisley Range because the not-quite-former-agent needed to ‘practise until she bloody well gets it right. I can’t afford to lose Double-Os to her shoddy aim.’

James loved Q when she replaced M’s Chateau de Laubade 1974 Vintage Armagnac with a 20-year old Talisker because ‘he’s the head of MI6, not the DGSE. It’s just not patriotic!’

James loved Q.

Loving Q was, oddly enough, rather comforting and simple.

Being in love with Q, however … that was bloody terrifying.

People assumed that Double-Os were fearless, but that wasn’t entirely true. Daring? Yes. Bold? Most certainly. Double-Os were the ones just audacious enough to jump into the fray when others would be running away from it, but they weren’t fearless. Fear was as necessary a part of the kit as one of Q’s earwigs or a hand gun. There had to be a bit of fear in order to see the danger, respect it, and find away around it or to destroy it. A fearless agent didn’t see the danger until it was too late.

Fearless agents quickly became dead agents.

And even though he had made a career out of striding right up to danger, grabbing it by the bollocks, and ripping them off at the root, James Bond, the Double-O, felt just enough fear to recognize and respect the danger, and so always came back from his missions, in body, alive.

James Bond, the man, however, could not always say that the same held true about his heart.

And as devastating as Vesper had been, Q …

He sighed. Alec was right. James couldn’t continue to live in limbo when it came to his feelings for Q. It wasn’t fair to either of them. He could either take that final step and allow himself to risk everything to be with her exclusively (she deserved nothing less), or he would follow the path that
led solely to friendship. James knew which way he wanted to go -- accidentally calling her ‘love’ earlier was a pretty strong indicator even he couldn’t ignore -- but he honestly didn’t know if he had it in him to go that way.

He shook his head and met his own eyes in the mirror. For a man not given to long periods of introspection, James had certainly done a great deal of such thinking when it came to his Quartermaster.

James knew he wouldn’t decide anything tonight, certainly not when he was about to go out to seduce another woman to gain access to critical information about a possible international terrorist cabal.

Yeah, James didn’t need Alec to tell him that making decisions about the possible love of your life whilst sleeping with a mark was probably the height of just a bit ‘not good.’

James looked briefly at the Omega on his wrist and pulled an earwig from the front pocket of his darted-front trousers, tucking it in his ear. He had a little over two hours before he connected with Q on comms in advance of his dinner with Ida Darmail and the start of the honey trap.

Double-O Seven had surveillance to complete.

~~OOQ~~

“Double-O Nine, there are three hostiles incoming from the right hand corridor, 15 metres ahead of you.” Q said, tracking the heat signatures provided to her by satellite imagery. “Converging on your position in three ... two ... one.”

Four pops from Rand’s Sig Sauer sounded in her ear as did the muffled thud of three bodies hitting the ground. “Four bullets for three targets? Really, Double-O Nine!”

Nine chuckled at the mock disgust in her tone. “One of ‘em was a bloody big bastard. Centre mass wasn’t where it should’ve been.”

“Well, then, I won’t worry overly much about scheduling you in for additional range time. Just don’t make a habit of it, please. Budget cuts, you know. Two more coming in at your 10 o’clock.” She heard two more bodies hit the ground. “Much more efficient. Thank you.”

“A pleasure, Q. Fair to say they’ve received word from San Diego,” said Rand, he was a bit breathless but his voice wasn’t tense.

“It would seem.”

Rand Aguilar was in the middle of infiltrating an Arizona shipping facility used by the Yakuza. The Japanese crime syndicate had been making inroads into the US during the last half decade, and the warehouse, in a largely abandoned commercial district on the outskirts of Tucson, was primarily used as a staging point for trafficking drugs and smuggling weapons in and out of the United States. Normally, Six left domestic American issues to the FBI, but in two days the Yakuza and their local henchmen were to slated to transport an estimated 500 million in counterfeit South American and European currencies, including approximately 200 million in British notes, from the warehouse and into Mexico for distribution around the globe. Needless to say, the Crown was
heavily invested in seeing that such a shipment never took place.

Over the last month, nearly half of the currency had been transported to Tucson from San Diego where it had been printed, but the rest never would make it. The printing facility had been destroyed not 15 minutes earlier by 002 and 003, Elias Inthapatha and Constance Evans, as handled by R. By that time, Q had already guided 009 into the shipping facility, 400 miles away, undetected -- privately, Q thought that, in future, the Yakuza might want to rethink the idea of using local motorcycle gangs to facilitate such operations, but that was their issue -- and Rand had quickly fulfilled the first two goals of his mission: he had planted semtex explosives at key points in and around the warehouse and had downloaded data from the computer servers detailing shipping manifests, global distributors, and the like.

But those who had survived the destruction in California had clearly made contact with their Arizona colleagues, and 009 was now being hunted. There was, however, one more objective that needed to be completed before Nine could slip away.

“Double-O Nine, in 20 metres you’ll come across an electrical panel embedded in the south wall just past the large support beam,” she said. Nine had made his way into the facilities control room, a large, cavernous space that provided little cover. “Too many hostiles for you to open each of the gas mains manually. You’ll have to blow the electrical panel, instead. That’ll trigger a momentary surge that should unlock the gas lines automatically. If not ...” Q shrugged her shoulders though 009 couldn’t see it and shook her head at the absurdity of the system. “Whoever designed that facility was an idiot. Little wonder the area’s abandoned. It’s a bloody death-trap.”

“Found it. And once I blow the panel?”

“Get the hell out as quickly as you can. I’ll detonate the semtex remotely the minute you’re clear.” A visual alarm -- only a level three -- popped up in the centre of her screen; she noted only that it wasn’t associated with her current mission, so she swipe it to the side with a gesture, thankful for the efficiency of the new holographic interface. It was working perfectly. “Be quick about it, Double-O Nine, you’re about to have a lot of company otherwise.”

“Charge set. Three … two … one …”

A series of loud, violent snaps indicated that panel had been blown.

“And there go the lights. Switching to night vision,” Rand said.

A nod from Benji, observing the warehouse’s environmental controls from his station, confirmed for Q that the explosion had done its job; she focussed on finding Aguilar the quickest and safest way out.

“Confirmed, Double-O Nine. The gas lines are venting. It’s a large space, but it will fill up promptly, so put your respirator on. Take the corridor leading out from the west side of the room. There will be traffic, however. And do remember that bullets and natural gas don’t interact well together.”

There was a notable pause on the other end of the comm line followed by a huff of resignation. “Understood, Quartermaster. KA-BAR it is, then.” In Q’s mind’s eye she saw 009 hostler his Sig and pull his twin KA-BAR, straight-edge knives from their sheaths.

The alert message popped up from the corner of the screen into Q’s view a second time, its lights flashing more quickly than before to indicate increased urgency. She noted that it was from Bond, but things were critical with 009. “R, tend to Bond please?” she asked, swiping the alert over to
R’s console. If her second noticed that a thread of tension had leaked into her normally composed tone, he knew better than to comment on it. Q didn’t want to consider what might have happened to cause 007 to send out an alert, but she couldn’t focus on that now.

For the next six minutes, as natural gas filled the depot, Q guided her agent through the most direct route to safety. Unfortunately, ‘direct’ was a bit of a misnomer for even as gas flowed out of the lines, Yakuza henchmen rushed into the warehouse -- apparently missing the tell-tale sulfuric scent of the gas -- and there were a finite number of corridors that led outside, so Nine was going to run into some of ‘the baddies,’ as he liked to call them.

Of all the Double-Os, Rand was the most skilled with dual wielding combat knives, but the trick of it this time was to take out his opponents before they could get a shot off or else risk the explosive charge in the primer of the bullet igniting the gas.

Tense didn’t begin to describe the situation.

When 009 confirmed that he was clear of the building, Q began rapidly keying in a series of commands in her console. She looked up at the visual feeds on the holographic screens and waited for him to reach a distance of 100 metres from the warehouse. She entered the final command.

The building blew.

The satellite feed was obscured by the heat of the blast, subtle greens and blues exploded into a cloud of orange and red, but before the image could settle again, the satellite moved out of range. Q accessed the few CCTV and security cameras that still worked in the vicinity; each showed a different angle of burning wreckage, but the warehouse had been utterly destroyed. Not a single wall nor any of the 16 remaining enemy combatants was left standing.

“Report, Double-O Nine.”

The comlink crackled for a moment before Rand’s voice filtered through. “It’s snowing in the desert, Quartermaster,” he replied, his tone caught somewhere between the humor of seeing confetti-strewn banknotes flutter down from the sky -- Q caught them, too, on the video feed -- and the seriousness of what they had just accomplished.

“And your status?” She knew that the agent hadn’t escaped his encounters with the Yakuza unscathed.

“Mostly minor bruises and lacerations, but I’m pretty sure I’ve cracked my collarbone.”

“Again?” Q sighed. This would be the third time in five years. Hopefully the break wasn’t in the same place as last time. “Very well. I’ll notify Medical to prepare for that for your after-action physical.” She ignored Nine’s groan of frustration. “Your extraction team is five minutes out, but Tucson police will be there in under three. Make your way to the extraction point 1.4 klicks to the northwest; exact coordinates will be in your mobile. Stick to the side streets. The E.T. will have a medic attached and will get you patched up before your flight from Tucson International in the morning. Benji will be in your ear until extraction.”

“On my way.” Q watched 009’s shadow disappear between two nearby buildings, heading in the proper direction. “Thank you, Q.”

R caught her eye. His expression was grim. “No, it is you who have our thanks, Double-O Nine,” said Q to Aguilar as Benji came online. “I’ll see you when you return your kit in 36 hours. Safe journey home, Agent. Q, out.”
R handed her the printed transcript of his conversation with Bond the moment she switched off. Sometimes it was easier to read than to explain. Though not remotely askew, Q adjusted her glasses on her face and began to read.

As she did so, Q’s eyes widened in consternation and a borrowed phrase from Alec Trevelyan slipped unbidden from her lips. “Bloody buggering fuck.” She looked pointedly at R over the top of her spectacles. “Do what you need to make it happen, but get Bond on the first flight home.” She turned back to her station and keyed in a quick command to bring her comlink back online, this time to a new feed.

“Status, Double-O Seven. Are you safe?”

“As houses, Q,” he replied, but Q could hear the frustration in his voice.

“Injuries?”

“I’m fine.”

“Fine is tells me nothing. Too many variables and interpretations. I’ve stitched you up myself after you’ve declared yourself ‘fine.’ Are you injured?” Q carefully enunciated each word, not even attempting to hide her irritation.

“I am uninjured, Q.”

She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed a small sigh of relief, willing to trust in this small miracle for the moment. She again scanned the transcript that lay next to her keyboard.

“Accidental?”

“Not remotely.”

“Photos?”

“Plenty. Should I upload them to you or R?” They both knew that now was not the time for the cloud server.

Q thought for a moment. “R, if you would please,” she decided. He’d be able to start the analysis while she was up in Whitehall. “He’s working on your travel arrangements now. I’ll be switching you over to him in a moment.”

“Understood.”

“How easily are you able to get out of there?”

“I’m already back in my suite, secure. I’ve contacted the front desk to make arrangements to check out. My mother, lovely old woman for all that she always keeps tabs on me, died back home. Heart attack.”

“Well, you certainly know how to give me one on a regular basis, but if you call me old again, Double-O Seven ...”

He chuckled. Q smiled, strangely comforted by the sound. “I have to go tend to all of this,” she said with a shrug she knew he could not see.

“Not the outcome we were hoping for on this mission,” James said grimly, “but R will take excellent care of me in your absence.”
“Bond …” Q paused. There was much she wanted to say, but there was too much floating around in her head with this news, and she didn’t know where to begin, so she settled for the familiar, certain that Bond would understand. “I’ll see you when you return your kit, then. Safe journey home, Double-O Seven.”

The earlier frustration she had heard in him was gone, and his voice was soft when he replied. Not quiet, but … gentle. “For you, always.”

Q nodded, warmed through by his tone. Fine. Good. Yes. “Q, out,” she said finally and transferred the link back to R. She bit her lower lip, thinking, studying the painted stone walls before her that were unobscured now that the holographic monitor lay dormant. She heard R pick up the feed with Bond; Benji was still on with 009. Q flicked her attention to her nearest minion. “Sallah, ring up Moneypenny.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The young computer tech reached for the nearest land line telephone.

Q grabbed the transcript from her worktop, folded it in half, then in half again, and shoved it in the hip pocket of her trousers. Not the most secure way to carry sensitive information, but it would have to do. This needed to be dealt with in person. Walking briskly, she was halfway out of Q-Branch when she finished, “Tell her I need to speak with M, immediately.”

Q wouldn’t need to handle the comms for Bond’s honey trap, after all.

Ida Darmali was dead.

~~OOQ~~

The mobile on the table next to her chaise rang twice before she picked it up. It read ‘Blocked’ on the screen, but that was as it should be. There certainly wasn’t any doubt as to who was at the other end of the line. She slid her thumb across the bar to answer and pushed her long hair behind her ear before raising the phone.

“Salut, mon amour,” she said. It had been weeks since she had last seen him, last been held in his arms, and she had missed him terribly.

“Dear girl,” said the man on the other end of the line, his voice was bright, and he seemed to be in a good mood. “I understand your mission was a resounding success and that our incompetent doctor has paid for her ineptitude.”

“Oh, János told you, already?” she pouted, switching to English. She was truly disappointed in this news. “I had so looked forward to sharing it with you myself.”

“Now, now, Sweet. There’s nothing to be upset about,” he cooed in his oddly accented English that even after their years together she still had difficulty pinning to one particular country. Though if ever there was a man who transcended such inconsequential constraints as international boundaries, it was he. “János did nothing but sing your praises. He was quite impressed with your deft touch. He said that you have turned into quite the artist. I couldn’t be more proud of you.”

She raised an eyebrow in contemplation. Her love was always direct and to the point and would not have lied to save her feelings. Non. Never would he do that. She took a sip from her drink.
Some fruity concoction that was rather tasty but that she had already forgotten the name of. She hummed in pleasure at his approval. It was hard to come by and even harder to hold onto. “I’m glad,” she said honestly.

“Photos of your handiwork are already making an impact where they will have the greatest … effect.”

“Même avec Bond?”

“Particularly with him, I should think. But now that you mention him, it does bring up another issue.”

“Ce qui est… ?”

“MI6, and Bond specifically. I’m not quite ready for them to see the scope of what they have been blind to for years. Another couple of months should suffice … by autumn, I should think. It won’t matter by then.”

“Et maintenant?”

“And now they are a threat. Bond should never have been in Denpasar. My source tells me that that young Quartermaster of theirs is quite skilled at puzzles and pulled together enough pieces of ours to point Bond toward Bali.”

“Is she to be killed?”

“Oh, goodness, no. That would be counter-intuitive. Bond has always had a rather … dogged personality. He’d turn positively rabid if any permanent ill befell the girl. Besides, I will admit to being a bit … intrigued by her, as well. This Quartermaster may bear further study.”

She stiffened at his final comment. Well she knew how he chose to study some of these intriguing subjects of his. She wanted to rage at him for that idea but knew that it would only go poorly for her if she did, so she carefully modulated her response and focused on a different area. “So, if she’s not to be killed, perhaps a … distraction, then?”

His chuckle, the fulfillment of the barely contained amusement that had tinged their entire exchange, suddenly turned into a full-bellied laugh that, as much as she loved him, caused ice-cold dread to settle in her belly. More than once over the years she had prayed to never hear that laugh directed at her, and thus far she had been largely successful. “Yes! Yes … a distraction. Oh you are a clever girl, aren’t you?”

Had she been in the same room with him, she would have seen his internal machinations at play on his fascinatingly expressive face. Clinically, she knew what he was. Knew that she should be repulsed or horrified by his nature, but then most people would be horrified by her, too, if she wasn’t so skilled at masking her own predilections.

“Qu'est-ce que tu veux que je fasse?”

“Oh, I don’t want you to do anything, my dearest. Nothing at all. Return home for now --”

“But I’d hoped to join you in --”

“Enough! I do not idly issue orders,” he snapped, clearly angry though he did not actually raise his voice. Again that dread settled into her bones. She had, indeed, overstepped, and thought about letting silence be her contrition, but decided submission would be safer.
“I am sorry to have contradicted you, sir,” she said, infusing her voice with honest regret and fear, knowing that if the former was not sufficient, the latter would likely be enough to placate him. “I will in all things be ruled by you, bien sûr.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” The smile seemed to have returned to his voice, and she breathed a sigh of relief. “Is the psychotropic compound you’ve been working on complete?” he asked.

So abrupt was the change in the direction of their conversation that she found herself unprepared for the switch and took a moment to answer. “Oui. Oui, il l’est. We had success in lab testing right before I left for Indonesia.”

“Excellent news. Let us give it a try in the real world, then, shall we?

‘I don’t think it’s quite ready for that’ was on the tip of her tongue, but she pulled it back at the last moment, mindful of his previous anger with her. While the effects of the drug were what she had planned for, the side effects had been markedly … unpleasant and required additional testing to remedy. But she supposed that was really not her concern just now.

“Oh course, my love. Qu’est-ce que tu voudrais faire?” she said instead.

“Upon further reflection, rather than have János return with you, I want him to go to London. I will send József with the compound, and the brothers will meet with our representative to create your suggested distraction. Nothing too overt and nothing that would lead Bond or the rest of that pathetic band of spies to believe that we had anything to do with it.”

“I will arrange for the drug to be ready at my lab when József comes to fetch it.”

“Excellent, my dear. We continue to hide in the shadows, but not for much longer. Soon everyone will know who we are, but by then it will be too late.”

“Oui, comme il faudrait.”

“As it should have been for quite some time now, yes. And when we are together again, my dearest, make sure that your hair is blonde once again. It along with the facial prosthetics made for an acceptable and necessary disguise, I know, but I expect to see you as you should be when you are again in my arms.”

“J’aimerais te faire plaisir. Je t’aime.”

“I know you do. Au revoir, chérie.”

She drained her drink when she set her mobile down and signaled for another. As she did so, János’ massive form appeared in front of her, blocking the sun from view. She was grateful that he had arrived when he did as she wasn’t certain her legs had the strength to seek him out on her own. Such was always her reaction whenever she spoke with her love. His power always managed to leave her feeling drained yet vibrantly alive at the same time. And when she made love with him, well, there was no way to truly explain how utterly wrecked the experience left her. It was ravissant.

She let her memories linger a few more moments, knowing that the stoically taciturn János would wait patiently until she was ready to share with him what her amour had ordered. Her drink arrived and she took a long draught of the cool liquid then turned her attention to her oldest friend.

“Here is what he expects us to do, mon frère chéri.”
So? What'd ya think?

Yes, there's a bit of a clifffy, but Chapter Eight is already 3/4ths written, and I hope to have the chapter completed by the end of August so that the next update can roll late September/early October (after beta-editing and rewrites).

Comments truly are love, so if you've not left one before (and even if you have) please consider filling out that little form below to let me know what you're thinking.

Cheers all! Thank you all so much for reading.
That Which Gives Value to Survival

Chapter Summary

“Bond?” Q was looking up at him, hazel eyes concerned behind her spectacles. Her hand rested lightly on his forearm. It was the first time she had really touched him since that night when they’d been pressed together, half-naked against the wall of her sitting room, and the warmth of her hand seared through the fine wool of his suit jacket as though it didn’t even exist. He looked from her hand to her eyes to her lips which had continued to move, though he wasn’t entirely certain he knew just what she was saying.

Q's life changes again as she enters a lengthy rehabilitation that helps her recover not just from her physical injuries after Westminster Bridge but from the emotional ones as well (including Q's perspective on what Alec did to get thrown out on his arse).

But nearly six months before Westminster Bridge, Mallory, Bond, and Q go over the events of Ida Darmali’s murder and find themselves another step closer to discovering the nature of the Spectre that has been plaguing them from the shadows.

Chapter Notes

Tigger Warning: There will be graphic descriptions of a woman's murder in this chapter. Please be aware of what you can handle.

Greetings all!

It's been just over a month since the last chapter, and I darn near had this new chapter ready to go a week ago, but a series of unfortunate stressors kept me from finding the drive to do a final edit once I got it back from my beloved beta.

I must give serious kudos to that beloved beta, Springbok7. Not only is she a fabulous collaborator, writing alpha, and editing beta, but she has been a serious source of support to me this last month. With some of the crises -- of faith in myself and in others -- I have been through lately, it would have been very easy for me to toss in the towel in a variety of ways, but her faith in and support of me was unwavering. I could not have done this without her. We writers can be a sensitive lot, after all.

I hope that you enjoy this chapter (it's a long one). Please remember that this is a non-linear narrative that jumps back and forth between pre- and post-Spectre (but everything is labelled for your reading convenience). It is also a slow burn ... apparently a very slow burn, but we'll get there in just a few more chapters.

Please let me know if you like what you read. I could really stand some positive
Chapter Eight: “That Which Gives Value to Survival”

“In one aspect, yes, I believe in ghosts, but we create them. We haunt ourselves.”

— Laurie Halse Anderson, Wintergirls


Though the bulk of her injuries had largely healed while she was still comatose, Q contracted a bout of pneumonia less than a week after she woke, keeping her in the Intensive Treatment Unit longer than had been anticipated. Hospital Acquired Pneumonia was always a concern for patients in ITU, but for those who had lost their spleen, it was particularly dangerous.

Thankfully, Q had been caught up on her jabs, including pneumococcus, and the UCH doctors already had her taking the low-dose antibiotics that she would likely take every day for the rest of her life, so her case of the lung infection had been comparatively mild. If one didn’t count the shooting and the bullet wound and the paralysis, Q had rarely taken ill in her life -- though she had managed to contract that sodding stomach flu that had gone ‘round Q-Branch a few weeks before the Bridge -- and had been as frustrated with being ill with pneumonia as she had been with having caught pneumonia in the first place. Though easily fatigued, she had been mostly recovered by the time Mallory had visited her on New Year’s Day, but the illness nevertheless delayed her transfer to the rehabilitation facility she had chosen to continue her recuperation.

Finally, five weeks after she woke from her coma, ‘Dr Emily Wilson’ was released from University College Hospital and transferred to The Shea Spinal Cord Injury Centre just outside of Windsor to
begin her physical, occupational, and psychological rehabilitation.

When the day of the transfer finally came around, however, she had nearly gone up with no one but her nurse and her new bodyguards to accompany her.

For the first time since he’d learned of Q’s injury, Alec had been kitted out by R and sent off on a mission. MI6 had received intelligence of a credible threat from tattered remains of Spectre, but the nature of the intel had required that 006 be on site rather than working out of Q-Branch’s operations centre in his role as liaison. He’d flown to Marrakesh two days before Q’s transfer, and Mallory, Tanner, Moneypenny, and R were equally focussed on the danger still posed by the criminal organisation. The operation came first, after all.

Which as was it should be.

Q’s neighbor, Mrs. Akinjide, who had been a regular visitor both during and after Q’s coma, was watching her grandchildren whilst her eldest son and his wife finished up with the estate agent on the purchase of their new home in High Wycombe, but would meet up with Q at Shea and stay the rest of the week in guest housing so that she could participate in the family orientation sessions and learn how to best support her ‘dear Emily.’

People had lives beyond their involvement in hers, and Q was thankful for that, and for them.

Understanding and accepting that didn’t mean, however, that Q hadn’t woken up the morning of her transfer feeling apprehensive -- okay, fine, Dr Kate Goddard! Terrified! Sod it all! -- about going to Shea alone.

It was then that Danny Cabral, her friend since basic training all those years ago -- recently returned from a mission in Trieste -- had shown up in her hospital room a mere hour before the journey to Windsor. He came bearing gifts, too: the thermos of tea that had become requisite of visitors since practically the moment Q woke from her coma, a hot bacon buttie and a fresh almond croissant from Pret, and a large gift bag containing two colourful jumpers he had brought back for her from Italy.

“You’ve always been sensitive to cold; t’s why all jumpers, yeah? I’ve considered before getting you a bloody heat lamp for your office. Bask under it like a lizard on a ledge. But it’s got worse, hasn’t it? Last time I was here, you were bundled under three blankets and still shivering.

Q nodded. She’d always had a devil of a time keeping warm, but --

“Went home that afternoon and read up on how paraplegics can have a time of it regulating body temperature. Didn’t have time to go to Argos for that lamp ‘fore I left, so when I saw these in the Mercato Coperto, I thought they might help,” Danny had said as he helped Q into the thick aubergine, lavender, and lime woollen cardigan he had pulled from the gift bag. She caught sight of another in more muted colours of sage, buttercup, and ivory. “You’re over that sodding pneumonia -- ’n thank God for that -- but ’t might snow this afternoon, and there’s no need for you to catch a chill, luv.”

The tall, ginger-headed man had then passed her the steaming cuppa he had poured and took a sip from his own. “Aren’t you going to drink that?” Danny asked once he had swallowed. “Hey? You okay? Look a little peaky.”

Q had felt the heat of the drink through the ceramic of the mug in her hands, and it certainly helped her chilled fingers, but she hadn’t really registered it at first; she was too stunned by what Danny had said to her. He was the very first of her friends to use the ‘P’ word openly. All of them, Alec
in particular, had gone out of their way to not say ‘paraplegic’ in her presence. She could understand why they probably hadn’t wanted to use the word -- trying to protect her feelings, possibly uncertain of theirs -- but until Danny had used it, Q hadn’t realised that she’d been a bit annoyed by its absence. She was a paraplegic, and not talking about it, not using the word, wasn’t going to magically make her legs work again. Nor would she shatter like some fragile glass sculpture upon hearing it. It wasn’t as if the rest of the people -- therapists and staff -- she dealt with on a daily basis made any attempt whatsoever to moderate their word choices.

Firstly, Q appreciated Danny’s forthrightness. Secondly --

“You read up on all this?” Q had asked weakly, gesturing at her legs, immobile beneath the blanket that covered them.

“Of course. Why the surprise?” Cabral leaned against the worktop behind him. “If I wasn’t going back on Ready Status tomorrow, I’d have liked to have sat in on one of those orientation sessions you mentioned, but with so many of the others heading for the desert --”

Cabral had to be prepared to go out on an hour’s notice should he be needed in the field.

“So eat your brekky before they come to get us.” He had nudged the white, two-handled Pret bag that sat on her lap table with the knuckle of his index finger. “Don’t think I won’t steal that almond croissant. ‘M your friend, not a saint.”

Warmed by more than just the mug in her hands, Q had managed to drink her tea and eat half each of the bacon butty and the pastry -- even that small amount had been the most she’d been able to consume in one sitting in days, and she gave the rest to Danny -- before Liam, her nurse, arrived to collect Q for the journey to Shea. Danny had grabbed the two small carry-alls that held her belongings, and within minutes, they, along with the two agents on duty as Q’s guards, were sat in the back of a large 4x4 with tinted windows, the MI6 driver behind the wheel taking them through the late morning London traffic to Windsor.

It wasn’t the way the Quartermaster had ever envisioned spending her 29th birthday. Before leaving for Mexico City, Jam- no, Bond had said that he wanted to take her on holiday, someplace they wouldn’t have to fly to reach, to celebrate.

Q took a shuddering breath and clenched the fist that lay in her lap. She focussed on pushing the pain of that memory -- pushing Bond -- back to where it had scuttled out from the darkness to seek a moment in the light. Those memories were a part of what Q now considered her previous life and needed to remain there, locked away. For now. Maybe forever.

She watched the terraced houses and the shops on the Marylebone Road pass by as they slowly made their way out of London, and Q couldn’t help but feel that this escape from the confines of UCH was just a bit of progress for her new life.

Danny sat next to her in the second row of seats in the large vehicle, catching her up on the latest gossip at Six. While he didn’t know of the date’s significance to her -- he, like many others, believed her birthday to be in September, a misconception she had never felt the need to correct -- his presence at her side was a much appreciated comfort that made the pain of ‘what should have been’, a little bit easier to bear.

The 90 minute drive -- sodding traffic -- was a bit far in the opinion of her surgeons who had wanted Q to remain in London for treatment at the exclusive Pearson Clinic, but after doing her own research -- which led her down far more informative and enlightening paths than her surgeons had provided -- she had chosen the physicians and therapists at Shea instead. It was a private
Neither clinic, like Pearson, nor the NHS, like Q, to help defer the cost of treatment for those who must otherwise rely solely on the NHS. Additionally, Shea’s innovative treatments and rehabilitation procedures had shown a great deal of success in helping incomplete spinal cord injury patients learn to walk again, at least to some degree.

Her personal research into spinal cord swelling and ‘spinal cord shock’ had taken Q all over the map. Some doctors insisted that swelling decreased only within the first several weeks after the injury and that patients should not expect increased mobility or sensation after that time frame. Other studies indicated that swelling could continue to decrease for as long as 18 to 24 months post injury, and that changes in mobility and sensation were to be expected.

The contradictory information had not sat well with the linear-minded Quartermaster whose life was largely encoded in 1s and 0s, but her therapists had said it made sense given how little was still understood about the way the nervous system truly functioned. Two patients with the exact same injury could, and would, have completely different experiences when it came to degrees of movement and sensation. No two SCIs were perfectly alike, just as not even identical twins were perfectly identical. And Camazotz, this was not.

