Summary

In which Bond is a retired naval commander with too much house, Q is a mechanical engineer with too many sisters, and they have lengthy conversations about decorum, bonnet-ribbons and philosophy in Regency England.

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“I just thought you might go pay a visit,” his mother suggested.

“Me?” Q asked, aghast. “Pay a visit?”

“He must be starved for proper gentleman company, now that he’s settled in so far from London--”

“I am far from proper gentleman company.”

“--and perhaps if you befriended him he could introduce you to some nice heiresses.”

“Heiresses?” Q repeated, baffled and horrified. “What in the world would I do with heiresses?”

Notes
Hat tip to Desiderii, hedwig-dordt, and ophelia-rising for editing and beta work. 

Podfic by RsCreighton

See the end of the work for more notes.
A series of chimes fluted prettily next to Q’s ear, not loud enough to be heard outside the room, and certainly not down the hall, where the pressure plate that activated them was tucked beneath a loose board to serve as warning that someone was on their way to bother him in his workshop. Someone was almost certainly his mother or one of his sisters, and the chime was accompanied by neither Georgiana’s trumpeting “Q! Q!” nor by Martha’s purposeful stomping, which meant it was either light-footed Alice or his mother.

Q very intentionally did not look up as his mother came through the door, particularly not when she began fussing the instant she crossed the threshold.

“Q,” she scolded, pushing a stack of papers aside so that she could set down the tray, “you really must let me tidy up in here, it isn’t fit for human habitation.”

“I don’t habitate in here,” Q argued, keeping his attention on his delicate soldering work. “I work. I adore you, mama, but last time you tidied up in here you tidied your way through two of my experiments and the repair job I had for Mr. Monkford.”

“I brought you tea,” his mother announced, stubbornly moving more papers so that she could unload the tray. Q tried not to twitch as she did so, and quickly set down his work in order to preserve several of his experiments from the risk of spilled tea.

“Thank you,” Q said, taking a scone and starting to eat it as he tidied the papers she’d just rearranged. He hoped that was all she wanted, and that if he did not engage in further conversation, she would go away. This plan had never worked with his mother or sisters, but Q remained hopeful.

It did not work. His mother continued talking as she poured tea for him and fussed, the two of them continuing to rearrange stacks of paper back and forth to their dual purposes. “Someone moved in to Ainsburgh House down the way,” she informed him with great gravity.

Q tried to imagine what possible significance this could have to him. “Someone you expect to require the services of an engineer?” he asked, to indicate that unless that person had some interest in engineering, invention, or mechanical repair, Q didn’t care about him.

“His name is Commander James Bond,” she continued, holding out a cup of tea and helping herself to a second one. Evidently she intended to make herself at home in his laboratory until she had gotten to her point.

“An army man?” Q asked, even more puzzled as to why his mother cared.

“Navy,” she corrected, very pleased with herself for the distinction.

Q’s eyes rolled toward heaven. His mother: couldn’t differentiate between engine valves to save her life, but she knew every detail of every bonnet-ribbon scandal from here to London. He allowed himself the assumption that Commander James Bond’s naval credentials were of some deep significance in the world of millinery and matchmaking, and promptly dismissed the information.

“What about him, mama?” he asked, draining his cup of tea and trying to remember if he’d eaten lunch. Or breakfast.
“He is rich,” Mrs. Boothroyd said with great enthusiasm.

Q blinked. Tried to comprehend why she thought this was of particular significance to him. “You think he might be the sort to be an inventor’s patron,” he guessed, genuinely hopeful.

His mother looked as confused as Q felt. He watched her compose her features into what he considered her ‘condescendingly supportive’ expression. “Well, I don’t know about that, darling. I suppose I don’t see why not. I just thought you might go pay a visit on him.”

“Me?” Q asked, aghast. “Pay a visit?”

Under normal circumstances, Q’s womenfolk went well out of their way to ensure that Q paid no visits that weren’t directly related to his engineering and mechanical repair work. They made no secret of their fears that he would open his mouth and say something untoward, and everyone was best served if Q stayed behind in his workshop.

“He must be starved for proper gentleman company, now that he’s settled in so far from London—”

“I am far from proper gentleman company.”

“--and perhaps if you befriended him he could introduce you to some nice heiresses.”

“Heiresses?” Q repeated, baffled and horrified. “What in the world would I do with heiresses?”

“Really, Q,” she scolded. “It’s about time you thought about marrying. And if not you, at least take Georgiana and see if she can’t win his heart. She has the best chance of catching a noble husband, after all, pretty as she is.”

Q stared at her. “I will not take my sister to parade before some new neighbor as though she were a show horse for the buying.”

“Yes,” his mother insisted. “You will.”

“You don’t know anything about him,” Q argued.

“He is rich. And unmarried. Now, finish your tea, then tidy yourself up so as not to disgrace your good breeding. I’ll prepare a welcome gift for the two of you to take along.”

“Mama,” Q groaned. “No.”

She gave him her most stern look. “Now, Q.”

Q went.

~

They took the horseless carriage, much to Mrs. Boothroyd’s horror.

“What are you doing?” she fussed, carrying out a basket only to find Q helping Georgiana into the carriage.

Q looked confused. Georgiana, unperturbed, reached out for the basket and settled it on the seat next to her. “We are going visiting, mama.”

“Not in that contraption!”
Q tried very hard not to take offense at this insult to his craftsmanship.

“We can’t take the carriage, mama,” Georgiana explained with cheerful enthusiasm, “we still haven’t
got a horse, and the Winstons are still in Brighton so we can’t borrow theirs.”

“Q,” Mrs. Boothroyd said, appealing to his maturity as the older sibling. “We are trying to make a
good impression.”

“Mama, if Commander Bond is offended by inventive workmanship, then I cannot find it in me to
desire his acquaintance. It is my unnatural contraption or nothing.”

Mrs. Boothroyd pursed her lips, making mental computations about the return of the Winston
carriage horse and the preferable window of opportunity for displaying one’s prettiest daughter to
new and marriageable neighbors. Her children waited.

“Fine,” she huffed. “At the very least, no other family in the district has the singularity of being able
to arrive in a mechanical conveyance.”

“There you are, mama.” Georgiana beamed. “It shall make us interesting.”

Q found himself hoping very fervently that his mother was right and that their new neighbor would
be thoroughly horrified by his invention, and that would be the end of this ill-advised excursion.
Georgiana, as usual, seemed to regard the entire thing as a lark.

Their mother gave them a disapproving frown. “You will stay inside the vehicle like a respectable
young lady, Georgiana.”

Georgiana widened her pretty blue eyes. “Of course, mama.”

Alice, not quite of marriageable age and staying obediently by her mother’s side, fought a smile.

“Go on then,” Mrs. Boothroyd scolded. “Mind your manners.”

Q activated the engine, which purred to life as reliably as any of his inventions, and set off down the
lane. For her part, Georgiana sat primly in the covered part of the carriage until the moment they
were out of sight around the bend, and then wiggled up through the front window and into the
driver’s seat next to her brother. He smiled at her. “What do you think of this?”

“Wouldn’t mind marrying the owner of Ainsburgh House, if he’s handsome. You know perfectly
well that I am meant to be a proper lady, and not the sort of country daughter who polishes silver.”
Georgiana primly inspected her slender white hands, which were her frequent excuse for trying to
get out of chores. It worked about as well as Q’s ignore-and-discourage-conversation technique.

“You don’t have to marry to be a proper lady,” Q told her. “Soon enough I’ll invent something that
will make us rich, G. You don’t have to marry at all if you don’t wish.”

“Oh, I know that.” Georgiana sighed and giggled, smiling at her brother with fond adoration. “You
already have, Q. If only you’d let me go to London with you and find investors to start production on
these mad horseless carriages of yours.”

Q grimaced, as he always did at the talk of investors and production.

Georgiana disregarded his expression and carried on. “And until you do I shall have to go on
polishing silver, so I may as well consider the courtship offers of the wealthy landowners who ask
for my hand.”
Her logic made Q’s head ache. “But I don’t want you to marry a wealthy landowner.”

“Of course you don’t, my darling brother. You would be best pleased if the lot of us stayed old maids forever to linger around polishing your silver and bringing you tea.”

“Yes,” Q said, sighing. “What’s wrong with that? We get by just fine as we are.”

Georgiana patted his knee patronizingly. “Yes, Q. But I want to get married.”

~

The drive to Ainsburgh House was long and elegant, although poorly maintained. Georgiana mused aloud that he could be forgiven for not yet repairing the driveway and the grounds, having only just moved in, but thought it peculiar that there were no gardeners at work to return the grand estate to the opulence it had enjoyed under its last occupant.

“Surely he does not lack for money,” she said. “Mama heard from Mrs. Albright that half his fortunes were inherited, and the other half were awarded to him for great deeds in the war. He’s a national hero.”

“A war hero and blindingly wealthy?” Q groaned. “The poor man. He’s going to have every marriageable woman in the shire beating down his door.”

“Yes,” Georgiana agreed brightly. “But I’m the prettiest.”

Q wasn’t certain how to respond to that and didn’t try.

The front drive was bare of carriages, or servants, or any life at all. Q helped Georgiana down from the carriage, aware that a great house of this calibre should have an entire retinue flooding out to meet guests, or at least a single butler. But the doors stayed silent and shut, so the siblings climbed the steps and rang the bell.

“Isn’t anyone home?” Georgiana whispered after they’d been waiting for a minute. Even Q’s sense of decorum prickled at this odd reception.

At last, the door opened to admit a round-faced butler who greeted them with a sheepish smile. “Good afternoon. Forgive the delay, we haven’t a doorman. Welcome to Ainsburgh. I am Tanner, Mr. Bond’s valet.”

“Forgive our intrusion,” Q said with a polite inclination of his head. “I am Mr. Quintus Boothroyd, called Q, and this is my sister, Miss Georgiana Boothroyd. We are here to be neighborly.”

“We brought cakes,” Georgiana added, holding up the basket they’d brought with a cheerful smile.

“That is very kind of you,” Tanner said, taking the basket while remaining between them and the door, as if to defend it from neighborly siege. “Mr. Bond is indisposed at the moment, but I shall see to it that he gets them. Would you care to leave your card?”

“Yes!” Georgiana bounced at the opportunity, then remembered her decorum. Daintily selecting a card from her little handbag, she held it out with a smile. Q fought to keep from raising an eyebrow at the hand-calligraphed pink card.

Tanner did some brief juggling with the basket in order to take the card, smiled politely at them both, and then looked past them and startled. “Where is your horse?”
Both siblings followed his gaze to the carriage.

“We haven’t got one,” Georgiana said, proud.

Tanner stared at her.

“It drives itself,” she elaborated.

The valet flustered, not certain to be confused or offended. “You are having me on.”

“We are not,” Georgiana said, tiny and indignant. “Would you like a demonstration?”

Tanner peered at their peculiar conveyance. It was lifted higher off the ground than ordinary carriages, due to the necessity of fitting the engine underneath, and Q had reinforced it heavily to protect the carriage. “Does it really?” Tanner asked.

“Truly,” Georgiana affirmed. “Q, darling, will you turn it around the drive for Mr. Tanner, please?”

Normally Q would make an effort to resist Georgiana’s coaxing, but he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to show off his inventions. “Gladly,” he agreed, with a polite bow.

Georgiana stayed at the top of the stairs with Tanner, supervising like a proud little queen, as Q descended and started the engine. He steered the carriage in a simple circle around the drive so that the valet could see that it truly did operate under its own power.

Tanner stared as Q made his way back up the steps. “I can hardly believe my eyes. There must be some sort of trick.”

“There isn’t,” Georgiana assured him. “There is a very small engine underneath. Like a train sort of engine, only smaller.”

“And not like a train sort of engine at all,” Q clarified as he got to the top step, although he knew Georgiana didn’t care.

“Where did you get such a thing?”

“My brother made it,” Georgiana said.

The door behind them opened. All three turned in surprise.

“Mr. Bond!” Tanner said, startled.

The man who stepped out of the house was middle aged and of average height with very short blond hair and a flawlessly tailored suit. His face was too gruff to ever have been traditionally handsome, and his lack of a smile gave him a distinct resemblance to a bulldog. He glanced over the siblings in turn, and then looked past them to the vehicle. “Good afternoon,” he said, after a moment.

“Good afternoon!” Georgiana jumped in to fill the silence, as was her gift. “I am Miss Georgiana Boothroyd, and this is my brother, Mr. Quintus Boothroyd. We call him Q.”

Mr. Bond looked as though he might be considering an amused smile. “It is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

“We were just discussing my brother’s invention,” Georgiana exposted.

“May I take a closer look?” Mr. Bond asked, his eyes returning to Q. There was something terrifying
and captivating about those eyes that made Q feel he had somehow underestimated the man. He seemed instantly more predatory, and Q’s lips parted in surprise, forgetting the question he’d just been asked.

“It would be our pleasure,” Georgiana said, pretending she wasn’t currently being ignored.

Mr. Bond’s attention returned to her, and this time his smile was genuine. He smiled more with his eyes than with his lips, but the sparkle it gave them made him seem friendly and warm. Q edited his mental assessment to ‘friendly bulldog’, not certain how to quantify the certainty he felt that the man was dangerous.

“Tanner,” Mr. Bond ordered, without taking his eyes of Georgiana, who was beaming at the attention. “See about making us some tea, won’t you?”

Tanner disappeared back into the house with the basket, and the three of them descended the steps.

“I’ve never seen such an invention,” Mr. Bond said. “A horseless carriage. How does it work?”

“The engine is of my own design. I improved upon the designs of Monsieur de Rivaz to make a more efficient and streamlined engine that could fit beneath an ordinary carriage. The reinforcements are to protect the engine from shocks.” Q led him to the carriage, opening panels to show the functioning of the engine and to explain how it operated.

“You’re an inventor?” Mr. Bond asked, evidently fascinated.

“Yes. I make a living doing engineering and mechanical repair.”

“Show him how it works, Q,” Georgiana prompted.

Q smiled a little. “May we take you for a ride, Mr. Bond?”

“Please,” Mr. Bond said, eyes twinkling with mirth.

Q helped his sister into the carriage, where she settled down politely, and then turned to Mr. Bond. “Will you ride inside or up front, Mr. Bond?”

“Up front, thank you. After you.”

Swinging up into the driver’s seat, Q offered a hand down and was ignored. Mr. Bond sprung gracefully up to sit by his side. Any injuries he had suffered in his time as a war hero had obviously not compromised his physical agility.

Explaining the controls as he started the engine, Q drove them down the length of the drive, and then back up to the house, discussing mechanics with Mr. Bond the entire time. Their host had a lively layman’s interest in mechanics, although very little practical knowledge, but he had a solid knowledge of science and engineering which Q enjoyed. His education had been thorough.

As he dismounted from the carriage, Mr. Bond held up a hand to assist Q in getting down. Surprised, Q took the hand to be polite, and found the grip firm and steady. His feet touched the ground, and he looked up into a pair of sky-blue eyes that smiled at him. Flustered, Q smiled back, unsure how to react. The moment passed quickly, and Mr. Bond graciously helped Georgiana from the carriage, attention on the young lady as any gentleman’s should be.

Their mother would be thrilled, Q thought. The pair of them had completely charmed the initially reclusive Commander James Bond. Q wasn’t at all certain how he felt about the accomplishment, or
the certainty that they would be invited in for tea and soon invited back again.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note on the Boothroyds: In my mind, Desmond Llewelyn will always be Geoffrey Boothroyd, even though Ben Whishaw shall always be my Q. I therefore prefer to think of Geoffrey Boothroyd canonically as our Q’s predecessor. In this story, I have made Major Geoffrey Boothroyd Q’s father.

Inspiration for Ainsburgh: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimsthorpe_Castle

The Boothroyd Residence (although one should note that given the Boothroyd’s finances, the gardens are kept only for vegetables and certainly not in the neatly-manicured condition in the pictures): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groombridge_Place
“Tell us everything,” Alice begged when they returned to the house. “You’ve been gone for hours.”

“We stayed to tea,” Q explained. “Have Georgiana tell you everything.”

“You were there too,” Alice said, having none of Q’s antisocial protestations. “Was he handsome?”

“Not really,” Q said. “Looks a bit like a yellow bulldog.”

“He does not!” Georgiana countered, indignant, as she shoved a stack of plates into Q’s arms. “Set the table. He looks,” she continued to Alice, “like a great predatory lion. You’ve never seen a man look so trim in a suit—”

“It was just a well-tailored suit,” Q argued.

“It was an exquisitely tailored suit,” Georgiana corrected. “Oh, to have a gown made with the expense and care of that suit! I would be the envy of the district.” She sighed happily, which prompted Mrs. Boothroyd to give her silver to set out. Georgiana promptly delegated the task to Alice, and their mother immediately after set Georgiana to serving the soup. “An exquisitely tailored suit,” she continued, “over a pristinely maintained soldier’s body—”

“Georgiana!” Mrs. Boothroyd scolded, scandalized. Martha started laughing, and Alice looked between the other women with a deep blush, uncertain how to react. Q finished setting the plates and sat himself down, mind and heart inexplicably uneasy. “So he had you in to tea? Was he polite? Educated?”

“He was odd,” Georgiana said. “Charming and handsome, no doubt, but he only had the one servant that we saw. His poor valet, Mr. Tanner. He seemed to be used to running a proper house, and quite flustered by their lack of staff. I can only think that he simply hasn’t had the leisure to hire them, but it does seem very odd. Mr. Tanner nearly tried to run us off at first, they must have had ever so many marriageable young ladies being neighborly, but then he saw the carriage.”

Mrs. Boothroyd shuddered nervously at mention of the carriage. “What did the gentlemen think of it?”

“Oh, they were fascinated. Mr. Bond had us give him a turn about the lane in it, with Q explaining all the technical whatnots. Utterly charmed, they were. They saw the carriage and Mr. Bond came right out of the house asking questions and invited us straight in to tea.”

Q kept his attention on his soup, letting Georgiana recount their story with far greater detail and skill than he could have.

“Did you find out what brought him to the country?” Mrs. Boothroyd asked.

“He’s retired,” Georgiana explained. “Came to the country for some peace and quiet.”

“And a wife?”

“Well, he hasn’t got one, has he?”

“It is possible he doesn’t want one,” Q interjected.

All four women turned to stare at him in disbelief. Q colored and returned his attention to the soup.
“He doesn’t have a wife,” Georgiana continued primly. “Only a valet. He must be lonely.”

“Did he invite you back?”

“He did. Luncheon tomorrow.”

Q fidgeted in his chair, not certain what made him so unhappy about this turn of events. He hated the thought of his little sister marrying and leaving home, as polite and well-off as Mr. Bond seemed to be. He disliked that his mother had all but packed Georgiana’s bags to marry her off to a man she hadn’t even met, and that the only necessary trait in a suitor was his wealth. And he disliked the predatory nature of those ice-blue eyes, because he didn’t know why they were predatory or what it meant.