Danny had stayed long enough to see Q settled into her room and into the care of the clinic, the bodyguards coming on shift, and the newly arrived Mrs. A, but he had gone back to London with the driver shortly after lunch. He’d given his Quartermaster a fierce hug and a promise to come back out to visit the next week if he was still in country; he wouldn’t be, but Q would have little chance to miss him or Alec or … Bond since it quickly became apparent that her life was about to undergo another drastic shift.

Her first two days at Shea were devoted to meeting with her physician, care coordinator, and therapists, whose comprehensive evaluations assessed her abilities -- such as re-evaluating and determining the range, function, and sensation remaining in her legs -- and helped set her rehabilitation goals. Her treatment team confirmed the evaluation done at UCH, and agreed that while the increased sensory perception in her legs was a definite positive, her lack of significant motor control below the level of her injury was daunting and would be Q’s greatest challenge.

Q explained this to Mrs. A to mean that while her nerves still worked in some ways such as in allowing her to feel varying degrees of pain, temperature, and pressure, they no longer sent the correct messages to her muscles, making it nearly impossible for her to stand or walk without significant support.

However, Q was young and strong and had recuperated well from the other injuries caused by the bullet, so there were indications that with the right therapies, things could improve, thought it was unlikely that she would walk again. At least not as she had done before. Nevertheless, with her enthusiastic approval, Q’s therapists put forth an extremely rigorous rehabilitation programme with the primary physical goal of Q being able to stand on her own with the assistance of forearm crutches for 20-30 seconds by the time she returned home.

Q couldn’t wait to begin.

The coming weeks and months would be the most physically and emotionally challenging of Q’s life, and given her experience in Argentina six years prior, that was saying something. Thankfully, she had been rather fit before she had been shot. She in no way met a Double-O’s standard of fitness, but Q had certainly been above average when it came to typical ‘boffin-level’ athleticism. That alone would aid her in her recovery.

Q started her gait programme, which included body-weight supported treadmill training, almost immediately. Dale and Cora, her physical therapists, strapped her into a harness not unlike that of a
parachute which was attached via cables to a robotic pulley system embedded in the ceiling above a treadmill. The harness and pulleys would provide physical support while Dale and Cora guided her legs as Q ‘walked’ on the treadmill. As her body learned to -- hopefully -- bear her own weight again, the level of support the system provided could be adjusted as her legs were ‘retrained’ for walking, balance, and motor control.

Q also spent time in sport therapy where she would eventually become as skilled at archery as she was with handguns and rifles, not that she could share that knowledge with her therapists.

Sundays, however, were the designated ‘sports days’, and a variety of sports were available to patients such as wheelchair basketball and rugby, sitting volleyball, and even some table tennis sessions. None of it was required, nor were many of the patients at Shea technically eligible for official participation -- many who played rugby lacked the three limb impairment required for league play -- but joining the weekly scrimmages allowed patients another avenue to get used to how their newly altered bodies moved, felt, and responded.

The teams were largely comprised of paraplegic and quadriplegic players who had already transitioned back to their lives after completing their rehabilitation at Shea and similar clinics throughout the southwestern Home Counties. They came on Sundays to play with and support each other and the current patients, and in doing so created such a positive environment of fun, competition, and good-sportsmanship that Q slowly felt her spirit begin to heal a bit, too.

Q had been delighted when Cora had mentioned the "Sunday scrums" during their very first session, and had signed up immediately. She would finally learn to play rugby as she had wanted to do since she was a little girl. A petite frame was no longer quite such an obstacle when one was in a wheelchair, especially one specifically designed for a sport originally called Murderball. Her opponents and teammates, as well as the Quartermaster herself, would quickly learn that she was a no-holds-barred competitor who wasn’t afraid of a little rough-and-tumble if it meant scoring a goal.

The only way she could have loved it more was if, when she lifted herself back into her wheelchair after being knocked to the ground, she had been coated in mud instead of just having scraped against a pitch made from hardwood coated with polyurethane.

During the week, she spent hours in the gym with exercises and resistance equipment that would further strengthen her muscles and joints and build her overall endurance. In some ways, Q was on the road to becoming more fit than she had been prior to the accident, and she couldn’t help but laugh at her reflection in the mirror one morning, several weeks into her rehabilitation, when she saw the ‘guns’ starting to develop in her arms.

Her first session attempting to swim, however, was disastrous and nearly sent her into an emotional free fall, but the addition of a set of floatation bands for her legs had made all the difference, and her time in the pool eventually became the true solace to her condition that Q had feared she might never find. She moved freely and gracefully in the water where buoyancy was her ally against gravity, and it didn’t matter as much if her legs worked or not.

Most days Q collapsed into bed more exhausted than she had ever been in her life and slept dreamlessly until her nurse, Liam Foster -- who had taken care of Q from the moment she had entered ITU as a comatose, post-surgical patient -- woke her early the next morning to begin the whole process again.

Recently retired from the Royal Army Nursing Corps after serving several tours abroad at Camp Bastion and other exotic locales, the Irishman was honest, direct, and his no-nonsense approach appealed to Q’s own. They had grown close over the weeks she had been at UCH, and Q trusted
Impressed with Foster’s military record, skills as a medical professional, as well as the anecdotal evidence provided by Trevelyan and Tanner regarding the way he and Q interacted, Mallory had offered Liam a permanent position with MI6. The level of security needed to maintain the Quartermaster’s safety whilst she was in Windsor was already a bit of a logistical nightmare for Tanner, and M very much wanted to keep any ‘official secrets’ paperwork to a minimum for himself. It would be a much simpler process to reactivate and increase Foster’s clearances from his time in the army than to initiate new ones for nurses already working at the facility. It wouldn’t eliminate the problem altogether as Foster couldn’t work 24/7, but every little bit helped.

Foster, who had found himself chafing at the differences between the familiar military chain of command of the RANC and the “bloody bureaucracy” of the civilian NHS, jumped at the opportunity. Liam would continue as Q’s nurse while she was in rehabilitation but would eventually fill an upcoming retirement vacancy in Medical itself once Q returned to Six full-time.

His time at Bastion had left Foster with an expertise in pain management -- which didn’t always mean medication -- and he worked well with Q’s physicians on that component of her rehab just as he had when still at UCH. It had become a particular concern after Q’s first experience with muscle spasms had left her shaking on the ground of the hospital’s garden during one of her initial excursions outside the High Dependency Unit. Agony was too pedestrian a term to describe the pain, and she had squeezed Liam’s bear-paw of a hand so hard that she’d left bruises behind. The pills she had been prescribed largely took care of the issue but left her so tired and muzzy-headed that she could barely function.

Those spasms were surely the punishment meted out to the damned in Dante’s (unwritten) 10th Circle of Hell, but if Q had to choose between the pain and unrestricted access to her mind … well, there was no choice, so she worked the problem to determine an alternative solution, and with the help of Dale, Cora, and Liam, eventually determined that swimming was again her best course of action.

The spasms didn’t seem to hit as often if she had spent time in the water, so her physical therapists ensured that swimming was in her daily diary of therapies. The spasms didn’t go away completely, nor did they ease in severity, but they were reduced enough in number that Q was largely able to leave the muscle relaxers in the phial except in extreme circumstances.

When she wasn’t engaged in physical therapy, the rest of Q’s days were spent adjusting to life without her legs. She had learned the basics of washing and other tasks involving personal hygiene before leaving UCH, but they still caused her the most emotional difficulty. One never appreciated the simplicity of a quick, restorative shower or of popping off to the loo until it ceased being simple.

Everything had to be managed. Bathing. Bladder. Bowel. Everything had to have a plan. She was lucky that at her level of injury, she had been left with some motor control in those last two areas, and, of course, Q had always been task oriented, but this …

I can do this.

I can do this.

I can do this!

There really wasn’t a choice, after all.
It was after her second session of occupational therapy that Q realised she’d need domestic help as well. Dusting and washing up were manageable with the right tools, but her warehouse wasn’t small, and even with a lift already in place, three stories and nearly 400 square metres was going to be more than she could care for on her own without spending an entire day on it.

She refused to ask Alec to take it over. He was her friend and her housemate and a Double-O. He was a man with a life of his own. He was not her carer, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Besides, if Alec ever went on another long-term undercover mission, she would be on her own anyway. Q had no desire to move to a smaller house. She loved her home and there had been enough changes to her life as it stood -- dear God, something had to stay the same -- so she would need an MI6-approved housekeeper for the heavier stuff.

Q knew that she would eventually learn kitchen skills, but she didn’t hold out much hope for success there, either.

“Don’t worry about it overly much, Emily,” Lina, Q’s favourite OT reassured. “Maneuvering in the kitchen is often people’s greatest domestic concern, but you’ll have plenty of practice with all that before you head back, and by then the renovations to your home will be complete.”

“You don’t understand. I was a disaster in the kitchen before all this happened. I doubt the sudden loss of my legs is going to improve the situation.” Q went on to relate to Lina how Mrs. A had once called the fire brigade after Q had boiled dry a pot of water for pasta, and how she had needed to replace the replacement pot a month later trying to heat up beans to put on toast.

“It’s beans on toast!” Lina had exclaimed incredulously. “It doesn’t get much simpler than that.”

Q was able to tick off each item on a single hand. “Tea, eggs and soldiers, soup out of a tin and into the microwave. That’s the sum total of my culinary repertoire, and believe me, I have tried. The kettle is electric and turns itself off when the water boils for the first time. The toaster has a timer, a loud one. I modified it myself. So does the microwave. Even if I have to reheat the soup more than once it won't spontaneously combust when -- Yes, Lina, I do mean when and not if! -- I get distracted by a … a project, or an email.”

Her lack of prowess in the kitchen had once been a source of some shame to the boffin who excelled at so many other technical skills, but Q was ultimately a pragmatist, so after the Beans on Toast Incident of 2012, she accepted her limitations and got on with stocking her favourite tinned soup flavors in the pantry.

“So … perhaps a decent supply of take-away menus, instead,” Lina suggested.

“I have a full basket on the worktop waiting for me.”

While getting about in the kitchen -- no matter how poorly she did it -- was rather requisite, driving was something altogether different, and Q would ultimately choose to forego learning to use assistive technology for that task. While Q had a license, she had little used it in London and had never owned a car of her own; she had no plans to change that.

The bulk of the driving she had done had been in the course of testing the enhancements made to the automobiles assigned to the Double-Os. God, she had loved the speed. The pressure of the clutch beneath her foot. The effortless shifting of the stick in her hand. Outfitting an Audi R3 or a Porsche Turbo S with hand controls was certainly doable but she couldn’t bring herself to even contemplate such an undertaking, not for testing. No. Mariam, Q’s chief motor-minion, would take on those duties now.
M had said he would approve a budget so that Q-Branch could modify a car for her use, but Q had rathered that money be spent on developing tech to go into the field with her agents. She did accept his secondary offer of an MI6 driver, however, as her days taking the Tube were over. And though there were assistive options that would allow Q to ‘run’ to work or ride in on her Triumph, they weren’t overly practical given her new security detail, another new fact of her post-injury life. One that Mallory said would continue even after she returned to Six.

She had argued that point rather vehemently at first -- contending that she was no school girl in need of minders -- but after Mallory had given her that look whilst ticking off on his fingers his items of concern, and when Tanner had only shaken his head solemnly during her appeal to him the next day, she’d given it up as a lost cause. Q might be as stubborn as the British curling team in pursuit of Olympic gold, but even she could see the wisdom of a graceful retreat on those occasions when faced with a battle she was unlikely to win, especially if Trevelyan were drawn into the discussion. Three against one were not favourable odds.

Though she wouldn’t be driving anymore, mobility had, nevertheless, become her primary concern. While still at UCH, Q had spent a fair amount of time looking at her options. In fact, she took the bulk of a fortnight before settling on the style of wheelchair she felt would work for her both at home and at Six. She ultimately chose an ‘active’ wheelchair with a rigid, structured frame that was still foldable. The seat and backrest were fully adjustable, cushioned in such a way as to help alleviate pressure sores, and she’d also ordered supplemental cushioning that she could add during those multi-day stints at Six when she’d be too busy to fuss with ‘mobility breaks’. The chair was of ultralightweight construction to accommodate her petite figure and the speed with which she would likely need to move around Q-Branch, HQ, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

In hospital, she had learnt how to transfer from wheelchair to bed and back again as well as how to move about in that bed, something else Q had never given conscious thought to until faced with rolling over with relatively dead weight below her hips. But it would be at Shea where she would learn to perfect every wheelchair transfer imaginable: chair to toilet, bath, shower chair, stair, lift, sofa, and car before moving on to ‘advanced’ wheelchair training that would allow her to maneuver slopes, kerbs, and rough terrain.

Before it had been delivered to her at Shea, however, the wheelchair made a brief stop at Q-branch where her minions had painted the accent bars Q’s favourite shade of mulberry and outfitted it with a set of GPS trackers. Additional ‘modifications’ the minions had developed would be made when she was no longer dwelling amidst ‘the civilian population’.

And if that civilian population of patients and their families at the Centre wondered who she was, the medical staff didn’t give it much thought. As a private, world-renowned rehabilitation clinic, Emily Wilson certainly wasn’t the first patient to arrive at Shea with her own nurse and a quartet of rotating bodyguards -- affectionately named The Four Horsemen -- though it was rather unusual for a patient to be treated by her own psychiatrist.

While the clinic had several, highly-qualified and greatly respected mental health professionals on staff, none of them had the security clearance necessary to treat MI6’s Quartermaster -- not that anyone at Shea knew who she was-- but more importantly, none of them had Q’s trust.

She had been forced to see a therapist after Argentina and again -- briefly -- in the mess that followed the bombing of HQ, but Q had largely left those sessions feeling more confused, irritated, and at sea than she had before she went, so she hadn’t initially held out much hope for her
meetings at UCH with Kate Goddard, regardless of what M had said about how much Kate'd helped him. M’s intended, however, was direct, no-nonsense, exceedingly kind, and never let her attachment to Gareth Mallory intrude into the realm of her sessions with her patient. Kate never let Q get away with avoiding a question either, yet she was always honest when Q asked about her opinion.

The high pressure and high secrecy of jobs such as Q's already imposed a significant toll on the minds and spirits of those who held them, and when physical trauma of any kind was added into the mix, the resulting impact could be insidiously pervasive and devastating, often in unexpected ways. Fortunately, Kate had a deep understanding of the effects of and interactions between physical trauma and that of the emotional and spiritual varieties.

So along with the therapy necessary to help strengthen her body, Q continued to meet for ninety minutes, thrice weekly, with Kate to do the same for her psyche.

The sessions were never what one might classify as comfortable, but rarely in her life had Q ever felt so much like a sailboat caught in the midst of a truly impressive gale, her emotions within howling like the winds of such a maelstrom, for all that she appeared calm on the outside.

Today the tempest was blowing at full force.

Kate Goddard closed Q’s journal and set the moleskine book on the low table at her side. She and Q were sat in the small atrium that looked out onto the Shea Campus’ gardens where they always met for their sessions. Q had taken a liking to this view from the second storey, and apparently came here should the weather not allow for her to sit outside during what little downtime she had.

Kate watched Q watch the rain and considered what she had read. As part of her therapy, Kate had encouraged Q to write down everything and anything she was feeling about the shooting, things associated with it, her injury and what it meant for her life moving forward. Admitting to never being much for writing down her thoughts, Kate initially thought Q might reject the idea out of hand, and had been genuinely surprised when Q had handed her the first of what were now three journals -- actual paper rather than digital from the technophile! -- at the start of their second session.

“I don’t need to check your homework, Q,” Kate had said seriously but with a hint of a smile for the earnest expression on Q’s face as she passed her the notebook the first time. “This is for you, not for me.”

“I know, but … I think it will be easier for me to talk about things if you have an understanding of how they developed in my head between our sessions. Rather like a mission briefing, I suppose,” Q had explained, and she had been right in her assessment.

It generally took Kate five to ten minutes to read through Q’s journal at the start of each session, and it enabled them to launch right into the issues that concerned Q the most. While not always an exemplary patient, Q was certainly one of the most focussed Kate had ever had; she considered her psychological therapy to be just as important to her recovery as anything having to do with her body. Q’s prior negative experiences with psychotherapy had prompted a great deal of personal research on the subject, and while she clearly understood the need for mental balance and the occasional need for help to get it, she had refused such help from the staff at MI6.

Q’s reluctance to speak with anyone in the weeks after her coma had been born in many ‘bloody useless’ sessions with Six’s in-house psychologists over the years -- Kate really needed to discuss that overall situation with Gareth -- and Kate had been left with the impression that Q had been searching for the right person to talk to for quite some time. Now that she had, the Quartermaster
was willing to speak about all manner of subjects and issues, everything save the one true elephant in the room: James Bond.

Kate quickly discovered that asking Q direct questions about Bond was forbidden, and doing so would drive Q from the room, an icy silence following her out the door like waves in the wake of a sailboat. His name mentioned indirectly in connection with other topics would cause Q to curl in on herself, physically as well as emotionally, and though she would continue the session, her participation became muted and wan and was clearly painful.

So closed-lipped was Q on the subject of her former lover that Kate had had to get any information at all about the man from Gareth, who initially provided her with a redacted file. She had looked at the first page, sighed, and pushed it back to him across the kitchen worktop as they prepped dinner. “I love you, Gar’, truly, but as good as you are at what you do, sometimes you really are a biscuit short of a packet about everything else. I don’t want to know about James Bond the agent,” she said, gesturing at the file. “I need to know about James Bond the man.”

Gareth had sulked at her insult throughout dinner, but when Kate served him up a cuppa and a piece of bakewell tart -- pudding always turned around his sour moods in a trice -- he had shared what personal information and observations he had of the man before arranging for her to meet with those who knew him best: Alec Trevelyan, Bill Tanner, and Eve Moneypenny.

Based on the current contents of Q’s journal, however, today’s topic of conversation wouldn’t be about her therapy or her injury or even the heretofore alluded to but as of yet unaddressed James Bond. No. Today’s discussion would have everything to do with that “sodding, insensitive prick,” Alec Trevelyan.

“So it’s been two days since you wrote that you threw Alec out, and I can see that you’re still quite angry about the situation,” Kate said. As Q turned her wheelchair away from the window to face her, Kate noted how the younger woman’s eyes kept darting back to the journal on the table. “Anger’s normal. We’ve talked about how it’s part of the grief process, but this is the first time your anger has been directed at some one rather than some thing. Why is that?”

“Because he’s a sanctimonious, patronizing, condescending, over-protective, know-it-all who suddenly seems to think just because my legs are dead that my brain must be, too.”

Kate ignored the ‘legs are dead’ comment for the time being. They’d had that discussion many times before, but it wasn’t the key issue for Q today.

Over the weeks of their association, Kate had got what she suspected was only a glimpse of the keen mind she shared the room with in these sessions, and ‘bright’ didn’t come close to describing it. Even with her security clearances, Kate accepted that she’d never know the full scope of the Quartermaster’s duties and what was necessary for her to complete them. All Gareth had to say -- all he probably could say -- on the subject was that Q was a ‘once in a generation intellect … no, strike that, luv. Once in four generations,’ and Kate believed him.

Kate had also inferred that, thanks to a whole host of childhood issues that they hadn’t delved into yet, Q largely attached her sense of self-worth to her intellect and her job. It therefore stood to reason that, given her paralysis, she would feel threatened by anyone or anything that attempted to strip her of her ability to use her mind whether it be in pursuit of her professional goals or -- in some ways even more notably -- in making decisions for herself and her needs.

And that perceived threat could easily morph into a sense of betrayal when coming from someone as close to her as Alec Trevelyan.
Q's expression darkened to match the fire in her eyes, and her response was tumbling out without even a pause to take in a breath.

"Because he wants to make my choices for me. I don’t need that from Alec. I need him to support me, not decide for me."

Kate did not react to the acidic tone, but instead probed deeper in that level voice of hers. It was not the least bit monotonous, but was still somehow calming no matter the nature of the words she spoke.

"But is that what ‘over-protective’ is? Yes, there’s an element of control implied in the word, but for what purpose?"

"I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, choosing for myself. I don’t need him to safeguard and shield me. He knows that."

There was no sigh -- Kate was too much the professional for that -- but in the sanctity of her own mind, she wryly noted that no matter how intelligent a person might be, every last one was human, with all the accompanying blind spots that made people the fallible creatures they always had been and always would be. She drew in a deep breath in preparation for the plunge to the crux, the very heart of the issue that had been laid before her.

"Consider the nature of your relationship with Alec, Q. It’s a veritable give and take of protection, safeguarding, and shielding of the other. You met when he helped rescue you from a plane crash on an Argentinian mountaintop, and he continued to safeguard your well-being on a rather disastrous journey home afterwards. That’s the foundation your friendship is built upon, and since Argentina it has literally become your job to watch out for him. You design technology and offer operational support specifically to ensure that not only is the mission completed, and the realm preserved, but that he, and the other agents under your care, comes home safely. You’ve even given him a place to live. You are two exceedingly close friends and have been since practically the moment you met. Might being protective of one another or even overly protective of one another simply be expected?"

"But he can’t protect me from this," Q replied tightly, gesturing at her legs and her wheelchair.

"And that’s the real issue," Kate shifted in her chair so that she was subtly leaning a bit further away from Q. "Alec wasn’t there when you were hurt, was he?"

"No. He was on a mission." Q’s shoulders relaxed minutely. She probably hadn’t even noticed they had, but Kate did. A sign of acceptance of the circumstances that had kept Alec away. Good.

"Would you bear with me for the next few minutes, Q? I’d like you to answer some questions to help ensure I have a firm grasp of the circumstances leading up to your injury. If I ask something you can’t divulge, just say so, and I’ll move on."

"Fine." Q knew that Kate would never ask something she shouldn’t, and wouldn't push if somehow she did.

"So Alec was on a mission. Would you say that, as Quartermaster, you have a solid understanding
of mission prioritising? What makes one more critical than another given timing, circumstance, location, ex cetera?’’

“It’s one of my primary inter-departmental duties.” Had been since she had become R and Boothroyd largely gave up the day-to-day running of the department so that he could focus on R&D. Since becoming Q, however, she involved herself only in mission planning and briefings for A-level senior agents and Double-Os and had assigned Maximus, her own R, such tasks for the secondary senior and junior agent missions.

“Again, without asking you to compromise security, how would you classify the mission that ultimately resolved itself at Westminster Bridge?”

Q stiffened. She could easily answer the question without compromising security, but to do so she would have to compromise herself. She could barely stand to think about Westminster Bridge, about what it had come to symbolize for her -- the end of the life she had known for 28 years, a life she had loved for all that it was fundamentally screwed up on a personal level -- but thinking about the series of events leading up to Westminster Bridge … those memories had far too much James Bond in them, and they … they just hurt.

“Q?”

She had wheeled her chair away from Kate to look out the window again, but she didn’t really see the grey skies and the rain-heavy clouds sagging with their burden. All she could feel was the burden that was her own.

And there he is, Kate thought as she watched Q start to shut down. James Bond. “Leave the emotions out and just focus on the operation analytically,” she said quickly in an attempt to keep Q on the primary topic. Though, in many ways, Bond was the primary topic. “How would you classify the urgency of the mission?” Kate asked again after a few moments.

“There was no mission … not initially,” Q said, clinically, straightening in her wheelchair. Just focus on the facts, and you can do this.

“We’d been tracking Spectre for nearly a year when Jam- when Bond and I received new intel -- more of a tip, really -- from an impeccable source, but the means of exchange was … well, it was unconventional. Couldn’t be verified independently.”

Such was the case when given a tip from a dead woman. Thank you, ever so, Olivia Mansfield.

“Given that set of circumstances, Bond didn’t think M would approve a mission, so he hared off in the middle of the night to verify the intel on his own.” According to Tanner, Mallory was still briefed daily regarding repairs taking place in Mexico City.

“And did he? Verify it?”

“He did.” And if I’d trusted in the intel -- in him -- a bit more, maybe I wouldn’t be here now, Q thought bitterly.

“And what did that mean for mission classification. I assume it increased?”

“Eventually. Yes. It became Priority One: Ultra. There is no higher classification. The situation represented a clear and immediate threat to the United Kingdom and eight other countries.” This was nothing that hadn’t already been reported in the media in the weeks since Blofeld’s attack, though the specifics of what that attack signified would always remain highly classified.
“And that attack was thwarted by James Bond, Gareth Mallory, Bill Tanner, Eve Moneypenny, and you, correct?” Kate had been given the pared down, but not bare-bones, Spectre after-action reports weeks ago when she’d originally agreed to treat Q at Gareth’s request.

“Yes.”

“And where was Alec Trevelyan?”

“His mission at the time took him overseas.”

“And did it have one of these Priority One: Ultra classifications?”

Q scoffed. “Not even remotely. It was a milk run, really. Barely a Level Four. A simple data drop from a known informant followed by a secured-escort out of the country, but it ran long when the woman fell ill and was unable to travel. It was nearly a fortnight before he was able to get her out and home.”

“Is it standard procedure to send a Double-O on such a low priority mission.”

“It’s not common, no, but it’s not unheard of. Alec volunteered, actually.”

“Why?”

“We were spread a bit thin. No different than the way it’s been since before the Games and then by Denbigh’s manipulative austerity cuts, but we’d lost a pair of senior agents the month before, and a few others were out for medical reasons, paternity, maternity, your standard scheduling nightmare with a counterintelligence twist. Alec had been on a 3-week assignment before that but had just cleared his mandatory downtime.”

“So he was ready to go back out in the field.”

“Like every Double-O, there’s a part of Alec that’s always ready to go back in the field if he’s needed, but --” Q stopped abruptly and with a soft groan leaned forward with an elbow propped up on the arm of her wheelchair and dropped her head into her open hand.

Kate waited. “Q?” she asked when a full minute had passed.

Q looked up and around, trying to find something to focus on other than the flat gray outside, some bit of color in her world, but there was nothing. She dropped her eyes to her lap and tugged first at the end of her long plait and ultimately at the cuffs of the navy jumper she wore. She was clearly embarrassed, and even before the name slipped past Q’s lips, Kate knew again which one it would be; she mentally cheered when Q was able to press on in spite of it.

“Bond and I had finally become intimate while we were on a mission, but neither of us had got ‘round to saying anything about it to Alec yet. It was still too new. Still ours, even though he’d been largely supportive from the start. We were perhaps not always as … circumspect as we should have been in choosing locations for our liaisons. There was an evening a few days toward the end of Alec’s recuperation period. Well, he’d a date with this barista he’d been seeing off and on for a few months, so Bond and I thought we’d be alone at the warehouse. The date went pear-shaped, and Alec came home earlier than expected, and Bond and I were on …”

“The kitchen worktop?”

“Dining room table, actually.” Q didn’t blush as she told the story. Keeping it factual -- clinical -- was the only way she’d be able to get through it as it stood. “We were still mostly clothed. Hadn’t
much got past some serious snogging, but it was clear where we were headed. Alec apologized for barging in -- thought he’d interrupted what was Bond’s and my first go -- swore to us that even though finding his friends nearly shagging like rabbits on the table he’d eaten breakfast at just that morning wasn’t what he had been expecting, both Bond and I had caught him doing far worse over the years. It was awkward, though, and we each ended up decamping to our own rooms. Alec took the milk-run the next day.”

“And were you the only one injured in the Westminster Bridge operation?”

Q blinked at the sudden shift in topic and turned back to face Kate. “No. None of us walked away unscathed. You know that.” Eve and Tanner’s injuries had been largely superficial -- cuts and bruises from flying glass and the like -- but Mallory had been severely concussed and had cracked several ribs when, to get to Bond, Blofeld’s men rammed the car M had been driving. He had also sustained serious lacerations from broken glass in his fight with Denbigh in the CNS Building.

“But no one else critically. No one else sustained a nearly fatal, life-altering injury.”

“No.”

Kate could see, by the faintly puzzled frown that scrunched Q’s forehead that she was not following the line of reasoning to its inevitable conclusion, and Kate had a strong sense of being humoured as she continued to drop her own version of breadcrumbs.

“If he hadn’t been out of the country on a mission he volunteered to take, would Alec have been with the rest of you that night?”

“More than likely.”

“But he wasn’t?”

“No.”

“Alec was instead half a world away on a level four, milk-run ill-suited to his superior skill set when one of his closest friends nearly died and was permanently crippled during a Priority One: Ultra which is exactly the kind of mission that he, a Double-O, is trained to handle. How do you think that makes him feel?”

Q reared back in her chair, unprepared for the question. “What?”

“How do you think that makes him feel?”

The word popped instantly into Q’s mind, but, “Alec has no reason to feel guilty. Why would he feel guilty? It’s not rational.”

“Reason and emotion are antithetical, Q. There’s nothing reasonable about guilt. It’s pure emotion. You know this. Or, in the last week, have you managed to resolve your own guilt over having designed and manufactured the very bullet that was used to shoot you?”

Q’s hazel eyes flashed behind her spectacles. Oh, you bitch, jumped to the tip of her tongue, but she reined it in because -- sod it all -- Kate was right.

“Alec didn’t shoot me,” she said tightly instead, “and he knows we’re each of us prepared to give our life in protection of our country. I may not be in the field like he, and Bond, and the other agents are, but if I had died it would have --”
“If you had died, it would have wrecked him. It would have wrecked all of them, Q. Alec, Gareth, Bill, Eve, Maximus …” and though Kate was supposed to stay impartial, she couldn’t help that part of her heart that broke at the almost imperceptible shake of Q’s head as James Bond’s name hung heavily between them, unspoken.

Oh, Q. Of course James would have been devastated if he’d learnt that you’d died.

Though no one seemed to know why Bond had left as he had, the one thing everyone seemed to agree upon was that if Bond had known what had happened to Q on the Bridge, he never would have let Blofeld live.

Q rallied a few heartbeats later, setting aside the sharp splinters of her heartbreak at the hands of Bond in favour of the still smouldering coals of her anger toward Alec. “Feeling guilty is no excuse for what Alec said, dictating what I should and should not do. Mrs. A feels badly about the whole situation, too, but she would never even consider doing such a thing.”

“Mrs. Akinjide has attended the family classes and seminars. Alec hasn’t.”

“It’s hardly Alec’s fault that a tentacle of Spectre tried to reassert itself right before my intake. He needed to be in Morocco. He was a critical component to the whole operation.” Q’s instinctive defence of Alec even as she railed against him was not in the least bit surprising given the close nature of the relationship.

“So you’ve said. Remember, I was there when you explained, rather pointedly, to the Head of Family Services that sometimes there are things -- critically important things -- that take us away from family at inopportune times, how Alec was needed to attend to one of them, and that if she wanted to take issue with the fact that he wasn’t there for your intake, you were more than happy to accommodate her. Given that I know a bit of the reason why Alec left London, and the fact that the Head of Family Services is clearly the weakest link in this otherwise exemplary facility, I found your verbal evisceration of the woman rather inspired. And yet you’re now holding Alec accountable for the very thing you were defending him against. You’re insisting that he interact with you in a very particular way that goes against his protective instincts when he has not had the opportunity to learn differently and is already wracked with guilt for not having been there when you were hurt.”

Kate picked up Q’s journal and looked at it thoughtfully for a moment before holding it out to the Quartermaster.

“In all these pages, and even in session today, you keep asking ‘how could he do that to me?’ And it’s a fair question.”

Q heard the unspoken ‘but’ in Kate’s voice even as she took the book from the doctor's hand, and she knew that she wasn’t going to much care for what followed.

“Perhaps the thing that’s bothering you, Q, the question that really needs to be answered is, ‘How could you do that to him?’”
before Westminster Bridge

“The pictures you took largely speak for themselves, but any additional observations you may have, Double-O Seven, would be invaluable,” Mallory said to his agent.

It had been nearly 36 hours since the Quartermaster had appeared in M’s office, comm transcript in hand, to tell him that their prime suspect in a thwarted bioterrorism attack, their strongest investigative tie to what might be an international terrorist cabal, had been murdered along with her masseur in a spa treatment room at The Legian Bali resort.

The photographs spread across the top of M’s desk were brutal. The masseur had been garroted with piano wire, and though the image showed the weapon still lodged in what remained of his neck, Farabi Kut’s head had nearly been severed from his body.

He was the lucky one.

With the exception of the left side of her face -- of which there was just enough remaining to make a positive identification possible from the distinct beauty mark just below her missing eye -- there was not much that remained of Ida Darmali that was really recognisable as Ida Darmali. She had been expertly carved up with a fine blade that the medical examiner at Sanglah Hospital in Denpasar had identified as belonging to a surgical scalpel. Q had infiltrated the hospital’s computer servers earlier that morning to retrieve Dr. Wardana’s preliminary autopsy report and learned that Darmali had still been alive when the majority of her wounds had been inflicted, including when her intestines had been pulled from her abdomen and wrapped like handcuffs around her wrists and as a noose about her neck.

Q kept her attention largely focused on her tablet and the annotations she was making to the autopsy narrative based on the discussion that went on around her. She had seen the photos -- once -- and found herself deeply unsettled by the images she could not purge from her mind. She wasn’t squeamish, but it was the first time Q had cursed her eidetic memory.

She knew that the savage nature of the doctor’s execution -- for that’s what it was -- was not unheard of among some of the groups that MI6 fought against, but neither was such barbarism common. When Q finally started to work full time for Six, she had used her increased security clearance to familiarize herself with some of the more notable mission reports of the previous two decades. In one such file, Q had come across the details of an American CIA agent, an ally of MI6, who had been tortured nearly to death by a Central American drug lord when he had been lowered into a tank filled with hungry sharks. Amazingly enough, the agent had lived, though he had been permanently maimed. Sadly, his new bride had not survived, murdered by the same drug lord.

Situations like that and what was represented in the photos in front of her, left Q wondering how Bond and Alec and the rest of the Double-Os managed to see what they saw, do what they did, be who they had to be in the field, and keep on coming back to Six when it was all over; to run through their debriefs, evaluations, and requalifications like normal, well-balanced human beings -- as if they were like every other Londoner making up the swarm of humanity that lived there -- and then turn around, slough off that humanity like some soulless selkie shedding its skin, and go right back out to see and do and be the madness all over again. It was beyond her comprehension how
anyone stayed sane and moved on with life having to stomach some of the things they were forced to in service of Queen and Country.

Though, when Q considered the coping mechanisms that some of the agents used -- alcohol and sex were definitely the most innocuous among them -- perhaps more of the madness clung to them than anyone cared to examine too closely.

“Well, I’d say the message is rather clear,” Bond said mildly with a gesture at the spray of photos on Mallory’s desk. “But the intended recipient is still a bit ambiguous.”

It hadn’t taken the report from Psych to clue them into the fact that Darmali’s killer felt that the doctor had been strangled by her own ‘gutless’ inability to do the job she had been tasked with doing. If that metaphor hadn’t been clear enough, then certainly the word ‘échec’ carved into her chest had cleared things up.

Failure, indeed.

It was now obvious that Ida Darmali had been working for someone, and that that someone had been displeased that the bio weapon she had hired Eran Holdst to deploy had not been. Q was holding firm to her belief that it was the organisation that had had MI6 chasing its tail for months and had posited her theory to M more than once since Darmali’s murder.

“Well, a woman like she wouldn’t be without colleagues. Others in the employ of this group Q is convinced is skulking about in the shadows,” M said.

“Reasonable, but I believe that the message was also meant for me,” Bond replied, brushing away a non-existent piece of lint from the leg of his trousers. He then rose from his chair to walk about the room. He’d been sitting in cars and airports and on planes for the better part of a full day and though he was exhausted, he needed the stretch.

Q couldn’t help but be a little irritated at the man as she watched him prowl about the room. Bond had been on the ground in London for all of 90 minutes, and though he had been travelling for over 27 hours still managed to look as put together as he had the last time Q had seen him in Q-Branch five days prior.

Flawless.

She, on the other hand, looked and felt as though she had slept in the back of a farm lorry.

In addition to the day-to-day administrative duties of Q-Branch, tending to a host of fabrication issues that had popped up on two time-sensitive projects in R&D, and regular briefings for the ongoing missions being run by R and the others, Q had also been focussed on gathering the research-intensive data and materials needed for this briefing; she’d managed to catch a 20 minute nap in her office about three this morning, but that and the few short minutes she’d found to clean up just prior to this meeting only left her feeling more rumpled and bedraggled than she had before.

Artfully tousled, my arse. Her sour thought echoed an off-hand comment Alec had made years ago when she’d stumbled through the warehouse door after some 72-hour stint or another. It had become one of his intermittent jokes that no one would ever know if she’d just woken up or come off an extended shift with her ‘artfully tousled hair and avant garde wardrobe selections.’ She threatened to reprogram the shower controls in his en suite in retaliation to the joke, but never bothered to actually follow through on the threat.

With some measure of reluctance -- Alec could be an arse but she missed him horribly, barely
reconciled and then he was haring off to Romania with Danny -- Q dragged her attention back to the matter at hand.

Just in time, too.

“You? Specifically?” asked M, a bit surprised by his agent’s suggestion.

“If not Bond, then certainly MI6,” Q piped in. “Which means they know we’re paying attention.”

She scrolled through several pages of documents on her tablet until she found the one she was looking for. “Darmali had been at the resort for four days before Double-O Seven arrived, and in a rather bizarre set of weather-related circumstances that hindered travel arrangements for many others, he was the only new guest to arrive in the day and a half prior to the doctor’s death. Even the resort’s last new hire, a Czech masseur, took place nearly a month ago.”

“We know the doctor was scheduled to meet with someone,” James said. He approached M’s desk after a turn around the room and began to push at the photos on the desktop with his fingertips, dismissing some, looking more closely at others, hoping something new might jump out at him and give them a direction in which to go, but nothing more stood out than when he had been on the scene itself. Finding nothing, he resumed his stroll.

Something about this whole case made him, not antsy, but unsettled. It was like seeing a picture-puzzle out of the corner of his eye that didn't quite have all its pieces lined up the way they were supposed to be but looked utterly normal when viewed straight on -- the sense of eyes watching where there shouldn't be any or ghost-fingers trailing over the back of his neck -- and if this was what Q had been feeling for the last months, little wonder she had been so tense during their last comm chat before Darmali’s demise.

“If not a handler then at minimum someone complicit in her activities,” James continued as he approached the window. He looked down on the pedestrians -- office workers, government officials, and tourists -- scurrying about their business. “While we can’t confirm the supposition, of course, even if her killer wasn’t staying at the resort, there was plenty of opportunity to kill her before I arrived. So if not intended specifically for me, then the message was certainly meant for me to bring back to Six.”

James was too much the professional to run his hands through his hair in frustration at the feeling of being one step behind, but he did cross his arms, if for no other reason than to conceal the clench of his fists. Which he'd be more than happy to forcefully plant on a target's ribcage. Whenever they finally had a target, that is.

“My staff has been looking through the security footage from the resort in the days prior and subsequent to the murders,” Q added. She crossed her legs and adjusted her glasses. “There’s no evidence that the meeting took place before Bond arrived. The Legian Bali has rather impressive video surveillance for all that it’s kept on an open server. There are cameras on virtually every corner and in every hallway, but there are two locations in which there would be no cameras. The guest suites and, understandably --”

“The spa treatment rooms,” M finished for her.

“Precisely.” Q continued. “There were three other resort guests undergoing treatments at the time of the murders: Evangeline and Hugo Mott from Houston, Texas, couples massage; and Melina Weiss from Austria, seaweed wrap and a deep tissue massage.”

“What are their stories?” asked Bond over his shoulder.
Q consulted her notes once again. “The Motts were on holiday. A second honeymoon given to them by their children, it would seem. Ms. Weiss … ah, yes, here it is: rest, rehabilitation, and recuperation. Apparently she took a rather nasty spill down a relatively benign slope in Gstaad in February. Left her with a dodgy knee.”

“I remember seeing her that morning at the bar and then again on the beach later,” Bond said, turning back to the room. “Young. Pretty, ginger-haired thing with a knee brace, a walking stick, and a dreadful limp. The only thing they might have had in common was the drinks server, but in the time I observed the doctor, I never saw any indication of messages exchanged between her and Ms. Weiss. I had no contact with the Motts.”

“I’m not surprised,” Q commented with a knowing chuckle. “If their room service bill is anything to go on, it seems the only time they left their suite was for daily spa treatments.”

“Well done, Hugo,” replied Bond suggestively. Q chuckled lightly and a small smile even cracked Mallory’s typically sober countenance. James crossed from the window to Q’s side but did not resume his seat.

“No suspects, then, in the murder of Ida Darmali,” said M.

“Not as of yet, sir. No,” Q confirmed. It went without saying that Q-Branch would continue to scour through the video footage, dig through the resort’s computer servers, hack into employee email accounts, anything and everything necessary to find even the smallest clue.

“So we’re back to square one on this nameless terrorist organisation.” The tone of his voice caused Q to look up sharply from her tablet. It was the first time since Q had started bringing her suspicions of this group to Mallory that the doubtful note was absent from his voice when he spoke of it. Clearly Darmali’s murder had tipped the scales, and he now believed … at least to some degree.

“I’ve started calling it Revenant,” Q admitted quietly from her seat. Bond and M looked at her quizzically and she shrugged in response. “Well, ‘Mysterious Global Criminal and Terrorist Organisation’ is rather a mouthful.”

“Very well, ‘Revenant’, but not to anyone outside of this room with the exception of Tanner and Trevelyan as they’ve been in on this since the beginning,” Mallory insisted. He tossed his biro to the top of his desk, frustration at their lack of progress clear on his face.

“We’re not back to square one, though, sir,” Q corrected. She tucked her tablet between her thigh and the arm of her chair so that she could pass each man a file folder from a small stack she had brought with her.

“What’s this?” Bond asked, approaching her chair. He handed one folder off to Mallory and then flipped through his own, scanning the few pages attached to the inside front cover of the file.

“The CDC’s analysis of what Holdst had in those canisters,” she said, looking up at him. “We received the report from Atlanta late yesterday afternoon.”

“That took awhile,” Bond commented. Holdst had been killed nearly three months ago.

“Not really. Bioweapons aren’t as readily identified and classified as conventional explosive or nuclear weapons. The testing involved is much more complex.”

“The report says the canisters were filled with a lentiviral vector.” Mallory looked up from his folder, equal parts annoyed and puzzled. “Q, I did well enough in the sciences to pass my O-
“Understandable, sir. With a few exceptions, this is largely outside my area of expertise, too, so I consulted Emmaline. We spoke at length last night.” Like the department chief of Analysis, as Quartermaster, Q had the rank and clearance to read in what other professionals she deemed necessary to assist with the gathering, analysis, and dissemination of intelligence that came her way. Emmaline Y’da was MI6’s Chief of Medical. Herself a renowned surgeon, Y’da’s father had been one of the world’s leading virologists, appointed Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University, an academic chair founded by King Henry VIII in 1546, and though Emma’s medical career had taken a vastly different path than her father’s, she knew far more on the subject of virology than anyone else of Q’s reckoning. “Emma helped to clarify a great many things in the report.”

Bond had continued to read the precis of the report as Q addressed M’s concerns. Like Mallory, James had the average Etonian’s knowledge of biological science, but his interests had been more in psychology -- ironically -- and the physical sciences. Nevertheless, he remembered enough about cellular replication to get a sense that what he was looking at was not a good thing.

“Sir, if you would?” Q asked Mallory, gesturing at the large LCD screen on the far wall. Once it was on, she paired her tablet with his system and clicked a link in the file she had sent herself. “Oh good, a cartoon,” snarked Bond when the computer animation Q had created, detailing how lentiviral vectors worked and what it meant for their current security situation, began to play. “Hush you.” Q smacked Bond on his arm with the back of her hand and pointed at the screen. “Sit down, pay attention, and you might actually learn something.”

With her words, James was suddenly struck with a sense of déjà vu so powerful that it lay heavy and thick on the back of his neck, dispelling even the ghost-fingers that had continued to haunt him whilst the discussion had moved on.

It was but the most recent in a series of similar situations, all centring around Q, but try as he might, James could not consciously place where the overwhelming sense of familiarity was coming from. The first time had been right after Skyfall when Q had stitched up his wounds, but other than minor incidents here and there, it had largely lain dormant until the night he and Alec had brought the kittens home. The three had been eating dinner at the cracked remains of Q’s table, Alec revelling in his reclaimed status as Q’s best mate, and was regaling his two friends with stories of adventures he had experienced with each of them over the years.

A particularly ribald story involving James, three snails, a pair of Lederhosen, and a Bavarian biergarten had left Q giggling in a way that was adorable in James’ eyes but clearly embarrassing in hers. When he called her on it, she had stuck out her tongue at him -- a wholly un-Q response -- and returned her attention to Alec and his stories. James, however, had felt a moment of familiarity that he could not place. It had been fleeting, but with each subsequent experience the feeling grew stronger, lasted longer, and he couldn’t --

“Bond?” Q was looking up at him, hazel eyes concerned behind her spectacles. Her hand rested lightly on his forearm. It was the first time she had really touched him since that night when they’d been pressed together, half-naked against the wall of her sitting room, and the warmth of her hand seared through the fine wool of his suit jacket as though it didn’t even exist. He looked from her hand to her eyes to her lips which had continued to move, though he wasn’t entirely certain he knew just what she was saying.

“Double-O Seven? Are you quite all right?” Mallory’s insistent tone cut through the noise Q had
unintentionally caused in Bond’s head and snapped him back to the present. He blinked twice and covered Q’s hand momentarily, squeezing slightly to reassure her before retaking his seat next to hers.

“Yes, sir. Apologies.” He crossed his legs and opened the file again, appropriately attentive for what Q was about to brief them on.

“We’ve all been running a bit ragged these last weeks, the two of you in particular,” Mallory said, knowing full well that neither his best agent nor his workaholic Quartermaster would ever admit to something as commonplace as exhaustion. He gestured at the screen. “If you would please, Quartermaster. What is a lentiviral vector?”

For the next two hours, Q gave the men a layman’s explanation and briefing of the five hour conversation she had held with Emma Y’da the night before. She had wanted the CMO to deliver the information, but Y’da had been called into emergency surgery shortly before Bond arrived from Heathrow and had yet to emerge from the theatre. As morning wound down toward noon, M called for a hearty snack so they could refresh themselves, and Q only just managed to contain her sigh of relief at the first sip of Earl Grey she had had since her morning cuppa.

“So the CDC has determined that the viral vector -- a trigger, for lack of a better term -- in those canisters was designed to deploy a payload containing the replication gene for a virus currently lying dormant … in whom?” asked M.

“The populace of Frankfurt, Germany would be my guess, as that was the weapon’s destination,” Q replied.

“To what purpose?” M wanted to know. Terrorism as a motive didn’t quite seem to fit, even with what little they knew. It was, of course, the one question for which Q did not have an answer, but Bond apparently did.

“Extortion,” James supplied as he finished his bacon butty and picked up his cup of coffee. Per Q’s ‘orders,’ he had shut up and paid attention and had spent the bulk of Q’s briefing not only processing the details, which were very thorough given they were not Q’s area of expertise, but also considering motives for such a reckless action. “It’s the only thing that makes sense given the evidence. Eran Holdst was a whore. So long as he was paid well, he was indiscriminate with whom he worked. Hamas, IRA, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Muslim Brotherhood; it didn’t matter. Our theory is that Ida Darmali was working for someone, be it an organisation or a single individual, yet there’s no evidence that she had ties with any known terrorist groups, so a new player, but not one that wants to terrorize in the -- pardon me -- traditional sense.”

“I don’t follow,” admitted M, but he was definitely intrigued in where Bond was going.

Q, however, did.

“Oh, that’s brilliant,” Q said with a complimentary smile as she caught on to his theory. “Double-O Seven is right. Sir, the aim of terrorist organisations is to promote and create terror: bombings, plane crashes, chemical weapons attacks. They’re quick, pointed, designed to maximize casualties and the fear they create. *This*,” she indicated the animation on the screen, “doesn’t do that. The vector payload was designed to interact with a dormant virus that has hidden out inside people’s cells for months, maybe even years, and incite it to replicate. It would have been deadly, yes, but the method of transmission would be slow, unwieldy. It’s also incredibly complex. We’re talking years of research and millions of pounds invested to create this. Not to sound callous, but a sarin gas attack or a bomb on the U-Bahn would be faster, cheaper, and we know that it promotes terror in the way that the terrorist organisations we are familiar with like it.”
James set his coffee cup on the small table next to him and picked up Q’s narrative. “But with extortion, you quietly infect a population with a dormant virus, and some time later threaten your victims with the trigger that completes the genome and starts the replication process. Pay us -- money, property, services … secrets, it doesn’t really matter -- or we release the trigger and people die.”

“So the Germans refused to pay,” Mallory said.

“That, or Frankfurt was a test case,” posited Q. “Not to ensure that the virus and trigger worked; Revenant, if that’s who we like for this, would have tested that extensively.”

“Extortion only works if you can back up what you threaten you’re going to do,” James asserted. “Attack Frankfurt now --”

“And approach London, Paris, or New York later,” Mallory finished the thought. “Which means there’s more of this out there.” He popped two paracetamol from a blister packet he pulled from his desk drawer and swallowed them with the remainder of his tea. The headache that had been threatening for the last hour had erupted full force.

“It’s likely, yes, sir.” Q agreed. “However, the fact that we’ve seen no intelligence indicating a repeat in the three months since Bond thwarted the attack is a positive thing. As is Darmali’s death, in a way.”

“Explain.”

“As we’ve already stated, her death was clearly a message, and while it’s reasonable to assume that the message was, in part, addressed to MI6, its primary recipient would likely be anyone who worked with Darmali on the project.”

“A warning. A much more specific type of message,” said James, pointedly. “Not a warning to stop altogether -- there would already be too much money invested -- but one advising caution lest they fail in their mission like poor Ida.”

“We need to know what the Germans were infected with and whether they were actively threatened with the trigger or if they were to be victims of a test case,” Mallory said.

“Shall I pack for Germany, sir?” James asked. He rose and buttoned his jacket, all 007 at the ready.

“Not just yet. Oh, relax, Bond, I’m not pushing this or you aside,” he said as a sudden tension around Bond’s eyes told M his agent was both surprised and irritated at the veto. Mallory knew far too well how Bond prefered to see situations through from beginning to end, but the reality was that this could take months to conclude and while they needed the intelligence, M already had assets in the region.

“I spoke with Agents Parsons and Lee this morning. They wrapped things up in Poland last night and can be in Frankfurt in two hours once they have mission parameters and a flight from Gdańsk Lech Wałęsa International. They can get us the information on the virus, and I have a few contacts in the BND, the BfV, and the MAD that I can approach about the extortion.” Gareth had worked with members of all three German Intelligence agencies over the years and was confident that one of them would be able to tell him whether or not the Germans had been extorted directly.

“I don’t need a Double-O to collect this intelligence, but I will need a rested Double-O to act on it once we know a bit more. You’ll see it through, Bond, I promise, but you’ve been on the move for
over a month --"

“And he’s still recovering from that gunshot wound he suffered in the Burkina Faso mission,” Q interjected pointedly, looking up at Bond.

“It was a graze ,” Bond bit out, glaring down at her.

“Medical would beg to differ,” Q said. “As would I.”

“Yes, Quartermaster, I’m sure Bond is appreciative of the reminder,” Mallory sighed at the tight grin on Q’s face and wondered if it was possible for these two to bicker any more like an old married couple and immediately concluded that they probably could. He quickly returned his attention and commentary to the now openly annoyed Double-O. “And you’re still recovering from a gunshot wound, so I want you to stand down until we know what’s going on in Germany.” He could see Bond’s body tense for an argument and held up a hand. “Not a word of complaint, Double-O Seven.”

“Sir.” While the agent’s tone was compliant, the look in his eyes was still bordering on defiant, and Mallory knew that he’d need some task at the ready to keep Bond from haring off on his own during his ‘down time.’

Mallory turned his attention to Q. “Is there anything else you need, Quartermaster?”

She considered his question, her mind was definitely working more slowly than she was happy with. She was exhausted and felt as though she had used up the remainder of her energy reserves to tease Bond, but it had been worth it. He now knew that she was concerned about the unhealed wound and, more importantly, had not forgotten about it.

Q finished her tea and rose slowly from her chair. Food would likely help her fatigue, but she had not been tempted by what Moneypenny had brought them. She’d grab something to eat later when the images of a butchered body weren’t quite so fresh in her memory.

“Ida Darmali’s blood,” she said candidly. Q bent and set her cup and saucer carefully on the serving tray at the centre of the coffee table, the clink of china punctuating her assertion.

“Her blood ?”

“Planning on adding a biomedical component to R&D now, Q,” asked Bond.

“It wouldn’t be as big a leap for me as you seem to think, Double-O Seven,” Q said with an eyebrow cocked in his direction and ready to fire at the slightest provocation, he was sure. “Virology might not be my thing, but a fair portion of my doctoral research in Uni resulted in nanotechnological applications in the medical field.”

She gestured at the CDC report files that were now stacked in a pile on Mallory’s desk. M would keep one and have the others destroyed. “But at issue here is the fact that biological weapons are notoriously hard to control and predict, but something like this -- a virus -- even more so. It would be ridiculously easy for Darmali and the people she worked for to become infected with their own weapon, so it would have been exceedingly reckless of them to not engineer their own protection against it.”

“Her blood would tell you if that was the case.”

“Yes, sir. The more I dig around into the report’s data, the more I get the sense that --” she gave a little growl of frustration that each man found both endearing and threatening; Q ran the fingers of
one hand through her curls until they reached the band that held them together at the base of her neck. “There’s something familiar about it, about the way they planned this dispersal -- but I can’t put my finger on it.”

“You think Darmali’s blood might help you determine what it is?”

“Won’t know for certain until Emma can get it under a microscope, but Darmali’s the only one we know about who was directly involved in the development of the virus and its delivery system. If she engineered a vaccine or a cure, it would stand to reason that she would use it on herself. If it’s there, it might provide us a way to combat this ourselves.” Q shrugged her shoulders, and James was a bit concerned about the hint of resignation he heard in her tone. Q didn’t like not knowing things, and typically attacked those areas in which she was ignorant like a lioness chasing down a gazelle, but now she sounded almost defeated.

“Time will be of the essence. The coroner won’t hold onto those samples once he’s made a final determination on cause of death which in this situation is rather conclusive,” M said. “Who do we have in the region?”

Q pulled up the data on her tablet. Normally she had information of this kind committed to memory, but her brain had been near to running on empty for the last 36 hours. “Alaina Ball is in Brisbane and Rick Ogata is in Singapore. Neither is on an active mission, but Ball is scheduled to meet up with Agent Eichner in Quito in three days for the Olsney extraction.”

“Olsney Extraction”? Sounds like a bloody medical procedure,” James interjected not quite under his breath in an attempt to add some levity to what had turned into an intellectually and psychologically exhausting morning for them all. Thankfully, it seemed to have been well-received if Mallory’s chuckle and Q’s slight grin were anything to go by.

“Too right, Double-O Seven,” M agreed. “Very well, Q, send to Agent Ogata Priority Level 2 mission parameters; Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia for collection of all post-mortem biological specimens pertaining to one Ida Darmali.”

“Priority Level 2. Yes, sir,” Q acknowledged as she made the notations in her tablet. While not the highest classification, the level two designation placed a significant level of urgency on the mission and should ensure that the specimens were obtained before they could be destroyed. “Thank you, M.”

Mallory noted that her smile, while appreciative, was weary, as was the rest of her bearing for that matter. “Q, once you’ve contacted our agents in Singapore and Poland, I want you to turn things over to R for the next three days. Things are settling down a bit now. Go home and get some rest.”

James couldn’t help but agree with M. Q looked ready to drop, as though she hadn’t known a decent night’s sleep in weeks, which she likely hadn’t if she had been sleeping regularly on the futon in her office. Her normally tidy cardigan sat askew on her narrow shoulders, and while her hair was typically a bit fly away no matter how she tried to contain it, it seemed to have taken off in more directions than normal. Her hazel eyes didn’t shine as brightly behind their spectacles as he had come to appreciate, and the dark circles beneath them were a worry. James felt his earlier irritation with his Quartermaster fade quickly.

“If only I could, sir,” Q responded. “I’ve an automobile shipment worth nearly three-quarters of a million pounds arriving in an hour that I must supervise, and my quarterly evaluation with Master Cha is at half four. I’ve had to reschedule that five times in the last month due to the overload in Q-Branch, and he’s promised to pull me from active duty altogether if I miss today’s session.”
Cha was uncompromising when it came to mandatory hand-to-hand combat and self-defence qualifications, and other than the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief of Psychological Services, and the Quartermaster, he was the only other department head who could summarily yank an agent’s field status if they didn’t pass requals. While Q was a trained agent, she was one who didn’t go into the field, yet she still needed to maintain ‘active’ status in order to remain the Quartermaster of record. It was a requirement of the position that Olivia Mansfield had put into effect a few months prior to the bombing that made Q the Quartermaster, and Mallory had seen the wisdom in keeping it in effect. That Q had failed to make her scheduled requalifications five times meant that Cha would make sure that things would not go easily for her this afternoon, and Bond and Mallory each winced in sympathy.

“When that’s finished then. Three days. At home. No exceptions, Quartermaster,” Mallory said, rising to his feet. He punctuated each phrase with a tap of a knuckle to his desktop.

Q tucked her tablet against her chest and turned for the door. “Sir,” Q said with a smile that, while unfailingly polite, did not actually acknowledge M’s order. “Thank you for your time, M. Bond.” She nodded at each man in turn and was gone before either could call her to task.

“She has no intention of taking time off, does she?” Mallory sighed once the door to his office closed.

“But you’re thinking it.”

“I am.”

“Bond?”

“Yes, M?”

“I believe I do have a mission of sorts for you, after all. Granted, it’s not exactly commensurate with your skill set and experience, and I’m not rescinding my order that you take your down time …”

“How do you feel about babysitting an obstinate boffin during her enforced holiday?”

“Intriguing. Could be quite … fun, actually.”
“Need to know, Double-O Seven.”

“Of course, sir … Thank you, sir?”

“Bond?”

“M?”

“Go away.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

Please do use that comment feature below if you like where things went with this chapter.

The next one will be coming around the end of October or early November. I have a few chapters almost ready to go, but with NaNoWriMo coming up, I'm stockpiling to get this story through the holidays.
Seven-Eighths of it Underwater for Every Part that Shows

Chapter Summary

But R had a greater worry, and it was this:

James Bond kept secrets because he had to.