“You must go,” Mrs. Boothroyd was saying. “Georgiana, you’ll wear your pink gown, I think, and —“

“There’s something wrong with him,” Q said.

Alice dropped her spoon into her soup. The four of them stared at him again. Q scowled. “Why doesn’t he have any servants?”

“He only moved in a few days ago,” Georgiana said, using a tone that clearly indicated she thought Q was being unreasonable. “And he almost certainly had at least one or two other servants we never saw. You could never live in such a house without them. I’m sure he’ll obtain more in the next week.”

“He’s very young to retire from the navy,” Q pointed out, feeling argumentative. “What happened?”

“Well, you certainly mustn’t ask. It may have been something traumatic.”

“I don’t think he’s trustworthy.”


“Nor do you, and yet the two of you keep talking of marriage.”

“Q,” Mrs. Boothroyd said, stern. “Your sisters need to be thinking of their marriages above all else right now. If Georgiana has caught the eye of such a respectable and wealthy man as Mr. Bond, you should be glad for her. I know you are sorry to lose your sisters, as am I, but we must prepare ourselves for these things. All I want is for my children to make good matches.” Her eyes glittered with a hint of impending tears, and Q knew he couldn’t argue further while she was at risk for launching into a speech on all the hard work she did raising them only for them to marry off and leave her all alone in her own age and would they be giving her grandchildren and…

She sighed and shook it off, returning her attention to her middle daughter. “Georgiana, you must be certain to guide the conversation toward any wealthy young women of Mr. Bond’s acquaintance who might be suitable matches for our Q. It would no doubt do wonders for his disposition if your dear brother were to be enamored of a young lady for once.”

“I have sisters who are maddening enough,” Q groused. “I cannot bear any more young ladies in my life.”

“Best to hurry,” Mrs. Boothroyd added to Georgiana in a stage whisper.

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“What are you wearing?” Georgiana demanded.

Q looked down at himself, and then up at her. “Clothing,” he answered, not certain if this was a trick question.

“That won’t do. Wear your gray jacket.” Grasping him by the shoulders, she turned him about and shoved him back into his room, helping herself to his closet. “And these slacks. Hurry up. We’ll be late.”

“We wouldn’t be late if you weren’t making me change,” Q pointed out, waiting until she turned her back before putting on the indicated outfit. “I was ready an hour ago.”

“And then you got oil stains on your trousers,” Georgiana complained. “You know that I have to do the laundry, don’t you? You should have a care for my poor delicate hands.”

“My oil stains feed us,” Q countered, stepping up to her side. “Better?”

“Better.” Georgiana primly undid his cravat, retying it to her satisfaction. “You look respectable now.”

“That seems deceptive.”

“It is deceptive,” Georgiana agreed. “Courtship is all about deception.”

“But I’m not courting anyone. Are you trying to deceive Mr. Bond to think that you have respectable family members?”

“That’s precisely it, yes.”

“Seems a difficult illusion, given that he has already made my acquaintance.”

“He was charmed by you!” Georgiana said, moving on to adjusting Q’s collar and fussing with his sleeves. “How he was looking at you when you talked about your engine design. I rather think he was more impressed with you than with me.”

“I find that very unlikely,” Q said, obediently letting her fuss. “May we go now?”

“Yes. Come. Let’s go charm our way into wealth, shall we?”

Grimacing, Q let himself be dragged down the hall and out to the carriage. “I still don’t at all approve of this mercenary and deceptive method of courtship.”

“You don’t approve of anything that doesn’t have gears.”

“Gears are honest,” Q said. “People are mercenary and deceptive.”

“Don’t refer to your own sister as mercenary and deceptive. I shall tell mama.”

Q started the engine and waited until they were halfway down the lane and Georgiana had wiggled up onto the driver’s seat next to him. “Would you want to marry him if he weren’t fabulously wealthy?”

“That is an absurd hypothetical, Q. He is fabulously wealthy.”

“And do you want to marry him?”
“I don’t see why I shouldn’t, if he were to make the offer. He is handsome—“

“He isn’t.”

“Charming.”

“Certainly not.”

“Well-dressed.”

“That is not a personality trait of consequence.”

“Patient and kind to my extremely tiresome older brother.”

“Very well,” Q agreed. “That’s one marriageable trait he possesses.”

“I counted six.”

“Your mathematics have always been deplorable.”

This time, as they turned up the drive, Mr. Tanner was waiting at the top of the steps for them, next to an older woman with an imperious expression.

“Who do you suppose that is?” Georgiana whispered.

“The requisite matron who will dismiss your marriage qualifications as a country bumpkin.”

“Q! That was cruel.” Georgiana swatted his arm and settled into a sulk.

Unappreciated for his humor, Q pulled the carriage up in front of the house and stopped the engine. Mr. Tanner came down to help Georgiana from the carriage, but the woman stayed where she was.

“Welcome back to Ainsburgh,” Mr. Tanner greeted them, in a much better mood now that he was openly permitted to welcome them as guests. “I trust you are both well?”

“Yes, Mr. Tanner. Thank you.”

Q let Georgiana handle the pleasantries, and turned his attention instead to the woman at the top of the stairs. She was watching him in return, with a no-nonsense expression that suggested she was sizing the two of them up and most likely finding them unworthy.

Glancing at his sister and finding her fully engaged discussing the weather with Mr. Tanner, Q strode casually forward and began climbing the steps. He knew that Georgiana had noticed several seconds later, when her lively conversation suddenly trailed off. Walking up to the strange woman, Q inclined his head politely in greeting. “Good day.”

“Good day,” she replied, crisply.

“I am Mr. Quintus Boothroyd, and this is my sister, Miss Georgiana Boothroyd.”

“Mrs. Olivia Mansfield,” she replied, every syllable deftly pronounced. “Welcome to Ainsburgh.”

“Thank you,” Q said, politely, whereupon the two of them fell silent and took each other’s measure, being neither of them of a conversational nature.
Q could feel Georgiana blanch from the bottom of the stairs, and heard her decorously guiding Tanner and her conversation with him up toward where this horrifying display of social ineptitude was taking place. “Will Mr. Bond be joining us shortly?” she asked, brightness a little bit forced. She seized hold of Q’s arm once she reached his side perhaps a little more fiercely than was necessary. “Good afternoon,” she said to Mrs. Mansfield.

The door opened, revealing Mr. Bond, to everyone’s great relief. “Mr. Boothroyd. Miss Boothroyd. Please. Do come in.”

They were shown in to luncheon, passing another smartly-dressed female servant holding a stack of linens and looking as though she meant business about them. She paused to curtsey, and then continued right along her way with the clear knowledge that the business she was about was more important than extended politeness. Q watched her go, impressed by her demeanor.

It was a comfort to see that Mr. Bond did have other servants, and wasn’t entirely eccentric, and Q found himself completely charmed by the efficient and intelligent way they conducted themselves. He guessed that Mrs. Mansfield was a housekeeper of some sort, given that she hadn’t introduced herself with any sort of pedigree which might declare her rightful ability to pass judgement on potential fiancees. Q found himself fond of her on this account, as Q himself held very little stock in this marriage-and-courtship nonsense.

And yet it was Mr. Tanner and Mrs. Mansfield who served them, and the fare was very simple. It indicated that Mr. Bond might have only three servants, which was still quite questionable for a man of his wealth in such a house as this one.

“Why so few servants, Mr. Bond?” Q asked, in a moment where Georgiana had paused for breath between topics of lively social fashion. His sister promptly firmed her mouth and turned purple, giving him her clearest ‘shut up, shut up’ expression. Q ignored her. “It is such a large house.”

Something sharpened in Mr. Bond’s gaze as he looked over at Q. He seemed intrigued by Q’s disregard for polite conversation. “I confess I wasn’t certain I was going to stay.”

“And are you now certain?” Q asked.

Mr. Bond smiled again, entirely predatory. Q felt his stomach squirm uneasily, confused about how to interpret that expression and Mr. Bond’s intent. “Not certain, no, but I do find my neighbors to be excellent company.”

Q forced a polite smile. “Well, I do hope you shall stay, and I believe that Georgiana hopes the same. You are an improvement upon the former tenant of Ainsburgh, old Mr. Botton, who seemed perpetually disappointed that society had advanced out of the feudal era.”

Mr. Bond’s lips twitched with amusement. “I shall try to be an improvement upon old Mr. Botton.”

“Do,” Q advised.

“Do you intend to entertain?” Georgiana asked, trying to regain control of the conversation.

“Not if I have anything at all to say about the matter,” Mr. Bond said. “You will have to forgive my anti-social tendencies, but I have little patience for society occurrences. I hoped that by limiting the size of my staff and hosting no parties, I would attract little notice.”

“You purchased Ainsburgh,” Q said, disbelieving, “hoping to attract little notice.”

“I was led to believe that it was a provincial estate of very little significance and no local society to
speak of,” Mr. Bond said.

Q saw Georgiana turn pale, because she’d complained as much on a frequent basis.

“Also that it was smaller,” Mr. Bond added, with a little bit of a smirk.

“I think you should fire your realtor,” Q advised.

Mr. Bond smiled, not taking his eyes off of Q.

“Well, if you do happen to change your mind about entertaining, I do hope you shall enlist my help,” Georgiana offered, returning the conversation to livelier topics. “It has been my lifelong ambition to host a noteworthy social event.”

“Why haven’t you?” Mr. Bond asked.

Georgiana flustered. “I have hosted social events, but social events in general are not considered noteworthy unless they either feature something exotic or are of very grand size. I have nothing more exotic than a very fine embroidered China silk shawl, and mama has been very clear that I am not to host more than fourteen guests in our house at one time.”

Q tensed, expecting she would receive condescension in reply, but Mr. Bond only looked around the dining room thoughtfully. “How many guests do you suppose could be hosted in Ainsburgh?”

Georgiana’s face lit with the pleasant fantasy. “Oh, certainly a thousand, if you made use of the gardens.”

Mr. Bond lifted his brows. It was hard to say whether his expression was amused or horrified. “If I change my mind about entertaining, I shall indeed know who to contact.”

Undeterred, Georgiana went off into an accounting of all the noteworthy parties in the region in the past year, none of which had been hosted at a place anywhere near the size of Ainsburgh. She ended the luncheon by trying to coax Mr. Bond into a picnic and a drive on the next day.

“Georgiana,” Q scolded, “I cannot chaperone you every day, I have work to do. Not tomorrow. Saturday.”

“Your mechanical repair work?” Mr. Bond asked.

Puzzled that a wealthy gentleman would be interested in the tedium of working for a living, Q nodded. “Yes.”

“I’d like to install mechanical works in my orangerie,” Mr. Bond said. “I have an interest in the use of clockworks for gardening. Would you be willing to look into such a thing?”

Torn between the feeling that he was being patronized into permitting Georgiana’s demands and the genuine hope that he had a potential wealthy patron interested in his inventions, Q nodded again.

“Why don’t we go look now?” Georgiana prompted, very interested in setting this idea into motion.

“That’s a lovely suggestion,” Mr. Bond agreed. He pulled out her chair for her, and offered his arm, and then pulled out Q’s chair and offered his other arm.

Q looked from the arm to him in bafflement, not sure if he was being mocked. He glanced to Georgiana for help and found her confused but eager that he should appease their host. He hooked his arm through Mr. Bond’s, finding that their position forced him to rest his hand lightly on Mr.
Bond’s forearm like a young lady rather than holding his own arm firmly in place for his sisters to hang upon as he was accustomed. The arm under his hand was thickly muscled and strong. Q was confused and unsettled by this new role, which was neither friend to Mr. Bond nor chaperone to Georgiana.

He guessed—and hoped that he was right—that Mr. Bond was making an effort to treat them equally, and to keep Q from feeling excluded. They were siblings, and young compared to Mr. Bond. That was all it was.

Georgiana never stopped talking if she could help it, and their conversation in Mr. Bond’s greenhouse (Georgiana very politely did not point out that it was not presently an orangerie, being that it did not contain oranges, even if it had been so in the past) fluttered between Georgiana’s admiration of the architecture and counsel on the future floral contents and Q’s advice and ideas on what sort of mechanical improvements could be installed in a greenhouse.

Confused and wary though he felt about the entire situation, Q couldn’t help but enjoy the conversation and occasionally was caught smiling as they discussed theoretical inventions and what they would require to build. It was Georgiana who eventually insisted that they had to leave before their mother began to worry, and she did indeed get her promise from both Bond and Q about the picnic.

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“Mrs. Olivia Mansfield is very disapprovingly not paying us any attention,” Georgiana observed, standing by Q’s side at the carriage while Mr. Tanner packed the picnic supplies into it and they waited for Mr. Bond to appear.

“I don’t think she likes me,” Q whispered back, making a half-hearted effort at fighting his grin.

“No. Although in her defense, you did try and stare her down.”

“She started it.”

“I think that’s everything,” Mr. Tanner said, appearing around the side of the carriage. Both siblings promptly fell silent and smiled brightly. Mr. Tanner smiled back, looking as though he felt he’d missed a joke but was too good-naturedly glad to be smiled at to make any sort of fuss about it.

“Has Mr. Bond been delayed?” Georgiana asked. Q couldn’t tell whether or not her concern was genuine.

“I don’t believe so, no,” Mr. Tanner looked up at the house at the exact moment that Mr. Bond stepped out of it.

“Does he just enjoy making an entrance?” Q asked. Georgiana stepped on his foot.

“Thank you, Mr. Tanner,” Mr. Bond said as he reached the bottom step. He was impeccably dressed, as ever, one hand in his pocket and his predatory almost-smile in place. “I believe that Mr. and Miss Boothroyd serve as each other’s chaperones, so we won’t—“ He stopped suddenly, gazing at Georgiana, and then looked back at Mr. Tanner, expression giving nothing away. “I’ve changed my mind. Do come, will you, Mr. Tanner?”

“Sir,” Mr. Tanner agreed, unruffled.

“Miss Boothroyd,” Mr. Bond said, opening the carriage door and holding out his hand to assist Georgiana in entering.
Ever the little lady, Georgiana took his assistance, gracefully settling inside. And then Mr. Bond turned to Mr. Tanner, eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief. “Mr. Tanner,” he said, holding out his hand again.

That did succeed in flustering Mr. Tanner. He turned red, but knew better than to argue with his employer, and awkwardly let himself be helped into the carriage. Mr. Bond shut the door.

For his part, Q had no qualms whatsoever letting his puzzlement about this arrangement show on his face. Mr. Bond ignored it with a smirk, offering his hand to help Q up onto the carriage.

Disdaining the help, Q sprung easily up the side of the carriage into the driver’s seat and then felt himself blush as Mr. Bond settled next to him a moment later. The man moved like a jungle cat, and he had the muscle weight to match. It was difficult not to feel tiny next to him although they were almost of a height.

“Will you teach me to drive it?” Mr. Bond asked him.

The blush deepened, and Q kept his eyes stubbornly forward. That soft, rumbling voice was unnerving so close to his ear while Mr. Bond’s thigh was pressed along his own. Q didn’t know why it should be unnerving, but added the feeling to his list of suspicions about Mr. Bond.

“Certainly,” he agreed despite his desire to bolt out of a social situation that he didn’t understand. He began explaining the operations of the driver even while doubting what he was doing. He’d never allowed anyone to drive the carriage but himself and wasn’t certain that he wanted to be winning favor from Mr. Bond by giving the lesson. His sister had intent to be courted by this man, but Q remained doubtful. He had no idea how to refuse him without upsetting Georgiana, so he explained everything he did as though he intended to allow Mr. Bond behind the controls—which was an entirely horrifying thought.

Georgiana gave directions to her preferred picnicking spot by leaning her head occasionally out the window while Mr. Bond asked questions about the region and Q tried to answer as best he could.

“Forgive me for interrogating you,” Mr. Bond said, bemused. “I thought you had grown up in the area.”

“I did,” Q said, finding his blush persistent. “And I’ve spent most of my life coming up with excuses to get out of going visiting.”

Mr. Bond laughed, warmly amused. “Instead you spent your time inventing carriages such as no one has ever seen.”

“Correct.” Q very stubbornly refused to look over at his expression.

“I would like to see more of your inventions some day,” Mr. Bond said, leaning in closer to him.

Q almost fell off the carriage by sharply leaning away. He couldn’t understand this situation at all. None of Mr. Bond’s behavior made any kind of sense. Maybe he lost his senses in the war, Q thought to himself.

“I don’t show my inventions to the public,” Q said, sharply.

Leaving it at that, Mr. Bond leaned back in his seat and let Q alone.

Completely flustered, Q sat and blushed until Mr. Bond started asking questions again as though nothing had happened.
“Tell me about Q’s inventions,” Mr. Bond said, once the four of them were comfortably lounged on picnic blankets and partway through a second bottle of wine.

“Oh, where to start.” Georgiana beamed, proud of her brother’s genius. “Q, tell him something clever.”

“I won’t,” Q snapped, obstinate, and scowled at Mr. Bond, finding that his blush had returned. “Why do you want to know? You aren’t an engineer. What value is the information to you?”

Georgiana and Mr. Turner shifted uncomfortably at the awkward moment, but Mr. Bond held Q’s gaze, unintimidated.

“Q,” Georgiana scolded, swatting her brother’s shoulder. “He is showing interest. You are interesting.”

“I’m not,” Q returned, irritable. Georgiana’s gaze was easier to hold than Mr. Bond’s, so he turned his scowl on her instead.

“You’ll have to forgive my brother,” Georgiana said, with a very long-suffering sigh. “He’s an unrepentant shut-in. My mother keeps hoping that if only we could introduce him to a clever young lady with a very lengthy tolerance for hearing about engine construction, perhaps it would improve his temperament.”

Q tensed, recognizing exactly where she was heading with this.

“I see,” Mr. Bond said, amused. “But you haven’t been able to find any?”

“No.” Georgiana made an adorably perplexed expression. Q rolled his eyes—he’d seen her practicing it in front of a mirror. “I think it must be the curse of the countryside, but mama will not permit any of us to visit London, not even for the season.”

Mr. Bond considered the two of them. “If you will forgive me saying so, your brother does not seem to have an interest in meeting clever young ladies.”

Frowning, Q peered at him. It was true, but he couldn’t imagine what reason Mr. Bond would have for so rudely saying so.

Mr. Bond held eye contact with him again, as unreadable as ever. “Nor in visiting London, I don’t think.”

“No,” Georgiana sighed, trying to use frivolity to put a stop to this train of conversation now that it had entirely escaped from the direction she’d been trying to guide it. “He is so very tiresome that way,” she huffed and then smiled fondly at her brother.

Q turned his head to look at her, completely lost about what had just transpired.

Glossing over whatever it was, Georgiana kissed her brother’s cheek and then diverted the four of them with her opinions on the latest season of opera, none of which she had actually seen.