The Quartermaster kept secrets because she had to and because she didn’t always know when or how or what to share.

Each had trust issues.

How did he explain to this woman he both knew yet didn’t how important it was that she be willing to share with James Bond the things about herself that she’d clearly kept locked away for decades.

“Just be careful, Q,” R said at last.

Chapter Notes

My Beta! My Beta! My Beta is a GODDESS!! I know that I write this in the notes before each chapter, but Springbok7 is truly my saving grace She knows exactly the right questions to ask, the right phrase to tool, and the perfect times to jump in and save me from myself.

Hi everyone! It's been about six weeks since the last chapter. A bit longer than I had planned, but it's that crazy time of the school year. Though, as I think about it, when is it NOT that crazy time of the school year? Grading never seems to go away. To help make up for the delay, here's 17k worth of narrative for your (hopefully) reading pleasure.

Be warned, however, that the ANGST TRAIN is definitely pulling into -- or out of, depending on how you look at it -- the station in this chapter. There's very little that's emotionally easy for Q, James, Alec, or R in this chapter. They will each say and do things that do not show them in their best light (except maybe R), but I like to think that their actions and reactions are as human a response as a writer can create. I feel that the quotation at the start of the chapter is particularly apt this time around.

Remember that this is a non-linear narrative that takes place both before and after the events at Westminster Bridge as depicted in SPECTRE. Chapter headings will indicate which timeframe is which.

Please do take the time to comment on this chapter if you appreciate what you read. Comments fuel a writers drive to create, even the short ones (though the longer ones are brilliantly awesome!).

P.S. Chapter 10 will be a bit later than my approximate 4-6 week update schedule
because both my Beta and I are involved in the 2017 00Q Reverse Bang. A fair portion of Ch. 10 is written, but it’s a matter of arranging writing schedules amidst work, the Holiday season, and the 00QRBB.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Nine: “Seven-Eighths of it Underwater for Every Part that Shows”

“There is a luxury in self-reproach. When we blame ourselves, we feel that no one else has a right to blame us. It is the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution.”

— Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray
It was early evening by the time Q headed back to her room on the third floor. After her session with Kate had ended, she'd had another go on the treadmill with Dale and Cora and followed it up with 90 minutes in the gym working just about every muscle group she had, as well as a few that might be evolutionary throwbacks because she'd sure as hell had never encountered them before.

A second 30 minute stint in the pool supplemented the swim she had taken in lieu of lunch and coincidentally served as a pleasant cool-down session that would hopefully stave off any leg cramps the protracted day might induce. Her biceps and triceps, however, shook and buzzed with exhaustion, and though she felt that she barely had enough strength to push her chair down the corridor, Q had declined two offers of assistance before she had even left the canteen.

Dinner had once again been an unsatisfactory affair.

It wasn’t that the food was bad. Quite the opposite, in fact. While maintaining good nutrition was a critical component in any patient’s recovery, the directors of the clinic knew that well-planned meals meant nothing if the patient couldn’t be enticed into eating them -- ever a concern for those recovering from a spinal cord injury -- so they’d hired a chef who had been trained at Le Cordon Bleu and had worked as a sous chef at a restaurant in Bagshot boasting a Michelin star.

All well and good, but Q’s appetite still had not rebounded to what it had been prior to the shooting. Given that she’d not eaten since breakfast, she should have been ravenous, but she’d only picked at the comfort food she’d ordered for dinner: Toad in a Hole with mushroom-onion gravy. Not even the sticky toffee pudding had tempted her. Besides, Q had always struggled with bothering to eat when she was particularly focussed on something.

And Kate had given her much to think about.

Q's head, teeming with the issues and thoughts Kate had urged her to confront, hung low as she slowly wheeled herself along the deserted corridor to her room, thankful that the tide of people around the clinic was ebbing instead of surging. Too drained to maintain even the pretense of courtesy, she was equally grateful that Nadia Zuniga -- the 'Horseman' currently on duty -- was the least talkative of her four bodyguards and had accurately gauged Q’s mood: Zuniga kept a distinct and discrete distance between them this shift. In light of the day’s events, Q appreciated at least the illusion of solitude.

The door to Q’s room was open and, as always, the light was on. Also as always, the senior agent stepped in ahead of her charge to clear the space. Q noted Zuniga’s slight hesitation at the threshold, but then the agent continued forward smoothly on silent feet while Q waited outside. A moment passed followed by another before Zuniga reappeared in the doorway and nodded to Q, moving down the corridor a fair bit to take up her post. As she wheeled herself forward, Q puzzled over why the agent was standing farther away than was the norm, and then she reached the room's
threshold and stopped dead in her chair.

The last person -- scratch that -- the second-to-last person she would have expected to see that night was sat on the floor of her room, his back propped against the side of her bed. Anger flooded back in to burn away Q’s exhaustion with white-hot flames. She was ready to shout at him, scream for him to get the hell out of her room. Out of her space.

The impulse died on the inhale.

Alec was asleep, so deeply in fact that he had apparently -- in an unsettling, atypical fashion for a Double-O -- not even awakened when Agent Zuniga had stepped in to clear the room.

Q frowned at the notion.

She rolled forward into the room and maneuvered her wheelchair next to the guest chair that was Alec's usual seat. It had been his habit -- both in his thus far limited visits to see her at Shea and before whilst she was still at UCH -- to draw it closer to the bed and sit with his feet propped up on the foot of the mattress beside her own while they chatted about news, weather, or rugby, trading tales of the ridiculous when the mood hit them.

He was not using it this go round, however.

Q’s frown deepened as she assessed the man on the floor. Her usually swift mind was somewhat dulled with the physical and emotional exhaustion of the day, but she was fairly certain that the clothes Alec had on -- a long-sleeved navy t-shirt and jeans -- were the same he had been wearing two days ago when she'd expressed her expectation that he not darken her doorstep again until he learned to back off with his high-handed approach to her life.

The somewhat harsh light from the fluorescent bulb overhead did nothing to soften the lines of his face, but it did give Q the opportunity to study Alec in what should have been the relaxation of repose.

Though he slept, he was far from relaxed.

Alec’s head was leant back against the duvet, but its mortar grey tones only served to draw attention to the similarly coloured strands scattered amongst the caramel of his hair, and she noted a deep furrow was etched between the brows over his closed eyes. There was a pinched look about his mouth: even his jaw seemed tense under the bristle of at least three days' worth of stubble. Crows' feet that were usually most apparent when his head was thrown back in hearty laughter were prominent: their deep lines cut in toward the flesh at his temples, an unfortunate complement to the creases that marred the corners of his down-turned lips.

Visually tracing those lines upward, Q’s own brow furrowed at the sight of puffy, purple shadows beneath his eyes that brushed upward to stain even the fragile skin of his lids. That skin was, perhaps, not quite as multicoloured as the time he'd come home from a mission in Atlanta with twin black eyes, but it was a near thing, especially considering she knew he'd not been out on assignment since returning from his mission to Morocco.

He looks old, Q thought, sorrow filling her at the realisation. Having examined Alec’s face, Q’s eyes naturally began to take in the rest of him, but as she did, the picture … altered. The image was not one of agedness but of youth: a child, abandoned.

Lost.

Though she'd failed to take note of it initially, one of the pillows from her bed was absent from its
home on top of the mattress and currently resided in Alec’s lap. His right arm was curled around the cushion, nestling it between his chest and his right thigh which was drawn up, foot still planted against the floor, to keep both arm and pillow in place.

His left leg had likely been in a similar position, but at some point that foot must have lost sufficient traction against the tile of the floor and slid down: the leg was splayed out in front of him, forearm resting on the floor alongside his hip. His palm was turned upward as if in offering … or entreaty.

She might be tired, but Q’s brain was not so exhausted that it could not conjure an image to fit the evidence: Alec -- who was always at the ready with a ribald joke to make her laugh no matter how low she felt or how weary he was himself -- stoic, supportive, cheeky, loyal Alec with his face buried against the soft cotton of the pillow, muffling any sound that might be overheard by passing ears.

Q twitched back physically in her chair as the mental picture blossomed, only then noting the details that her brain had observed but she had not consciously registered: the bits dried salt at the corners of his eyes, and the patch slightly damp fabric on the upper end of the pillow beneath his chin where the grey had turned to darker slate.

"Oh, Alec," she sighed, suddenly feeling as old as he looked as the anger that had been churning under her skin for over two days -- diminished by her session with Kate but reignited at her first sight of Alec in her room -- finally stilled, settled, and drained away. Bracing an elbow on the arm of her chair, Q rested her chin on her palm as she regained a bit of that calm that affection for her friend had always brought her, but as she watched Alec sleep, Q couldn’t help but come to the realisation that she had brought about this situation. Something he didn’t remotely deserve.

Though they tried their damnedest to be otherwise, Double-Os weren’t invincible: physically or emotionally. Q had seen the damage bullet and stab wounds had done to their bodies. So, too, the effects of burns and broken bones, dislocated joints and rent flesh. Those traumas healed in due course: any long-lasting ramifications were clear and apparent. The psychological trauma was something else again. Though they all claimed to be sociopaths, Q didn’t know of a single one who actually was one: they each cared too damn much. But she also didn’t know of a single one who made honest use of Six’s psychological services. Not that she could blame them; she avoided Psych, too. The head-shrinkers currently in residence were shite, outdated in their treatments and practises, and they had been largely deemed untrustworthy, focussed as they were on the bottom line rather than on the true mental health of people who often had to commit otherwise unspeakable acts in the name of national security and the public’s safety.

In spite of their intimate friendship, Alec and she had only rarely spoken of the psychological traumas they had each incurred after coming to work for Six. Given what she was learning about herself in her sessions with Kate, Q couldn’t help but wonder if things would stand between them as they currently did if she and Alec had talked more about those wounds.

Would things have turned out differently between her and Bond if they had done the same?

Would sorting through all this adversity still seem so bloody impossible?

Q’s hands tightened on the arms of her chair. Wondering about the ‘woulds’ was likely to drive her ‘round the twist. If ‘ifs and ands were pots and pans, there’d be no work for tinkers’ hands,’ or so Eustace had been fond of saying.

So she would tend to what was, what is, and what needed to be.
She wasn’t good at it -- if nothing else, that was one thing all her sessions with Kate had clarified -- but they needed to talk. She needed to talk, but she was so sodding tired. What energy Q had kept in reserve was depleted, and the imminent chat was likely to be protracted and trying. Maybe just a quick rest before waking Alec up.

He shouldn't sleep like that for too long, anyway: his neck would not thank him for it ...

~~OOQ~~

Q woke to the unexpected slide of her chin off her hand and the resultant jerk of her head, glasses slipping off her nose, as she accidentally pitched forward. She hadn’t meant to drift off completely, just rest her eyes. Only by some miracle did she manage not to fall out of her wheelchair and onto the floor next to Alec. In her exhaustion and distraction she had forgotten to lock the wheels, but the distinctive squeak of rubber on tile, accompanied by Q’s panicked gasp as she steadied herself, served to wake the agent at her feet.

Alec tossed aside the pillow he had been nestled into, reached with his left hand across his body to grasp at his hip for a weapon that was not there, and not finding it, coiled his body to spring up at the perceived threat. Only once he was ready to act did he open his eyes, and he froze in puzzlement. Q adjusted her spectacles and watched Alec stare at her as first confusion, then recognition, and finally understanding flashed through his green eyes.

“Q …?” Alec breathed, reaching out to touch her, but thinking twice, halted the action and diverted his hand to instead grip the top of his own bent knee; the rest of him seemed to almost shrink a little with uncertainty.

Q felt an instant pang at Alec's aborted movement, but what could she say? Where should she even start? How could she explain the horrible twisting knot of emotion that had been roiling through her for days?

A week ago, nothing would have stayed his motion, and she'd have already been weighed down by an arm slung across her shoulders, tucking her up into his side and comforting warmth. She'd never been especially overt in showing physical affection, and there might as well have been an unspoken rule preventing others from showing such gestures to her in turn, but if anyone were the exception to that rule it was Alec, for whom personal space -- at least her personal space -- regularly meant nothing, even if the contact he initiated was fleeting: a brush of fingertips against her shoulder or the across the back of her hand. Just a tiny moment of contact that said, ‘I'm here with you.’

Speaking with Kate had given Q a clearer perspective and had allowed her some insight into what had been triggering the maelstrom within, but that earlier conversation in no way removed the emotions themselves. They ebbed and flowed like a tide, sometimes distant as though belonging to someone else, other times so present she wanted to scream with the weight of it all.

Anger.

Frustration.

Jealousy.

Envy.
Resentment.

Grief. So much bloody grief!

Guilt. Yes, if she were being honest with herself. Too much of that, too. And many more emotions she'd not even had a chance to name.

Q grimaced and shuddered at the wave that had crested again and threatened to pull her under.

Before she could say a word, could articulate what she was feeling and begin to formulate an apology, Alec had seen the grimace and the shudder, misinterpreted the reason behind it, and was off at a gallop with the bit firmly between his teeth.

"You're not an invalid!"

Q recoiled at the force and raw pain she heard behind those words.

“I didn’t mean to … I mean I should have known not to -- Fuck, me! I know it's poison-- I mean--Shit! No, that's not what I meant." Those final six words were more a growl of frustration than an articulate point. He pressed his palms flat against the tile beneath him for a moment, pushing so hard that his fingertips and knuckles turned white from the force of it.

"Look at me! What the fuck do I know? Nothing! I'm an idiot. You're right! Such an idiot! I'm not questioning- No, I am, but… Not you … Not- not what you do! Not who you are! But- How to- What this meant for you. Means for you."

Alec’s vague, almost helpless, gestures seemed to encompass the entirety of Q in her wheelchair, the Shea facility around them, and possibly far more than existed in this physical plane. Q was still too stunned at his intensity to respond to his words as they washed over her. This was unlike anything she had ever seen from him before. This was not the staid, focussed, deadly Double-O, nor was it the buoyant, companionable friend. This was a confused man searching for answers to questions he struggled to even know how to ask.

"There’s too much I didn’t know, that I don’t know." Alec’s usually clear green eyes were clouded with his distress. "I didn’t set out to hurt you. I didn’t mean to make it sound like I was taking control. You’re right. You’re completely right. You’re still you, and I knew that. I know that. That’s maybe the one thing I do know. I just--" his firm tone faltered, and his eyes dropped.

Though he had been preparing to stand when he first woke, had even drawn up his legs to do so, Alec now sat cross-legged on the cold, hard tile of the floor. As his eyes fell, his hands twisted together and then parted to scrub his palms against the coarse denim covering his thighs. He drew a shuddering breath and then tucked his balled up fists into his armpits, arms wrapped around himself protectively.

Shoulders hunched in defeat, Alec stared morosely at his ankles, and though it was a much softer tone that carried his next words to Q's ears, the emotion dripping from them was thick and sluggish like blood oozing from a raw, festering wound.

"You matter, Q. To me. I… I don't have a lot of friends, you know that. Real ones, anyway. I make people laugh but… I reckon if they're laughing, they're not judging… what I do… who I am… I'm not close to many people. If-- If I don't let them in, it doesn't hurt so much when I lose them."

It was then that it finally all clicked: the fight with Alec, the point Kate had not-so-subtly driven home in their session earlier, Alec’s distress now. For all that she was dealing with a truly horrid
reality with the loss of her legs, Q was not the only one who'd lost something or some one. She wasn't the only one dealing with the consequences of that sodding bullet or of Bond walking away. She may not want to think of him or about how the knowledge of that betrayal sometimes hurt more than the physical pain she dealt with every single day, but she had forgotten that Alec had lost Bond, too. Even if one day he came back, so much had gone wrong this time, that things between the two men might never be the same.

Before Q could collect her thoughts on what all of this truly meant, however, Alec shook himself free of that mood, banged his fist down on his knee -- clearly not even registering the force of the blow on a joint she knew had pained him for years -- and lifted his head to spear her with a fierce look.

"It's-- There's-- Just... You... now. Jam--" Alec bit off that name, clearly trying to avoid causing her any more discomfort. “I just want to keep you safe! I need to know you’re safe.”

He shrugged deprecatingly and the corner of his mouth twitched as if trying to smile.

"I know your job's dangerous sometimes. But-- that danger, it's not the same as mine. Blowing things up in your lab. Running tests. Some of those experiments you do, they're mental! Your job’s dangerous, sure, but it’s controlled, even if it's unpredictable. I’d imagine that’s half the fun for you. I know it is for me."

The ghost of a smile shaped her lips as well. He was right. That was half the fun.

"It's different. This... is different. They-- You almost died, Q! Died! And I wasn't here! I-- You're all the family I have left. I want-- You're moya sestra, my family. Mine!"

This time his fist thumped against his chest, right over his heart. The desperation lacing his words only grew stronger as he continued. She could practically taste it in the air.

"You're my anchor. Lose you and... No! It’s not an option!"

Coming about as suddenly as a beating yacht under full sail, boom swinging around to switch its tack, Alec’s tone changed again, returning to self-directed disgust and frustration. He leapt up onto his knees in front of her chair and gripped the arms in his hands to pull her closer.

"I should’ve been here, damn it. I could’ve stopped them. Maybe it would’ve been enough. It should have been enough. Two Double-Os instead of just one. And Mallory. He knows what he’s about, took out Denbigh, after all. And Eve was there. Tanner, too. All of 'em at the Bridge. Right? One more could have made all the difference."

Yes, and if there had been one more in the host to make it 301, Leonidas would have won at Thermopylae, Q thought with a grimace, but Alec kept on railing.

"But before all that -- if I’d only been here! So much else I could have done. The Dead Armoury, yeah? Can’t shoot if you don’t have bullets. Can’t shoot if you’re dead, either! Could’ve stopped him from walking away, at least. I’m so sorry! I let you down. Always! Fuck! Westminster Bridge. HQ. The old HQ. Boothroyd was like a father to you. And Argentina! Could’ve got there so much sooner. Why am I even doing this? All I ever do is hurt you!"

Though still on his knees, he had turned from her, looking about him, trying to seek the answers to his questions in the furnishings of the room, in the walls themselves. Alec's thoughts were clearly tortuous now and confused, and he was only picking up momentum as though he were a tube train with failed brakes on a downhill stretch, barrelling through station after station unchecked as it
approached its destruction at the end of the line.

This was … this was about far more than just her injury or their fight, Q realised. This was a man who had dragged all his personal and professional demons out of the shadows but been shockingly unprepared to confront them in the light. On further consideration, it looked far more likely that those demons had dragged themselves out with no care or concern for the damage they caused.

It was a situation she was all too familiar with.

Q had never seen Alec like this and, truth be told, she wasn’t entirely certain if she should be scared by it or annoyed, but in either case, it needed to end. He needed to calm down or things would only get worse. His self-castigation accomplished nothing -- she was an expert at it, and she was coming to realise it had only ever brought about more pain -- and unless Alec pulled back on the throttle …

Since she lacked a handy bucket of ice-cold water to empty over Alec's head, Q made do with what she did have and slapped her hand down on the arm of the chair.

“Enough!”

The flood of words spilling from Alec dried up, evaporated like mist before the sun, and he stilled, collapsing back onto his heels and staring at her with wide eyes as if he’d never heard her shout at him before.

The silence hung over them for a couple of heartbeats. Tense. Hurting. So unlike them.

Scared or annoyed? Those had been her choices.

Q chose annoyed.

“Shall I fetch you a scourge, then?” she demanded. “I’m sure you’ll be wanting to take responsibility for my mother’s murder, too. And there’s Eustace’s cancer, of course.” She leaned back in her chair, folded her hands in her lap, tilted her head, and eyed the tormented man, critically.

“Since we're assigning blame, is it your fault that Liandri died? I didn't even know you existed back then, you'd barely made Double-O, after all, but since you're obviously responsible for every painful thing that's ever happened to me, why not add that to the list?

“But --”

“No, Alec. Just -- no .”

Q sighed, and though the way she had woken had filled her with a jolt of startled energy, she now felt as weary as she had when she’d first come out of her coma. She scrubbed at her eyes beneath her glasses, for once not caring about the smudges she would leave behind by not taking them off first. She adjusted her chair -- a nervous habit she had developed over the last few weeks -- and locked the wheels.

"There’s absolutely no guarantee that we wouldn’t still be sitting here like this even if you’d been there with us to take out Blofeld and Denbigh. Or worse, to my mind, you could’ve been shot instead!”

He flinched. It was minute but telling, just a slight tightening about his eyes: a physical response that Q had become well-acquainted with over the years that spoke to Alec’s disbelief that he could
have been the one injured or killed. Of course he hadn't considered it. Bloody Double-Os. Invincible, the lot of them.

Q sighed again.

Alec opened his mouth, no doubt to express some suitably bullheaded sentiment like, ‘That's the risk agents take each time we go out on a mission I’m a field agent. You're not,’ but Q cut him off and finished her rebuttal.

“You don’t always hurt me,” she said as gently as she knew how.

Her attempt at redirection succeeded.

Mostly.

"Maybe I don't set out to hurt you… but I never stop to think! I just react! And people get hurt. You. M. Our M. And I took that mission to Erfoud when you needed me here!” he argued, referencing the mission that had taken him out of London for the first time since Q'd been injured.

Spectre had attempted to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of its compound in the Sahara, and it had taken Alec, Double-Os Four, Ten, and Eleven along with four senior agents to knock that desert contingent back into the Middle Ages.

“Were you needed in Morocco? Don’t-- no. Just stop and think about it. Objectively, Alec.” He sucked in a startled breath for she had just echoed Tanner's words from two days prior.

"If you had not been there, on the ground with the rest of them, and were instead liaising here in London, would the mission have been successful?”

The question was rhetorical.

Alec’d known as soon as the intel had surfaced that he would have to go: the contact in Morocco -- his contact -- would have refused to deal with any other agent, would only meet with Alec as it was Alec to whom she owed a debt. He had saved her daughter years ago -- seemed to be a habit he was prone to, saving someone’s daughter -- and had never had the need to call in that chip. Until SPECTRE. But even knowing that had done nothing to assuage his guilt at having been gone.

“That’s not the point --”

“That’s precisely the point! You were doing your duty. Duty, Alec. Just as you have always done. You were where you needed to be, doing what you needed to do back when HQ was bombed and when M died. And yes, now, too. It’s what you do. It’s what you all do. Where you need to be when you need to be there. I wanted you here for my intake, of course I did, but you were needed in Erfoud.”

He couldn't refute her logic but Christ! He did not have to like it.

Q continued without giving him a chance to respond, desperate that he understand not only what she was trying to say, but its import, too.

"I agreed with Mallory’s orders then, I still do, and more importantly, so do you . Neither of us would ever put personal needs ahead of duty. But, yes, while you were away, you missed the orientation sessions that covered some critical aspects of my rehabilitation, things that would have helped you know how to interact with and relate to me,” she gestured at her chair, “to this now.
But rather than give you a chance to catch up once you’d got back, I held you accountable for things you hadn’t been here to learn and, consequently, didn’t understand. I did something to you personally that I would never do to you while in the field on a mission, and yet … Alec, I -”

Q sighed. God, she was pants at this, but she knew that if she didn’t get this right, help Alec understand here and now what she meant, their friendship would suffer in countless ways. She couldn’t risk losing that, too.

Though Q was tempted to stare at her lap as Alec had done -- for unlike him, there was much for her to be ashamed of -- she instead fixed her eyes firmly on his.

This was something from which she would not quail.

“You don't always hurt me. In fact, you hardly ever hurt me. And I'm so, so sorry I ever gave you cause to think you had.”

Q reached out and cupped Alec’s cheek with her hand, rubbing at the dried salt in the corner of his eye with the pad of her thumb. A heartfelt, if somewhat unpractised gesture on her part.

“There’s only one person in this room who’s hurt the other, who’s responsible for the current state of things between us, Alec, and it is not you.”

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**MI6 Headquarters, London, England: May 2013 (Six months before Westminster Bridge)**

“Ye know, I’ve never been much for the silver gals, m’self, but with curves like that …”

“Definitely. Gorgeous. Just gorgeous. All of them.”

“Bit of an understatement, don’t you think, R?”

“Leave off, you wanker. I’m awestruck.”

“Cesar is going to be sorry he missed this.”

“That he is, poor sod. ‘m in love. Oooh, that body. Trade w’ me, Eric. There’s a lad. That’s all ‘m asking. I’d die a happy woman. She’s more than ye can handle, anyway.”

Q cleared her throat, hugging her tablet to her chest, rocking back and forth on the soles of her trainer-clad feet as R and two of her R&D boffins all but fell over each other at the sight in front of them. All that was missing were the catcalls and low whistles that American telly so exemplified.

“If you three are quite done. Drool might not be a corrosive, but it does dull the shine. Dreadfully tedious to clean up, too.” Q managed to contain the roll of her eyes, but only because she secretly agreed with them. The ladies were, as R had said, gorgeous.

“Like you’re not thinking the same thing,” R snorted, gesturing at the three performance
automobiles that had been delivered not a quarter of an hour past. “I know you!”

Okay, maybe it wasn’t quite such a secret.

A black Jaguar F-Type, a red Audi R8, and a silver Aston Martin DB10 sat in a line in front of their bays in the bunkers Q-Branch had appropriated for its garage, and they were truly spectacular. Their smooth fenders and graceful lines practically glowed beneath the specially enhanced lighting in this part of the Branch, and though she contained her own reaction to the sight as was befitting her position as Quartermaster, her inner petrol-head was ‘squeeing’ with delight and bouncing from bay to bay to bay to bay …

Yet while the Jag and the Audi and the DB10 were undeniably lovely -- and would be more so by the time the motor-minions were done with them -- it was what sat outside the fourth bay that truly held Q’s attention.

“Is that what I think it is?” R said. He stood at her side. While Eric and Mariam continued to coo and fawn over the new acquisitions, Q had drifted to the ancient, battered shell that was still more husk than car. Her hum confirmed R’s observation.

“1963 Aston Martin DB5: Inline-6 engine, 282 horse at 5,500 rpm, top speed 143 miles per hour, zero to sixty in 8.1 seconds.” Q sighed and ran her index finger around the inside of the empty headlamp housing. “At least she was …”

“I’d have thought she’d be buried in a scrap heap in Scotland.”

Q shot him an angry glare over her shoulder. “She may just be a car, but she’s just as much a casualty of Raoul Silva as M and those we lost in the explosion, and I’d no more leave her behind than I would any of them.”

At least this one I can bring back, she thought.

Q ran an appreciative hand over the curve of the right fender of the hollowed out body and across the new bonnet she had acquired and finally installed a fortnight ago.

While still largely a skeleton, the corpse in front of her was slowly resurrecting. Had been for months now. In the week after it had first arrived at the warehouse, Q had stripped the chassis and media-blasted the frame to expose any corrosion, cutting out and replacing sections as needed, and during those interminable weeks when Alec was MIA, she had given the car nearly an entirely new panel structure including the doors and the boot as well as the recently acquired bonnet. Only the roof and the front fenders were original to the car.

It would have been simpler to replace the whole lot -- especially when taking into account the hours she had spent digging out bullets followed by shaping, filling, and priming the panels -- but those bullet holes were as much a part of the car as anything else, and Q felt that to simply replace everything was to deny what the car -- and those who had used her -- had suffered at Skyfall. They were battle scars, and while her work to date generally cosmetic in nature, there was a big difference between disguising and healing those scars and getting rid of them altogether.

Q knew it was absurdly sentimental to anthropomorphise a car to such a degree, but … well, anyone who had a problem with it could just sod off.

But her work on the DB5 had largely come to a halt in the last several weeks, she was rarely home long enough to do anything with it, so she figured that if Macallan and Wuyi had come to live with her at Six, the car might as well come, too. It would be far easier for her to slip down here when
She had a spare hour or two and tinker away on Bond’s car to escape the stress of the rest of the Branch and perhaps fix a bit of her own sanity at the same time.

“It’s more of a personal project, anyway,” she explained with a softer tone this time. “Eric, Mariam, and Cesar will focus on those three as per the modification plans, and the entire enhancement budget is still assigned to those vehicles, so you needn’t worry. This one’s rebuild is being privately funded.”

“Q …”

She turned to her second. The concern in his voice was something she didn’t often hear.

“Are you sure about all this?” R asked. He had shoved his hands into his trouser pockets and inspected the ground at his feet for a moment before looking up at her from beneath his dark fringe, clearly discomfited by his own question.

And while Q understood that he clearly wasn’t talking about the cars anymore, she wasn’t entirely certain what he was talking about. The expression on her face was enough to prod R into continuing.

“You and Bond.”

Q stiffened. The comment was unexpected. She wasn’t about to deny the … something … that had been developing between her and the agent. Anyone with eyes and ears could see how well they got on with one another in person and on comms, but not even Alec had questioned her so directly. “Do your concerns come from your professional capacity, or is it more of a personal query?”

“Must they be mutually exclusive?”

Q’s brow furrowed as though puzzled by his response. “No. I … suppose not,” she said at last. “So …”

“Are you concerned about my ability to remain unbiased and professional when it comes to how I interact with Commander Bond either within Six or when he is in the field?”

R considered his response, weighing the interactions he had witnessed first-hand between his Quartermaster and the Double-O. Their flirtations within the Branch were light-hearted and mildly suggestive in a way that often kept the minions entertained and making wagers as to when the two might just get on with it already, but they’d never been inappropriate nor made anyone uncomfortable.

If he counted Istanbul (before M had pulled her off comms) and Skyfall (which was difficult to categorize anyway), Q had been Bond’s handler for seven missions since bringing that programme online, and while there was no such thing as a run-of-the-mill mission, Bali was quite the most notable to date. The way he saw it, Q had masterfully handled the fractured demands on her attention where one misstep on her part could have lead to the death of either Aguilar in Tucson or Bond in Denpasar. She had delegated responsibility for her agents to her subordinates and reclaimed them at the correct times and for the appropriate reasons. And, giving credit where it was due, what if any overtly emotional response she may have felt about the alert Bond had sent in the middle of Aguilar's mission, she had not let it affect her focus or her orders. She had been as efficient as ever, possibly even more so, as R’s Quartermaster had a tendency to thrive under pressure.
“No.” R decided. “Bias and professionalism are not a concern for me.”

“And if they became such, you would come to me with those concerns so that I might move them up the chain of command in a proper fashion?”

“Naturally.”

Q took a step toward him. One that, if she were a Double-O or perhaps a little taller, could be considered menacing. “I will hold you to that, Maximus. Such bias can be problematic to detect in oneself even when purposefully on the lookout for it, so if you see it in me and don’t report it in a prompt fashion, I’ll sack you myself for negligence and dereliction of duty. Are we clear?”

“Very clear, Quartermaster,” Maximus said, only just managing to keep himself from retreating a step. He wasn’t afraid of her but she was fierce in her convictions, and anyone who didn’t have a healthy respect for the intensity with which the Quartermaster viewed the collective and individual jobs of those within Q-Branch was likely to get burned by it.

“Too many lives depend on what we do down here,” she had said more times than Maximus could count anymore, and he knew it wasn’t just lip service. She worked three times harder and longer than anyone else, never asked of her staff what she wasn’t willing to do herself, had gone toe-to-toe against M and the Foreign Secretary -- would probably do the same with the bloody PM or the Queen herself if it were warranted -- on issues that mattered to the Branch and Six as a whole, and was respected, feared, and adored because of it.

Q relaxed noticeably at his response. The tightness about her eyes eased and the previous puzzlement returned to her face, this time accompanied by a curious smile that tugged at one side of her mouth. “You said it was also a personal query?”

Maximus had been truthful when he’d said that he knew her, but that wasn’t entirely accurate. As her second-in-command, he knew her skills and passions, strengths and weakness better than anyone in the Branch. He had worked with her for over five years, having come over from MI5 just four months after a very young Q had started in TSS. She had risen quickly, first to a team lead and then to senior projects manager, advancing past older and more experienced men and women, many of whom had been there since she was in primary school.

There had been protests -- some of them quite loud -- and the Major had called a meeting to listen to and address those complaints and concerns. As Boothroyd asked his questions of the various staff, it became evident that even the loudest of the protestors couldn’t deny her skills and creativity were unlike anything seen in TSS or R&D in decades.

“Mr. Vo? Does Dr. Wilson have the support of her current team?” the Major had asked him. Maximus had been summoned to the meeting to provide insight into her management style, though he knew Boothroyd was already quite versed in the subject. Maximus’ answers were completely for the benefit of the naysayers.

“Definitely, sir. She’s demanding but fair. Expectations are clear and precisely laid out for all of us. And she’s approachable, for junior and senior staff alike. Doesn't play favourites. Willing to work through a problem with any of us to find a solution without judgement or censure. She’s one of the best leads I’ve ever worked with. I spoke with the rest of the team prior to this meeting, and the only problem most seem to have with her promotion is that not all of them will work with her directly anymore.”

“Thank you, Mr. Vo.” Boothroyd had leaned back in his chair and run a hand through his thinning, white hair. Maximus had thought at the time that the Major looked tired, as if this was the last
thing he wanted to or thought he would have to deal with.

“Ms. Simpson?”

“Fine. So she seems to know what she’s doing as a team lead, too, but Projects Lead is an entirely different kettle ‘o fish, Booty.”

“So you’ll grant that she has experience, skills, creativity, and a solid management style. I’m rather at a loss as to why we’re here, then, Valarie.”

“Come on, Major, she’s what? Nineteen?”

“Twenty-five, I believe,” Maximus had piped up from his spot next to the door.

“I have bunions older than that, Boothroyd.” *That* nasally voice had been thus far silent in the meeting, and Maximus had hoped not to hear it at all. It had been wishful thinking.

Maximus remembered being sick to his back teeth of that man’s disparagements, especially considering the majority of them had occurred behind closed doors, where the subject of the attack could do nothing to rebuff the sly attacks made against her.

“You have bunions older than half the people who work at Six, Carstairs, but I don’t see where your age -- or that of your bunions -- and, I assume, your experience has done much to push the SIS into the 21st Century.” Maximus had been surprised at the vehemence behind his words, but once he’d started it had been nigh impossible to rein himself in: he’d been wanting to say something for weeks already. “That ‘girl’, as you are so fond of calling her, has made more progress toward achieving the Major’s goals for this department in the last six weeks than I’ve seen you accomplish in the last year.”

“Easy, Mr. Vo,” Boothroyd cautioned.

“My apologies, sir, but I find it difficult to stomach this sort of narrow-mindedness,” he had said, gesturing at the small assembly that had gathered in the Major’s office. “Dr. Wilson is precisely what MI6 needs more of, and I think you believe so, too, sir. That she should be judged poorly solely because of her age is unacceptable.”

“Says the man who’s, what, six months older than she is?” Carstairs had snapped.

“Eight years, actually. And while I may not have the years of either the Major or yourself, Martin, I’ve seen enough in my career to know that age is no guarantee of efficiency.” That phrase had been something he had heard Wilson mumble one afternoon after Carstairs had shot down her proposal for a scheme that would assign specially trained handlers to Double-O agents in the field with the intent of increasing mission success percentages while decreasing agent mortality rates.

From the way she had said it, Maximus had been left with the distinct impression that she had run into closed minds like Carstairs’ far too often in her young life. A theory that was confirmed by Boothroyd’s sudden bark of laughter.

“Oh, that’s brilliant! You sound just like her, Maximus. And both you and she are perfectly correct in that assessment, by the by. It’s the reason why I hired each of you. Fresh blood and the hope of progress.”

“I’ll not work under someone who’s younger than my youngest [grandchild],” Carstairs had growled, and not for the first time Maximus had been left wondering whether or not the man was really British. If so, he had apparently left his reserve in his other trousers on a daily basis, the crotchety old bastard.
It had been at that moment that the Major’s frustration had reached its breaking point. “I don’t believe I ever said that you had a cho--,” he had snapped, but before he could finish what would likely become something he’d later regret, R, who had stood behind and to the left of Boothroyd’s chair for the whole meeting, saying nothing, leaned down to whisper something in the Quartermaster’s ear. Boothroyd nodded as he listened to what his friend and coworker -- a true gentleman if ever Maximus had met one -- had to say. “Yes. Yes, of course. Just so,” he had replied with a nod.

Much calmer for having had listened to his second’s advice, the Major returned his attention to the five in the room who were dissatisfied with the situation. “Dr. Wilson will be promoted as planned, but as Jameson just reminded me, there are, of course … options.”

There had been three: settle in and work with the new project leader, transfer to a different department, or take an early retirement. Carstairs and Simpson, unsurprisingly, chose to take option three -- they were less than two years from it anyway -- no one transferred.

The future Q had remained remarkably unphased by it all and had left everything in Boothroyd’s hands. “He’s known me for years,” she had said to Maximus in the canteen over a rather disappointing egg and cress sarnie before he had left for the meeting, “so it’s possible undue bias did enter into my promotion; it’s hard to keep that out of decisions even when you’re on the lookout for it. I’m not the one to say, but the Quartermaster will make the decision that’s best for the branch. That’s what matters. If not me now, then someday. I just want to do what I was hired to do.”

And she had done so. Brilliantly. Pulling off feats of technological and operational skill that Maximus could only dream of doing himself, but for all the time he had worked at Q’s side as colleague and professional sounding board, he couldn’t say that he knew her.

And there weren’t many people who did, but not because she was standoffish or rude. Yes, Q was intense and focussed and motivated -- and demanded the same of the people she worked with -- but she was also witty, self-deprecatingly funny and kind. She was genuinely interested in the personal lives of her minions and asked after their families: she remembered things like birthdays and anniversaries, celebrated their successes, and mourned their losses. She joined them at the local to watch footie -- though she preferred rugby herself -- or for quiz night when she could, and on one particularly memorable occasion Q had belted out an impressive cover of Alannah Myles’ ‘Black Velvet’ during the MI6 versus MI5 karaoke night. A year later, he was still trying to figure out how all video evidence of the occasion had been mysteriously deleted off of every mobile in the pub. And its CCTV feeds!

But for all that, Q was extremely reluctant to share personal details of her own. Maximus didn’t know her real name, only the alias she had used before becoming R. He’d found out her birthdate purely by accident. Thank you, Alec Trevelyan. Ronson had always thought it in the autumn, but it was actually in January; she had never bothered to correct Ian or any of the others when the Branch lit the candles on top of a Victoria Sponge and handed her a stack of greeting cards and a gift bag containing a bottle of Talisker, wishing her ‘Many Happy Returns’ in mid-September.

He knew that she needed tea like pigs needed mud in which to wallow, but while Earl Grey was her favourite, she’d try any leaf at least once. Usually only once.

She had two cats.

So other than what he saw on a day to day basis through their work, he really knew nothing about who Q was. At first Maximus thought it just a matter of her being caught up inside her own head - - not uncommon for a genius-level intellect, and he wasn’t wholly convinced that she wasn’t
somewhere on the spectrum -- but while those two scenarios might be causes, a much sadder realisation had started to creep into R’s understanding of his boss’ reluctance to share about herself.

It was one of the most frustrating things about the woman.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want people to know.

It was that she didn’t think they would be interested to know. She didn’t consider that they might actually care.

James Bond, however, was clearly interested. As was the Quartermaster.

In fact, those who had known her the longest couldn’t remember when Q had been as animated as she was when in Bond’s presence, and while Double-O Seven’s edges were as razor-sharp as ever in the field, they were perhaps a bit tempered when at home, and everyone in Six knew who to thank for that small mercy.

While he and Bond might not get on easily with one another, each man knew that was primarily because of fundamental differences in their personalities, but ones that they were largely able to recognise and set aside when circumstances required that they work together. It would never be their first choice, and it was no accident that the handler assignments had been made as they were, but both men were more than professional enough to pull as a team in the harness and move in the correct direction. In fact, Maximus had a great deal of respect for the skill with which Bond did his job -- mostly.

But Maximus had a greater worry, and it was this:

James Bond kept secrets because he had to.

The Quartermaster kept secrets because she had to and because she didn’t always know when or how or what to share.

Each was passionate.

Each had trust issues.

Now Q wanted to know what Maximus’ worry was about the relationship she was forging with the Double-O. How did he explain to this woman he both knew yet didn’t how important it was that she be willing to share with James Bond the things about herself that she’d clearly kept locked away for decades.

“Just be careful, Q,” he said at last.

“That’s not really a query, Maximus,” she said with a quirk of her eyebrow.

“No, it’s not. Q, you’ve never been much for sharing. And this …” R had to push forward. In spite of his personal reservations about the man, he couldn’t ignore what he saw or what he had seen. “This could be good for you. He could be good for you.”

“I didn’t think you liked Bond.” Q studiously managed not to smile at the glare her second shot her. The ‘and that should tell you something’ was so heavily implied in his eyes even Martin Carstairs would have been able to pick up on it, if he hadn’t been busy sunning his pasty, retired arse in the desert outside Phoenix, that is.
“Just don’t close yourself off, Emily. Not with him.”

Q shot him a glare of her own for using *that* name, and declared, “I don’t close myself off. I’ve always… *always* answered his questions. Anyone’s questions, really.”

Maximus just looked at her, his exasperation clear on his face.

“Look, just… It’s okay to let people -- to let him -- get close to you. I know you don’t think you’ve kept people at arm’s length, and I know this really isn’t the kind of conversation either of us is comfortable with. But. Just try not to build new walls as fast as you pull down the old ones, alright? There’s a lot of people who care, Q. *A lot.* And, we just want you to be happy. And you are. With him. I can see it. Even if he *is* a bloody wanker!”

She couldn’t help her laugh. But at the same time, she couldn’t deny that R had a point. Several in fact. She opened her mouth to reply --

“Hey, Boss! Cesar’s back. Want we should give him a chance to ogle the merchandise?”

Mariam’s shout echoed through the garage.

Q’s gaze lingered on R’s for another moment before she dropped it to check the time on her tablet. She had just over an hour before she had to have her arse handed to her in the gym. Ogling automobiles as well as the rest of this peculiar conversation would have to wait. There was a tech briefing to hold.

And an email to send, if she was going to take R’s advice to heart. He had given her much to think about, but they were things that had been much on her own mind these last weeks, anyway. It was time -- more than if she were really being honest with herself, and she did at least *try* to be that -- that Bond got the chance to read the AAR and other pieces Mansfield had collected regarding the mission that ended up detailing the events of Q’s birth. Mallory would see that the file got to him. It was not a topic she cared to go over in person. Discuss later, fine. But the initial perusal? No, that was best left to the privacy of a closed office and no passers by, and once Bond had gone through it all, they could talk. She could handle that: she’d already talked over the crash with the man, and this was -- slightly -- less painful -- than that had been.

Shaking herself free of the sudden wave of melancholy, she returned to the business at hand.

“Cesar will just have to drool later,” Q said to the trio of approaching minions. “Let’s take this to my office. Sallah said she’d make sure there was tea and a few biscuits for you lot.”

“And what about you, Boss?” asked Cesar.

“You know you’re not supposed to eat for a least an hour before going into requals,” commented Eric, drily.

“That’s no eating for at least an hour before *swimming*, you prat,” replied Mariam, smacking her fellow motor-minion on the shoulder.

“Drowning, requals with Master Cha … I fail to see the difference here.”

“I appreciate your faith in my abilities, Eric,” Q replied drily.

“Always, Boss!”
Once he’d wrapped things up with Mallory, James made his way to his office -- one of three bullpen-like affairs in Six’s new rooms in the FCO where Double-Os and Senior Agents could tend to all manner of tedious forms and reports -- to finish his after-action report. He’d completed his personal outline on his tablet somewhere above Southeast Asia on the way to Shanghai, wrote the bulk of the narrative itself before he more or less passed out from exhaustion after dinner on the flight to Paris, and had started the abstract on the final leg to London. So much of the report was complete, in fact, that James could easily have finished it in half an hour, but instead he triple checked everything to ensure that every last detail was supported by what he remembered and by the photos he had taken at the scene of the murders. Admittedly, while he had always been thorough -- if not always prompt -- with his AARs in the past, James was being purposefully meticulous this time around. If one point had been driven home during that morning’s debriefing, it was that the events surrounding Ida Darmali’s murder, and what it likely signified on a larger scale, could have not only national but also potentially international impact, and he was loathe to misreport a single detail.

So it was much later than he had planned when James made his way out of the FCO, down Whitehall, and below ground to the Bunkers, using the secreted in plain sight entrance at the base of the Clive Steps. He had been looking forward to personally delivering to the Quartermaster M’s orders for her holiday -- if only to see the look on her face -- but found that Q was already in a closed-door meeting with R and three of her motor-minions.

The resulting flurry of text messages that were consequently exchanged on the subject of M’s ‘inane orders’ had been highly entertaining from James’ perspective, but Q had ultimately capitulated.

*Meet you at the top of The Steps when I’m done with Cha, then.* - Q

*I’ll wait for you in the gym.* - JB

*I haven’t needed a minder since I was six, Bond.* - Q

*That seems to be a matter of some debate.* - JB

*I’m not getting rid of you, am I?* - Q

*You don’t want to. Admit it.* - JB

*I admit nothing. Fine. But, I’ll need food, after.* - Q

*I’ll even let you choose where we dine.* - JB

*How magnanimous of you.* - Q

*Isn’t it, though?* - JB

Left with time to kill, and ever adverse to checking in with Medical, James headed to the small gym to tend to his own workout so that he’d be on hand when Q finished hers. It was a surprisingly abbreviated session -- okay, so maybe his thigh had been more than grazed by that bullet, sod it all -- and only 45 minutes later James was attired in a fresh suit and tie and found himself purposefully surveying the controlled chaos in the much larger MI6 training gymnasium.
Grunts and screams, and more than one curse, intermingled with the dull slap and thud of flesh smacking against soft tissue and bone -- or the thickly padded training mats -- all echoing off the rough stone walls of the large space deep in the bowels of the bunkers. Despite several large industrial fans that pushed in fresher draughts from the surface, the air was thick with the musty smell of sweat and the coppery tang of blood.

Pods of trainees, field agents, and upper-level support personnel were scattered about as they went through the paces of their hand-to-hand training with Master Cha’s assistants. The master observed and assessed a group of four -- their hands were wrapped securely, protective head gear strapped in place, and from the sodden state of their clothing, they'd been at it one way or another for a fair stretch already -- that sparred with one another on the heavy mats.

It was in that group that James finally spotted Q.

She worked as a solitary fighter to fend off her trio of attackers with a rather bizarre combination of martial arts. From what James could tell, the most dominant form she used was muay thai, but there were also elements from Brazilian jujitsu, some kickboxing, and even good, ole honest street fighting.

It was messy.

It was raw.

It was dirty.

It worked … more or less.

As the three circled Q, two jumped in at once, executing a series of coordinated attacks that initially had her back-pedaling for safety, but once literally against the wall, she twisted and pushed off the stone at her back, tucking into a ball as she rolled past the pair.

“Yes!” Cha’s loud single clap punctuated his approval. “Always make use of your surroundings.”

Q sprang to her feet as they rounded on her again, but this time she had the advantage of time and space to defend herself, and the two were dispatched in short order with a series of rapid fire cross and jab punches, each of which were followed by quick elbow strikes to the face.

Conceding the point, the pair bowed out as the third – a tree of a man, a junior agent whom James suspected had much more muscle than mental acuity – struck from behind, knocking the legs out from under her. Q rolled away just in time to evade what would have been a vicious foot thrust to the abdomen. The Tree then launched himself at her, but she spun beneath and behind him, leaping to her feet and executing a solid roundhouse kick to her opponent’s back.

She had speed, yes, but James still did not see this ending well.

“She’s too bloody small. Not enough power. She'll do to start, with that speed, but she's a boffin. She’ll never be able to hold out. No endurance,” he muttered under his breath with a shake of his head.

“Don’t count out Q just yet. She’s been working at this for years.” Moneypenny stood next to him, sweaty and still breathing heavily from her own sparring. She held her headgear in one hand and mopped at her face with a towel in the other.

“She’s not strong enough to kill with those techniques. Too small, too many hours on a keyboard. She'll never get enough leverage to be lethal doing … whatever that is.” The jerk of his chin in
the direction of the mat seemed to indicate what he thought about the a la carte approach of her fighting style.

Moneypenny paused in the midst of scrubbing at her neck with the towel and cast an amused eye in the crotchety Double-O's direction.

“She doesn't have to be able to kill, James. She's not a field agent. Q will never match anyone on size or strength, though technically, neither are actually necessary to kill. We can't all be hulking beasts like you, Trevelyan, and Aguilar. A trio of bloody trees is what you are, but have you forgotten how truly terrifying M was? Q is barely taller than she, yet M was every bit as capable of wreaking havoc as the three of you. Q’s more than able to defend herself and incapacitate someone long enough to get away. That’s what we need her to be able to do if she’s ever taken.”

James stiffened noticeably at the mere thought of Q being abducted.

Eve rolled her eyes before looking away. The man was brilliant as an agent, one of the best Double-Os the SIS had ever turned out, but there were days when she wondered if he’d taken one too many knocks on the old noggin. Everyone has their blind spots though, she supposed, and apparently Q was one of Bond’s.

James’ sudden epiphany was in realising that, in her own way, the Quartermaster was just as deadly as a Double-O, if not more so since agents were hampered by the -- generally -- face-to-face, one-on-one nature of their physical interactions.

Q was not so restricted.

Whether by proxy, through the technology and gadgetry she and her team invented for use in the field, or directly -- her hacking and coding skills had led to more than one bridge blown up and building brought down -- Q was quite possibly the most dangerous person in the UK and Europe, maybe even the world, and it put her at risk. It was why her identity was such a carefully guarded secret.

Logically, professionally, James knew an abduction was possible, even probable. Their enemies -- and likely even some of their allies -- would see Q in one of two lights: as a commodity to be exploited or as a threat to be eliminated. And he knew that, he really did, but before Eve's words, it had never been a tangible, immediate thing to him, and it felt like a blow across his shoulders with a pipe that knocked the breath from his lungs.

James decided then and there that he would do whatever he could to ensure that Q would be prepared if she were ever kidnapped, and he apparently wasn’t the only one. As he continued to watch Q fight on the mat, James could pick out moves that he could see came straight from Alec Trevelyan.

As brilliant a martial arts expert as Master Cha was, he still spent the majority of his time within the walls of Six and there was a certain … honour, or perhaps respect, for opponents that the man had never quite managed to lose despite his years with the intelligence organisation, and that esteem for one’s enemy could be seen in the fighting styles and techniques on the floor in front of James. All well and good for theoretical combat, but things were different in the real world. It was only natural that Alec had felt the need to supplement Q’s defence skills with some from his own playbook.

Alec had picked up a lot of truly nasty, dirty, and quite dis honourable moves over the years, but in street fighting, and in the spy business, the point was survival, by any means necessary. And if breaking someone’s finger or stabbing them in the groin with a pen ensured that, James had
absolutely no qualms whatsoever about Alec teaching Q such moves. There were things James could teach her, too: tricks and evasions that were easy to learn and didn’t depend on size or strength to bring about.

“Danny Cabral thought the same back when they were in training together,” Eve said, affirming James’ plans as he shared them with her. “Ian Ronson, too. That’s when they all became friends. Ronson and I were already field agents, but were in as part of a refresher course. Things are a bit different now, of course, since they implemented that cross-departmental basic training proposal Tanner dreamt up. That’s when I knew he’d be a good one for M, even got her to sign off on the extra staff required. Master Cha was more than pleased. Course, no austerity cuts in those days.”

Eve seemed to realise that her musings had diverged, and she returned to the topic at hand.

“Anyway, at the time she did her initial training, the standard hand-to-hand techniques weren’t designed for someone Q’s size, and she kept getting her arse handed to her every time she stepped out onto the mat. There were many back then, even amongst the trainers, who resented someone bound for the technical divisions being trained alongside field agents.”

James thought about it, and had to admit that his reaction probably would have been the same back when he was the young, arrogant, idiot trainee. But as he’d grown and matured as an agent, James had realised that you took help where you could find it and when you could trust it. He’d seen too much, relied on too many ‘unconventional’ allies over the years to discount trustworthy assistance when he could get it.

“But no one was going to contradict Herself on that decree; M insisted Q be trained and so she was. Passed, too. Legitimately. Outscored all of us when it came to firearms certifications. Managed to get the best of everyone who had previously thrashed her, too, in her own way. She squeaked by there, though.” Eve’s tone was tart and just a bit irritated, and James was finally forced to comment on what he had been casually observing for quite some time.

“You two really do not like each other do you?”

Eve drew back and looked at him as if he had lost his mind. “Good lord, James, whatever gave you that idea?”

“Moneypenny, the ambient temperature tends to drop 10 degrees whenever the two of you are in the same room together.”

James had lost track of the number of cool looks and clipped conversations he had seen and heard Q and Moneypenny exchange over the last several months. They were always professional, but perhaps too much so. Granted, Q was tetchy and fractious -- James found it part of her appeal -- on the best of days, and Eve’s derisive wit had landed her in trouble more than once over the years. Each woman was also in possession of a tongue that could cut sharper than one of 009’s KA-BAR knives. While neither had a penchant for suffering fools, nor had either ever been intentionally cruel to anyone, as far as James knew. Nevertheless, their interactions with one another seemed to contain little of the warmth that each woman was, at least, capable of conferring on others within their tight circle of spies.

Eve seemed to consider James’ comment even as they watched Q stalk and evade her opponent on the other side of the gymnasium. Q was struggling. The Tree was surprisingly agile for his size and kept the Quartermaster on the defensive. Unable to find a way past his long reach, Q was dancing around him on the balls of her feet when she thought she had found an opening, but her choice was a mistake, and James shook his head in empathy, knowing from experience what was likely to come next. Q had executed her superman punch from the wrong angle, giving The Tree
the opportunity to grab hold of her. Consequently, Q found herself on the wrong end of a hip throw that sent her flying against the padded wall. James groaned as if he felt the impact himself -- if the line of her iliac crest didn’t bruise heavily, it would be a minor miracle -- but he locked down his impulsive need to see if she was okay, something that would be inappropriate for the setting and that Q would not appreciate.

“Oh, now that was a mistake,” Eve commented with a mocking chuckle.

James bristled at her clearly dismissive attitude. “Oh relax, James. I meant Rickon, not Q.”

“What do you --”

“Master Cha applauded Q for making use of her surroundings, but she forgot about what’s on the walls.” Eve pointed to a pair of racks mounted a bit farther along the wall that contained both long and short wooden staves. “She’s seen them now. This match is so over, poor sod.”

Surely enough, as Q picked herself off the floor from where The Tr -- Rickon’s throw had landed her, she grabbed a pair of jō staves from a rack and once on the mat again, proceeded to take Agent Rickon apart.

“That is the one exception,” Moneypenny said gesturing with her chin at the pair on the mat. She had crossed her arms over her chest and James was a bit surprised that the look of irritation she had worn through most of their conversation about Q had turned to one of frank admiration. “It was Ronson’s idea for her to try Aikido. She didn’t care for it on the whole, except for the staves. Get a stick in her hand, and there’s not much Q can’t do.”

Q didn’t attack full force -- that wasn’t the point, though Rickon was ultimately defenseless against the wooden staves -- but she wasn’t going any easier on the man than he’d gone on her, raining down blows on his padded arms and shoulders and legs. Each time she brought him to the ground, Rickon struggled to his feet, trying to find a way to best her, but it wasn’t going to happen.

Like all the others she had used to this point, Q’s moves weren’t smooth or practiced, but they were quick, brutal, and nearly incapacitating -- street fighting with sticks -- and James imagined that Q’s mind was processing the output of information from Rickon’s body to inform her next attack in the same way that she analysed computer data to determine the best way to guide her agents in the field.

James chuckled in appreciation and let his smile linger as he watched. What was it Q was always telling him and the other agents? Right tool for the right job?

Good girl.

“Oi! Rickon,” Master Cha called out to the agent who was again trying to pick himself off the ground where Q’s attacks had left him for the third time in as many minutes. Q, herself, stayed at the fringes of Rickon’s long reach, staves at the ready should he decide to attack again, but Cha’s subsequent words put an end to the combat. “Sometimes it is the better part of valour to know when you’ve had your arse handed to you. This is one of those times,” his Welsh accent was thick with humor. “Quartermaster, meet me in my office for your scores and evaluation. Then you can clean up and continue with your day.”

Q bowed politely to the Master and then to Rickon before tucking the staves under one arm, reaching out with her free hand to help the hulking agent to his feet. The man readily accepted the assistance from a woman half his size before limping off to the showers. As Q wiped down her weapons, replaced the jō staves to their rack on the wall and hurried off to Cha’s office, Eve turned
“James, it’s not that we don’t like each other, per se,” Eve said, picking up the thread of their previous conversation. “I think we do, actually, though we’ve never discussed it, but we’re … careful with each other. That and we both know we’re never going to be ‘besties’.”

“Then why the --”

“Two reasons, I guess,” she interrupted, anticipating his question.

Eve set her headgear on the ledge of the low wall that separated the gym from the spectator/storage area in which they stood and leaned a hip against it. A quick glance around the space assured her they were relatively isolated. Most of the sparrers were heading for the showers, the scheduled training time over. Cha and Q were already ensconced in his small office near the heavy, World War II-era doors that led into the training space. This wasn’t information Eve shared with just anyone, but given that clearly something was going on between the Quartermaster and the Double-O, she was willing to provide James the information he sought.

“Firstly, we’re both rather strong-willed women --” The sharp kick Eve gave him to the shin cut off James’ snort of amusement mid-huff, though he was grateful she was wearing trainers rather than her stilettos, “-- in a profession that, forgive me, is still in many ways a ‘boys’ only’ club. It’s not as difficult as it was when Olivia Mansfield was coming up in the service, and certainly her appointment as M made things much easier for all the women in the SIS today. Mallory is an ally, too, but it’s still not an easy road.”

She pointed a well-manicured finger at Bond. “You’d be amazed at the shit she caught when she appointed a female Quartermaster after the Major was killed. Not quite as bad as the storm Stevens weathered over Martel’s appointment, as I heard it. But female and young? I’ve no idea how, but M managed to keep most of the heat off Q since Q was too busy trying to piece Six together after the bombing to have any time to waste on that idiocy. The enquiry into Q’s involvement in Skyfall wasn’t pretty, either. Some called for her to be ousted, others imprisoned, but Mallory would have none of it. Told the committee that if they fired Q, he’d go, too. And given the complete chaos everything was in at that point, Mallory had them by the bollocks. They knew they needed him, so it was a threat they took seriously.”