“Did you think that Mr. Bond’s behavior was odd?” Q asked as soon as they were alone on the carriage and heading home.
“Odd?” Georgiana asked, surprised. “No, I didn’t notice anything. He has a very blunt manner of speaking, but I am accustomed to your particular manner of rudeness and he is quite tame by comparison.”

Q frowned, frustrated. His senses told him that something was peculiar about Mr. Bond, but Georgiana was the great social genius in the family. If she hadn’t noticed anything odd, then everything had to be fine. “So you find that normal behavior for a man going courting?”

“What behavior?” Georgiana seemed honestly perplexed. “I found him gallant and charming, as ever. He wasn’t as attentive as would have been ideal, but he seems very interested in your work. No more than appropriate, so you can release whatever worries you’re holding about him scheming to steal your inventions. You are interesting, Q. Just look at the carriage. We could be touring the country making a fortune showing it as a novelty, if nothing else. People are either horrified or fascinated by it, sometimes both. You should be flattered. Besides, he has invited us back. I think everything is going quite well.”

“I don’t trust him,” Q sighed, knowing he’d already lost.

“You are a silly, paranoid fool.” Georgiana said, smiling. “And I would not exchange you for the world. He’s a perfect gentleman, Q. Nothing odd.”
The Perils of Having a Scotsman to Dinner

Chapter Notes

Note for persons familiar with Austen: It may be worthwhile to note that while this is ostensibly a Pride and Prejudice AU, I draw far more of my style and knowledge of period social decorum from the Brontes. I also intentionally chose to set this story very rural and the Boothroyds are so poor as to have neither servants nor horse, so they're interacting in a different social strata than most of the Austen books and characters would.

My thanks to hedwig-dordt and ophelia-rising for editing and beta help, starting from this chapter.

“Invite him to dinner,” Mrs. Boothroyd said.

Q dropped his spanner. “No.”

“Yes,” Georgiana said, sipping calmly at her tea. “Q still doesn’t like him.”

“Why doesn’t Q like him?” Alice asked.

“Because Q is jealous of his sisters and fears Mr. Bond will steal them all away,” Georgiana said, intentionally sensationalist.

“Not all of them, let’s hope,” Martha interjected, without looking up from her book. “Polygamy is very much frowned upon in our fine country.”

“When shall we invite him to dinner, mama?” Georgiana asked, with a smile that suggested she was politely not remarking on her family’s inability to stay on topic.

“Sunday.” Mrs. Boothroyd suggested, all four of them ignoring Q’s muttered ‘never’.

“Mama,” Martha said, still with her nose in her book. “May I invite Dr. Moore, as well?”

Everyone went quiet and stared at her.

“Dr. Moore?” Georgiana repeated, taking up the trail of inquiry. “I thought you had refused his suit.”

“I didn’t,” Martha said, unperturbed. “I simply deflected your inquiries about it.”

“I thought you didn’t like him.” Georgiana raised her eyebrows indignantly.

“It isn’t my job to correct every misconception that crosses your mind, Georgiana, I should never get anything else done.”

Alice leaned toward Q while the older girls were busy huffing at each other. “Martha is being courted by Dr. Moore?”

“I think that’s what they’re saying, yes.” Q grinned, pleased that Georgiana’s indignation was being directed at someone other than him for the time being.
“Of course you may invite Dr. Moore to dinner, Martha,” Mrs. Boothroyd said, talking over all of them. “We would be honored to have him as a guest.”

“We would indeed,” Georgiana agreed, with an utterly wicked smile.

Martha gave her sister a warning look over the top of her book, to which Georgiana stuck out her tongue.

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“Here, Q, take these to the dining room and--oh my word, Mr. Tanner!”

Q caught the stack of plates before Georgiana dropped them, then looked to the windows in bemusement, seeing nothing. “What about Mr. Tanner?”

“I forgot about him!”

“Did you invite him?”

“No, but Mr. Bond may very well bring him. He is his valet, and it would be highly unusual for a man of his station to travel alone.”

“I don’t see the problem.”

“How can you not see the problem?” Georgiana asked, distraught. “What shall we do with him?”

Q tried his best to sympathize with whatever mysterious disaster was looming in Georgiana’s mind. “Feed him?”

“Surely we cannot seat him at the table, he is a servant, and Mr. Bond would find that quite irregular, I doubt he has ever shared the table with a servant.”

“Georgiana,” Q started, and then stopped, perplexed, not sure how to help her.

“In a proper house, he would wait in the kitchen, with the other servants, but we haven’t got other servants, and it would be terribly shameful to leave poor Mr. Tanner to eat alone.”

“Terribly,” Q agreed, deciding it was better not to try making sense of it.

“What shall I do? Perhaps he won’t bring Mr. Tanner, he is somewhat eccentric about his servants after all—“

“Georgiana,” Q interrupted.

She fluttered worriedly at him. “What?”

“Seat him at the table, as a guest.”

Fretting and fidgeting, she chewed at her lip. “What if Mr. Bond is horrified?”

“Georgiana, Mr. Tanner accompanied us on the picnic and ate with us. Mr. Bond does not treat him like a drudge, and as you said, Mr. Bond is very liberal with how he treats his servants. He will not be offended.”

His sister frowned at him, not certain whether Q was to be trusted on matters of social decorum.
Giving up on the conversation, Q headed to the dining room with the plates, calling over his shoulder, “I shall be offended if you seat Mr. Tanner in the kitchen.”

“Yes, but you are a godless republican!” Georgiana called after him, huffily.

((Author’s Note: Republican is used in the 19th century British sense of the word. Q subscribes to the Locke school of English Republicanism and Liberalism, mostly because he thinks that the class system is silly.))

“Q,” Mrs. Boothroyd said, taking the plates from him. “Go stand at the door and see our guests in when they arrive.”

“Yes, mama,” Q obeyed, ignoring the scowl he got from Georgiana, who would have preferred the task.

The day outside was dreary and wet. Q stood on the threshold, watching the rain.

He didn’t have long to wait before a carriage pulled up. It was a simple, unornamented vehicle, but Q recognized Mr. Tanner in the driver’s seat, and stepped into the rain to help.

“Have you got somewhere I might put the horse?” Mr. Tanner asked, more interested in getting out of the rain than in observing pleasantries.

“The carriage house is there,” Q pointed, attention split as Mr. Tanner opened the door and Mr. Bond emerged from the carriage.

“Q,” he said, greeting him with a smile. “You’re getting wet.”

“I—“ Q said, torn between the desire to help Mr. Tanner with the horse and to escort Mr. Bond inside. Georgiana would have known how to handle the situation.

Mr. Bond made the decision for him, placing a hand on Q’s arm and guiding him toward the door.

“You called me Q,” Q said, considering being indignant.

“Not for the first time,” Mr. Bond pointed out.

“Oughtn’t you to call me Mr. Boothroyd?” Q asked, intentionally being difficult.

“Only in polite company,” Mr. Bond said, at a low rumble, just as they stepped inside to find three brightly-smiling young ladies waiting in a row for them.

When Q just stared in bafflement, Georgiana shot him an urgent look.

“Mr. Bond,” Q said, remembering his role as the man of the household and therefore Mr. Bond’s host. “May I introduce my sisters, Miss Martha, Miss Georgiana, and Miss Alice Boothroyd.”

The three of them curtsied, just in time for their mother to come imperiously up behind them. “And my mother,” Q continued quickly, “Mrs. Susan Boothroyd.”

“Delighted to make your acquaintance,” Mr. Bond said, allowing Q to take his overcoat before gallantly kissing Mrs. Boothroyd’s hand. “I must thank you for lending me the company of your children. They are wonderfully diverting.”

“So kind of you to say,” Mrs. Boothroyd said, completely charmed. “Please, be welcome to our humble home. Right this way, Mr. Bond.”
The three girls looked ready to swoon. Q stared at his family in disbelief.

“Even you?” he demanded of Martha, as she shifted with the other three to watch Mr. Bond walk away.

“You said he looked like a bulldog,” Martha said.

“He does.”

Drawing herself up primly, Martha looked away. “He isn’t as handsome as Dr. Moore, but I can see what Georgiana sees in him. Ah! Listen, there’s Dr. Moore. Go take his horse, Q. And if you call him a bulldog I shall salt your tea for a month.”

“I shall take care to find him the epitome of English virtue,” Q said, resigning himself to going back out into the rain. He took Dr. Moore’s horse to the carriage house, finding Mr. Tanner just finishing up with Mr. Bond’s horse.

“Good evening, Mr. Boothroyd,” Mr. Tanner said, helping him with the tack without being asked. Q let him, working alongside him easily. He was more comfortable around Mr. Tanner than his employer, and found himself grateful that Mr. Bond almost always had him present.

“Thank you for inviting Mr. Bond to dinner,” Mr. Tanner said, quickly proving himself more valuable with horses than Q was. “He is grateful for your kindness to him.”

“Georgiana’s kindness,” Q corrected, puzzled by why Mr. Tanner would bring up the topic in such a manner.

“And yours.”

“My kindness?” Q repeated, lost.

“You’ve been a friend to him,” Mr. Tanner said.

Q stared at him. “I have been almost actively hostile toward Mr. Bond, and only contained more for fear of Georgiana’s wrath.”

Mr. Tanner shrugged, as if to say that he wasn’t sure Q’s version was accurate. “He’s been himself again, since he met you.”

“Georgiana,” Q corrected again, confused and frustrated by Mr. Tanner’s conversation. “Since he met Georgiana. Please won’t you come inside, Mr. Tanner,” he said, crisply.

Mirroring Q’s confusion, Mr. Tanner shut his mouth and let himself be led inside.

The house held a cheerful cacophony originating from the dining room, where the three Miss Boothroyds were entertaining the two bachelors. “This way, Mr. Tanner,” Q said, pausing in the hall with him to shed their overcoats and lave their hands in a basin. He found himself now grateful that he’d had the conversation with Georgiana regarding Mr. Tanner and thus knew how he should be handled.

Q presided at the head of the table as the technical head of household, with his mother at his right hand and Mr. Bond at his left. He felt almost painfully uncomfortable in the role, although he was accustomed to taking it on in public situations. Their family was a matriarchy more often than not, and everyone involved preferred it that way. Georgiana sat between Mr. Bond and Mr. Tanner, and looked pleased as Punch about it.
“Mr. Bond,” Dr. Moore was just saying, “of Ainsburgh?”

“The same,” Mr. Bond said. Q watched him closely, surprised to see a guardedness about him that he hadn’t seen before.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Bond,” Dr. Moore said. “Forgive my surprise. I had heard that you were strictly not sociable.”

“I’m not, as a rule,” Mr. Bond replied. “The Boothroyds have convinced me to make an exception.”

“Then we should all be grateful for it,” Dr. Moore said, more conventionally charming than Mr. Bond. He smiled, taking in the seating arrangements. “I take it that it’s Miss Georgiana whose golden temperament has melted your heart?”

“Miss Georgiana and Mr. Boothroyd have been more than welcoming,” Mr. Bond said.

“Tell us about yourself, Mr. Bond, won’t you?” Mrs. Boothroyd prompted. “It is so rare that we get gentlemen from London in this part of the country.”

“You’ll forgive me for correcting you, Mrs. Boothroyd,” Mr. Bond corrected, “but I’m not from London originally. You find yourselves in the company of a Scotsman.”

Georgiana and Martha instantly looked delighted. Mrs. Boothroyd blanched, and Q smirked, but Martha made quick work—unintentionally—of distracting from her mother’s reaction by settling into a happy discussion of modern Scottish literature. Dr. Moore looked irritated that Mr. Bond knew more about this subject of Martha’s interests than he did himself, and Georgiana looked annoyed to be excluded almost entirely from the topic. Q tried to hide his amusement about the situation by focusing on his food.

“Is it true you were a hero in the recent war, Mr. Bond?” Dr. Moore asked, at the first opportunity to change the subject.

“It is,” Mr. Bond answered, making no effort to elaborate.

“A credit to our nation’s army, no doubt—“

“The navy,” Mr. Bond corrected. “I was a Commander in the Royal Navy.”

“—and yet I have not heard what heroism it was that earned your laurels,” Dr. Moore finished.

“Oh, yes!” Georgiana begged. “Do tell us your war stories, Mr. Bond.”

“The thing about heroism,” Mr. Bond said, his gaze locked on Dr. Moore and icy cold, “is that it isn’t as neat and pretty as in the legends of Camelot. My war stories are not polite dinner conversation.”

The table was silent in the awkward moment. Alice’s fork clinked and she blushed.

“Excuse me,” Mrs. Boothroyd said, desperate to cause a distraction. “I just have to fetch the next course. Alice, help me carry, please?”

It broke the tension between the two men, but even Georgiana looked lost for an appropriate change of topic.

Commander Bond, Q wondered. Commander Bond, who was too young for retirement as a career officer and too old to be anything else. Who didn’t want to talk about the circumstances that had won
him unusual honors and wealth for heroism in battle. Something had ended his military career very abruptly, and sent him in search of remote English countryside for retirement, despite being a native Scotsman.

“Why not return to Scotland?” Q asked. He spoke softly, although he knew perfectly well that the question wasn’t a tactful retreat from the topic that had shattered their dinner conversation.

Mr. Bond looked over, meeting his eyes. “Nothing left for me in Scotland,” he said, with quiet honesty, as if there was no one at the table but the two of them.

“What is it, then, that you hope to find in England?” Q asked.

Mr. Bond’s familiar almost-smile crept up one corner of his mouth. “Diversion.”
“Q,” Alice said, with the gentle tone that was somehow more effective than the outright scolding of her mother or sisters. “You haven’t left your workshop all day.”

Q sighed and lifted his goggles, setting his work aside and coming over to the little table where Alice had brought a tray of sandwiches. He dropped into the chair tiredly and helped himself to a sandwich. “I’m trying to catch up on all the commissions I’ve been neglecting.”

“You work too hard.” Alice poured him a cup of tea and pushed it toward him.

“I have to keep us fed and the creditors paid,” Q said.

“And then you forget to feed yourself. We worry.”

“You worry. The others scold.”

“We worry,” Alice corrected. She looked so sweetly stubborn about it that Q couldn’t help but smile.

“Promise me you’ll never grow up,” he said, taking the tea and smiling fondly at her over the rim of the cup.

“I want to grow up.”

“Yes, but I don’t want you to grow up. If you grow up you’ll turn into Georgiana and Martha, fluttering on about husbands. I never thought I’d see the day that Martha would flutter over a man, and now...”

“You’re worse than mama,” Alice teased.

“Well, it’s true. You girls are going to grow up and leave mama all alone with no one but me and my gadgets for company. And you know how she’ll hate that.”

Alice smiled at the image. “She’s proud of you, you know.”

Q blinked. “What?”

“Her genius inventor son, supporting the family with his cleverness and skill? She’s probably proudest of you out of all of us.”

Q blushed, scowling at his tea. “Don’t be silly, Alice. I’m the difficult one. She tolerates me as best she can, that’s all.”

“Why don’t you see your own value, Q?” Alice asked, sympathetic.

“My value is in working hard and supporting this family,” Q said, picking up a sandwich and returning to his workbench. “Thank you for the sandwiches, Alice.”

“I’ll be back in an hour,” she warned, the sternness merely adorable on her gentle face. “If you haven’t eaten them all I shall scold you.”
“Alice?” Q said, lifting his head for a moment.

She stopped in the doorway and looked back at him, attentive.

“One last hug, before you grow up,” he begged.

Alice laughed and ran over, throwing her arms around him. “It won’t be the last hug, silly.”

“It might be,” Q said, hugging her tight. “I swear, one day I’ll blink and you’ll be a woman grown and married, with three children.”

“One day,” Alice agreed, resting her head on her brother’s shoulder. “Not today.”

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“Ah! You’ve won again,” Georgiana complained, tossing down her cards with a sigh.

“Forgive me,” Mr. Bond said, smiling with easy pleasure in their company now that he had been in the district for over a month and acquired the habit of entertaining the Boothroyds on an almost daily basis. “I have a gift for cards.”

“We must play something else,” Georgiana insisted, and then suddenly brightened with an idea. “Do you play chess, Mr. Bond?”

“I do. I admit I have not done so in years. Mr. Tanner, do we have a chess board?”

Q set down his cards—he was also losing to Mr. Bond—and frowned warily at his sister. Georgiana despised chess. Q was the one who played, and had no partners except Martha when she felt like losing.

“Will you be attending the Wallaces’ dance, Mr. Bond?”

“I had no intention of doing so, but you are welcome to try and convince me,” Mr. Bond said.

“You must,” Georgiana insisted. “Everyone of any consequence in the district will be attending.”

“What about the people of no consequence?” Mr. Bond asked.

Q couldn’t resist a little smirk at the question.

“Oh!” Georgiana flustered. “They do not generally go to parties.”

“Maybe they simply haven’t been invited.”

Georgiana huffed primly. “Mr. Bond, you are teasing me. The relative society of our district is limited almost entirely to farmers and shopkeepers. Everyone is invited. The people of consequence shall simply be better dancers.”

“Is that how one determines consequence?” Mr. Bond asked, still teasing.

“Around here it is,” Georgiana confirmed.

“Will the entire Boothroyd clan be attending?”

“It will,” Georgiana said, arching a brow at Q to let him know that he wasn’t to argue. He didn’t.
“Will you promise not to abandon me to the clutches of any marriageable young women?” Mr. Bond asked.

“You have my word,” Georgiana assured him solemnly.

“And you, Q?”

Q met his eye for a moment, then looked up gratefully as Mr. Tanner returned with the chessboard. “Are you asking me to promise not to abandon you to marriageable young women?” Q asked.

“Among other things.”

“I think you’d be better off not entrusting yourself to my hands,” Q said. “I have a very hard time dissuading marriageable young women from anything they set their minds to.”

“If you don’t, I shall deflect every one who comes to me into dancing with you.”

Q’s mouth fell open in indignant surprise. Mr. Tanner set the chess board down on the table in front of them, and Georgiana promptly pushed it between Q and Mr. Bond.

“I shall refuse,” Q asserted.

“Do you not dance?” Mr. Bond asked, beginning to lay out the pieces.

“It’s best for everyone if I refrain.”

“Then how will you ever come to be a person of consequence?”

Q flushed at the teasing, lightly indignant. “I prefer to be a tinkerer left to his own devices,” he said.

“But you do at least promise to attend,” Mr. Bond pressed.

Picking up one of the pieces, Q made his opening move. “I do,” he said, accepting the challenge.

Mr. Bond played well, almost as well as Q did. He developed his pieces with excellent strategy, using techniques Q hadn’t seen since the death of his father and plenty that Q had never seen. In response, Q played the techniques that he’d developed himself, knowing that he lacked education and experience on strategy but more than made up for it with intelligence.

Georgiana watched, telling them about who would be attending the party and all the gossip she considered relevant, while the men played.

Twenty minutes into the game, Georgiana gave up on them and resorted to playing cards with Mr. Tanner.