James’ eyes widened appreciatively. He’d been quite ill during the enquiry, but he vaguely remembered Q returning to the warehouse after she’d given a long day’s testimony to the committee, but all she had said about it when he asked was that it was out of her hands. James’ fever had pulled him back to sleep after that, and he’d never got round to questioning her further, but three days later Q returned to Six as the Quartermaster. Clearly there had been far more to it than what Q had led him to believe -- even for a Brit, and despite all the talking she did, the woman had a frightening talent for understating a situation -- and James’ regard for Gareth Mallory rose notably in light of what Eve had just shared.

“That doesn’t explain you and Q, however,” he argued.

Though her position had always been filled by a woman, there wasn’t anyone who could say that Eve Moneypenny hadn’t completely redefined the role of M’s P.A.. In some ways, she was quickly becoming the power behind the throne, and James considered all the other women in Six who held positions similar to those of Eve and the Quartermaster. Strong women in what had been traditionally male roles: Emmaline Y’da in Medical, Clara Brannon in Analysis, Hetty Martel in Inventories, to say nothing of Constance, Francesca, Vely, and Arabella -- Double-Os Three, Eight, Ten, and Twelve.
“Wouldn’t it make more sense if you worked together? Solidarity, yeah?”

Eve snorted. “James, it’s not like you and the male Double-Os are off drinking down at the local when you’re all in town. Hell, it’s something of a minor miracle that you and Trevelyan get along as well as you do. All that testosterone and ‘alpha maleness’ doesn’t exactly blend well together, yet you expect it to be different for alpha females?”

James readily conceded the point, especially once Eve suggested how easy it would be for those nine women to take over the world: they’d have the plans laid out over a couple of bottles of wine and some nibbles after work one evening. James was pretty sure Eve wasn’t kidding.

“Okay, the second reason for the tension, then.”

At this Moneypenny sighed and dipped her head a bit. Embarrassment was not an expression that Eve often wore, and it put James a little on edge. “There’s ... Well, there’s a bit of ... history there.”

“Seriously?” He didn’t have to ask what kind of history she meant, it was clear from the look on her face, and James was actually astonished. “You and Q?”

“It was a mission,” she snapped. All her embarrassment evaporated at the tone of shocked incredulity in his voice.

Try as he might to prevent it, James’ lizard brain engaged as he considered how all that might have come about. He coughed twice and pulled himself together as best he could before asking, “Who was the mark?”

Moneypenny rolled her eyes. The man could be so thick sometimes.

“Q was.”

Eve sketched out the basics of the mission to Cyprus nearly seven years earlier. How she and a male agent had been sent to retrieve the ‘willful’ future Quartermaster from her unauthorized Gap Year. The parameters were straightforward: seduce Hannah Cole (Q’s alias at the time), drug her if necessary, and return her to London for inclusion in the upcoming recruit training class.

But Q had managed to turn the tables on them by actively -- Boothroyd would later say doggedly -- pursuing Eve instead of the male agent. Moneypenny refused to go into detail -- ‘Ask Q if you want to know, James. You’ll not get the details from me’ -- but indicated that she was the one left drugged, and with the male agent sufficiently engaged by a bizarre distraction created out of a Turkish bath, a donkey, and 200 litres of Phati Ice, Q was able to hop the first flight off the island and disappear into the depths of Istanbul.

James thanked his training for his ability to keep from laughing in the face of the story Eve had just largely not told him.

As she wrapped up her tale, the tension seemed to drain out of Eve and she chuckled ruefully, though the look in her eyes was again one of frank admiration. James raised an eyebrow at the unexpected shift in attitude. Mercurial moods he got -- he did in fact reside with Q whose emotions could, and did, turn on a sixpence -- but he hadn’t expected it from Eve. She didn’t often allow such capriciousness to show through the facade that made up the formidable, professional persona she showed the world more often than not.

“Oh James, do close your mouth,” she chided with another chuckle. “I’m more than adult enough to recognise the humour in the situation. And really, that story’s just the tip of the bloody iceberg
that is our dear Quartermaster.”

“What do you mean, Moneypenny?” James asked, pointedly. There was something in Eve’s tone this time. Something that suggested there were things about the Quartermaster -- darker than those Q had already shared with him -- that Q preferred to keep hidden from sight and understanding; James felt warning pinpricks of apprehension poke at his instinct.

Eve sat herself more firmly atop the low wall and drew up a leg to plant her trainer-clad foot on top of it. Propping her elbow on her knee, she dropped her chin into her palm and stared off into the past for a minute or so, before she started speaking again.

“Where to even start,” she mused, before a wicked grin bloomed on her face, and she sat up straight again.

“Still won’t get the mission details from me but... background. Context. Oh, this is just brill!” she chortled, honest-to-goodness chortled. James couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her so relaxed outside the local, and his misgivings eased a bit. “Now, understand I’m not clear on the ‘family’ dynamic involved with all this, so...” she shrugged her shoulders submitting that unknown to fate.

“Anyway. Q’d just graduated Uni. An’ from what I can tell, told M to bugger off and promptly vanished off our beloved isle. The old bird was livid! Absolutely livid! I was a field agent, nothing to do with that lot at the time, but everyone knew the royal knickers were in quite the twist. M acted like her usual self. Fiercely direct as ever, she was, but there was a layer of ice under every last thing she said. You remember how she’d get, I’m sure of it. Oh, Herself did not like losing. Well, suppose none of us do, at that.”

James hastily closed his mouth before the woman could call him on it, again. He’d known her how many years and never seen this side of her. The sheer glee! It was unnerving, and he was suddenly glad that the ‘alpha females’ congregated just as much, or rather as little, as the ‘alpha males’ did. God help them all if ever that changed. No secret, no organisation, no country would be safe.

Eve sniggered, continuing on with the thread of the story.

“Old Boothy, though? He thought it was marvelous! He was so proud of Q. Lit up any time anyone mentioned it. Not that those of us in the know much dared to when Herself was about. Classified details, too, of course. Oh,” Eve’s dark eyes snapped to James’, “I think you were out on deep cover. You probably didn’t see it. There’s no chance in Hell you’d forget it. M gave the Major a hard time about it once or twice, but I think he managed to talk her down. Or something. All I know is that a few weeks after that dratted mission, M stopped being so... sharp... brittle... She’d sorted it, I heard from R -- the old R, Jameson -- before he retired. Said that Q’d the gumption to contact M directly, and lay down her terms. No wonder Herself was stalking around looking like blackest thunder. But whatever the Major said to M, that was the end of that. She and Q came to some kind of understanding.”

Eve returned to the topic of Major Boothroyd’s pride.

“He really was proud of her, though. Boothy, that is. Didn’t know it at the time, but I’ve picked up bits and pieces from things Q’s said in passing... him too, before he died. Poor, lovable sod.” She paused for a moment in her tale, and James noted Eve all but wore her sorrow at the Major’s passing, even though her face barely changed its expression.

He spared a moment to recall that Ian Ronson had also been lost around that time. Blasted Istanbul
fuck-up!

She cocked her head to the side as if considering anew things she had known for far longer than he
had, and suddenly that prickle of foreboding was back dancing along James’ spine.

“There was this kind of game those two would play -- the Major and Q. Scuttlebut being that Q
was a mite awkward. Socially. He’d set her scenarios, ‘mission parameters’ of a sort, I suppose.
And she can act, that one can. Secret love of theatre. So. Yeah. She’d just … change. You’d
never even know it was her. Pull on a whole different facade like one of those hideous jumpers
she favours. Q’d have been brilliant as a proper actor. James, you have got to go see her if she
ever finds time to do Great Ormand Street’s Christmas charity pantomime again.”

James frowned. Pantomime?! Q?

Eve continued, oblivious to James’ increasing tension.

“Yeah, well an’ with her distinctive look. Her size. You’d think she’d stand out in a crowd, but
once she sets her mind on it, that’s that. Q’s not Q anymore. She becomes whatever the role
requires, yeah? Oh! There was this one time.” She flapped a hand in his direction to emphasise
her words. “Ronson told me the details after, I think… Or was it Cabral? Can’t have been
Markley, he’d transferred by the time I got the background. Shame that… Those three were thick
as thieves. Two gone now. Well, not at Six I mean. Markley’s kicking around up north
somewhere last I heard. But Ronson... God, I miss that bastard! He was a good sort, Ronson was,
even if he had a shite sense of humour! Bloody evil-minded....”

“Anyway, so. You remember Itskovsky? Old John?” She shook herself free of the melancholy
and rolled on, barely acknowledging James’ terse nod.

“Oh God, he was an insufferable arse! The bloody cheek of the man. We all hated him, the utter
prick, even the boys. How he used to lord it over Juniors. He’s the one that almost got Martel up
on charges for threatening to throttle him and then went on and on for weeks about how
‘emotionally unstable’ women are and that they ‘have no business in such high-stress jobs,’ never
you mind that his boss was a woman. I almost wish Hetty had throttled him, instead of just
shouting him out of her Branch.” Eve scowled as she spoke.

James did remember Itskovsky, and exactly how much of an arse the man had been, even to
Double-Os and fellow Senior Agents. He had not been saddened in the least when he’d finally
heard that the belly-aching critic who was never happy with anything had finally up and retired.
When it’d happened, however, James hadn’t really noticed. He’d been otherwise occupied chasing
down Yusef Kabira in Kazan to care much about whether the sanctimonious prig prefered the
beaches of Kauai to the slopes of Zermatt.

“But Q got revenge for the lot of us. Junior Agents, that is. I don’t know who came up with the
idea, Justin probably. Had his fingerprints all over it. And I’ll be forever grateful. The hardest
part was not laughing in Itskovsky’s face. He’d no idea who Q was, of course. Avoided trainees
like the plague, and after, she was buried in TSS for months. Practically no one outside of the
Branch ever saw her. So, once we’d had the head’s up, Q shows up one morning in a smart, little
tailored suit, done to the nines, looking terribly earnest on her ‘first day’ and latches onto the man.
And she was always so polite, and wide-eyed and innocent and ‘Sir’ this and ‘Sir’ that. Oh Christ
did he eat it up at first!” Eve burst out laughing, clapping a hand over her mouth to muffle the
sound as she struggled to get herself under control.

“She acted like Itskovsky hung the sun, moon, and all the planets beside, all the while insulting
him so subtly; he never even realised what she was doing.” Finally Eve’s giggles were -- mostly --
under control.

“It was brilliant! Really, I doubt any of you Double-Os could have done better. Magnificent! It was all we could do not to laugh in his face. It truly was. He couldn’t get a single thing done. She was everywhere. And every time he thought he’d pawned her off on someone else, up she’d pop when he turned around. No one up top cottoned on to what she was doing either. That or Q managed to avoid all those who might.” She shrugged, obviously it hadn’t been something anyone in E-Branch cared about enough to investigate further.

James’ frown deepened when Eve compared a Double-O’s ability to blend in undercover with Q’s acting skills. The thought that she was that good, and from the sound of it she was, was remarkably unsettling. He was used to maneuvering between reality and pretense in the field, but to know that he might have been unwittingly doing the same at home … That one space in which he’d felt truly safe right from the start. The raw admiration in Eve’s voice did not help him feel any less unnerved by the revelation.

“I’ve no proof, and neither Danny nor Ian ever mentioned it, but I’m near certain she put that genius brain and computer skills of hers to good use against Itskovsky, too. He put in for retirement not six months later. Good riddance, I say. Though I do hope she didn’t wreck his finances too much; he’s a right tosser but he did good years for Six. Deserves some kind of pension; just nowhere near me, thank you!”

Had Q used her technological skills against the man to force him out of the organisation? The thought of Itskovsky’s -- manipulated? -- retirement was, by association, dragging forward memories long-buried. Buried for damn good reasons, too.

James flatly refused to walk that path and forced his attention back to technological concerns. He had witnessed others -- far more vile, or so he’d thought -- use technology to engineer the financial ruin of one in favour of the financial gain of another: a 115 million pound prize he also refused to think about had been involved on one such occasion.

He’d stood next to Q at her station as she’d siphon off money from arms dealers and other terrorist organisations to weaken them before agents were sent in to break them apart. Not that he had any issue with ruination for those bloodthirsty bastards but… he’d heard Q casually threaten Alec, other Double-Os -- even the occasional rebellious or just disruptive minion -- with similar ruin for anything from late tech return to bothering her during her first cuppa of the morning. She’d been casual about it, but they had not. Nothing else reliably made them jump, but that always had. Hell, she’d even done it to him a time or two, but he’d always assumed she was joking and played along.

James was starting to question just what he did know about the Quartermaster. Had she really been joking?

Before he could say a word, though, Eve had started speaking again.

“I probably shouldn’t be telling you this. Especially since Q doesn’t go in for these things so much now. No time I suppose. But it’d be a shame if you didn’t know. We’d play a game, too: the Juniors, the trainees, and Q. After sessions, down at the local. She’d thrashed the lot of us one way or another by then, and the rest of the class had finally accepted the boffin as one of theirs. Became a way to help her fit in a bit, not that she’s ever really figured out how to do it well, I think, but she was so much worse back then -- horribly awkward; childhood must’ve been a nightmare if Boothy’s scenarios actually improved things for her -- except for when she was around the Three Musketeers: Ian Ronson, Danny Cabral, and Justin Markley.”

Eve wrapped her arms around her leg and smiled disarmingly up at Bond even though her tone
held nothing but amused wickedness. “So. Danny’d pick someone, or Justin did. Those two. Terrible. Worse than you and Alec. If I didn’t know better I’d swear M snatched the pair of them off a circus wire. Not that Ian was any better. Anyway. They’d pick a mark, usually some done-up tosser who shouldn’t have set foot in a place like that.”

She gestured around the observation area as if it were the pub of her memory, indicating the players and the play. “They’d whisper the outline to Q, and off she’d go. The rest of us had to guess what she was up to, what angle she was playing, before she finished, otherwise we’d be on the hook for drinks that night. Oh, could she work them. Didn’t matter who, either. Young, old, women, men, Q’d have them lipping up the sugarcubes in no time. Never cruel, either. Not one of them ever left feeling hurt, embarrassed, or realised that they’d been played. Got an instinct for it, when she actually tries. And she’d be so pleased when she’d finished. Proud, too. Well. She’d every right. Bloody good she was. Probably still is. Like riding a bicycle and all, but like I said, doesn’t go in for that so much now. Hasn’t really since back when she became R. So serious and staid all the time. Respectable.”

Eve might have been relaxed, casually draped on the low wall, but James was far from it. He could feel the muscles knotting up across his shoulders, his teeth almost grinding against each other. And Eve, for all that she’d been a field agent for years before Istanbul, seemed utterly oblivious to the tension thrumming in him.

But the precept ‘know your enemy’ stayed James’ tongue. All these months. This was more than he’d learnt about Q in months. He’d do nothing to stem this tide of intel. ‘Doesn’t go in for that so much now,’ Eve had said. ‘So much now’ wasn’t the same as ‘not at all,’ was it? And how would Eve know?

There was obviously a lot she kept concealed, the Quartermaster. From Eve. From Ronson and Cabral. From him. Even Alec. Hell, from everybody, as far as he could tell. Even the great mind of Olivia Mansfield had its blind spots.

James’ stomach churned at the idea. He felt ill.

Eve laughed again, utterly unaware of the intense conflict raging within James’ mind, but the sound only served to raise his hackles that much higher. “Honestly, given all that, I’ve no idea why I even get annoyed when I think about Cyprus. It’s really bloody funny. Professional pride, I suppose. Not to mention, I really do dislike sedatives. Horrible taste in the mouth after. Bloody hate that.”

Bond’s rough exhalation was a concession in spite of the fact that Eve was apparently done reminiscing on the Quartermaster and her amazing deception skills. He really wanted to growl, but he managed to keep it -- and the nausea his previous train of thought had evoked -- firmly behind his teeth.

It was … this entire conversation -- and all the things he’d never even known he didn’t know -- was skirting dangerously close to history repeating itself. And to all the anger and bitterness and betrayal he’d fought so hard to contain. James could feel the poison seeping up from where he’d buried it all those years ago. Only a hour ago, fuck, ten minutes ago, his thoughts when centred on Q were filled with affection and, yes, love. But now he was left wondering if any of it was real, or if like with The Bitch, it had been manipulative pretense from the very beginning.

Par for the course in this conversation, his next question -- which he’d hoped would clarify things -- only deepened that mystery.
“Who was the male agent?” James demanded.

“Ewan Sewell.”

James knew him. He was a good field agent. Too moral to be Double-O material, but he knew what he was about. Sewell was tall and fit with blond hair and blue eyes. He was also male which James had assumed was the Quartermaster’s preference, despite the new information that Eve had just imparted. “And yet she marked you. I would think that Sewell would be more Q’s type?”

“He is her type. That’s why M sent him. I was just the backup. She couldn’t send you, and he was the agent who most --”

“What do you mean she couldn’t send me?”

“I don’t know, James,” she said with a shrug. “It was six years ago. I assume you were on a mission som --”

James kept his voice level, and the frustration, annoyance, and yes, anger, swirling around inside him from his face or posture. Q wasn’t the only one who could act.

“No. I mean why would she send me?”

Eve looked at him, speechless, apparently still unaware of how everything she had said had affected him.


The smile, at least, had finally fallen from her lips. He was, perversely, quite glad of it. He found nothing about any of this amusing in the slightest.

“Because Q has a type.”

He allowed a small glimmer of his emotion to show then. Just a glint of annoyance. None, however, of the tempest that raged under his skin.

No hint at all.

“You already said that.”

“James, you created the type.”

A deep breath, drawn silently through his flaring nostrils and held. Three. Four. Five. Exhale.

“I haven’t known Q long enough to --”

“What are you- Thirteen years, James. You’ve known Q for thirteen years.”

No breath now. It had been quite stolen from him.

Those words. He could not wrap his mind around those two words.

Thirteen years? What? Thirteen?!

That was-- He’d have been, what, twenty-nine? Give or take… He’d not even made Double-O at twenty-nine. Hell, he’d barely been an agent at all. Junior Agent, maybe. Certainly not Senior.
And when would he have had any kind of contact with children?

For surely, surely, she’d have been a child. A brilliant one. Quite probably troubled and awkward and a right handful and all.

But.

He’d remember that, surely. Her.

He’d remember Q, even as a child.

Wouldn’t he?

“That’s not possible, Moneypenny.” Each word sounded pained to his ears.

“How do you not know this?” Eve seemed genuinely puzzled, though his thoughts had raced too quickly for her to notice any pause. But she wasn’t done, not by a long shot. And the more he heard, the sicker he felt.

“James, you met Q when you escorted the Major up to Oxford to meet with her 13 years ago.” Eve slid off the ledge and stood straight.

The whimsical manner she had used to tell her stories was gone from her tone. Eve was all business, now. “She would’ve been what, fifteen or sixteen then? Doctoral candidate in two separate areas of research, if memory serves. The Major’s notes and summary from that meeting were in the brief M gave us before Cyprus. Boothroyd indicated that he felt you left quite an impression on ‘the wee girl’ as he called her then. M juxtaposed that information with the few liaisons Q had in Uni and on her travels prior to Cyprus to determine that she could use Sewell to seduce Q because he looked like you.”

Sicker, yes. And hotter. Angrier. He took a deep breath and consciously worked to unlock his jaw so that he might speak.

A prickling, fiery itch under his skin made James want to turn and bury his fist in the solid brick wall behind him and to Hell with whatever damage he did, to himself or to the wall.

“You really don’t remember any of this?” Eve’s incredulity was palpable between them, and he could see that she had finally twigged on to his state of mind.

James wasn’t angry with Eve, however. There was something about her words that jabbed at shadows of memories, burning pricks of red-hot steel he could feel, memories that he’d been subconsciously trying to pin down for months now.

So. It had been pretense, after all.

“I think I’m starting to.” James’ voice was tight, and he inhaled roughly in an attempt to loosen it.

But the rush of cool air into his lungs seemed to shift something inside, and rather than heat, rather than tongues of flames consuming all in their path, the fire within had transformed with that cool air.

It had become the chill of ice.

A blast of sleet and hail bombarding him until every bit felt flattened by the power of those stones.
And then that skin-stripping burn of frozen steel began to spread.

Permafrost wrapped about his limbs.

His body.

His heart.

“You and Q have never talked about this?” Eve asked, hesitantly.

James looked past Eve’s shoulder to the closed door of Cha’s office where the martial arts master and his Quartermaster pupil continued their discussion then reached behind him and pulled his top coat and scarf from the hook on the wall. He shrugged into it and linked the length of wool around his neck. He pulled his leather gloves from the pocket, and slapped them repeatedly against his thigh; each staccato tap was more forceful than the last and held none of his controlled grace. He failed to notice.

“If you would, Moneypenny, when the Quartermaster is finished with her conference, please tell her that I will meet her on the Clive Steps as she had originally requested,” he said tonelessly.

“He hadn’t answered her question, and Eve’s brows furrowed at the tension that obviously filled Bond’s frame. She was left with the unsettling impression that she had inadvertently set in motion a series of events that would lead to quite the row between the Quartermaster and the Double-O, and she wasn’t even quite sure what the problem was.

“And what will you be doing in the meantime?” she asked, being quite careful now with the words she used.

James’ sharp blue eyes snapped to hers, and they appeared colder than Eve could ever remember seeing them before. “Getting some air,” he said as he turned on his heel and marched from the gymnasium.

There was only one thing for Eve to think at that moment.

Shite.

Chapter End Notes

See that comment button down there? Yeah, that one. Do please make use of it if you liked even a small part of what you read just now. I'd really appreciate it.

Have a fabulous week, everyone! Cheers!
Chapter Summary

The ride to the third floor felt like one of the longest of Tanner’s life -- should have taken the stairs and to hell with his heart. Q’s guard, Zuniga, may have called out a greeting as he rushed past her, but he was too focussed on reaching his goal at the end of the corridor he’d never know for sure. That he didn’t hear shouting from Q’s room should have brought him comfort, but --

What he saw was so unexpected, so different from what he had feared that it stopped Tanner dead in his tracks.

Chapter Notes

Oh lord!

Six months ... I'm so sorry. At no point was this story abandoned, though it may feel to some of you like it was. It’s been six months of one life issue after another for both me and my beloved beta. Both this project and our contribution to RBB had to be pushed to the back burner for a bit whilst we sorted the craziness out, but as many of you know, real life is never fully sorted out.

On top of all that, this chapter, long since completed in terms of the plot, had some structural issues we've been struggling with, so rather than continue to have you wait, I'm posting the portion of the chapter without the structure issues, and we'll continue to work on the other part behind the scenes until it's ready for publication.

Consequently, James does not appear in this update. It focuses largely on Alec/Tanner, and Alec & Q & Tanner (friendship) in the post-Westminster Bridge era.

Again, apologies for the horrible delay -- six months fly past much more quickly than one realizes -- and we hope not to have such a long one again.

This chapter has been picked over carefully, but we've undoubtedly missed some errors. If so, they were missed whilst feeding and watering the rest of the prose.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Ten:  First there Must be Truth

“We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.”
Bill Tanner stood in the doorway of Q’s room, hand braced on the frame, near ready to collapse in gratitude and utter relief at the sight that greeted him.

This is not what he had expected to see.

His trip to Paris had been a whirlwind of meetings. Six’s wretched budget issues forced two full days’ worth of work -- three, if he were being truthful with himself -- into barely a day and a half. But if Bill had to make a decision between choosing that whirlwind or continuing the surprisingly agonizing anticipation of what was developing between him and Alec, well, there wasn't much deciding to be done.

The sensitive and secure nature of the meetings combined with the DGSE’s ever prickly nature regarding digital communication by foreign operatives within their facilities -- even more so since Nine Eyes -- meant a virtual lockdown on mobile phones and grudging consent paired with pointed looks of Gallic disapproval for his Q-Branch issued tablet.

Bill had politely declined his hosts’ offer of a ‘secure’ line to contact Six -- allies, yes, but Bill hadn’t been born hier, merci beaucoup -- which meant he’d spent nearly as much time on his mobile back at the hotel in conference with Mallory as he had in conclave inside the Arrondissement de Ménilmontan.

While there had been no mention of contact between them while he was away, and Alec likely wouldn’t be expecting any, Bill nevertheless felt some frustration that there had been no time to jot off even a text let alone make a call.

Things in Paris had been just as tedious as he predicted, but Bill managed to keep his focus even with random warm, romantic, and yes, lustful thoughts of Alec popping into his head at the most unexpected times. Bill wanted to know -- needed to know -- if his memories of those few moments stolen in Q’s sitting room and the tacit understandings he and Alec seemed to share were as he remembered.

And hopefully built upon.

He’d texted Alec the moment he touched down at Heathrow, just to let Alec know he was back, but any hope he might have had to check for a response died the moment Bill crawled, already exhausted, into the back of the car sent to collect him. Not only had the whirlwind meant he’d not
been able to take any breathers to check in on personal matters, but there’d also been no opportunity to address any of the items on his endless list of ‘HQ Fires to be Put Out.’ Thus, from the time his driver pulled away from Terminal 5, Bill had been bombarded by calls from various department heads -- each with his or her own emergent issue that only the Chief of Staff could solve -- that the drive into London was just as congested with ‘traffic’ inside the car as outside.

M was still in a mission briefing with 0011 when Bill arrived at HQ, so he took a quick moment to check his text messages.

Nothing from Alec.

He was neither disappointed nor terribly surprised. Alec was just as busy as Tanner on any given day and would reply when he had a moment to do so. Bill paused, considering, before firing off a trio of messages, inquiring about the things that had been weighing on his mind since leaving London: was Alec in a better headspace? Had he contacted Q? Would he like to meet at the warehouse before popping out for dinner? Assuming it was still on offer.

God, Bill hoped it was.

He’d never given conscious thought to a romantic relationship with Alec Trevelyan until the other night, but now that he was thinking of it -- actively -- Bill could see that the attraction had been there all along, buried beneath more serious concerns with far greater consequences than the lives of two men. Those concerns needed to be pushed aside for tonight, so that he and Alec could decide whether or not to … whether or not.

Bill had barely finished pressing the ‘send’ button on the third text when the door to M’s office opened, Xavier Patterson stepped out, and M ushered his Chief of Staff in. Bill spent the next three hours sequestered in M’s office, providing a final briefing for his boss over the terms and tentative agreements he had brokered between the SIS and the DGSE. It was the cap on an already exhausting 48 hours, and Mallory shared a wry grimace with him when Bill’s fourth yawn interrupted the report.

When Bill finally emerged from M’s office, weary but satisfied with the results of the last two days, he thumbed open his phone and saw that there was still no response from Alec.

Okay. Now he was concerned.

In the months they had been working together, text messages had been their primary mode of communication, and Alec had always been prompt in his replies. Where Spectre was concerned, too many situations could turn on a sixpence for him not to do so.

Tanner hit the speed dial command assigned to Alec’s number as he stepped into his own office adjacent to Mallory’s. The call didn’t ring through but went directly to voicemail. Tanner’s jaw tightened reflexively.

He propped a hip on the edge of his desk, waited 30 seconds, and then dialed again.

Voicemail.

Concern slid over to active worry.

The only reason the call would forward directly to voicemail was if Alec had turned off the phone, it was out of range, or it had been destroyed. Alec never turned off his mobile, in part due to his liaison work, but chiefly because he considered himself as permanently ‘on-call’ when it came to Q. No matter the tension that currently existed between the Quartermaster and the Double-O, Alec
would never risk missing a call from or about Q by turning off his phone, and given the fallout from the Morocco mission, nothing voluntary would have removed him from range again so long as she was in rehabilitation. Anyone with eyes could see that.

Another speed dial command and Tanner connected with a second voice mailbox, this time Q’s. Not as disconcerting since she only had her mobile on her when she was in her room at the start and end of her day. The rest of the time it stayed locked in a secure safe hidden in the new table next to her bed. Nevertheless, Bill’s worry ramped up yet another notch.

“Tanner!” Liam Foster’s thick brogue sounded through the speaker when Bill’s third call connected. “Been awhile since I’ve heard yer dulcet tones. Thought ye’re out of the country for a few days. Back then?”

Q’s nurse was as cheeky and direct as ever, and while Bill normally appreciated the man’s casual humour, with the worry squeezing at his lungs, he just was not in the mood. He took a deep breath to calm himself. No point in alienating the man by biting his head off, especially not when Q’d taken such a shine to the voluble nurse.

“Glad I reached you. Have you seen Alec Trevelyan recently?”

Bill was proud of himself in a vague sort of way. He was fairly certain none of the concern he felt had seeped into his voice. That feeling was confirmed when Liam responded in his typical fashion with a flood of words that told his listener a great deal about the man he was looking for but did nothing to actually assuage the misgivings fluttering like moths in the pit of Bill’s stomach.

“That I have. Just this afternoon as a matter of fact. Was coming in just as I was leaving for the day. Looked like right shite, Alec did. Like he hadn’t slept in a week. All haggard and pale, stressed like. Swear if I dinna know the bloke as well as I do, I’d recommend a B12 shot and a week of rest out in the Cotswolds. What’re ye doing to yer people over there these days, Bill? If that’s what you’ve in store for me, I might have to rethink coming to work for ye when Q goes back.”

The Chief of Staff drew in another breath and gave himself a shake. He’d at least located his quarry.