“Who taught you to play?” Mr. Bond asked.

Q moved his piece and then looked up, considering his opponent. Mr. Bond was more tolerable on the far end of a chess board. His intelligence was clear, and he had an excellent mind for strategy. It helped further that the game gave Mr. Bond’s predatory nature an outlet that wasn’t directed at Q. Allowing himself to simply enjoy the challenge of having a chess partner who could nearly match him, Q was surprised by the return to conversation.

“My father,” he answered, dropping his eyes back to the game because that was safer. “Major Geoffrey Boothroyd. He was a strategic genius.”
“I’m familiar with his work.”

Q stared at him, shocked. “You are?”

“He was a strategist and an engineer. Many of his designs are still in use today. I didn’t realize he was from this part of the country.”

“You knew him?” Q asked, swallowing around a lump in his throat.

“Only in passing. He pre-dates my era, but I know of his work in the Royal Engineers. I can tell you, at least, that his memory is very well-respected, and he would have been delighted by your inventions.”

“He died while I was still young,” Q said, gazing sightlessly at the pieces before him. “I knew of his love for clockworks. I had no idea he was an engineer during his military career.”

“If I find myself in London again, I’ll obtain a copy of as many of the records as I can,” Mr. Bond promised. “Or perhaps you could simply accompany me, if we can convince Mrs. Boothroyd to spare you for a few days.”

Thoughtful and sad, Q looked across the room at his sister, laughingly winning at cards with Mr. Tanner. “Take Georgiana,” he murmured. “She has always wanted to see London, and mama will better be able to spare her.”

“Georgiana isn’t the one with the interest in your father’s inventions,” Mr. Bond said.

She wasn’t, but she was the only reason Mr. Bond had to be interested in the Boothroyds. Emotions muddled by Mr. Bond’s apparently conflicting motives, Q’s fingers twitched. On some level he’d already known that Mr. Bond would refuse to take Georgiana, but he didn’t understand why and the implications scared him.

Panic welling up in his chest, Q tipped over his king to concede the game. “Forgive me,” he said, mouth dry, and stood.

It took a moment longer to remember his manners. “We should be getting home. Georgiana? Mama will be expecting us.”

Startled, Georgiana stood. She made their apologies smoothly, knowing well when her brother needed to be protected from his social anxieties, and the two of them made their escape.

~

“What was it like, in London?” Q asked, sitting in the parlour with his mother and a book.

Mrs. Boothroyd set her embroidery in her lap and looked at him in surprise. “That’s an unusual question, from you.”

“I remember it, a little. Our house in London. We had servants, and a carriage. I’d never thought much about it before.”

Wistful and sad, Mrs. Boothroyd smiled at the memory. “I didn’t know you remembered that.”

“I never told you.”

“No,” she agreed, shaking her head. “It’s Georgiana who always asks me to tell her stories of when I was a society beauty in London.”
“The great and romantic epic of how you married Major Geoffrey Boothroyd,” Q said, smiling because he knew the story well. Georgiana had requested it almost weekly in her teenage years.

“Whereupon we had four children and retired to his family home in the country,” Mrs. Boothroyd finished, with a little sigh.

“Do you miss London?”

“Sometimes. I miss the servants and the proper carriage. I miss the excitement and all the attention. I’m not sorry we left.” Decisively picking her embroidery back up, Mrs. Boothroyd focused on her next stitch. “What makes you ask about it?”

“Just curious, I suppose. A conversation with Mr. Bond left me wondering what the other side of that life was like. Not the bits that Georgiana asks about. The rest of it. Was my father much for parties and all that?”

“Geoffrey? Goodness no. He always found a sofa to sit upon so that he could watch society go by and complain about them. He said he hated it, but I always suspected he quite enjoyed the complaining. Gave him something to do with all that wit.”

“Did he have a workshop, in London?” Q asked, not sure how to ask for confirmation about what Bond had told him. He didn’t want to admit the source of his curiosity. Worse, he didn’t want to find out that the ray of hope Bond had given him was false.

“A workshop? No, not at all. No space. Not something that fashionable people did. It was one of the things that pleased him so about moving here. He took over that old room at the back and it’s been filled with your clutter ever since.”

Q wondered if she even knew about Major Boothroyd’s engineering work in the army. She encouraged Q’s work, but she never remembered how any of it functioned, so Q didn’t bother to tell her about the details. He wondered if his father had been the same. If he’d simply never gone into detail about being an inventor for the military, Mrs. Boothroyd might never have thought to repeat it for Q’s sake.

~

They took the horseless carriage to the party, much to Mrs. Boothroyd’s horror.

“It would be more shameful if we were to split into three groups to accompany the Monroes, the Winstons, and the Carlyles in their carriages,” Georgiana attempted to explain to her, “since we still have no horse.”

Q eavesdropped on the conversation within the carriage as he drove, trying to use it to distract himself from the anxiety of going to a dance, where he might be expected to be polite, socialize, and —worst of all—dance. He intended to use his usual technique of backing slowly into the quietest corner he could find and looking faintly ill so that the forcibly sociable might be discouraged on account of potential contagion.

It was for this reason that he had a reputation throughout the county for being sickly and weak, which—in addition to his awkward and aloof refusal to socialize respectably and his preoccupation with building peculiar machines—had entirely ruined his marriage prospects, to Q’s relief and his mother’s indignation.

Letting the women off at the front steps, Q parked the carriage at the far end of the drive and strolled back alone. It was rare that anyone had servants in their part of the country, and plenty of the
attendees had simply walked up from the village, so there were other farmers and innkeepers who walked along with him, and some of them stopped to converse with him about his work, which set him at his ease.

The Wallaces owned a manor house, one of the largest constructions in the district, though still well and truly dwarfed by Ainsburgh. It was lit tonight, shining out of the darkness of England like a ship on the sea. Q was tempted to hang back and return to the safety of his carriage while he could, playing the role of coachman because it was easier and more comfortable than the head of household.

Twice he had been approached in the past few months by men seeking his permission to court Georgiana. He had refused them both. It rattled him to be asked. Q had no idea what made good husband material, and knew that Georgiana wanted to marry up, into a house with at least one servant. He preferred how Martha handled things with Dr. Moore—she sorted out what she wanted, and informed the family later. Martha alone knew what was best for Martha. For the most part, the girls had the sense not to leave him with that sort of important decision.

_We get by, don’t we?_ he thought, walking up the steps to his fate. He worked, Martha kept the accounts, mama and Alice kept the kitchen and garden and Georgiana tidied the house. It was neat and efficient. He didn’t want it to change.

Inside, the party was loud and lively. Q stepped to the side where he could see the dancing and watched for his family.

He spotted Georgiana first, in a whirl of color, dancing with a young man Q didn’t know, and his mother trying to keep old Mr. Adams from stepping on her toes. Martha was near the back, having what seemed to be a lively debate with Dr. Moore. Last, he spotted Alice to the side, dancing elegantly with Mr. Bond.

They were the best dancers in the place, but somehow they were easy to overlook, and Q wondered if it was intentional. There was a smooth grace to their dance, without any flair to draw attention. They moved through the other dancers like fish through water, as if they were both in their natural element.

He felt a pang of irritation at the pair of them. Mr. Bond was supposed to be courting Georgiana, and Alice was still too young to be courted. All of the dances he’d ever been to were informal enough that children often danced with the rest, but Alice didn’t look like a child anymore. Dancing with Mr. Bond, she looked grown-up and graceful, like the young lady she would soon become.

The dance ended, and Mr. Bond surrendered Alice into the hands of a bow-legged young man who danced like a drunken ox, and then was promptly pounced upon by Georgiana and Mrs. Boothroyd. Q took a few steps down into the party, selecting a quiet chair off to the corner where he could watch his family and try to avoid being noticed.

He watched as Mr. Bond turned aside every young lady who came his way but the Boothroyd girls, and danced with all of them, favoring Alice and Mrs. Boothroyd because they were asked less often than Martha and Georgiana.

Alone in his corner, Q stared into the blur of dancers, forgetting what was happening around him and taking refuge in his own mind and the concepts of the clockwork designs he had planned.

“Have you been hiding?”

Mr. Bond came up at Q’s side, interrupting his thoughts. Somewhere across the floor, Georgiana was
dancing happily with Mr. Tanner. Mr. Bond held out a glass of cordial. Q took it, grateful for the drink even if it did come from enemy hands.

“Not very well, it would seem,” Q remarked. The cordial was sweet and rich, redolent of cherries and honey.

“I beg to differ.”

“You dance very well, Mr. Bond,” Q said, keeping his eyes on his dancing sisters rather than on the man at his side.

“And with all of the Boothroyds but one.”

Brow furrowing in confusion, Q glanced over at him. He didn’t at all understand what Mr. Bond was getting at. “There are plenty of willing ladies present. No need for gentlemen to dance with other gentlemen.”

“Not even if they so desire?” Mr. Bond asked.

Feeling a blush flood his cheeks, Q stared at him in defensive puzzlement. “I prefer not to dance.”

“Let me change your mind.”

Q had rarely danced with anyone but his sisters, and had certainly never had opportunity to follow someone else’s lead in a dance. To follow Mr. Bond’s lead, in a dance where Mr. Bond was so highly desired as a partner with all the young ladies and under the jealous eye of all those young ladies seemed like a terrifying thought, and he didn’t understand why Mr. Bond would want to put him in such a situation. As if he weren’t enough of a social pariah, he would be seen as wasting the time of the most marriageable man in the county, and for what purpose?

“That sounds untoward,” Q said, returning his gaze to the dance floor. “Go dance with Georgiana. She is always complaining of a lack of good dancing partners.”

“I will dance next with you or with no one,” Mr. Bond promised, taking a seat near him.

Q stole puzzled glances at him. Unhurried and comfortable, Mr. Bond was watching the dancers with a smile. “Mr. Tanner and Georgiana dance well together, had you noticed?”

They did dance well together. Mr. Tanner danced very well, but he was still only the second-best dancer at the party. “You ought to be dancing with her,” Q said.

“I am waiting to dance with you.”

It didn’t take long before Mr. Bond began attracting young women.

“Mr. Bond.” A pretty young brunette with an adorably upturned nose approached them with an intent smile. “You are all alone over here. Come, let me have the next dance.”

“Forgive me,” Mr. Bond said, glancing over at Q with a smile that suggested he intended to make good on his earlier threat. “I needed to rest my leg. Old navy injury, you see. Mr. Boothroyd, however, would be delighted to accompany you.”

The brunette turned to Q, her smile looking a little forced, but she couldn’t politely refuse.

“Excuse me,” Q said, standing up before she could say anything. “I find myself indisposed. Perhaps another time.”
Deeply unsettled, Q set down his glass and made his exit from the party.

The night outside was quiet and dark by contrast. Q headed off across the gardens, looking for air and space somewhere he wouldn’t be found.

“Q.”

He spun, startled to find that Mr. Bond had followed him out. Q felt rattled, but Mr. Bond looked calm and steady in the light spilling out from the house.

“What are you doing?” Q said, feeling completely lost in all things relating to Mr. Bond.

“Apoloizing. I should have known that would make you uncomfortable.”

“Why are you apologizing when you should be inside dancing with all the prettiest girls in the county?”

Mr. Bond stopped directly in front of him, only a breath away. “I don’t wish to dance with all the prettiest girls in the county. I wish to dance with you.”

“Dance with Georgiana,” Q pleaded. “She adores you. And yet here you are, as always, wasting conversation on me.”

“Q,” Mr. Bond said, trying to reason with him although Q had no idea what there was to reason about. “Georgiana is—”

“Q!”

Both men turned back the way they’d come. Q felt Mr. Bond’s hand clasp his arm, a light, protective, almost possessive gesture done without thinking.

Martha descended the steps and crossed the grass toward them, a concerned frown in place. “I saw you both leave suddenly. We were concerned.”

Mr. Bond’s hand dropped from Q’s arm. Q felt conflictingly relieved and bereft that it was gone. “My fault,” Mr. Bond said, claiming responsibility before Q could speak. “I tried to bully Q into dancing and ended up giving offense.”

Martha’s gaze weighed heavily upon Mr. Bond for a moment before it transferred more lightly to her brother. “Q?”

“I’m fine, Martha,” Q promised. “Please, go inside and enjoy yourself. Let me be alone.”

Martha nodded, accepting Q’s needs without questioning them. “Mr. Bond,” she said, not intending to leave him with her brother after Q had just expressed a desire to be alone.

Mr. Bond took the cue and offered his arm to her. Swallowing, Q watched them walk back inside, and tried not to feel abandoned in the dark, just the way he’d wanted.

Chapter End Notes

Inspiration for the Wallace Manor: http://www.framptoncourtestate.co.uk/
“Q, you’ve barely eaten.”

Blinking as he emerged from a haze of calculations, Q set down his pen and looked up. Martha was frowning at the untouched tray of cheese and apples that Georgiana had brought in a few hours ago.

“Come here,” she ordered, giving him her sternest look until he set his papers aside and came to the table where Georgiana had left the food. He nibbled obediently.

Martha sighed and sank into a chair. “What has you so upset? Georgiana won’t tell me.”

“Nothing,” Q insisted. “Mr. Bond makes me uncomfortable, and at the Wallaces’ party it became pointed. Nothing more. I’m grateful that you’ve begun going in my place.”

He didn’t want to discuss the topic further, and hoped that his stubborn expression would dissuade Martha from pressing the issue. Ever since the party, Georgiana had begun taking Martha with her when she went to Ainsburgh, without saying a word to Q. He told himself he was grateful and relieved, and that his worries were unfounded. Mr. Bond had only ever been friendly. He knew it was foolish to feel so suspicious.

“Georgiana seems happy,” Martha said, with a sigh. “I’ve never seen her so bright and sweet. She tries to hide it in front of you, but she is happy.”

“I’m glad,” Q said. The apples and cheese tasted like ash. He kept chewing out of stubbornness.

“There’s something else I need to speak with you about.”

Q nodded, putting on the best responsible, man-of-the-house expression he could manage. “What is it?”

“Dr. Moore has been invited to participate in an expedition to the East Indies. He will leave within the week if he accepts. He has asked me to accompany him, as his wife, and I have agreed.”

Q stopped chewing. “As his wife? That seems very sudden.”

“The departure is very sudden, I admit. The marriage isn’t. You do know he has been courting me for months, Q, and I have known him for years.”

“Yes, but it seems very sudden wherein you will be a married woman and no longer my little sister,” Q said.

“I haven’t been your little sister since I grew taller than you three years ago.”

Q couldn’t resist a smile at that frequent topic of teasing. “Yes, well, it isn’t very polite of you to point that out.”

“I am a woman grown, Q.”

“More than grown,” he added, hoping to keep the topic on their respective heights and not return it to that of marriage.
Martha was having none of this. “We plan to have a small wedding in the chapel on Saturday, family only, and then we’ll leave on Tuesday.”

“Tuesday! I am losing you as soon as Tuesday?”

“Please be happy for me, Q. An expedition to the East Indies. I shall have the opportunity to experience adventures in person, rather than always in books.”

“I am happy for you,” Q assured her, shaking his head. “It is just the sort of thing you would do, even though I shall miss you desperately. Somehow we shall manage without you.” Nodding supportively, he held out his hand to her. She clasped it with a smile.

~


“I like the rain,” Martha said, standing patiently as Georgiana fusssed with the ribbons on her dress.

“You would,” Georgiana scolded. “It is good luck, though. It means you shall have many children.”

“Ugh, don’t threaten me. You know I hate babies.”

“Dozens of them,” Georgiana said, scrunching up her nose playfully. “Squalling.”

“You are dreadful,” Martha laughed, swatting at her.

Q watched the two of them with half a smile, trying to hide the sadness in his eyes. Martha leaving, and soon enough Georgiana would follow. He’d always expected that one day it would come to him and his mother, alone in a house that was too large for them, but now that the prospect was approaching it seemed singularly depressing.

He glanced out the window, spotting two men on horseback approaching and frowning in puzzlement at the sight. “G, come and look. Are we expecting someone?”

Leaving the ribbons, Georgiana came over to his windowseat and peered out, shortly followed by a curious Martha and Alice. “Two men,” Georgiana said. “Young. In some kind of military uniform? Q, go get the door.”

Q looked up at the wall of sisters blocking him in to the windowseat and smiled wryly. “I will if you’ll let me up.”

“Hurry!” Georgiana scolded, pinching him. “We’ll be late to the wedding. Go see what they want.”

“Hurrying,” Q promised, rolling to his feet.

Getting to the door just as the men were knocking, Q opened it and frowned at them in puzzlement.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, sir. Is this the Boothroyd residence?”

Q could hear his sisters fidgeting curiously in the hallway behind him. “It is. May I help you?”

“We’re seeking Mr. Quintus Broothroyd, son of Major Geoffrey Boothroyd.”

“You are speaking to him,” Q said, feeling his heart give a peculiar nervous flop.
“Excellent. I am Corporal Kenneth Baker and this is Private Robert Fletcher, up from London. I have a requisition for your services. May we come in to discuss the details?”

“You have a what?” Q said.

“Q, what’s going on?” his mother demanded, pushing her way into the doorframe next to him. “What’s this all about, then?”

“Good morning, madam. We’re here to request Mr. Boothroyd’s services for his Majesty’s army.”

“Request his services?” Mrs. Boothroyd bristled. “Doing what?”

“Engineering, madam. We have reason to believe—“

“Does he get a choice?” Mrs. Boothroyd said.

“Yes, certainly, although we do hope—“

“Then it can wait. If you’ll excuse us, gentlemen, we have a wedding to attend. There’s a pub just down the road, do come back this afternoon and Q would be delighted to speak with you. Q, go finish getting your sister ready.”

“Yes, mama,” Q said, bemused.

The girls pounced him as soon as he was inside.

“The army, Q,” Georgiana said, as awed and baffled as the rest of them. “What in the world could they want you for?”

“Engineering,” Q said, feeling his heart fall a little bit in fear that his comfortable, provincial life was ending. “The carriage. It must be about the carriage.”

His horseless carriage, that Georgiana wished for him to patent and industrialize, that scandalized his mother, was considered a talking point across half a dozen counties and was the reason he was famed throughout their region of the country for his skill with clockworks and engines, and that won the charm and friendship of curiosity-seekers like Mr. Bond. Georgiana and Martha had long believed that sooner or later a rich investor would turn up on the doorstep offering to set the carriages into production for him. It seemed the military had come for him first.

~

Martha had a simple service in the church, with no one in attendance but her family and the pastor. She wore her best dress, beribboned decoratively by Georgiana, and carried a small bouquet of early spring flowers.

As the pastor droned on about the duties of marriage, Q looked at his family next to him in the pew. Mrs. Boothroyd was sniffling bravely, trying her best to conceal the tears rolling down her cheeks as she watched her daughter with joy and sadness. Georgiana had her hands clasped to her chest in rapture, while Alice was sitting as patient and polite as a China doll.

Martha looked happy and fulfilled. Her hair was styled prettily in the latest fashion—also Georgiana’s work—and it made her look no longer the same sister. He was accustomed to the Martha who wore workboots, argued with him about proper wagon repair, and scolded him for being callous of Georgiana’s feelings. This one looked like a grown woman and a stranger, dressed finely and with hair shining. He had never before seen her smiling as she did at Dr. Moore, with a
sort of sweet contentment, and found himself wishing he’d made more certain of the man.

*Will you listen to her opinions and know when to tease her and when to let her have her way? Will you let her stomp about in her boots and leave her books on every possible surface?*

The doctor looked steady and patient, and adoring of Martha. Q tried to remember what he knew of them together, and the significance of it. He wasn’t certain which of them led in conversations, or how they argued.

Martha was happy, in love, and leaving him, and Q knew nothing about it but the bare facts.

He knew, at least, that his mother and sisters had more sense about these things than he did. If they had decided Dr. Moore was an acceptable match, then all was well.

When it was done, Martha hugged and kissed her mother and each of her siblings.

“Are you happy?” Q asked her. It was the only question he knew to ask.

“Blissful,” Martha promised, and kissed his cheek. “Take care of yourself, Q, please. I worry the most about you.”

“I will,” Q promised. He felt numb. Martha’s hands dropped from his arms, and she returned to her husband, whispering playfully with him.

“Georgiana,” Q started to ask, and found her already at his elbow.

She put a hand on his arm, patting him. “I know,” she said. “Just keep your mouth shut and smile.”

~

They parted ways as they left the church. Martha and Dr. Moore went one way, and the Boothroyds went the other. Q kept his mouth shut and smiled, as Georgiana had advised, at least until Martha was out of sight and he could let the smile fade.

Georgiana secured a spot between her mother and her brother, holding them both by their elbows and directing them along sternly as she chattered on about how pretty Martha had looked and how much she would undoubtedly enjoy being reckless and unladylike on the far side of the world.

“You two are acting as though she is gone already,” Georgiana chided. “She will be in and out constantly the next three days as we help her pack, and if I catch anyone being miserable and making her feel guilty, you shall go without dessert for a week.”

“What if she is eaten by cannibals?” Alice asked, curiously.

“There are no cannibals in the East Indies,” Georgiana explained, behaving as though she were a great expert on the topic. “Only in America.”

“Oh. What is there in the East Indies, then?”

Georgiana considered this, somewhat flummoxed by the question. “Tea,” she concluded at last, it being the only thing she knew for certain came from the East Indies. “There is tea.”

The army men were waiting for them again when they returned from the church, so Mrs. Boothroyd invited them in while Alice fetched refreshments.

“What can I do for you gentlemen?” Q asked, trying not to feel too concerned about their presence.
“It was brought to the attention of our superiors that the son of Major Geoffrey Boothroyd is a
practising mechanical engineer. His Majesty’s army is in development of an engine which
inexplicably will not function. These papers explain—not in detail, of course—the five projects we
have for which we would like Mr. Boothroyd’s services as a consultant, along with what we are
offering in compensation.”

“How long would I be away?” Q asked, leafing through the papers. They were vague about the
construction of the projects in question, and very vague about some of the projects entirely, but the
salary they offered would provide nicely for his family, letting them reapproach the lifestyle Mrs.
Boothroyd remembered and Georgiana wanted. They’d get more use out of a servant than they did
out of Q being there in person.

“Three months at a minimum, I would think, and possibly much longer. If I may speak frankly; we
realise that you are not the career officer your father was, Mr. Boothroyd. But we would very much
like you to consider a longer stay as an option.”

“May I have time to think it over?” Q asked.

“Certainly. Here is my card, and the offices in London to which you should report at your
convenience. Now, if you will excuse us, we have a very long journey ahead of us.”

Georgiana stuck her head into the room the minute the men had left. “What are you going to do?”

“Accept,” Q said, thoughtfully browsing through the papers they had given him.

“But what about us!” Georgiana pouted.

“You don’t actually need me here, Georgiana. The family needs the money I bring in. With this…
we can get that horse so you can have a proper carriage again. You can hire someone to help out
around the house. And I… I’ll be a proper engineer. I’ll be paid very well and have a proper
workshop.”

“Can we visit you in London?” Alice asked.

“Of course you can visit me in London,” Q promised. “Once I’m settled, I hope you’ll all visit.
Besides, it will be good for me to get out of the county.”

_Away from Mr. Bond_, he thought to himself. A tangle of relief and regret rose in him at the thought.
Q pushed it away, focusing his attention back on the papers.

Chapter End Notes

Next week: On the Virtues of Keeping Gardens
Q didn’t see much of London the first week he was there.

He went from the quarters they had given him to the workshop they had given him, and back again. Outside the walls of the army base, London was loud and dirty. He’d gotten lost twice on his way from the coach stop, and had never imagined that any city could be so large. All the houses were brick and stone, covered with soot from thousands of coal fires throughout the city. From what he’d seen, it was just endless streets that all looked the same, with unfamiliar, unfriendly people.

Inside the walls of the army base, at least, the men were friendly. He was highly-respected, first on his father’s reputation and then on his own, as he made short work of fixing and improving every project they brought to him. He’d never had such high-quality tools and materials, and was quickly given three assistants and half a dozen collaborators, all of whom promptly took to calling him “Q”.

He wrote home nightly, sent the lion’s share of his wages back to his mother, and found himself content. Achingly lonely, but content.

After a week, Mr. Bond appeared.

“—here on a social call, visiting Mr. Quintus Boothroyd.”

The lock on his workshop clicked home under Q’s hand. He was the last to leave, as usual, when all his collaborators had long since gone home to families and dinner.

It took a few seconds for the half-heard words to process in his mind before he recognized the voice and spun. Mr. Bond was standing across the yard from him, speaking to one of the officers.

Heart fluttering like a frightened rabbit, Q stared at him, speechless as Mr. Bond made polite farewells and crossed to where Q was standing.

Mr. Bond here? his mind queried, stymied by this turn of events. How? Why?

“Q,” Mr. Bond greeted him, eyes glittering with friendly mirth.

Clearing his throat in a desperate attempt to manage words, Q nodded in greeting. “Mr. Bond. How…?”

“Perhaps you will let me explain over a drink. Are you fond of coffee? I know of an excellent coffeehouse not far from here.”

Q’s mind spun through potential means of escape and found none socially feasible. Beside which, he was exceedingly curious for an explanation. “I have not often had occasion to have it,” Q answered, which was something like acquiescing.

“Then let us make the occasion,” Mr. Bond proposed, his hand brushing Q’s elbow as he guided him out of the army base and down the street.

“What brings you to London, Mr. Bond?” Q asked.

“I came to apologise.”
Puzzled, Q glanced over at him. “Apologise?”

“I wrote to some of my contacts in the army, seeking information about Major Boothroyd after our last conversation. I did not expect them to make such short work of acquiring you.”

Q’s emotions spun. Mr. Bond had told the army about him. That was what had prompted the requisition. Mr. Bond had been inquiring after information on Q’s father, pursuant to their discussion. And now Mr. Bond was here, for him.

“You came all the way to London to apologise to me? A letter alone would have sufficed.”

“I felt responsible,” Mr. Bond said, holding the door to the establishment for him.

Q stepped inside, embraced at once by the smoke and caramel scents of coffee, and the lively cacophony of voices in discussion. He recognized scientists and soldiers from the base mingling with students, scholars, and a variety of opinionated Londoners. Smiling in confused interest, he shifted ever so slightly closer to Mr. Bond. The place was noisy and crowded, far more crowded than the sleepy northern pubs to which Q was accustomed, and all those strangers made him nervous—and yet he could not help but be interested and intrigued by a place filled with so much intellectual debate.

Steering him with a few light touches on Q’s back and shoulder, Mr. Bond obtained a pair of coffee drinks to his satisfaction from the bar. Placing one of them into Q’s hands, he elbowed his way into a pair of seats near the back of the room. Q noticed with surprise that as crowded as the place was, Mr. Bond somehow managed that no one so much as brushed against Q in passing.

“Are they all like this?” Q asked, having to speak up to be heard.

“The good ones are,” Mr. Bond replied, grinning. “I have a policy to never patronise a coffeeshop that doesn’t have a student brawl over Miltonian philosophy at least once a week.”

Q’s lips twitched with a smile, not certain whether or not he was being sincere.

“Have you seen the sights of London?” Mr. Bond asked, sipping at his coffee.

“I haven’t,” Q admitted, not wanting to confess that he found London dreadful and had barely left the army base.

“I feared as much. You never go anywhere unless dragged, do you?” Mr. Bond teased.

“Not if I can help it.”

“Let me show you around.”

Mystified, Q squinted at him. “You came all the way to London to show me around?”

“As I said, I felt responsible. It gave me an excuse to conduct some business in London I had been putting off, and I promised your mother and your sisters that I would ensure that you were still eating.”

“I’m eating,” Q said, smiling fondly at his family’s fussing. “They give me three hot meals a day at the base.”

“Do you like the work?” Mr. Bond asked, conversational.

“I do. It’s a greater challenge than any of the assignments I received doing repair work back home, and I enjoy the collaboration with other engineers.”
“I am glad for that,” Mr. Bond said. “And in your spare time, I shall see to it that you are toured properly around Town.”

“Isn’t necessary,” Q said.

“It is,” Mr. Bond said. “Georgiana will have both our heads if you haven’t at the very least seen Westminster and St. James.”

Q smiled again, unable to resist. “She probably would, at that.”

~

After the coffeehouse, Mr. Bond hailed a hackney carriage to take them to dinner at a private club.

“How are mama and the girls faring without me?” Q asked, watching London pass by outside of the carriage window.

“They’re doing well,” Mr. Bond assured him. “I visited to ensure they had everything they needed before I departed. They miss you and Martha both, but they are glad for you.”

“How long do you intend to stay?” Q asked.

“At least a matter of weeks. I have business to attend to here in Town. Besides, I am glad to play tour guide for you.”

Q blushed. “You must have more important social connections in London. It is kind of you, but there’s no reason to waste your time on me.”

“Social connections which I plan to assiduously avoid.”

“Why?” Q asked.

“I’m afraid I’m quite unsociable, even more so in London than in Ainsburgh.” Mr. Bond said with a smile. “Here we are.”

He dismounted smoothly from the carriage, holding a hand up for Q and helping him down. As Q’s feet touched the ground, he looked up and found Mr. Bond smiling at him again. Cheeks flooding, Q was himself only inches from Mr. Bond and with his hand still captured. His heart flipped over in his chest, feeling confused and lost in Mr. Bond’s presence.

“Shall we?” Mr. Bond murmured, tucking Q’s hand around his arm and guiding him up the steps. Feeling out of his depth, Q followed obediently.

The private club was handsomely appointed, and full of naval officers—both in uniforms and in civilian suits.

“Commander Bond!” The host greeted him with enthusiastic surprise. “We did not know you were in London.”

“Only just arrived,” Mr. Bond explained, warm and friendly while keeping possession of Q’s hand. “A quiet table, if you please.”

“Bond!” someone said promptly, coming up and clapping him on the arm. “Are you in town? What a delight? And who is this?”

“Good evening, Lieutenant Commander,” Mr. Bond said. “This is my companion, Mr. Quintus
Boothroyd, who is working as an independent consultant to the Royal Engineers at the moment.”

“John Strangways,” the stranger said, offering his hand. “Research and development, is it? Every year it seems like they increase their budget for odd inventions.”

“Do they?” Q said, leaning closer in to Mr. Bond because of the sudden influx of talkative strangers around them.

“Come, join my table, won’t you? I insist.”

Lieutenant Commander Strangways led them to a table, talking vivaciously with Mr. Bond as he did so. Keeping Q close, Mr. Bond took control of the conversation, answering most questions on Q’s behalf and smoothly redirecting the topic where he wanted it to go. Q realized with surprise that Mr. Bond was protecting him, creating the illusion that Q was lively and social while actually Mr. Bond did all the talking for him. It felt oddly safe, and allowed Q to relax and almost enjoy the company of the naval officers without having anything expected of him.

They dined on foods Q had never eaten and didn’t recognise, and Mr. Bond insisted that he sample the finest French and Italian wines that the place had to offer, so that Q was almost as lively as the rest of the table by the time they left.

Mr. Bond’s hand was warm and steady on his arm as they obtained a carriage to return to the army base, and Q leaned against him, feeling sleepy and content.

“Now what do you think of London?” Mr. Bond asked, his voice a warm rumble near Q’s ear.

“Better,” Q said, for once not questioning the way his heart felt like it was swimming in his chest. A result of the wine, no doubt. “I may patronise the coffee shop again. And it was pleasant to converse with your naval acquaintances. I enjoyed that.”

“We shall continue your familiarisation with the city tomorrow, then,” Mr. Bond said, helping Q from the carriage and delivering him to the barracks. “Can you walk?”

“Yes,” Q said, detaching himself from Mr. Bond’s arm and checking that he was steady on his feet. Reasonably steady. “Yes.”

“Tomorrow,” Mr. Bond promised.

Q smiled back at him. “Tomorrow.”

~

In the light of day, he felt like a fool.

He focused on his work the best he could, trying not to dread the evening when Mr. Bond would arrive. Mr. Bond had turned up in London for no discernable reason but to apologise in person and to tour Q around the city, and for some inexplicable reason Q had agreed. It all seemed very peculiar, and left Q with a restless feeling in his gut. He felt lost and unsatisfied, like there was something just out of his reach, but the feeling made him too nervous to focus on.

Mr. Bond arrived at the workshop in the late afternoon, his rank and honors evidently sufficient that he could walk right into a highly secure army facility without question.

“I have permission to steal you,” he informed Q, his usual warm smile in place.
“Do you?” Q asked, looking up from his tinkering and trying to resist the urge to smile and tease him in return. “Will you be returning me later?”

“I might,” Mr. Bond said, watching Q work. “But it is possible I will become tempted to keep you to myself forever.”

“Considering that this is the army we’re talking about, they might take objection to that,” Q said, feeling the smile get away from him and curl up the corners of his mouth.

“Your company is worth the risk.”

That statement wasn’t in any way believable. Q set down his engine cog and peered at him. “It is a fact universally acknowledged that I am dreadful company.”

“I disagree.”

“Why?”

The smile tucked up securely in one corner of Mr. Bond’s mouth. “Do you want me to make a list?”

He held Q’s gaze easily, as usual, so it was Q’s eyes that dropped back to the clutter of engine parts across his workspace. “No. I’m too afraid to know what would be on it.”

Giving him a few feet more of space, Mr. Bond leaned back against a worktable across from Q and folded his arms. “What is it about being liked that makes you so uncomfortable?”

Q blushed. That question made him uncomfortable. And yet, it was a valid question. “I’m not liked outside of my family. My clients and coworkers are sociable with me, and my reputation for my work is good. But I am nothing but my work and my family, Mr. Bond. There is nothing to like. Therefore, your sentiment is suspicious.”

“You’ve not had friends?” Mr. Bond asked, more sympathetic.

“I can barely maintain a conversation with my sisters without becoming bored. People bore me. Why should I bother?”

“Do I bore you?”

“No,” Q said, sharply honest because the interrogation was wearing on his nerves. He set down his tools sharply and glared. “You make me uncomfortable.”

Mr. Bond watched him again, steady and non-judgemental, until Q’s gaze faltered and he dropped his eyes with a blush.

“Come with me,” Mr. Bond said, walking over and untying Q’s work apron in order to take it from him and lay it across the table. Allowing for no argument, Mr. Bond took him by the arm and steered him from the room.

~

Mr. Bond took him to Kensington Gardens.

“I have never understood the purpose of parks,” Q said, as they alighted from the carriage. He gazed out upon the lawns and wrinkled his nose, uncertain about this adventure.

“Are you being quite sincere?” Mr. Bond asked him.
“I am.”

Disregarding Q’s skepticism, Mr. Bond took possession of his arm and guided him along one of the garden avenues. “You don’t see the value in taking the air?”

“I do not, but I am not unwilling to be convinced.”

“And what of the value of admiring a thing simply for its beauty?”

“Yes,” Q agreed. “I suppose so.” He smiled. “I admit I have never been to a park of this magnitude.”

“That is a pity. One day I shall submit to Georgiana’s persistence that I ought to properly maintain the gardens of Ainsburgh, and you shall have a park to stroll at your leisure. For the time being, I honestly find myself fond of its feral appearance.”

“You might maintain half and leave half,” Q proposed. “So as to have both.”

“I cannot tell if you are sincere in that suggestion,” Mr. Bond said, “but I find it very tempting.”

“Georgiana would be horrified.”

“She might like it. It would make the place interesting.”

Q laughed, shook his head and laughed again, putting his hand over his mouth to try to contain an uprising of giggles.

“For your education,” Mr. Bond said, mirthful, “the purpose of a garden is to promenade and engage in conversation.”

“I see,” Q nodded, trying to treat very seriously with the topic. “As we are doing now?”

“Just so.”

“Then I must make an effort at being conversant,” Q said. “Tell me, Mr. Bond, do you have strong feelings about the topic of ribbon bonnets?”

Mr. Bond’s laugh was loud and deep, his grip on Q’s arm tightening fondly. “I do not.”

“I see. I am out of conversational topics.”

“You are terrible at this,” Mr. Bond observed, his smile as wide as Q had ever seen it.

“Dreadful.”

“My dear Q, are you fond of reading? I know that you have at least studied the modern scientists. You mentioned the designs of Monsieur de Rivaz upon our first meeting.”

“I am. My father left an extensive library of science and philosophy works. My sisters insist upon developing the library into genres of romanticism and poetry, many of which I have read—before you tease me for my in-depth knowledge of Pride and Prejudice, I beg you to understand that it was the primary topic of discussion in my household for an entire year.”

“But you prefer the science and philosophy?”

“I do.”
“Who is your favorite of the modern philosophers?”

Q glanced over at him, curious and surprised. He’d never had occasion to discuss philosophy with anyone but Martha. Georgiana complained loudly of headaches anytime he tried, and even Alice only gave him perplexed expressions. “Voltaire,” he said, almost hesitant with the confession.

“And why is that?”

Feeling shy and defensive, Q stole glances at him. Mr. Bond seemed entirely sincere with his interest. “I appreciate his approach to reason,” he said, having to make an effort not to stammer the words. When Mr. Bond did nothing but listen, as though genuinely intrigued by Q’s opinions, he continued. “I think my favorite of his works are those done in collaboration with Émilie du Châtelet. I find myself a little jealous. I cannot imagine what it would be like, to be one of two brilliant minds, sparking off of each other in order to create works of greater and greater genius.”

“Would you like such a life?” Mr. Bond asked, hypothetically.