“How long ago was this? You leaving, I mean.”

Typically Bill had Liam’s diary committed to memory, but he’d left those memos to Moneypenny while in Paris, and in the chaos surrounding his return to Six, he’d not had a chance to get an update from Eve before she’d left for the day.

“Oh, about three hours ago, I’d say. I left a bit later than usual. Finally had tea in the canteen with that lovely OT, Julia, I was telling ye about the last time ye were out this way. Hey, she’s a pretty brunette friend in HR if yer interest--”

Bill never heard what else Liam had to say about Julia’s pretty friend in HR as he’s disconnected the call.

“Shite.”

For whatever reason, Alec had clearly deviated -- how drastically Bill still did not know -- from the plan they had sketched out regarding the agent’s reconciliation with the Quartermaster, and as bad off as Trevelyan had been the other night, it seemed he’d managed to spiral downward in the intervening days.
Again, shite!

His mobile vibrated, and Liam's name popped on the display. Bill frowned, stood, and debated, but before he'd made a decision, the ringing ceased.

For all of ten seconds.

"Shite!" he swore again as he fumbled with the device, almost dropping it in his haste to answer, realising that Liam would only keep ringing him if he didn't take the call, or worse yet, ring someone else to have them check on him.

"Oi! Bill? Everything alright, mate? The line drop?" Liam asked the moment the call connected, not giving Bill a chance to explain. The nurse was clearly concerned.

"M fine. It's fine. I just-- I almost dropped the bloody mobile. Must've hit something on the screen when I caught it."

The excuse sounded hollow, but Liam didn't call him on it.

Bill pinched the bridge of his nose and tipped his head back, eyes closed, as he held the device to his ear. He owed the man some explanation for his behaviour, even if he had no intention of giving the real reason for his distress. That was not his story to tell.

"My apologies, Liam. It's been an exhausting couple days. I'm knackered. Not thinking clearly. There-- Something came up, needed to get in touch with Alec. Thank you. You've been very helpful."

"So long as ye get yerself some kip, the rest'll sort itself out. I'll see ye tomorrow then?"

Bill was too drained to recall whether he was scheduled to pop over to the facility the next day.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. I'll need to check my diary," he responded before they said their goodbyes and disconnected once more.

Bill took a quick look around his office. His assistant had taken his luggage and outerwear from him when he arrived. He ignored his carryall in favour of his topcoat and scarf on the coat rack next to the door, checked to make sure he had his wallet, thumbed open the mobile again and put in his request for a car -- no driver.

The trip out to Windsor hadn't been as nightmarish as it could have been considering the time of day, but it had still taken Tanner the better part of 90 minutes to reach the Shea Clinic. He'd called both Alec’s and Q’s mobiles multiple times on the drive when he thought he could safely get away with it, and even risked sets of texts during two, particularly tedious traffic snarls. All the way to the facility, he couldn't escape mental images of the verbal bloodbath -- or worse -- he was likely to wade into when he got there.

Brilliant and stubborn -- words that described both Trevelyan and Q -- could be complementary traits, but not in this situation. Not when emotions were already running high. Not when each person was capable of leaving both figurative and literal explosive destruction in their wake -- Bill didn't want to think about it, but like a little child being told ‘don’t look up at the sun’ during a total solar eclipse, he really couldn't help himself.

A glacial age later, Bill pulled into the car park of the rehabilitation facility. He flashed his badge to the guards at the security desk as he pelted for the pair of lifts just off reception. Sod the preservation of dignity!
The ride to the third floor felt like one of the longest of Tanner’s life -- should have taken the stairs and to hell with his heart. Q’s guard, Zuniga, may have called out a greeting as he rushed past her, but he was too focussed on reaching his goal at the end of the corridor he’d never know for sure. That he didn’t hear shouting from Q’s room should have brought him comfort, but --

What he saw was so unexpected, so different from what he had feared that it stopped Tanner dead in his tracks. Left him weak with such surprise and relief that he had no choice but to grip the door frame just to stay upright.

Bill glanced back up the corridor, but Zuniga stood at her post with her back to him, giving off an aura of supreme unconcern with the precipitousness of his arrival. She was a senior agent. She worked with Double-Os. In the grand scheme of things, the sight of her Chief of Staff practically sprinting down the corridor was nothing for her to get excited about.

Another thing for which he was grateful.

He turned back to the room and paused to appreciate the tableau.

Alec, dressed in the same t-shirt and jeans as the last time Tanner had seen him -- as if Bill needed any further evidence that something had gone severely sideways -- was stretched out on Q's bed, his sock-clad feet resting beside the duvet-covered lump that were Q's. The head of the bed was tilted up, and Bill could see that Alec's right shoulder was resting against the railing at the far side of the frame. A pillow was just visible behind his head and his eyes were closed, though he didn’t seem to be asleep: the fingers of his nearer hand were gently brushing over Q's hair. His right arm was wrapped around the middle of her back, hand splayed across her spine and the curve of her ribs, just above the duvet that was bunched up about her waist.

Q herself was lying half on top of the agent, curled as tightly into his side as possible. Her head rested on the swell of Alec's collarbone, the crown of it tucked in under his chin.

Her right arm was caught between the agent's bulk and her own slight form, and from the doorway, Bill could see how her fingers were twisted firmly into the material of his t-shirt. They pulled the cloth tight across his belly -- as though even asleep she was afraid if she didn't hold him in place, he'd be gone when she woke -- while her left was slung across his chest, hand disappearing between his torso and the railing behind. It seemed her left knee was sandwiched between Alec's legs, and if he was being honest with himself, Tanner was relieved to see that leg drawn up slightly under the duvet.

He hadn't been present for any of Q's rehabilitation sessions -- that was not his place in the scheme of these things -- and only had the words of the Double-O and the Quartermaster and the medical reports to go on regarding her progress in rehabilitation. Although everything indicated that things were moving apace and that she retained a degree of movement in both limbs, it still settled something deep within him to see evidence of that progress for himself. In her wheelchair, it was all too easy for Q to conceal her true state, so the casual sprawl he was seeing was heartening.

Regardless of what Q might have thought if she were privy to his thoughts, Bill’s relief had little to do with her usefulness to Six and everything to do with her ability to maintain her personal foundation, those qualities that she viewed as tantamount to her own survival.

She was brilliant in so many ways, but her self-image was irrevocably tied to her abilities, and retaining even a shred of functionality in her legs would only bolster that image. She was not an invalid, as he had so carefully explained to Alec, and every tiny piece of day to day living that she was able to accomplish, unassisted, should be used to reinforce her sense of independence.
Bill huffed a breath into the quiet room. Unwinding his scarf from his neck and pulling off his
gloves, he dropped into what they’d all come to think of as ‘Alec’s Chair’ -- yes, proper noun.

The rustle of his clothing or the scuff of his shoes against the floor gave him away. When he
looked up again at the bed, Alec’s green eyes were staring back at him, a look of mild horror and
dismay on his face. His hand had stilled in Q’s hair, and he seemed to be barely breathing.

He looked, if Bill was being completely honest, like a boy caught with his sticky fingers deep in
his grandmother’s treacle tin.

"What? Not happy to see me, then?" Bill laced as much humour into the words as he could
manage.

The horror dropped, only to be replaced with, of all things, a faint tinge of red that swept across
Alec’s cheeks to colour even the tips of his ears. Tanner wouldn’t have believed it if he wasn’t
seeing it with his own eyes. Alec Trevelyan, blushing!

The man in question shrugged with his free shoulder and pulled his hand from Q’s back to drag
through his own unkempt hair. Bill managed to contain a grin at the decidedly chagrined look
settling across Alec’s face.

"I-- I may have lost the plot. Just a bit," his voice cracked at the end, and he had to clear his throat
carefully before he could continue. "But, tsel’ opravdyvayet sredstva, da ?"

Bill nodded slightly in agreement. He was pretty certain that he’d never know precisely what
means were used to achieve these ends, but if it got his friends here, well …

She must have felt the rumble of Alec’s words through his chest for though she did not wake, Q’s
grip on the t-shirt tightened, and she pressed her torso more closely to Alec’s The soft whimper
that slipped past her lips nearly cleft Bill’s heart.

Q’s singular mind and fiercely determined will generated in her a physical animation and sheer
presence that, from Bill’s perspective, were without compare. Seeing her like this, still in Alec’s
embrace -- her fiery mein packed away by slumber like coals banked for the night -- Tanner was
suddenly struck by Q’s vulnerability. With the absence of those qualities he’d apparently taken for
granted, Bill was transported back to the only time he had ever seen the Quartermaster completely
exposed and truly helpless: there, collapsed on the tarmac of Westminster Bridge at Gareth
Mallory’s feet, bleeding out from the shrapnel of a bullet she’d designed herself.

In his time as a field agent, and even still as Chief of Staff, Bill had seen -- and in some cases
caused -- all manner of wound and injury. Most had killed. Some had not, leaving their victims in
states of incapacity that varied from minor psychological trauma to permanent disfigurement. He
had long since tried to convince himself that he was inured to such sights, and though he’d known
he was fooling himself, it had never been thrown into quite such sharp relief as that night on the
Bridge.

Q stumbling past him and Eve, beneath the police tape to Mallory’s side, mouth open to call out
after Bond as he walked to the far side of the Bridge, clasped that doctor’s hand in his, and
disappeared down the stairs to the footpath below.

The words Q had been ready to shout cut off by a strangled cry so searing and painful that the echo
of that sound stayed with Tanner still.

Her tiny form crumpling so quickly and unexpectedly that even Mallory -- with his instinctual
manners, courtesy, and quick reflexes -- had been unable to break Q’s fall before her knees hit the pavement and the rest of her followed: strings cut when the bullet fractured.

The blood pulsing out between Bill’s fingers as he tried to help staunch the flow once he reached her side.

Eve’s harsh cry for the paramedics.

Q’s lips forming the words she was desperate to speak. Her tongue and lungs lacking the strength and the breath needed to create the sound.

The confusion and loneliness and anger and fear Bill saw in her hazel eyes: a tangle of emotions only ever seen in the eyes of those who know they are dying.

Those eyes closing a heartbeat later, accompanied by a single, ragged exhale.

And then nothing more.

The irony that if Q had not accidentally designed a defective bullet, she’d have been high up in the CNS Building, far from help, when the explosive charge within the casing detonated; the knowledge that when it finally did shatter, had there not already been EMTs on site, The Quartermaster -- his friend -- would have died there on the cold, wet tarmac of Westminster Bridge.

“Bill?”

Tanner shook himself from the memories and turned his eyes from Q’s form -- unmoving in repose but for the gentle rise and fall of her back as she breathed -- to Alec and the worried concern that looked back at him.

“I’m … fine. Wool-gathering.” Bill shrugged and let half a smile tug at one corner of his mouth to reassure the agent that all was well. He nodded at Q, however. “Probably should wake her up, though,” he said. “She won’t take kindly knowing that I’ve --”

“Bozhe-moi!” Alec’s eyes widened with consternation. On a good day, Q would have been horrified to be caught in what she would consider a compromising position, but now --

Alec wrapped his free hand around Q’s hip and nudged her a bit with the shoulder she was currently sleeping on. “Wake up, myshka ,” he said in her ear. “You’ve company.”

Q’s eyes opened on his first words, and she immediately pulled her left arm in from its casual drape across Alec’s chest to push herself up. She didn't get far. She stilled partway through the motion and stared down at her legs. Bill saw the confusion on her face melt into sad realisation and ultimately resigned acceptance as her conscious mind processed and remembered that, no, her legs no longer felt or worked the way they were supposed to.

When he’d been visiting her one afternoon whilst she was still at UCH, Q had confessed to Bill how every morning when she woke there were a few blissful moments when she still lived in a world in which she could climb out of bed, walk through her home to the kitchen, and stand at the worktop while she waited for the kettle to boil. Then her conscious mind came back online, and she was faced with reality.

It was one thing for her to tell him that story. It was quite another to see it play out in front of him, and Bill swallowed tightly. Not for the first time, he was left with the painful realisation of how sodding wrong all of this was.
Clearly refusing to dwell on circumstances about which she could do nothing, Q focused on those she did have control over and used her left arm as a brace to take the weight of her torso while she adjusted herself on the bed. As she moved, Alec held his hands out away from her, giving her room to maneuver. Once her arm was out from between them, she pushed herself up farther and tugged the duvet free of her lower hip.

Before Tanner could offer to step out into the corridor to give her some privacy, she'd shifted herself smoothly -- leant against Alec, the back of her head resting on the same shoulder she'd been sleeping on -- and again comfortable, smiled at her guest. Bill was impressed. The entire process had taken hardly any time at all. Despite the injustice of her circumstance, the Quartermaster was adapting quickly.

“Je vois que vous avez survécu à Paris,” she said conversationally, apparently willing to set aside any embarrassment she might have felt at waking with Tanner in the room. “Je suppose que de Mangoux était aussi difficile que jamais.”

“The day I can’t handle either Paris or de Mangoux is the day I resign my position and take up selling twee souvenirs on Brighton Palace Pier,” Bill replied with just enough bite that Q had no illusion of the trip being any less trying and tedious than expected.

“Glad to hear it,” Q said with an appreciative smirk. “The mental image of you wearing a striped apron with your name embroidered across the top is an affront to the senses.”

Bill couldn’t help his smile. His eyes darted between Alec -- who had slung his arm around her shoulder -- and Q and the easy way they had with one another again. Whatever had transpired between them had clearly been cathartic. He was under no illusion that everything was resolved, reality afforded no Hollywood solutions to life’s problems, but Bill couldn’t remember the last time Q had been this animated and relaxed.

No. That wasn’t true. But since that last time was a direct result of James Bond, he didn’t want to think about that for too long. Bloody pillock!

Apparently needing to get up and move about a bit, Alec reached behind him to disengage the lock that held the side rail secure and was sliding out of bed as Q and Tanner finished their conversation. Awkward position notwithstanding, he pressed a quick kiss to her forehead, and she shot him a disgruntled look that he returned with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Wanker,” Q muttered in response.

Before Alec could disentangle himself from her completely, however, Q grabbed his shirt front again and took a quick sniff. “Dear God. How long have you been wearing this thing?” she demanded. Then she looked closely at the shirt. “You were wearing this on Tuesday. It’s Thursday, Alec.”

“At first distracted,” Alec admitted, looking everywhere but at her or Bill. He’d painted only part of the picture when he’d told Tanner he’d lost the plot. He’d actually found himself in an entirely new narrative where he’d been the antagonist in every aspect of Q’s life. He still wasn’t entirely sure why he’d gone so completely off the rails. He’d had low points in the past -- every agent did -- but this …

Like most of the Double-Os, Alec eschewed help from the shrinks at Six, they said they understood the struggles of agents in the field, but never came within miles of it -- bloody vultures -- but after what he had just spent the last several days experiencing…
He hadn’t been able to crawl out of that hole on his own; only the rickety ladder that Q had lowered down to him had been of any help, but Alec knew it was only a matter of time before he found himself in that pit again, and there was no guarantee the fragile ladder would hold up to a second climb. Q had enough to worry about without having to be responsible for his psychological stability as well. The painful truth -- what he had given focussed attention to while Q slept -- was that he could be of no help to her if he couldn’t take care of himself, and he wasn’t going to be able to do that alone, as much as that galled the Double-O in him to admit.

Q spoke often of her respect for Kate Goddard, and before she had fallen asleep had hesitatingly admitted how she was beginning to slowly -- very slowly -- come to terms with things that were both related to and completely separate from her injury.

“We’ve both been distracted.” Q said gently in response to his confession though her nose was still wrinkled from the overly ripe scent coming from his shirt. She cupped Alec’s cheek in her palm and ran the pad of her thumb over the days’ worth of stubble there. Then she patted it firmly once and gave him a push. “Off you pop,” she said. “You are going to take a shower.” She nodded at the en-suite at the far end of her room. “I am going to find you something to clean to wear, assuming they have scrubs that come in ‘Russian Bear’ size.”

Bill chuckled in response to that image. Alec elbowed Q in the ribs but slid out of the bed and headed for the en-suite. Once he was out of her way, Q tossed back the duvet from her legs and shoved the pillow up behind her head so she lay on her back against the slightly raised mattress. Bill watched silently as she used the button on the controls to raise the head to a 45 degree angle, then pressed her hands into the mattress on either side of her hips and scooted from side to side, ‘walking’ her hips closer to the head of the mattress until she reached the position she apparently wanted. Settled again, she grasped the knit fabric of her workout trousers and pulled first one leg and then the other close to her chest. She then did something that Tanner had not anticipated, but that, judging by Alec’s bland expression, wasn’t uncommon. Q looped her arms beneath her legs and threw them -- almost violently -- over the side of the bed, letting momentum and gravity swing her torso along with her legs so she wound up sitting on the edge of the bed perpendicular to the wheelchair at its side.

It was the work of mere moments before Q was again sat in her chair, wheels unlocked, maneuvering for the door. Bill realised that this mode of transfer must be something Alec had watched Q develop and perfect over the weeks. A sobering thought, given the number of repetitions it must have taken over such a short period of time to bring it to the level of competence and economy of motion he had just witnessed.

“I’m rather limited in my single and double-bladed inventory at the moment. Left it all at the office, I’m afraid, but there’s a sponge bag beneath the sink, complete with a disposable razor,” she called over her shoulder as she wheeled for the door. “Alec, scrape those wires off your face before you need a machete to hack through them, won’t you? I’ll see if I can’t order up something to eat, too. Probably peckish. Doubt either of you took the time for so much as a biscuit today.”

Alec grinned when Bill stood the way he always did when a woman left or entered a room. Watching him do it during his first liaison meeting with M, Tanner, and Moneypenny, Alec had later joked that Bill’s father had taught him well by instilling such gallantry in his son. The smile on Bill’s face fell instantly and without another word, he retreated to his office, shutting and locking the door behind him.

Bill showed up at the warehouse for the first time later that night, Thai takeaway in hand. He’d said little at first, but when the last basil roll had been eaten and they were each lingering over their second bottle of beer, Bill had apologised for his rude behavior and explained that his father had
been a right bastard who’d never known a polite moment in his life. He’d, thankfully, died when Bill was young enough to not be permanently influenced by the man’s cruelty, and his mother eventually married a kind man who’d raised Bill and his younger sister.

“It’s probably more than you wanted to know,” Bill had said with a shrug, “but it might explain why I reacted that way this afternoon even if it doesn’t excuse it.”

Alec had been taken aback by the apology. It wasn’t that people at Six were intentionally rude. Okay, well, some were -- Anderson in HR was a right arse, and so was that sodding vampire nurse in Medical who took unholy glee in verbally eviscerating any agent in her care who dared complain about her enthusiastic technique for drawing blood samples; her bloody needles hurt more than a stab wound with a K-Bar knife -- but most people were simply too busy with their own tasks and needs to consider others. For those in mission critical positions, rude -- or perhaps brusque or abrupt would be the more accurate terms -- was often the unfortunate consequence of the endless pressure they were under.

Alec included himself in that category. Though he actually tended to drive right past rudeness on his way to outright hostility. Which was probably -- okay, not probably, definitely -- worse. Up until that night, Alec had been able to count on three fingers the people at Six who he knew were capable of such apologies: Q, though grudgingly at times; Dr. Y’da, blunt and direct but sincere; and Crazy Eddie from the canteen who had run afoul of the entire building when he’d accidentally placed salt in the sugar bowls, ruining countless, morning cuppas.

Tanner had become the fourth, and that moment had probably been the point at which Alec first started to see Bill Tanner as something, some one, more than just his title and position.

Once Q left the room and steered her chair down the corridor toward the nurses’ station, Bill turned back to Alec and interrupted his musings.

“Are you okay?”

Alec considered the question, weighing his response. Bill watched him carefully but did not push as the man collected his thoughts.

“Yes … and no.”

Alec knew it wasn’t enough of an answer, so he pushed on even as Bill’s brow furrowed. “We’ve sorted out the big issues, but there are still things that we … no, that I need to work through. Otherwise … look, I’m tired of being an obstacle. I’m about as fucked up as they come, and I’ll not be much good to her or you if I can’t sort myself out.”

Bill took a deep breath and fought to keep his heart from plunging to his toes about what was implied in those words. “So … this … us …,” he gestured between the two of them, “… you don’t want to try --”

“God, no! Of course , I do! Why would you even think I wouldn’t?” Alec nearly shouted before remembering where they were. “Was it just me there the other night when all I wanted to do was shag you up against the wall?” he finished in a fierce whisper.

“But you just said that you wouldn’t be much good for me until you sort yourself out, which is complete bollocks by the way. The ‘good for me part’, that is … not the sorting yoursie --” Bill’s words came to a sudden halt as the penny dropped over what Alec had said. “Wait. You mean to tell me I could have had you the other night, and you sent me away?” He took two purposeful steps toward Alec.
“You had an early flight,” Alec said, lifting his hand as if to either ward off an incoming attack or signal peaceful intent and taking -- surprisingly -- two steps backward.

“I could barely keep my attention on those sodding meetings for the way you had me worked up over that night,” Bill practically growled, continuing his advance.

“Please tell me you didn’t give away the Commonwealth to the French. Q’d throw herself off the top of the BT tower rather than sing *La Marseillaise* with her morning cuppa.” Alec couldn’t help the self-satisfied curl to his lips at the knowledge that he’d managed to ruffle the feathers of the normally unflappable Chief of Staff, but he’d failed to notice that he was quickly running out of space into which he could retreat.

His back thumped the wall behind him as he took a final step.

“You are one sodding piece of work, Trevelyan, you know that?”

“Bill, I --”

Anything else he might have said was cut short when Bill surged forward and ground his mouth against Alec’s in a bruising kiss, his hands gripping Alec's deltoids and holding him in place against the wall by the window.

Hands trapped between their chests, Alec froze, his Double-O instincts warring with the fact that this was something he actually wanted.

Before Bill could pull back, Alec’s moment of hesitation passed and his fingers curled into the collar of Tanner’s top coat, pulling Bill closer so Alec could respond completely to the demands of the kiss. His lips parted, heart racing in his chest when Tanner licked into his mouth with a delicious ferocity. Alec had demands of his own, showing with lips and teeth and tongue every scrap of passion he felt.

Alec had stopped counting the number of honeypot missions he'd been sent on years ago. He didn’t even keep track of the number of casual partners with whom he'd spent a pleasant evening or two. It was likely a notable, but not obscene, number -- he wasn’t a complete slag, thank you kindly -- but none of them, not a single one, had ever made him shudder with desire and want just from kissing.

As the need for air forced them to break apart, Bill released his crushing grip on Alec's arms and passed his palms over the thick muscles of his shoulder and neck, humming appreciatively at the contained strength he could feel thrumming beneath the skin.

He pressed forward again, with equal passion but less bruising force, fastening his mouth over Alec’s once more as his hands shifted from Alec's shoulders to brush over the firm flesh of his neck.

Bill’s lips were insistent, cajoling, though Alec needed no convincing, and he cupped Alec’s face for a brief moment -- feeling now with his fingers the rough stubble that had scraped so deliciously against his own -- before sliding his hands up into Alec’s hair and tugging lightly. Alec groaned in response.

“This is getting long,” Bill said against Alec’s mouth, pulling again, this time more sharply, and causing Alec to gasp in a breath that Bill felt, cool air on the dampness of his lips.

“Been meaning to get it cut,” Alec said, chasing Bill’s mouth when he dragged it away to suck at the corner of his jaw.
“Don’t you dare,” Bill growled.

“Long it is, then.” The back of Alec’s head hit the wall when Bill started biting at another heretofore unknown erogenous zone for him, his left clavicle. He wrapped a hand around the back of Bill’s head, pressing him even closer, urging his actions further. “Vot der’mo! Need you to know … Don’t want … mean, not just about sex … want … all of you.”

Bill pulled back at that, and Alec groaned again but not with pleasure. He opened his eyes and started at what he saw.

As Chief of Staff, Bill Tanner had long since perfected a poker-face not even James Bond had equaled, and Alec had seen it on many occasions, but it was nothing in comparison to the serious expression that looked back at him now. Alec watched as Bill’s eyes searched his face and wondered what it was that the sober blue saw in him.

Good? Well, there wasn’t much of that.

Bad? More than Alec could stomach thinking about.

Something in between? Could he be that lucky?

He was about to ask what it was Bill was looking for when the man finally spoke.

“Then we’re agreed,” he said, eyes mirroring the softness in his smile. “All of each other … but plenty of sex, too.”

Alec's bark of laughter was more than half relief, and he gripped Bill by the back of the neck and pulled him in for another bruising kiss, but unlike before, he left it at one. “She’ll be back anytime,” he whispered against Bill’s mouth.

“ Probably a bit early to share all this, anyway, considering …”

“Yeah.”

Bill took a measured step backward, though his fingers, tangled with Alec’s, lingered. He ran the pad of his thumb over the top of Trevelyan’s left hand -- his gun hand -- and quirked an eyebrow at the shudder of pleasure the man didn't even try to contain.

“Responsive,” he murmured, surprised but pleased at the atypical reaction. Hands could be sensitive, of course, but usually the palms and fingertips, rarely the top. Bill raised it to his mouth for an open-mouthed kiss, but it wasn’t enough. He licked and then nipped at the rough flesh of Alec’s knuckles with his teeth, savouring the taste of the flesh under his tongue. An unexpected sense of pride and strength awakened in Bill when Alec’s hips jerked forward, seeking his, at the first bite.

“Cher voz’mi! God, only with you, I think,” Alec groaned. Bill continued to pull sensations out of him that no lover or mark had ever come close to achieving. Again … just with his mouth! Alec twisted his hand in Bill’s grip, to pull him close, needing to feel the weight of the man against his body, but Bill took two final steps backward, letting Alec’s hand fall from his grip.

Alec was pretty sure the heat he saw in Bill’s gaze was matched in his own, and he could all but feel the need and want vibrate between them, but this was neither the place nor the time. Though Bill had stepped back to give him -- them -- space, it really wasn’t enough, and Alec made a tactical retreat across the room to the en-suite. Close enough to continue a conversation but far enough away to let things cool down … a bit.
The situation was still fragile between him and Q, like a piece of broken china recently mended with adhesive glue. The repair would harden and strengthen with time, but until it had a chance to cure, it shouldn’t be jostled overly much. Alec was certain that Q would likely support a relationship between him and Tanner, but the one issue they hadn’t directly addressed earlier — though it had certainly been implied through almost everything else — was James. Given Alec’s reputation for being cavalier (at best) and coarse (at worst), some might scoff at the notion that he was capable of putting other people’s feelings above his own, and maybe they were right, but he would not throw a spotlight on Q’s heartbreak by being indiscreet with Bill in her room.

Tanner appreciated the distance, too. He was breathing heavily, the skin around his mouth practically danced with the tingling left by Alec’s stubble, and his cock was straining against his flies. Looking over his shoulder toward the door, he sighed with relief that there was still no sign of Q, but he buttoned up his overcoat again to be safe. He wasn’t going to calm down anytime soon. Not as long as Alec was right there: close yet untouchable ... for the time being.

Things had got far more heated than he’d anticipated or intended, and even though they were moving at a pace that was making his head spin, it nevertheless felt completely right. Didn’t mean it wasn’t distracting as hell, though, and it took Bill several moments to remember that there was a question that he had sort of asked and that Alec had only partially answered.

“What happened, Alec?” Bill asked softly with a helpless gesture. “Looks like you went rather spectacularly off the rails. Seemed that you were in a better place when I left the other night, so --”

“I was. I really was … until I wasn’t.” Alec scrubbed his hands through his already wild hair and looked more than a little bit contrite as he tried to explain. “After doing the washing up I fully meant to go down to shower, sleep. Ended up snapping the stem off one of those wine glasses we’d used, and … it was too much. Another thing I had broken. Something else of hers I’d ruined. Spent the night on the kitchen floor. Polished off the rest of that ZYR Eve picked up last month. It … went downhill from there. Fell asleep against the sink cupboard, and the next thing I knew I was awake, in a sweat, practically in a panic, convinced that Q was dead.”

Alec paused, and by the tension he could see in Alec’s shoulders, Bill could tell that he wasn’t finished. Alec’s left hand clenched into a fist, and he drew in a shuddering breath.

“Just a nightmare … it was just a fucking nightmare … usually shake the wretched things off in no time, but that .. fuck, it’s not even the first time I’ve had that one … or one like it. Variations. Come home from Sri Lanka, and she’s in a box. Actually there with you all on Westminster Bridge, and she’s dead in my arms. Or the one where I’m running ... running, and I can't get there in time, can't get close enough to catch her, and when I finally do, she's cold as ice. I’ve told you about those, yeah?”

Alec had, in fact, and it was one of the reasons why Bill had never told him just how close all three of those nightmares had been to becoming reality; he had advised both Eve and Gareth not to share that information with Alec, either.

“Wasn't scheduled to be at Six, anyway, what with the renovation plans. Just as well. They’d probably have put me on a 48-hour psych hold if I’d’ve shown up like that. I was a mess. Couldn’t think of anything but what I thought I’d ruined.”

Bill’s eyes widened. In the mad rush of travel preparation, dealing with the immediate fallout of Q and Alec’s dustup, and then the distraction of the burgeoning intensification with Alec, he’d completely forgotten that Alec had taken a few days’ leave from Six to devote himself to sorting out the warehouse modifications with Q. A bit not good, indeed.
Alec hadn't noticed his reaction, staring into the middle distance as he was, and kept on speaking.