“To live in a chateau and spend my days in science and philosophy?” Q smiled sadly at the fantasy. It seemed the sort of life lived by men of leisure like Lord Byron, who barely seemed to touch the ground. It wasn’t the sort of life that had ever been available to him. “Who wouldn’t?”

“I don’t know,” Mr. Bond said, smiling. “I imagine your sisters would object to the science and philosophy.”

Q laughed, holding Mr. Bond’s arm a little bit closer as they walked. “They just might. I can’t imagine any of them would endure science and philosophy on a daily basis, even if it meant an endless supply of bonnet-ribbons.”

~

“Dine with me tonight,” Mr. Bond said.

Q dropped into the carriage across from him, pleasantly worn out from their long promenade. “Have I got a choice in the matter?”

“Only superficially.”

“Then why ask?”

“For the pleasure of hearing you say yes.”

Blushing at the way Mr. Bond’s voice purred around the words, Q crossed his arms and shifted his eyes out the window. “Where is it that I won’t have a choice about dining?”

“My London house.”

Unable to help his curiosity, Q glanced back at him. “Your London house?”

Mr. Bond waited with his usual predatory smile, knowing Q had heard just fine.

“Very well,” Q said. “I consent.”

“Say ‘yes’,” Mr. Bond teased.

“Yes, I will dine with you at your London house tonight. Since I do not have a choice. Is it as absurdly oversized as Ainsburgh?”
“Nearly so.”

The carriage delivered them to a sumptuous London house of modern design, made from cream and white stone.

“Do you own anything that isn’t expensive?” Q asked him, trying not to be impressed as they climbed the steps.

“I appreciate fine things,” Mr. Bond said, holding the door for him.

And yet, like Ainsburgh, the house interior was empty and neglected. Candles and fires had been lit, but only in a corridor leading to the dining room and the parlour. They were greeted by a manservant, and at least two others servants were involved in cooking and serving the dinner, but the house remained lonely to a degree that was tangible.

“Did you not bring Mr. Tanner to London?” Q asked, surprised to not see him present.

“He had more important business to conduct in Ainsburgh,” Mr. Bond explained, pulling out a seat for Q.

The table was vast, and the two of them took up only two seats at one end. It made the table and the room seem as though they stretched on endlessly.

“Why do you not keep a full staff, Mr. Bond? Surely it is not the expense which stops you.”

“Not the expense,” Mr. Bond agreed. “I simply find it depressing that all this effort should be maintained for myself alone. I do not wish to walk through perfectly manicured gardens, designed and kept by a staff of twelve, for my sole appreciation.”

“Forgive me,” Q said, easily imagining that ache. “It is loneliness, then.”

“It is loneliness,” Mr. Bond confirmed, and smoothly changed the topic into a discussion of philosophy.

Their dinner for two was lively, and Q more than once succumbed to laughter. It was easier to relax in Mr. Bond’s company without Georgiana’s presence. On social visits with Georgiana, she made constant efforts to keep the topics lively and accessible to all, frequently glossing over Q’s contributions to the conversation. Left to their own devices, the two of them stopped caring about conversational decorum, and Mr. Bond was able to show active interest in Q’s thoughts and opinions.

After dinner, Mr. Bond served him sherry in the study, their philosophical discourse tapering off as they both relaxed from the food and alcohol.

“Don’t you miss Georgiana?” Q said, puzzling at him. As much as he was beginning to enjoy Mr. Bond’s efforts to tour him around London, it seemed strange that Mr. Bond would be putting in so much effort for him.

“Georgiana? Not particularly. No more than I miss your mother, or Alice. I find them sweet and charming, but I have no especial desire for their company without your presence.”

“My presence?” Q repeated, baffled.

“Yes, Q,” Mr. Bond repeated, smiling with warm amusement. He leaned against the mantelpiece, idly comfortable, like a lion at repose. “It is your company I desire. Not your sister’s.”
Couched in an oversized wingback chair, Q furrowed his brow at him. “I don’t understand.”

“I am more than aware of that,” Mr. Bond smirked.

“So you are not courting Georgiana.”

“I have never been courting Georgiana.”

Q’s cheeks flushed with indignation. “She thinks you have been courting her.”

“I don’t believe that she does.”

“How dare you treat so callously with my sister’s heart?”

“Q,” Mr. Bond said, as though he was being entirely long-suffering on the issue. “Georgiana’s heart is in better hands than mine.”

Setting his drink down sharply on a nearby table, Q rose to his feet and advanced on him. “Explain it to me. There’s something I don’t understand, and you know I don’t understand, and you’ve been like a cat in cream over the information almost since we met. Explain it to me.”

“I’ve been trying,” Mr. Bond said, but he set down his drink on the mantelpiece and took a step forward so that they were toe to toe. Slowly and with intent, he placed a hand on Q’s waist, and then cupped the other one behind his neck. Q stiffened in his grip, unnerved by the physical proximity and the peculiar intimacy of his touch. “I only wish to dance with you,” Mr. Bond said, and kissed him.

Q had been kissed before, but only the sort of perfunctory embraces that involved a hug and a peck. This was entirely different. Mr. Bond’s lips caressed his own, warm and possessive, his grip tightening to draw Q in closer.

World reeling, Q shoved him away.

Mr. Bond released him. Stumbling backward, Q pressed the back of his hand over his mouth and stared at him, entirely flustered.

He’d never been kissed like that. He’d only glimpsed kisses like that on rare occasions—a couple embracing in the darkness to the side of a dance. There was something grossly sexual about it, a sort of intimacy that was properly kept behind closed doors, and for Mr. Bond to kiss him in that manner...

None of it made sense.

“I am leaving,” Q informed him, keeping his distance from Mr. Bond.

“Forgive me,” Mr. Bond said, staying where he was and making no sudden moves. His eyes lingered on Q, deeply regretful. There was nothing he could say. Thankfully, he didn’t try.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know why I have all these feels about the history of coffeehouses. Americans didn’t discover coffeehouses until the 1980s, so this just seems ridiculously awesome:
Next Week: Trouble with Beribboned Basketry.
Trouble with Beribboned Basketry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Q devoted himself to his work.

He designed, built, and implemented in every waking hour, desperate to keep his mind off of the topic of Mr. Bond. Sleeping poorly, he ate little and spoke less. His assistants and collaborators made an initial effort to lift his spirits, but as the days wore on they left him to his misery.

Mr. Bond did not call upon him again, making his solitude complete.

After a month and a half, the requested designs were finished. The science staff at the base to stay on and continue, but Q declined, promising only to renew consideration on a later date.

He was desperate to return home, even knowing that Mr. Bond might be in the neighborhood. The man had left him more unsettled than ever, and Q didn’t like the thought of leaving his family vulnerable to Mr. Bond’s questionable intentions.

The day was mingled rain and sun when Q alighted from the coach and slung his bag over his shoulder. Summer had begun to bloom fully, and the walk along the country lane was pleasant on the way home. He passed the gate to Ainsburgh without a glance, keeping his attention very firmly on the far side of the lane.

Trees dripping on him, Q turned down the path to home, smiling at the sight of their house and the little garden alongside. There was a new horse in the meadow, a proud chestnut. Q regretted that he couldn’t have stayed longer in London in order to continue to better provide for the family.

“Q!” Georgiana called, bolting from the house with entirely unladylike haste. “Q!” Squealing happily, she threw her arms around his chest and hugged tight.

“Good afternoon, G,” he said, hugging her in return. “Are you well? You’ve barely written.”

“Forgive me, Q, I’ve been busy. I am sorry. You’re back so soon! You must tell me all about London. Did you enjoy it?”

“I didn’t,” Q said, quiet and regretful. “My apologies, Georgiana, I don’t think I am suited for London.”

Her cheer deflated. “I am sorry, Q. Did you enjoy the work, at least?”

“I did. I might go back someday. Not yet. For now, I need to be here.” He forced a smile, clasping her shoulder and then falling into step with her to return to the house.

“Q...” she said, uncertain. “Did something happen?”

“No,” he lied, keeping his face blank. “Nothing happened.”

~

His family left him alone, for the most part. Even Georgiana could get no details of London from him and had to give it up. The only topic he would discuss was his work, and that was variously confidential or excessively technical.
Before long, they abandoned their attempts at discussing his absence, and left him alone in his workshop.

He returned to his life the way it had been, as though Mr. Bond had never come along at all. There were maintenance requests aplenty waiting for him in the local counties, all sorts of clockworks and mechanisms that required his expertise to repair and would otherwise require a specialist up from London. He swore that Alice had grown three inches in the month and a half he’d been away, and Georgiana was obsessed with some new novel. She took to inflicting her opinions upon Q in Martha’s absence, claiming that neither Alice nor their mother could understand, although Q found it perplexing that she thought his was a sympathetic ear. Mrs. Boothroyd’s fussing over the need to marry off Georgiana and Q had not diminished, although her complaints of being left alone in her children’s absence had been replaced by a conspicuous silence.

“Q,” Georgiana said.

Q blinked and looked up. The sunlight from the window was indicative of late afternoon. He didn’t remember how long he’d been working, and he didn’t recall hearing Georgiana come in. She was sitting by the window looking long-suffering, and he wondered how many times she’d already tried to get his attention.

“Forgive me,” he said, putting his tools down and pushing his project aside. “You have my full attention, Georgiana.”

“I need to tell you something.” She sat up and smoothed down her skirt, giving Q a very serious look. “I have been trying to tell you for a week and a half, but you are eternally either busy or moping, and now I must insist.”

He folded his hands in his lap, attentive.

Deciding that his attention was acceptable, Georgiana lifted her chin primly, deciding how to approach the topic. She settled on blurting it out in one go. “I have accepted Mr. Tanner’s proposal for marriage.”

Q stared at her, uncomprehending. “You have what?”

“Accepted Mr. Tanner’s proposal for marriage,” she repeated, enunciating briskly.

“Who?”

“Mr. Tanner.” Georgiana sighed at him, exasperated.

At last it clicked into place. “Mr. Tanner?”

“Yes, Mr. Tanner. Of Ainsburgh. Have you received a blow to the head recently?” She leveled an irritated glance at him and spoke very slowly for his benefit: “I am marrying Mr. Tanner.”

“Mr. Tanner,” Q repeated.

Georgiana looked as though she was considering delivering the aforementioned blow to Q’s head.

“How did this come about?” Q said, feeling entirely flustered.

“What do you mean, how did this come about? He has been courting me.”

“Since when?”
“Since just about the first time we met. Q, really.”

“What about Mr. Bond?”

Huffing out her exasperation, Georgiana threw up her hands. “What about Mr. Bond?”

“I thought you and Mr. Bond...”

“Me and Mr. Bond!” Georgiana exclaimed. “Certainly not. Well, yes, at first, but very quickly not. Mr. Bond even so much as spoke to me after the Wallace’s dance, to make quite clear that he had no intentions of courtship, at which time it was all I could do not to laugh with relief because I was already entirely charmed with Mr. Tanner.”

“Mr. Tanner,” Q repeated, still having a hard time believing this.

“I give up,” Georgiana sighed, abandoning the attempt at explanation and storming from the room.

Q stared after her, still baffled.

“When is the wedding?” he called, at last.

The only response he received was the slamming of a door down the hall.

~

“Q, I need you to drive me to Ainsburgh House.”

Lifting his head from his notes, Q blinked at his sister, who seemed to be impersonating some manner of basket-tree, being as she was entirely laden with beribboned wicker baskets. “Why do you need to be driven to Ainsburgh House?”

“I need to deliver these baskets,” Georgiana said, speaking to him as though he were dim-witted, which she had found to be necessary when discussing any wedding-related topic with her brother.

“Is Ainsburgh House having a shortage of baskets?”

“You’re being impossible. Go. Fetch your coat. I’m going to put these in the carriage.”

Q fetched his coat, wandering out front to help his sister load baskets into the carriage. “If you would simply let me teach you to operate the engine, you could drive yourself to Ainsburgh. Where has the other carriage gone?”

“Mama and Alice took it to Ainsburgh already. Where did you think they were?”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“No. You wouldn’t. And at any rate, it is your highest purpose as a brother to drive me places.”

“Why are Mama and Alice at Ainsburgh?”

Georgiana huffed and set down her basket. “Preparing for the wedding. Honestly, Q, do you listen to anything I say?”

“Less than I realized,” Q grimaced. “I don’t think anyone had told me the wedding would be at Ainsburgh.”
“Mr. Bond has very generously offered the house for that purpose. He has even hired staff appropriately.” Georgiana paused, looking over at him. “Have you seen the house since the wedding preparations began?”

“No.” Q held out his hand to help her up onto the driver’s seat with him. “I haven’t been to Ainsburgh since before London.”

“Q,” Georgiana sighed at him. “I really wish I knew what had happened to upset you so. You’ve been increasingly withdrawn for months.”

“It is nothing, G,” he told her, starting up the engine. “Don’t worry yourself about it.”

“I do, though,” Georgiana said, but she sighed and fell quiet for the period of the drive.

The house was in finer form than Q had ever seen it. While still far from the sort of pristine country gardens that his mother and Georgiana idealized, it at least no longer looked like an abandoned old bulldog squatting on a hill. All the windows were dressed in crisp white curtains, and the effort of a man hung precariously by ropes was revealing the honey color of the stone beneath the decades of gray grime.

“Isn’t it fine?” Georgiana asked.

“It’s an improvement,” Q admitted.

As they drew up in front, a butler came down to receive them, and a maidservant began to assist Georgiana in unloading the basketry. Perplexed, Q stood by uselessly as the three of them sorted everything out and bustled inside. Not to be left behind, Q trailed closely after them.

The interior of the house was tidied even more finely, at least in the reception hall. The marble shone, giving the house the illusion of radiating light. Q followed them into a side hall, where floors and tables alike had been commandeered for purposes involving great lengths of white and burgundy cloth.

Entirely useless and out of place, Q hovered around the edges of the table, allowing himself to be ordered around by mother, sisters, and servants alike. The servants especially didn’t seem to have any awareness that he wasn’t one of their own, hired new or temporarily for the necessities of tidying the mansion and preparing for the wedding.

More than once he tried to get Georgiana’s attention and offer to return later to fetch her and the others, but each time he did he only received a new task. As he was the only one who could drive the horseless carriage, he was trapped here until one of them needed to return home.

Laden with a stack of fabrics and bid to take them to the second-floor solarium, Q wandered helplessly around the second floor opening doors. Having only a dim idea of what a solarium was, Q hoped to encounter some busy servant who knew more specifically what and where he should be headed.

Turned around in a long corridor with doors that looked all the same and completely unsure about which way he had come, Q’s heart lifted at the sound of a door opening near him and plummeted at the sight of Mr. Bond.

Both of them tensed. Still with a hand on the door he had exited, Mr. Bond took in Q and the linens at a glance, promptly understanding the situation. “Are you lost?”

Q wished he could have simply ducked through the nearest door, avoided the conversation.
awkwardly, or pretended not to have seen Mr. Bond at all. Instead, he swallowed and answered, “The solarium. These are meant to go to the solarium.”

“This way.” Keeping a careful distance from him, Mr. Bond stepped around Q and led the way down the hall and around the corner, opening a door and holding it for him. Not for the first time, Q felt like a skittish horse that Mr. Bond was trying not to spook.

Unnerved by the feeling of Mr. Bond’s eyes on his back, Q set down the stack on a prominent table and tried not to fidget. He was being given space. Even now, when they were forced into proximity by the business of the wedding, Mr. Bond was giving him space; or perhaps avoiding him, as a rejected suitor. He took a breath, wanting to say something to repair the damage, to thank Mr. Bond for his kindness and generosity, or to ask... something.

But when he turned around, Mr. Bond had gone. Q swallowed the breath that he’d taken, and felt relieved. He wasn’t at all certain what would have come out of his mouth if he’d had the opportunity.

Feeling lonely and lost in the spacious house, Q wandered down corridors until he found his way back to the stairs, and from there to the hall where the women were working.

It seemed that Mr. Bond had generously offered his house for Georgiana’s wedding to his valet, and had even gone to the trouble and expense of having the house elegantly outfitted as though for a princess. Q didn’t know how he felt about it, after the way Mr. Bond had behaved toward him, but when everyone around him was brightly spirited and gushing on about how generous and thoughtful Mr. Bond was, Q found it best to keep his mouth shut and obey the tasks they gave him.

He had some comfort in the fact that Mr. Bond took no direct involvement in the wedding preparations, and no one had the gall to ask Mr. Bond to assist with carrying bundles and rearranging chairs. Q wasn’t certain whether Mr. Bond avoided the preparations only when Q was present, or always, but on the days that he accompanied the women to Ainsburgh, Mr. Bond was only rarely to be seen.

Every morning, Mr. Bond sent his carriage to the Boothroyds to pick up the women and whatever was necessary for them to transport that day. Q’s involvement was only required when someone needed an extra carriage.

On the days that it wasn’t, he remained in his workshop, trying to catch up on the tasks that got neglected when he was hauled off to Ainsburgh, and ducking around the servants underfoot in his own home. He wasn’t certain anymore whether they were his mother’s servants or Mr. Bond’s, nor why or for how long they would be present. Trusting them to do their own duties as instructed by his mother and Georgiana, Q crept vigilantly around them, avoiding them and accepting the sandwiches that appeared in his workshop. When he was certain that Georgiana was nowhere near, he worked on a little clockwork kitten as a wedding gift for her, to remind her of him and as an apology for not being a better brother to her.

Some days, the women didn’t return from Ainsburgh until well after dark.

On one of these days, supperless and left to his own devices, Q stole a cold mutton pie from the kitchen and lodged himself in the library where he had a view of the front drive.

His books all seemed dull to him, restless as he was, and his sister’s books were utterly intolerable tonight. Picking up books, listlessly reading a paragraph or two, and then dropping them onto a pile of rejected options that he was too lazy to return to their places, he lifted his head on a sudden memory and went looking for the Greek philosophers.
The book that came to hand was Plato’s *Symposium*, which he had attempted to read as a child and become bored and confused with the lengthy philosophy on the nature of love and friendship. Having no better guide on the topic, he settled down to educate himself.

~

“Oh, heavens, Q, are you reading the *Symposium*?” Georgiana asked, over breakfast, trying not to giggle into her tea.

Chin in hand, Q looked up from his book. “I am, though I don’t understand the half of it.”

“No, I wouldn’t expect you would,” she teased, setting down a tray of tarts in front of him. Q helped himself to one. “Why, pray tell, are you reading Plato’s *Symposium*?”

“It’s philosophy,” Q explained, logically. “I like philosophy.”

She arched her pretty golden brows at him. Q put the book down. Alice, perplexed, looked between the two of them with wide eyes.

“Have you read it?” Q asked.

Dropping into a chair, Georgiana primly lifted a tart. “I have.”

“You despise philosophy.”

“It isn’t philosophy, it’s romance.”

“It’s romantic philosophy.”

“Yes,” Georgiana agreed, “which still brings us back to the question of why you’re reading it.”