"Spent the bulk of yesterday wearing a path in the sitting room floor. Going over and over in my head all the ‘What ifs’ and the ‘Could’ve beens’. Pointing fingers … some at James, but mostly at myself. I-I don’t understand what got into me, Bill. Nothing was good. Seemed everything was turning to rot and pain after I’d touched it."

“That’s not-"

“No. I know that’s not true, but …” Alec’s laugh was rueful as his gaze sharpened back into focus on Bill’s face.

“Q straightened that out. But you asked why, and … well, that’s where my head was. I’m not sure -- the rest is a bit of a blur -- but I know at some point I decided to tell her I was sorry about what I did on Tuesday. Remember enough that I took a cab to get out here. Yeah, I know,” he said with a shrug for Bill’s wince at the estimated cab fare.

“Next thing, I’m waking up on the ground there at the foot of the bed wondering what the hell’s happened, and Q’s sitting in her chair,” he nodded at the empty space next to ‘Alec’s Chair’ where Q had been when he’d woken.

“She … well, yeah, she had some rather pointed things to say. Apparently, I am not the source of all the pain in the universe,” his chuckle this time was entirely self-deprecating, “but, yeah, anyway we talked. I apologized. She apologized. Agreed we’d both been idiots. She was completely worn out, and … that happened,” he gestured at the bed where Tanner had found them when he’d arrived.

It had been a new experience for their friendship because while Q had always accepted Alec’s touch, it had never been something she’d sought out. But when they’d finally reached a state of equilibrium again, Alec had asked Q what she needed.

She had struggled to ask. It was likely that she always would. Her pride and 15 years of self-sufficiency would always work against her. “There’s so much I can’t feel anymore, and I- I need - -” her voice had broken at that point, but Alec knew even without her asking.

He had situated himself on the bed against the far safety railing as Q had maneuvered her chair into position and made the transfer to the bed. His thought to lift her himself had left Alec’s mind before it was even fully formed, but he had reached down to pull the duvet over her once she was settled. They had said little after that, and Q was soon asleep, leaving him to his thoughts -- much calmer but no less introspective -- until Bill had roused him from his musings.

“And so what do you need?”

“Two things,” Alec said after considering the question. He reached into his hip pocket, pulled out his mobile, surprised that it was powered down. *Huh. Don’t remember doing that*, he thought. “Kate Goddard’s number, if you have it. I’d ask Q, but until I know if the Doc’ll even take me on …”

“I have it,” Bill said, he’d had it since the day after M proposed to the psychiatrist for use on those days when, as Mallory’s Chief of Staff, Tanner might end up having more contact with M’s future wife than Gareth himself. He was happy to give it, though he was more interested in what Alec’s response to --

“Oh. *Fuck* !”
And there it was.

Alec looked up from the screen of his mobile where there flashed notifications for eight unanswered text messages, five missed calls, and a voice message. Tanner could honestly say that ‘sheepish’ was a look he never thought to see on the Double-O’s face.

“Bill, I—”

Tanner cut him off before he could say anything else. “There’s no reason to feel guilty. No. I can see it on your face, so stop it.” He held out his hand for Alec’s mobile and quickly created the new contact and returned the phone. “And there’s certainly nothing to apologise for. I’m just glad you’re safe and things are better between the two of you.”

“Thank you,” Alec said as he pocketed his mobile again, and his tone told Tanner he meant for more than just the phone number.

“You said there were two things.”

“I want this … us … Wait. I never even asked. I-is it too soon? But, it’s not like we don’t know each other, but maybe it’s too quick? It’s just that I’ve never felt so comfortable with anyone -- any … romantic partner -- like … well, I do with you. Look at what just happened!” Alec gestured off into the ether behind him in that land where previous musings dwelled. “Everything I just shared with you. I don’t do that. I mean, come on, ‘Double-O’!” He tapped his chest. “You know what we’re like. Hardly known for sharing. Secrecy. Isolation. Stiff upper lip and that sort. Not exactly the ‘have a sit and enjoy a cuppa’ type. Granted, my focus has been … elsewhere the last few days, but now, when I really think about it, it’s been like that from the start with us, hasn’t it? It’s … I’m … we’re different … with each other, I mean. Since the day I showed up at the hospital and scared the doctors. So I guess …” he rubbed at the back of his neck, looking conflicted in a way that Bill had never seen him before -- a nervous, self-conscious schoolboy peeking out from behind the form of the prepossessing, self-confident secret agent. “I think it’s clear that I … fancy you, and I’m hoping it’s not just me, but … can there … is there … an us?”

While anyone else might have found it impossible to follow the seemingly chaotic tack of Alec’s half-formed ideas, Bill had no problem doing so, especially since such rambling -- rather delightful rambling, at that -- seemed to be the way he expressed his emotional reactions. Bill was charmed by Alec’s awkwardness, and while it was not the most effective way to communicate, it was communication, something that was frequently the Achilles’ Heel for operatives outside of a mission. Inside of one too, for that matter. Though Alec seemed to have forgotten that Bill had already confirmed his desire to pursue this, he didn’t hesitate to give Alec the reassurance he so clearly needed. After all, there was nothing Alec had said that Bill didn’t agree with.

“If you want it, there’s an us.”

Alec huffed the same sigh of relief Bill had experienced earlier. “So the second thing I need is … Well, I’ve never done anything remotely close to an ‘us’, and I know I’m going to make mistakes. I just need to know --”

“Alec. I’m not going anywhere. I’ve a bit more experience in this arena than you, but you’ll notice, I’m still single, so I’ve clearly not perfected it yet. We’re both going to bollocks things up, but we’ll figure it out.”

It was then that they heard Q’s voice from outside the door to her room, speaking with Agent Zuniga down the corridor a bit.
“Not that I mind another lesson in how to access things in places I can’t reach anymore,” Q said, irritation clear in her voice and making it a bit louder than she might have intended.

“It’s not as easy as it looks, and you’ll need it more than you think, Dr. Wilson,” Zuniga replied, using Q’s cover name. “My cousin’s in a chair. Broke her back on a climb in Utah—”

“Yes, thank you, Ms. Zuniga…” and Q was off, giving the agent a lesson of her own.

Alec and Bill both winced at Zuniga’s misstep. _It’s not as easy as it looks?! Really?!_ But the smiles that immediately followed said the same thing. _Thank, God!_ Though there had been plenty of opportunities, Q hadn’t vented her vexation on anyone since the accident, and each man saw this as a sign that -- while far from normal -- she was at least on the path to becoming herself again.

Tanner, who had borne witness to countless Quartermaster philippics over the years had grown quite adept at determining the length of such lectures based on topic, approximate IQ of the person under criticism, and Q’s current level of irritation, said knowingly, “I hate to say it, but barring any foolish attempt at a defence on Nadia’s part, this should be a short but merciless one, so I’d say you’ve about three minutes before Q finishes out there, and I have to start scrounging up a new agent for the security detail. If she finds you’re not in that shower—”

“Oh! You’re a right bastard,” Bill growled under his breath, feeling his cock stir again at the sight of Alec’s obscenely fit body.

Alec shrugged. “Hey, I may be a fucking mess right now, but I’m still _me_,” he said with a cheeky grin.

Tanner stalked to the doorway as Alec ducked inside and kicked the abandoned clothes in after him. “We’ll continue this _discussion_ later.” His tone was both exasperated and filled with want.

“I look forward to it, _moy lapochka_,” Alec purred as Bill shut the wide door in his face.

Bill sagged back against the door as he heard the water start in the shower, his system buzzing with adrenaline and endorphins, but he was fully aware of the fatigue lurking underneath.

What was he getting himself into?

He might not know the details yet, but that didn’t matter. It would all be _so_ worth it!
Please let us know what you thought of this update. That comment button down there is a huge component in spurring on the creative process, and we could truly both use some positive feedback if you feel this chapter is deserving.

Ta for reading!
Et tu, Brute?

Chapter Summary

It wasn’t a one-sided interest anymore, either. The undeniable attraction practically hummed between them, but Bond was now her very dear friend, too. It had become a defining relationship in her life. Q had learnt to depend on him. She trusted him.

Chapter Notes

It's a bit silly of me to say it's been a while since this story had an update. I think we all know that. :) Real life, new fic, different and shifting obligations ... we all have them, readers and writers, alike, but I've received some lovely comments of late from readers hoping for a bit more. Thank you all for not demanding updates or calling me out. Your restraint and kindness toward this author are appreciated.

I will be honest with you in that I picked up this piece again for a couple of reasons. Firstly, because it has always been my intent to finish it. This Q is a woman excelling in a demanding field that is traditionally dominated by men. The fact that she is also struggling with a new disability, learning to live with it, and the circumstances surrounding it is also what draws me to want to finish this story. The second reason I picked it up was to try to push myself through some writer's block on another piece I am trying to finish. I don't know if I will ultimately be successful in the short-term with that, but it did help to dip back into this tale, at least mentally.

I cannot, however, promise regular updates. I don't intend for it to be another two years before the next one, though. That's a tad extreme, even for me. I hope. But it's at times shocking to me how quickly time really does fly. :)

That being said, approach this chapter with caution. It's notably shorter than some of the others which could exceed 10k words, but though shorter, it packs a bit of a whollop on the relationship between Q and James. The base components of Ch 12 are in my files, but there's a great deal that still needs to be done in order for it to be usable for another update.

I hope you enjoy. Thank you again for reading, sticking with me, and being kind in your comments. It is all very much appreciated and needed.

Be safe. Stay well. Read fanfiction.

MI6 Headquarters, London, England: May 2013 (Six months before Westminster Bridge)
From a little-used, and even lesser-known, guarded doorway that led from the bowels of the
Churchill Bunkers, a freshly-showered and newly-bruised Q stepped out into the misty rain that
had started to fall over London. It had been an unusually chilly week for mid-May, never getting
much above 8°C, and Q was glad of her hooded anorak and fingerless gloves Mrs. A had knitted for
her to guard against the cold and the damp. Linking a matching bottle green and aubergine scarf
around her neck and pulling up the lined hood of the coat, Q trotted up the Clive Steps, seeking out
Bond among the rather heavy evening foot-traffic of tourists rushing back to their hotels and
government officials making for the Westminster Tube Station.

There he was.

Q noted with a raised eyebrow and a surprising surge of a proprietary something that more than
one passerby -- female and male -- slowed to appreciate the striking figure he cut in the deepening
gloom of the rainy evening, but she couldn’t blame them much. Especially not once she noted her
own pace had slowed so she could do the same.

She couldn’t help the smile that pulled at the corners of her mouth at the sight of James Bond,
facing away from her, leather glove-clad hands clasped behind his back as he looked up at the
bronzed countenance of Baron Robert Clive’s memorial statue. He wore his dark blue woolen
topcoat and a blood-red scarf that when contrasted with his greying blonde hair and powerful
shoulders created a devastating effect on practically anyone who saw him. Though the cut of the
cloth covered what she knew to be a simply delicious-looking arse, Bond’s long legs were encased
in dark gray trousers that did little to hide the powerful muscles of his thighs. Indifferent to the
drizzle, Bond carried no brolly, and even from a distance, she could see that the short strands of his
hair had started to clump together in the damp.

A welling of happiness filled Q at the notion that of all the people James Bond could choose to
spend time with, he was spending an increasing amount of it with her. While they weren’t joined
at the hip, the situation wasn’t far from it. Between sharing accommodations, their work at Six,
and now spending downtime together outside of home, practically the only time they weren’t in the
other’s pocket was when Bond was on a mission, and even then, Q was usually in his ear.

Q’s shiver had nothing to do with the chill in the air. It was a heady feeling to be the focus of so
much of James Bond’s attention. Q found herself desperately wanting more, but yet fearing what
would happen if she got it.

She was grateful Bond had forgone mention of their first meeting all those years ago at Oxford
when she had been so awkward and gangly and spotty and … Oh, God! Even thirteen years later,
Q could hardly bear to remember how she’d struggled to pay attention to her conversation with the
Major with Bond sitting at the other end of the room all blond and brooding and overly serious.
He’d been judging her, of course, but back then everyone had done. She had done no different to
him, and her initial assessment of him lacking, but Bond’s clear care and concern for
Boothroyd’s safety had quickly swayed her opinion, and after that, she’d been done for.

Q had managed to comport herself well enough when they said goodbye at the end of that meeting,
shaking his hand professionally when what she’d really wanted to do was throw herself in his arms
and kiss him until she melted into the floor. It wouldn’t have taken much. The young Bond, not
yet jaded by his experiences in the field and what they had cost him, was polite and kind in the face
of her -- she was sure -- all too obvious adoration, and had kissed her hand like a chivalrous knight
of old and was gone.

Bond would be the first to say he was not a kind man -- an opinion Q would save for a future bout
of introspection -- but it was a kindness that he had said nothing of their meeting at Oxford, and Q appreciated that. She had taken to heart R’s warning about not keeping people out. She knew she needed to broach the subject with Bond soon, but not now. It was embarrassing enough to even think about, and she didn’t want anything to spoil the mood of their night.

Though she was exhausted and sore from weeks of intense missions, poor and infrequent sleep on her office futon, as well as what had become a rather extreme hand-to-hand combat requalification, Q was looking forward to this rare evening out. She dare not call it a date aloud -- she could barely call it such in her own head -- though it definitely had a date-like feel to it and, as such, made her unaccountably nervous. She hadn’t been on a date in over five years and this was James Bond, the man she had desired, to one degree or another, for nearly half her life.

It wasn’t a one-sided interest anymore, either. The undeniable attraction practically hummed between them, but Bond was now her very dear friend, too. It had become a defining relationship in her life. Q had learnt to depend on him. She trusted him.

But for all that.. a date. There was, in Q’s mind, a rather notable difference between eating Thai take-away in front of the fire in comfortable silence with the kittens wrestling each other over a stuffed mouse under the coffee table versus an elegant meal in a posh restaurant where she was likely to forget the difference between the fish knife and the dinner knife. It wasn’t that she was uncultured, for goodness sake, but Q had to face the fact that she simply didn’t get out all that much.

That was the reason why she had insisted on choosing where they ate tonight. If left to Bond’s devices, Q would have found herself in a private dining salon at Alain Ducasse at the Dorchester, and she was so not ready for that. Greek cuisine at The Four Lanterns in Fitzrovia was about what she could handle just now. The food was brilliant -- the moussaka beyond compare -- and the close quarters of the busy taverna would allow them the opportunity to talk, or not talk depending on their need, without feeling like every word could be overheard in the hush of the room.

If there was one thing sharing a space with James Bond for nearly seven months had taught her, it was that he was not a man who felt the need to fill the air with sound. Q couldn’t claim he was uncommunicative, taciturn, or even guarded in his speech, but he was deliberate in what he said and when. Unlike Alec who could be a veritable chatterbox, particularly when coming off mission, Bond didn’t engage in idle, purposeless chats to avoid long silences in person any more than he did with her on mission comms. If he wanted to know something, he would ask. If he wanted to expound upon a subject, he would. Q didn’t know if this tendency was a result of his years as a field agent where long stretches of enforced silence were oftentimes requisite or if it was just part of Bond’s nature. A similar stretch of years had certainly made no difference with Alec.

Simply put, Bond chose his conversations carefully and his words even more so, and on the whole, it was something that Q quite appreciated; she spent so much of her day speaking or being spoken to that she found their quiet evenings peppered by occasional, purposeful conversation -- when he was in country, that is -- extraordinarily soothing.

Forewarned is not always forearmed, however, and Q found herself completely unprepared for what came next. Bond must have sensed her approach, for he turned to face her the minute she reached the landing of the steps that served as the base of the memorial.

The look in his blue eyes nearly froze her in place.

James Bond was furious.

The smile Q had worn since spotting him fell. “What’s happened?” She almost reached out to him
but reined in her hand at the last moment. Every line of his form vibrated with barely contained tension.

Bond didn’t respond to her question. At least not right away. His jaw was set so tightly she thought it might fracture under the strain, and his eyes raked across her form as if seeing her for the first time and deciding that he in no way liked what stood before him.

“Bond? What’s happened?” she asked again, rapidly cataloguing ongoing missions, mentally evaluating agents and situations in case something had gone pear-shaped. But, she would have been called back in, prevented from leaving Six at all if that was the case.

“You lied to me.” His voice was low but colder than the wind that whipped around them.

Q was so stunned by his words her head snapped back as though he had physically struck her. She clenched her eyes shut behind her glasses and struggled to make sense of what he had said. “I what?” she demanded, opening her eyes again to look up at him, completely dumbfounded by his accusation.

“You heard me.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean that I understand it so a bit of clarification might be in order since I have never once lied to you.”

“Who are you, Q?” She shivered at the sound of his voice. She’d only ever heard Bond use that tone on missions and never directed at her.

“Wha --”

“Who are you? That’s what I asked you that first night when you brought me back after Skyfall. Do you remember?”

“Yes, and I gave you an answer.” Q shifted from heel to toe and back, unsettled, feeling physically and mentally wrong-footed by the direction of the conversation. What was going on here?

“You gave me an alias.”

“I gave you what I have, Bond,” she responded sharply, though still very much at sea. “Not everyone is born knowing who they are or with a family name and legacy that goes back centuries.” He looked away at her reply, staring into the middle distance.

His features did not soften one iota as he considered her words.

“Perhaps. Granted, aliases are to be expected in our line of work, but that wasn’t the information I was looking for that night. We’d worked around each other for years but never regularly or extensively enough until Skyfall that I had occasion to notice.”

“Notice what?”

“That there was something oddly familiar about you,” he gestured at his head as if stirring his own memories. “Something at the back of my mind telling me we had met before, but not at Six.”

Q glanced around instinctively at his mention of Six, but no one in the river of humanity flowing past was near enough or moving slowly enough to have heard the words spoken in such a soft voice; everyone around them was hurrying to reach their destinations or to just get out the infernal, frigid drizzle.
As she looked about, Q caught sight of a harried mother with two little girls who were plainly exhausted and cranky. The mum was trying to manage her bags and the brolly and still hold the girls’ hands to keep their little trio connected within the crowd. She was steadfast in her attempts to soothe her children and get them someplace warm and dry, clearly sensitive to their needs and feelings in spite of her own weariness.

Noting the juxtaposition of the dedicated mother and the livid Double-O, Q felt a surge of her own anger. What was wrong with the man? Did he honestly think she would be that shallow, that indifferent to his feelings, have so little respect for him, for his past, that she would lie to him so thoroughly? That she would lie to him at all?!

We had met before, but not at Six. As her mind replayed his words, anger warred with shame and embarrassment as Q realised that it hadn’t been kindness that had kept Bond from mentioning Oxford. He hadn’t remembered it.

At all.

Oh, God!

Bond glared down at her, and Q met his eyes unflinchingly despite her bewilderment. His eyes, that only hours ago had looked at her with respect, appreciation, and loving amusement now slashed at her, cutting through her heart deep to her soul itself, and she could practically feel the wound it had left behind.

She had precious few positive memories of growing up, and in spite of her awkwardness at the time, meeting Bond at Oxford had been one of them. To discover that she hadn’t even rated a minor footnote in the life story of Double-O Seven …

Q was completely at a loss for words. She opened her mouth, paused, and then shut it again. Nothing. There was nothing she could say that would appropriately capture the feeling of having her legs swept entirely out from under her, the ground she’d always thought of as rock-solid beneath her was suddenly a thin sheet of ice over a polar sea. Ice that was cracking, shattering beneath her as she floundered.

"What," he finally spoke, still in that low, cold, nasty tone, "has the proud, illustrious Quartermaster lost her voice? Cat got your tongue, Q? Or perhaps it’s guilt that’s silenced you now that you’re caught in your lies."

Q stiffened and anger finally flared into righteous indignation.

Oh hell, no!

Lies?! Lies killed agents in the field and hurt friends at home.

Guilt?! She had done her best to live her life honestly and honorably so that she could sleep at night knowing that she had done all she could to protect and defend the people and the country she cared about. She wasn’t perfect by any means, but --

But she had no more to feel guilty about than that woman, that mother, who was trying to do right by those little girls. Doing the best that she could to love and care for her children, and Bond had had that. He had known his mother’s love. Known his father’s pride. Even if only for a little while. But what had she had?

What mother had Q known?
What care? What love?

What connection?

Nothing! Not a sodding thing!

A string of aliases! Practically a series of bloody numbers, that's what she'd had, all she'd ever had -- Eustace had tried his best, but he had never been the paternal type -- until she'd made that connection with Boothroyd, and then she had mattered.

How dare he!? How dare Bond accuse her?! He knew nothing. Didn't even give enough of a shite to find out.

As she met his eyes, she saw that damnable, contemptuous eyebrow of his lifting ever so slightly, and the temper that she tried to contain -- that demon housed within her that very few ever saw -- was unleashed.

"Oxford!" she snarled in a low, harsh voice meant only for his ears. "So you’ve bloody forgotten Oxford? Did I make that piss-poor of an impression on you? The spotty, technology geek who didn’t make her first friend at Uni until three years in. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. I’m supposed to -- what? -- feel grateful you even bothered to give me a second glance now, yeah?" Q heaved in a breath, morbidly satisfied to see slow understanding followed by dawning horror cross Bond’s face. A horror she misinterpreted.

“Oh! There it is.” She pointed at him, her lips twisting into a pained smile. “Now he remembers. You can spare me the details on just how appalled you are to realise that it’s been that graceless, gawky, unpolished teenager you’ve been panting after these months. ”

Q knew she shouldn’t, but God he’d hurt her, and suddenly she was done, done holding back the tide of words that had been held dammed up behind her teeth since his horrific accusation. His cold anger had ignited her incandescent fury. Fire begat from ice, and oh how she burned with it.

And while he might have forgotten her, she had certainly not forgotten him, but what had once been a precious, sepia-toned memory had turned sour and humiliating in the harsh light of his indictments.

She was so angry, she shook with the force of it. She wanted nothing more than to hurt as she’d been hurt. Rend and tear as she’d been rent and torn. A small part of her reason tried to shout a warning not to venture down this path -- caution her about the regret she would feel later -- but her rage snuffed it out before it could fully draw breath.

"Started early, you and your mates. All swanning about in your Navy uniforms. Bet you pulled any bird you even looked at twice! Didn't have a care in the bloody world! Then on to Six. Same old thing, wasn't it? Junior agents! Always so bloody smug. So cocksure with fresh faces to impress! A new stage, but the same fucking pantomime! God, it never gets old, does it?"

"Wait, it wasn't… that's not what…” James started, knowing that some of what she was saying was at least partly true of him in his younger years, and perhaps that was why the thought of it hurt. He didn't want Q thinking that all he'd ever been interested in with her was a quick tumble.

She didn't pause, kept going as if he'd not said a word.

"I bet they were a tuppence a pair back then, the Uni girls? Who needs to chase skirts when the women are chasing after you? What difference would one awkward, spotty boffin make except to have a laugh at?"
If she had stopped to think too long about it, or if she hadn’t been so furious, she would have been ill at the notion that she had built the foundation of her romantic idealism on that day. On the man her 15 year-old self had thought James Bond was. God, what a fool she’d been to think she’d be different to him than any of the others.

Bond opened his mouth, "I never -"

Q ploughed on, straight over him. "I was just a girl. I didn't matter, did I? Do tell, Bond! Did you forget all about me in the first five minutes, or did you manage to make it all the way back to London first? Driving around in your flashy car, taking the Major over to see 'that slip of a girl', wasn't that what you called me?"

"You… that… I…" James stuttered, lifting a hand in an unconscious attempt to calm Q down. She was having none of it, though.

"Up until this moment I thought you a reasonably intelligent man, but tell me, Bond, who the fuck did you think your new Quartermaster was, hmm? You knew I was raised by the SIS! I told you that! How many 15 year-old geniuses did you imagine Six had? Thought M just squirreled away a pack of us across the arse ends of the UK in case she might have need of more than one someday, did you?! You know, I don’t know what disgusts me more. The fact that you thought so poorly of me or the fact that you didn’t think twice before you thought so poorly of me!"

James took a step back, his mouth working, but no sound emerging from his lips. He'd never felt so off-balance in his life, not even the first time he'd stood on deck during a storm whilst in the Royal Navy could compare.

"Q, I... " he tried again, still not quite able to believe that this fiery creature, this petite dragon, was Q. He'd seen her angry before, but never like this. His ears stung and his chest burned as the poisonous hiss of her words washed over him.

"When you're ready to discuss this like an adult, or God forbid, ask questions about the things you know fuck-all about and actually listen rather than just assume, you can find me in the Tunnels! Until then, stay away from me and stay the fuck out of my home!"

It was then that the rattlesnake stopped her low hissing, stopped her warning rattle, and struck to deliver the fatal dose of venom.

"I've never lied to you, James Bond. Not one fucking time! I'm not Vesper Lynd!"

James’ breath caught in his throat, and the blood thundered in his ears, blocking out all sound while his vision greyed and an array of sparks seemed to float before his eyes.

He couldn't breathe. Couldn't get air into his lungs. His chest felt like it was constricted by bands of iron, trapped in that steel cage that had become Vesper’s tomb.

Seconds that seemed like hours ticked past as he teetered on the brink of some bottomless chasm, knowing in his bones that if he fell now, if he lost his footing and tumbled into that fissure, he'd never make it out. The black abyss would swallow him, swallow him whole and never release him, no matter how he could try, he'd never manage to claw his way back to the surface, to daylight, to her … to Q.

"Oi, mate, you need a hand?"

He heard the gruff but kindly male voice not a metre in front of him and suddenly the world snapped back into focus, and he could breathe again. God, had London air ever tasted so sweet?
"I… sorry, I'm fine," James responded to the scruffy older fellow peering at him in concern.

"Them flashbangs'll get you every time," the man said, nodding wisely as he smiled sympathetically, and Bond noticed he was missing two teeth, and then remembered himself.

"Flashbacks? Yes. Terrible. Unexpected. It's the crowd, sometimes…" James rattled off the words as he started to look around frantically. Where the devil had Q disappeared to?

“Ummm, thank you,” James said vaguely with a quick glance at the old man, gripping his arm appreciatively before he took the steps two at a time down to the kerb. It was then that he caught sight of Q’s bright anorak across the road in St. James’ Park as she stalked past Duck Island Cottage. James winced, the pace she was setting looked brutal. In a few metres he’d lost sight of her round the bend in the path that went beyond the Guard Division Memorial and onward toward The Mall, and James was considering which line he’d be crossing -- bravery or stupidity -- if he decided to follow her now when the decision was wrestled from him.

A single pop, followed seconds later by a rapid succession of five more echoed through the park. Tourists and Londoners alike ran, many of them screaming in fear, from the direction in which Q had gone, but she was not among them.

Q!

James took off across Horse Guards Road at a dead run, rolling off the bonnet of a black cab that had only just managed to brake in time to avoid hitting him. James never even heard the curses the cabbie shouted at him as he was busily searching his coat pocket for the earwig he had not yet had the time to return to Q-Branch. He pushed it into his ear as he crossed into the park and shoved down his worry about Q just far enough to allow the Double-O within him to engage.

“Bond?” It was R’s puzzled voice in his ear.

“Multiple shots fired in St. James’ Park on the path toward St. James’ Cafe,” Double-O Seven said when he heard the link connect. “Q is at risk.”

“Say again?” R’s puzzlement had turned to outright disbelief.

“*The Quartermaster is at risk!*” Bond growled. Two fathers rushing their toddlers out of the park zigged when Bond expected them to zag: he planted one foot on the seat of a park bench and leapt over the back of it to avoid taking out the little boys. The gunshot graze on his thigh burned at the effort, but Bond didn’t slow his pace.

“Acknowledged, Double-O Seven,” R said, and his detached, professional tone slid smoothly into Bond’s ear as he took control of both his surprise and the situation. “Mobilizing MI6 security with Medical on standby. I’m notifying Metropolitan Police, but HCav will get there first.”

Sure enough, Bond caught sight of several of The Life Guards of the Household Cavalry in their red tunics sprinting across to the park to protect those running from what could either be a rare London shooting or a larger terrorist attack. In light of the subway bombings back in 2005, first responders were first responders be they police, fire brigade, paramedics, military, or counter-intelligence. London would be safeguarded as it had always been. At the moment, however, Bond would readily admit that his concerns were a bit more of a personal nature.

Three more shots sounded through the steadily falling rain, and Bond found himself losing precious seconds as he dodged dozens more who were running in search of safety. Still no Q. He had finally reached the bend in the path where he had lost sight of her when R’s voice sounded
again in his ear. “Are you armed, Double-O Seven?”

“Yes.” The earwig wasn’t the only thing Bond hadn’t had the chance to check-in.

“Message from M. Your License to Kill has been extended domestically. Do what you must to protect the Quartermaster.”

“Understood.” Double-O Seven pulled his Walther from the shoulder-holster beneath his suit jacket, keeping it low against his thigh, but as he drew the weapon, he caught sight of a trio of bodies on the ground outside the St. James’ Cafe, surrounded by people administering aid.

One of those on the pavement wore a purple anorak.

No.

No.

No!

No!

NO!

James didn’t stop running, and his voice was cool, detached, for all that the words he spoke nearly made him ill.

“The Quartermaster is down. I repeat. The Quartermaster is down.”

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