Q sighed, irritated. “I do not understand romance, Georgiana. I did not understand when Martha married Dr. Moore, and I do not understand now. How do you know you are in love with Mr. Tanner?”

Intrigued by the conversation, Georgiana poured herself more tea. “My heart flutters when I am around him,” she began, listing things as she thought of them. “Conversation with him makes me feel happy and safe. His gaze makes me feel valued. When he touches my hand, he is steady and gentle, and it makes me want to put myself entirely into his hands, because I trust him with my self, and I hope he will entrust me with his self.”

Q considered the book, and then lifted his head in thought again. “Does he make you feel whole?”

Georgiana giggled. “I suppose so. That bit was my favorite part, where the souls of lovers were thunderbolted apart.”

“It presents the idea that men may be lovers of men,” Q said, very gingerly.

“And women of women,” Georgiana added, brows lifted only slightly.

Q stared at her.

“Oh, go read Sappho, will you?” Georgiana brushed it off with a light laugh. To Q’s surprise, she didn’t seem to be scandalised in the least. Leaning forward conspiratorially, she grinned. “It is thought that old Miss Godfrey is a sapphist, because she dresses so oddly and is always having women visitors up from London.”
Q continued staring.

Surprised at last, Georgiana tilted her head at him. “Do you truly not know about this sort of thing?”

Unnerved, Q glanced over at Alice, who was watching them both with innocent curiosity, and then back at Georgiana. “My only knowledge is the occasional elaboration upon passionate excesses from the pulpit and this book.”

“I see.” Georgiana shrugged, the motion entirely unladylike. “Well, I suppose that all you need to know is that sometimes people like Miss Godfrey prefer the company of their own sex, and sometimes they dress accordingly, and sometimes bored churchgoers set about making a big fuss about the scandal, but it hardly ever goes anywhere. It’s very rare that anyone’s ever convicted of sodomy,” she said lightly.

Alice went red and returned her full attention to her breakfast.

It was hard to tell whether or not Georgiana could be trusted as a source. Q peered at her, then flipped to a section in the book. “What are your thoughts on Pausanias’ speech regarding the differences of love between Aphrodite Pandemos and Aphrodite Urania?”

“I think it’s utter nonsense,” Georgiana said cheekily, talking with her mouth full. “But I shall give you my more informed opinion after my wedding night.”

Q turned as red as Alice and quickly shut the book.

Chapter End Notes

Aphrodite Pandemos, usually translated as “Common” Aphrodite, of base lust, and Aphrodite Urania, “Heavenly” Aphrodite, of pure (not-sexual) love, at least according to Plato’s fictionalized version of Pausanias.

References for this section, especially on Regency-era attitudes toward homosexuality, include:
Plato’s Symposium ( http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symposium_%28Plato%29 )
The Trials of Oscar Wilde
“Gentleman Jack” Anne Lister ( http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Lister )
On the Advantages of Rain the Night Before a Wedding

“Don’t you dare rain,” Georgiana warned the evening skies.

“What shall you do if they don’t heed you?” Q asked. He was standing at the edge of the covered porch to the rear of Mr. Bond’s residence and watching the skies, while the women tied garlands together. They had made him try his hand at this task, being that garland-tying was now an urgent priority, but he had quickly been deemed so terrible at color-coordination and artful arrangement that he had been dismissed.

“I shall be most displeased with them,” Georgiana said, giving the hovering clouds another narrow-eyed scowl. “I have planned an outdoor wedding, it would be so lovely to have an outdoor wedding, and now the clouds are threatening to rain.”

“Perhaps they shall simply rain tonight and tomorrow will be clear,” Alice suggested. “Besides, I thought you told Martha that rain was lucky for weddings.”

“Of course I did,” Georgiana said. “Whatever happens on a wedding, you’re always supposed to tell the bride that it’s lucky. It wouldn’t be fashionable for unlucky things to happen on weddings. Q, pass me that basket. Now, at Liddie’s wedding—oh, I suppose I should call her Mrs. Ellis now—you see, her sister hadn’t baked the cake properly and it collapsed in…”

Feeling that he would crawl out of his skin to listen to any more discussion of weddings, after weeks upon weeks of little else in conversation, Q stepped out of the cover of the porch in hopes of a walk. Promptly hit by a stray raindrop, he turned about and slunk indoors instead. Ainsburgh was huge. He would just have a walk inside.

In the late evening, with all the preparations for the wedding tucked up and ready, most of the servants had retired. Here and there were knots of flurried activity, but it was easy enough to avoid the pools of candlelight and retire to the quiet darkness of the hallways instead.

The third floors of the house were the quietest, being only very lightly occupied. Q crept up a back stairway, having to fumble his way along by feel in the entirely dark corridors. He opened the first door he found, which revealed a completely barren room. It was lit by the twilight from the window, silvery on the floorboards. The next was full of spare chairs and a few tables, as though the lot of them had gathered for a convention and been locked into the room, leaving nothing behind but their bones. The third room was a study with empty shelves, nothing like the fully-stocked library Q had seen downstairs.

Too much house for one man, he thought, and wondered again about Mr. Bond’s loneliness. The man would not spend his money on keeping a staff and maintaining the place for his own benefit, but he did so gladly for his valet’s marriage.

He opened the fourth door onto a tastefully-appointed bedroom. At first glance it appeared to be a neglected guest room, with neatly made bed and an empty desk.

Mr. Bond lounged in the window seat.

Posture slouched and shirt unbuttoned, cravat nowhere to be seen, he made Q think of a woodcut printing from one of Georgiana’s books--The Robber King in his Den. The illustration was of a roguishly handsome villain sprawled decadently amongst his treasures, beginning to rise as though to approach the viewer, with a gaze as predatory as any of Mr. Bond’s.
Q felt his heart flop over in his chest. He was trapped in Mr. Bond’s sight, who had looked over when the door opened.

Mr. Bond’s fingers curled around the neck of a wine bottle, shoulder set to the glass of the window. He had been watching the rain and drinking alone.

“Forgive me,” Q said. “I did not mean to intrude.”

Silent, Mr. Bond watched him. His face was unreadable, silhouetted by the fading light of the rainy evening, but his gaze never left Q.

Feeling foolish, Q stepped out into the hall, pulling the door with him so that it pressed up against his back, not quite closed. His fingertips lingered on the ornate knob, tracing the floral designs of the cast bronze.

He leaned into the door and it opened. Unsure of what he was doing, Q stepped into the room and let the door shut, putting his back to it so as to keep as far from Mr. Bond as possible.

That dangerous gaze never wavered. Mr. Bond’s blue eyes were pure silver in the dim light.

“May I join you?” Q asked, having to force the words out from a dry throat.

Mr. Bond’s lips curved almost imperceptibly, but Q knew that expression. He knew how the eyes crinkled at the corners, filling the blue with summer-sky mirth. He knew how Mr. Bond’s lips pursed together, tensing close as if compensating for the curve in the corners, as if locking in the secrets that might escape if he showed his teeth in a smile.

Q’s feet took a step without consulting him, and then another, and he found himself standing near Mr. Bond at the far end of the window seat entirely without his consent. Once he had approached, there was nothing to do but to sit, so he did, perching nervously on the very edge of the cushion.

Mr. Bond tipped the bottle of wine toward him with as much cordiality as one could offer a bottle of half-drunk wine while in a state of disarray. Needing the emotional buttressing, Q took the bottle and tried it.

The wine was exquisite, probably French, and better than anything Q had ever tasted. Q made an incoherent sound of approval and offered the bottle back. Mr. Bond ignored the gesture, attention back out the window, so Q kept the bottle, sipping at it. They watched the rain together, silent in the darkness that provided them shelter from the social business downstairs and their shared, separate loneliness.

Q felt as though there was a terrible load of things that he didn’t know how to say, and it left him with absolutely nothing that he did know how to say, with the exception of the wedding, which he very desperately did not want to talk about.

He did so anyway. “It is very generous of you to provide for Georgiana’s wedding to Mr. Tanner like this.”

Mr. Bond kept his attention out of the window, showing no reaction. “It is no trouble.”

It seemed that Mr. Bond didn’t want to discuss the topic any more than Q did.

Q took a long draught of the bottle and handed it over. This time, Mr. Bond took it, sharing it between them every few sips.
As they sat and drank, Q slowly crept further onto the windowsill. His shoes made their escape, and his feet tucked up, so that his shoulder pressed against the cold glass in reflection of Mr. Bond’s.

“I have been trying to research a topic about which I know nothing,” Q said at last, beginning a confession which he even now had no desire to make.

Mr. Bond did not respond, perhaps expecting that if Q intended to continue, he would do so best unaided.

“I began with Plato’s *Symposium,*” Q attempted to explain.

That did get a reaction. Mr. Bond gave him an entirely peculiar expression, half amused and half puzzled. “Did it help?”

“I’m uncertain. I got lost somewhere around wondering if the intentions of the lover were honorable and whether it was honorable for the beloved to surrender to his male lover or whether it was better to maintain the pure love of Aphrodite Urania which is unsullied by the sexual affairs of Aphrodite Pandemos, and the work seemed to be entirely inconclusive on the topic, nor am I in any way certain how it relates to your intentions, nor whether they are honorable, nor by which code of honor they might theoretically honorable, nor whether even if your intentions are honorable--or not--it is subsequently honorable for me to surrender to your intentions, being what they may or may not be--”

“Q,” Mr. Bond interrupted, mouth twitching as though he was attempting to contain laughter.

Q trailed off and looked at him helplessly, lost within his own attempts to understand.

Patiently, Mr. Bond handed over the bottle and sat up to better explain. “If we may leave aside the question of honor for the moment, I can at least clarify some of the other topics which you seem to have so badly muddled within your own head.”

Taking the bottle and drinking from it, Q nodded.

“What Pausanias and the others are discussing, among many other things, are the questions of love between men, and lust between men, and the inevitable overlap between those two extremes.”

Q nodded again, grateful.

“Do you at least understand the concept of romantic love between men?” Mr. Bond asked.

Q swallowed. “Accept the theoretical existence of, yes. Understand, no.”

“Do you know anything of lust between men?” Mr. Bond continued, finding out just how deep Q’s ignorance ran.

Blushing deeply, Q shook his head.

“Do you find these concepts repugnant?”

“No,” Q confessed, although he knew he barely knew what there was to be repugnant over.

“If you wish to continue your research on the topic,” Mr. Bond said, “I have some titles in my library I would lend you. You’ll have better luck with French authors of the past two centuries than anything English.”

“I do not know whether I wish to continue my research on the topic,” Q said, feeling emotionally lost.
“Are you willing to consider allowing me to court you?” Mr. Bond asked, proposing the idea gently.

Tensing his jaw and considering it, Q watched him closely, trying not to be flustered by the way that he looked, with his shirt hanging open around a broadly muscled chest. “What would that involve?”

“The same sort of thing that courtship usually involves,” Mr. Bond tried to explain.

“Would I be the woman?” Q asked defensively.

“If I wished to court a woman, I would court a woman. I wish to court you, as a man.”

“Men cannot marry,” Q said.

Mr. Bond watched him in silence for a few moments. “Are you asking how the courtship would be consummated?” he said, gaze uncompromising as he asked the question that Q had just dodged.

Breaking the gaze and scowling out at the rain, Q took a sulky sip of wine. “Yes.”

“Sexually, if we wished. With private vows, also, if we wished. This can be anything we choose.”

“Do you desire me sexually?” Q demanded.

“Very much so.”

Surprised by that, even given their conversation up to this point, Q stared at him in shock.

“That surprises you,” Mr. Bond observed.

Q turned his scowl back out the window, ignoring the inherent question.

“Does it intrigue you?” Mr. Bond asked.

Q very much wanted to avoid considering the answer to that question. Mr. Bond waited, giving him the time and silence he needed.

The rain was heavier now, pattering steadily against the windows. Q bit his lip hard, emotions roiling. “Yes.”

Smooth and slow, Mr. Bond rose from his lounging position and bent forward over Q, giving him plenty of chance to react and recoil. When he didn’t, Mr. Bond lifted his chin, and took a kiss.

The kiss was warm and gentle, different from the way Mr. Bond had kissed him before. Q leaned into it, beginning to move his lips in mimicry and response, and giving a soft murmur of surprise at how it felt.

When Mr. Bond paused and pulled back to look at him, Q’s mouth followed his lips a moment before he blushed and leaned back. Shy, he glanced up and found Mr. Bond smiling down at him, as warm and full as Q had ever seen his smile, and he couldn’t resist a smile in return.

“Do you wish to continue?” Mr. Bond asked, lips already brushing against Q’s.

Nodding into the kiss, Q breathed out when it broke, “Yes.”

He shivered at the feeling of Mr. Bond’s tongue tracing his lips, pressing them apart and delving into his mouth. Whimpering, Q reached up, clasping a hand around the back of Mr. Bond’s neck to hold him near and opening his mouth to allow it.
Playful and tentative, he flicked his tongue against Mr. Bond’s and felt his partner flick back, warmly encouraging.

“Is this proper?” Q asked, when they paused to breathe and recover. Mr. Bond settled close to him, back against the window and thigh pressed against Q’s legs.

“No,” Mr. Bond answered honestly. “It is only considered proper for a man to kiss his wife in that manner, and even then the Church debates over the decency of it.”

Mr. Bond’s face was shadowed, but the line of his body was comfortable and content. One hand settled on Q’s thigh, gently possessive.

Q supposed he had never cared much for what was considered proper.

“Where did you learn such things?” he asked, letting his legs unfold and settling them over Mr. Bond’s lap.

“Men on ships for long voyages form companionships,” Mr. Bond said, unwilling to elaborate further.

Q offered him the bottle, and Mr. Bond took it with a smile, downing another sip and handing it back. Drinking from the nearly empty bottle, Q swirled it in his mouth. It tasted like Mr. Bond. He swallowed.

“What will I be, to you?” Q asked. “If I consent and you court me.”

“A companion,” Mr. Bond explained. “A lover. You may move into Ainsburgh when you please, or never, if you please. You may share a bed with me, or not. I will provide you a workshop and a library, and fulfill your every possible whim, and you may invent as you like or never lift a spanner again, if you choose.”

Head spinning, Q finished off the bottle. It all seemed impossible, that such a life would be on offer for him. “In return for what?”

“Companionship,” Mr. Bond said. “Eventually love, I would hope.”

“And what will we tell people?”

“We will tell them as much of the truth as they wish to hear. That you are my companion and dear friend. They will call us confirmed bachelors, and some people will suspect what that means. We will be excluded from company and invitations of those who believe it indecent, and we will receive invitations enough to compensate from those who think a bit of scandal adds spice.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Because we would not be the only ones,” Mr. Bond explained. “It is not entirely unusual for spinsters or bachelors to find comfort in others of their kind.”

Wanting to believe him, Q set the empty bottle on the floor nearby. “And I spend my days in a stately home, discussing science and philosophy?”

“If you prefer, we can always make it a chateau in France.”

Dizzy with the possibility, Q giggled, sliding down on the windowseat until his hips were stopped by Mr. Bond’s thigh. “Teach me of Aphrodite Pandemos,” he said.
Mr. Bond kissed him.

This time, there was nothing gentle in the kiss. Bending over him, Mr. Bond braced himself on one arm that trapped Q in the windowseat, and curled the other hand behind his head to hold him in place as Mr. Bond took heated possession of his mouth. Mr. Bond’s tongue pushed its way fully between his lips, taking and claiming Q as his own.

Q’s throat produced a sound of desperate pleasure that he’d never heard himself make before, his body reacting gladly to Mr. Bond’s touch while Q’s mind was still lost and reeling.

When Mr. Bond relinquished his mouth, Q was completely breathless. He felt emotionally vulnerable, forced to trust that Mr. Bond knew what he was doing and would take care of him. Irrationally frightened that Mr. Bond would pull away, Q reached up and clasped the front of his shirt, knuckles brushing against the warm, bare skin of his chest.

Still braced above him, Mr. Bond began unfastening the buttons of Q’s shirt. One by one they released, exposing him to Mr. Bond’s eyes and hands. Shy, Q watched his face for reassurance, and found it. Mr. Bond’s smile was warm and steady, pausing often to kiss him.

“Come,” Mr. Bond said, brushing his fingers over Q’s belly as he rose and held out his hand. Trusting, Q took the hand, letting himself be pulled up and led to the bed.

Mr. Bond stopped him by the side of it, pushing Q’s shirt open and letting it drop to the floor. He shed his own shirt a moment later, and paused to light a candle.

Q had only rarely in his life seen men shirtless, and those had not been two feet from him and muscled like a soldier. He stared openly as Mr. Bond lit the candle, watching the way the light gilded his muscles and played upon the planes of his body as he shifted.

“Does my physical appearance please you?” Mr. Bond asked, resting his hands on Q’s waist and holding him close.

Carefully, Q lifted his hands and placed them on Mr. Bond’s chest. He traced the muscles with his fingers, drawing back once as they twitched under his touch. His own body was slender and angular, oft neglected in favor of his mind. Mr. Bond’s body was solidly built and powerful. Q felt his belly clench with want, and understood that it was lust he’d been feeling all along. He simply hadn’t been certain of it until now, when it was too strong to be ignored.

“Yes,” he said, desperate with want.

“You are exquisite,” Mr. Bond told him, gently pressing back on Q’s hips until he sat down on the bed. “Do you realize that?”

“Me?” Q echoed, not certain how to believe it but knowing above all else that he wished to trust Mr. Bond’s word.

“You,” Mr. Bond said. He pushed Q down on his back and kissed him again, fingers trailing back to Q’s hips once the kiss finished. “May I continue?”

Continuing meant that Q would be naked and exposed to Mr. Bond. Terrified of the thought, Q bit his lip and paused. The idea of stopping was worse, and would leave the little knot of lust in his belly unresolved.

“Yes,” Q said, and bit his lip harder as Mr. Bond unlaced his trousers and pulled them down. Lifting his hips to help, Q let himself be fully stripped.
Vulnerable, Q propped himself up on one elbow, watching Mr. Bond through his curls.

Mr. Bond knelt beside him, resting his hand on Q’s hip and taking a soft kiss. “Tell me what it is that has you frightened.”

“I do not know what to do,” Q confessed. “I do not know what you expect of me.”

“What I would like is to explore each other. Touches can be pleasurable. Certainly you must have touched yourself.” Mr. Bond’s hand trailed over Q’s hip and down his thigh. “I find you exceptionally handsome. I wish to entirely take possession of your body, in every capacity you will allow.”

The gentle, light touches continued up Q’s side. It was relaxing and stimulating at once, and Q felt his fears melting away again. “May I see you?”

“Yes.”

Q sat up partway as James rose, watching as he unbuttoned his trousers and removed them. His thighs were as thickly muscled as the rest of him, his whole body dusted with golden hair where Q only had a few light trails. And between his legs hung a massive prick, nestled in a base of yellow curls.

Cheeks burning, Q tried not to stare and yet was entirely unsure where else to look. “If that is the indicator of manhood, I find myself entirely outdone,” Q commented, having to enunciate carefully in order to get words out at all.

“It is not a competition,” Mr. Bond assured him, settling onto his side next to Q on the bed. “And if it were, there are plenty of ways in which you have me entirely outdone.”

“What about?” Q asked.

“Yes,” Mr. Bond said. He leaned in to take a kiss, and when that one broke, began another. Sweet and lazy, they shared kisses for a few minutes laying side by side. As the kisses began to deepen, Mr. Bond rolled over, parting Q’s legs with his thighs so that he could kneel between them.

Wiggling to get comfortable in the new position, Q pulled him back down for more kisses. He felt as if he was floating with bliss on the soft bed, trapped perfectly within Mr. Bond’s arms and chest. Content with the new wonder of kissing, Q gasped with surprise when he felt Mr. Bond’s prick brush against his own. A moment later it pressed close, as Mr. Bond wrapped his hand around both. When he thrust forward, his cock slid against Q’s within the cage of his fingers.

Arching beneath him in surprised pleasure, Q dropped back onto the bed and stared up at him. He found Mr. Bond grinning like a cat, pleased with himself. Whimpering for more, Q rutted his hips up, learning how to match his movements to Mr. Bond’s in order to receive the most pleasure.

Having known no release but his own hand, Q was undone by the incredible feeling of Mr. Bond’s flesh hot and solid against his own. He spent himself with a cry, trembling.

Gently releasing him, Mr. Bond kissed him again, warm and reassuring. Pressing Q’s shoulder down into the bed, he broke the kiss with a smile. “Stay here,” he said, then donned trousers and left the room.

Uncertain and dizzy, Q stayed where he was, catching his breath and staring at the canopy of the bed. It was several long minutes before Mr. Bond returned, long enough for Q to start to chew his lip with worry that he’d been abandoned. Shy at his reappearance, Q remained quiet as Mr. Bond
brought a basin of water and a damp cloth to clean the seed from Q’s belly.

“I’d like to show you more,” Mr. Bond said, eyes lusty and affectionate as he met Q’s gaze. Nervous but willing, Q nodded.

Reaching for a small jar he had brought with him, Mr. Bond opened it to reveal a sweet-smelling salve. “Part your thighs,” he instructed.

Slowly, Q parted his thighs, blushing about having his most personal regions exposed to Mr. Bond’s view.

“Do you trust me?” Mr. Bond asked

Hesitating a moment, Q nodded.

Eyes steady on Q’s face, Mr. Bond dipped his fingers into the salve and reached between Q’s legs, rubbing his fingertip against Q’s anus.

Q scrambled backward and stared at him. “What are you doing?”

Mr. Bond’s lips curled with a patient smile. “Pleasing you. If you’ll let me.”

Cheeks completely red, Q tried to figure out if this was some manner of cruel jest. “I don’t think that’s how it’s done.”

“If you wish to stop, I don’t mind,” Mr. Bond said, returning the lid to the jar.

Q watched him. “Are you certain that’s how it’s done?”

“It can be very enjoyable.”

Tense and wary, Q eyed him. Mr. Bond’s handling of him until now had been pleasurable, but to be touched there seemed utterly filthy. “Tell me,” he said.

“I have a better idea,” Mr. Bond told him, setting the jar aside and cleaning off his fingers. He leaned over Q for a kiss, smiling. “I’m going to go fetch a book on the topic. I think you’ll find it hard to believe my word alone, and I don’t want to push you. We have plenty of time to explore these things. Stay here. Rest.”

Gently, Mr. Bond tucked him into bed and kissed him again before leaving the room.

Emotions in a tumble, Q hugged a pillow and watched the closed door. He felt vulnerable and trapped. Mr. Bond had all of the knowledge of their situation and Q had none. He wanted to trust him, and wanted more kisses and pleasure of him, but he found himself entirely unsure of whether this was a safe thing to want.

The space helped. It gave him a few minutes to breathe and recover, the worries melting away as he relaxed into the bed. The last time Mr. Bond had left for a few minutes, Q feared that he might not come back. This time, he knew that he would, and he knew that Mr. Bond wouldn’t push for anything more than Q desired.

Mr. Bond returned shortly, setting a tray of tea and cakes by the bedside and pressing a small stack of thin volumes into Q’s hand. “Read some of these. I imagine you’ll like the poets. The novels are terrible for both prose and plot, but they do a better job of explaining matters.”

Taking the books, Q stared at the plain brown covers. “What are they?”
“Greek and Roman poetry and French pornography,” Mr. Bond said, with an amused tilt to his lips. “Do us both a favor and don’t let your sisters get their hands on them.”

Q lifted his brows in horror at the thought of his sisters reading such things, and tentatively opened one of the books.

“I’ll let you read in private,” Mr. Bond said, gently. “If you require anything, my room is at the end of the hall.”

Q nodded, hugging the books to his chest. They would have at least some of the answers he sought.

When Mr. Bond left, Q helped himself to one of the cakes and scooted down under the covers to read. He found himself grateful that he had been left alone. It was easier to read without worrying about the pleasure and thoughts of Mr. Bond at his side. He had privacy and comfort, and relevant pornography.

Blushing copiously at the prettily phrased vulgarity of Catullus, he only found himself more confused than ever, and changed to one of the French novels instead. Even in translation, plenty of the words were unknown to him or unknown in this purpose, but with repetition he gathered their meaning.

The novel he began with was regarding the sexual exploits of a fictional French nobleman who carried on scandalous adventures with members of both sexes. More than once pulling the covers over his head and blushing in disbelieving shock at the things he was reading, Q skipped ahead to the chapters that detailed sex between men, with dawning comprehension and horror.

These were the things Mr. Bond wished to do with him? Q was not at all certain how he felt about that. Shutting the filthy book and pushing it off the far side of the bed, Q hugged his knees to his chest and thought it over. The characters in the books certainly seemed to enjoy the acts.

Restless and uncertain in his own skin, Q rolled out of bed and dressed. He paced the room, feeling cold. They’d never lit a fire, and he wasn’t certain he should now, but the room was getting colder as the evening deepened and it would be unpleasant to stay for long.

Leaving the books where they were, he blew out the candle and stepped into the dark hall, facing toward the stairs.

He could return home. Safety and his own bed, except that he was terribly rumpled and his family would almost certainly ask questions.

At the far end of the hall, behind him, was a door with a seam of light escaping from beneath it. Within that door would be warmth and answers, although there would also be the pressure of Mr. Bond’s desire that Q was not certain he wished to reciprocate.

He took a step toward the door. Mr. Bond had given him every opportunity to consent or refuse. If he changed his mind, he trusted that Mr. Bond would let him go.

Another step took him closer, and before he knew it he had reached the door at the end of the hall and touched the knob.

It opened to him, and Q stepped through.

Dressed only in trousers, Mr. Bond was curled in a chair by the fire, reading. He looked up with a smile at the sight of Q.

Nervous, Q shut the door and stepped into the room. “I was getting cold,” he explained.
“Forgive me,” Mr. Bond said, rising. He crossed the room and took Q’s hands gently. “Would you like to stay?”

Mr. Bond’s hands were warm and steady. Q stared up at him, heart fluttering. “I am tired,” he said, which was not agreement or refusal.

Gesturing to the bed, Mr. Bond led him to the side of it and removed the bedwarmer from near the foot of the covers.

Sharing a bed with Mr. Bond. Was that what he wanted? Too tired of fighting with his own heart and mind, Q let himself be led to the bed and stripped down to his undergarments.

“Come here,” Mr. Bond said, joining Q under the covers and drawing him into an embrace.

Unresisting, Q let himself be held. Mr. Bond was warm, and the embrace was soothing. Accepting that this was good and that Mr. Bond would ask nothing more of him tonight, Q relaxed and slept.
Q awoke cuddled against his lover.

He shifted, blinking at the broad chest in front of him, and decided not to move. Mr. Bond’s arms were warm around Q’s back, keeping him close and protecting him from the world. Mr. Bond’s breath was low and steady, providing a soothing rhythm that ran at a counterpoint to the heart beating beneath Q’s palm.


Q ran his hand up Mr. Bond’s chest, and found himself suddenly flipped onto his back and pinned. Heart ratcheting instantly into a panic, Q froze beneath him, wide-eyed until Mr. Bond’s gaze locked on him and they both understood what had just happened.

Releasing him, Mr. Bond rolled back onto his side, giving Q space. “Forgive me. I am unaccustomed to sharing my bed.”

He’d forgotten he wasn’t still in the war, Q supposed. “Forgiven.”

Relaxing back into the warm, protective man that Q was beginning to recognize, Mr. Bond smiled at him. “How did you sleep?”

“Well,” Q murmured, nestling back into his arms.

Sweet and affectionate, Mr. Bond hugged him close and kissed Q’s temple. “I fear we are probably running late as it is. You will need to return home to change into proper wedding attire, and I will be required for some manner of last-minute preparations here, I daresay.”

Q grumbled, not wanting to leave Mr. Bond’s bed.

“Once the celebrations have begun,” Mr. Bond said, murmuring into Q’s ear, “and we have made our congratulations, will you slip away with me?”

Smiling at the temptation, Q lifted his head. “To your bedroom?”

“Do you think anyone would notice?”

“I think they’d be surprised to see us enjoying ourselves at the party, rather. Georgiana will be too happy to notice, and the others will simply think I have snuck off somewhere quiet, as I often do.”

“Is that a yes?”

Q grinned. “It might be.”

“You are intentionally depriving me of the pleasure of hearing your consent.”

Q laughed, delighted, and kissed him. “Yes,” he said, enjoying their flirtation.

“I shall count the hours until then,” Mr. Bond said.

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“Here he is, mama, he isn’t dead.” Alice took possession of Q’s wrist the moment he walked through
the door, dragging him into Georgiana’s room where preparations were being made.

“Q!” Mrs. Boothroyd promptly began fussing over him. “Where have you been? I was so worried, I thought something must have happened, that a wolf had snatched you—”

“Mama, there are no longer wolves in England,” Q tried to explain.

Georgiana rolled her eyes. “I told you he’d just wandered off and fallen asleep somewhere, mama. You know he does that.”

“Yes, certainly, when he was six. Did something happen?”

“Not at all, mama,” Q answered, kissing her cheek to comfort her. “As Georgiana points out, I wandered off and fell asleep. Mr. Bond was so kind as to put me up in a spare room for the night.”

“He’s such a thoughtful man,” Mrs. Boothroyd said. “But you look a right mess, Q. Go comb your hair and dress yourself decently. Hurry up, now.”

“Yes, mama.” Smiling, Q made his way to his room to change. He felt different, as if his skin fit easier on his frame. There was a promise of companionship and a new life for him today, and he almost believed that it was true.

Once he was properly attired, he returned to his sister’s room where the three women were all fluttering about in half a panic.

“Mama, did you remember to take the roses to Ainsburgh?” Georgiana asked, holding onto her bed frame while Alice tugged the strings of her corset. “Here, Q, do up the corset, will you? You have better strength for it than Alice.”

Tapping his sister on the shoulder to tag her out, Q stepped into place and deftly tightened the laces on Georgiana’s corset. He’d done it dozens of times before, even though Georgiana and Martha had been the preferred choices to handle any corset-tying that the others needed.

“The roses!” Mrs. Boothroyd exclaimed. “No, where are they?”

“Downstairs, hopefully already in baskets. Have Alice help. I’ll make Q tie me into the dress. Hurry back!”

Mrs. Boothroyd and Alice scurried down the steps to comply, leaving Q alone with his sister.

She promptly folded her arms and turned on him. “Tell me what happened.”

Q smiled at her machinations to get them alone for a conversation. “Nothing happened,” he said, turning her back around so that he could finish fastening the laces of her corset.

“You are smiling for the first time in half a year, I think,” Georgiana said, expecting a proper explanation. “Something happened.”

“I wandered off, as you said. I came upon Mr. Bond in a spare room and we had a conversation. It settled the misunderstanding between us.”

“And then you stayed the night.”

“Yes.” Q tapped her hip to let her know he had finished.

Georgiana pointed. “Undergown, there.”
Bringing it over, Q helped get it over her head and began securing the laces and ribbons that tied it into shape.

"Are you in love with him?" Georgiana asked.

Freezing, Q released the ribbon he had been tying. Georgiana turned around to search his face.

"I don’t know," Q said.

"You are smiling again, though," Georgiana decided, allowing him to continue. "And I hope Mr. Bond will be, as well. You have no idea how melancholy he has been in your absence. Not at all the same man he was when you were in our company."

"Melancholy because of me?"

"Yes, you dear fool. It seems almost certain that he is in love with you. How funny that I thought I might marry Mr. Bond, when it seems he was meant for you all along."

"Oughtn’t you to be scandalized by this?" Q asked.

Georgiana grinned. "My dear Q, when have I ever been scandalized by anything? I think it is a lark."

"It is my life, Georgiana, not a lark."

"It is a lark," she corrected. "Has he given you terms as to how the affair will be conducted?"

"It isn’t--" Q blushed and sighed. "I have been invited to reside at Ainsburgh and live a life of luxury, among other things."

Georgiana clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, Q! You shall be a proper lady, with land and servants!"

"You are a cruel tease," Q said, blushing helplessly.

"I am happy for you," she said, taking his hands and smiling at him. "Truly."

He smiled back sincerely. "And I for you. Will you be happy with Mr. Tanner? He isn’t a lord, you know."

Georgiana laughed. "No, but he is employed by a very wealthy gentleman, which is almost as good. He has saved his pennies, and we intend to purchase a little house of our own in the village in a few months or a year."

"With a little garden and half a dozen noisy children?"

Giggling, Georgiana hugged him. "Oh, I do hope so. And we shall have you and Mr. Bond to tea and everyone shall be delightfully scandalized theorizing about the two of you and whether you are devil-worshippers and sodomites."

"Georgiana," Q said, horrified.

"Oh, go to," Georgiana said, playfully batting his arm. "No one would actually say such things. After all, we are British. It shall just be such fun hearing everyone politely hedge around hinting at the possibility that they wouldn’t rule out such theories."

"Not devil-worshipers," Q said, miserably, which sent Georgiana into a fit of giggles.
“If you could only see your face, my poor dear brother,” she teased. “Of all the people to become a confirmed bachelor, you are entirely unsuited to dealing with scandal. It is fortunate for you that you will be in the company of Mr. Bond. He is much more adept about such things.”

“You are very merciless in the manner with which you give your blessing,” Q complained.

“I am.” She kissed his cheek, smiling fondly at him. “And I do.”

The wedding was the liveliest Q had ever attended, which suited Georgiana. He found himself smiling throughout the ceremony, watching his sister’s sweet flirtations with Mr. Tanner and the flattered way in which Mr. Tanner received them. He looked like a man who had been given a gift he did not think he deserved but wished to do his best to care for nonetheless, and that was all Q wanted of him.

With the help of Mr. Bond’s money and servants, Georgiana had erected a grand pavilion in the gardens, which was reached by a maze of paths strung with Chinese paper lanterns. It made a magical wonderland of Ainsburgh, and made the house seem a queen in her glory instead of a huddled old crone in rags.

Staying safely near the company of his mother and remaining unmarried sister, Q watched the festivities with a smile. He danced once with Georgiana, as was his duty, and then retired to a quiet table. Alice was more lively, dancing with everyone who asked her, and Mrs. Boothroyd chatted happily with groups of her friends.

“May I ask a favor of you?” Mr. Bond murmured, appearing behind Q almost silently.

Blushing at once, Q looked up and nodded.

“Find a way to pull your sister and Mr. Tanner away from the party, and take them to the far corner of the gardens, just at the edge of the lanterns.” Mr. Bond pointed, waiting only for Q to nod before he disappeared again.

Mystified, Q rose from his chair and wove through the party to find his sister engaged in a spirited conversation with some of her friends and Mr. Tanner at her elbow.

“If you’ll forgive me,” he said to the young ladies occupying his sister’s attention, fighting down the waves of social anxiety that threatened to swamp him, “I need to borrow the Tanners for a brief minute.”

Georgiana’s friends made a show of complaining, but they laughed and let Q steer the newlyweds away.

“Q, what in the world is this about?” Georgiana asked, curious. “A surprise? From you?”

“Just trust me for a moment,” Q said, leading his sister and her new husband to the edge of the gardens as Mr. Bond had instructed.

“Well?” she asked, hands on hips.

“Forgive me,” Mr. Bond said, stepping forward and placing a hand on Q’s shoulder. “I asked him to conspire with me.” Holding out his hand to the newlyweds, he opened it to reveal a pretty bronze key. “My wedding present to the two of you, if you’ll accept.”
Mystified, Georgiana reached out to take it. “What does it open?”

Mr. Bond just smiled, and the three of them looked in puzzlement at him until something caught Georgiana’s attention over Mr. Bond’s shoulder.

Curious, Q turned, careful not to dislodge Mr. Bond’s hand from his shoulder. Across the gardens was the outlying building of Ainsburgh that was called the Summer House, a fanciful petite mansion with tall windows. The lights in the front window had just come on, and as they watched, the lights in the rest of the mansion went on, one and two at a time.

Georgiana squeaked with joy. “Truly?”

“In recognition to Mr. Tanner’s years of loyal service with me, I would like to offer Ainsburgh’s Summer House for your married residence. I would be very honored if you would accept.”

Regardless of propriety, Georgiana pounced Mr. Bond in a hug. “Thank you, thank you, we would be overjoyed to accept.” Laughing, she cuddled back against her husband and beamed at them, clasping the key against her heart.

“Go enjoy your party, Mrs. Tanner,” Mr. Bond said, smiling.

“Thank you,” Georgiana said again, and then bounced off back to the party.

Mr. Bond stayed, taking Q’s hand and bringing it to his lips to kiss. “I must insist that you share one dance with me, before I steal you away.”

Smiling fondly at him, Q inclined his head in a nod. “I accept.”

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One dance was all they lasted before the two of them crept away. Sneaking up a dark side staircase of the mansion, they made their way to Mr. Bond’s room, which was as brightly lit as the rest.

Mr. Bond kept possession of Q’s hand all the way, pulling him close once they were alone for a lingering kiss. “Have you decided to accept my request to court you?” he asked.

“I have,” Q said, smiling. He relaxed against Mr. Bond, mind spinning idly over all of the possibilities ahead for the evening and their life together.

They walked out to the balcony, watching the party unfolding below them. The gardens of Ainsburgh gleamed like a chest full of treasure, with the Summer House across the lawn the chief shining jewel. Q smiled at the view, watching his mother and sisters from afar for some time before turning to wind his arms around his lover’s waist.

“Will you promise me something?” Q asked adoringly.

“Anything.”

Q bit his lip, sweet and shy. “I would very much like to live happily ever after.”

“I shall do my very best,” Mr. Bond vowed, and sealed it with a kiss.

End Notes
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