Tap the Vein That Bleeds
by thegrumblingirl

Summary

The second time James says, "You must be joking," it still isn't the least bit funny.

Notes

Verse: More of a Personal Statement series, a few months after the events of ‘We Should Never Be Afraid to Die.’

See the end of the work for more notes
Down on My Bended Knees

Bond’s eyes shot open the second the door to his hotel room opened and then quickly clicked closed again. His left hand was already on the way towards the Walther underneath the other pillow when he recognised the footfall.

“James? It’s me, sorry for waking you. Oh, and you can let go of the gun now.”

Bond did indeed let go and sat up, rubbing a hand over his eyes to look a little less bleary than he felt, now that he knew his visitor was unusual, but not unwelcome. A few seconds later, Q stepped in through the door, looking for all the world as if bouncing about the globe at 5am was just another thing he did. James knew that, by now, he must have been on his fourth cup of coffee. James budge up a little so Q could sit on the edge of the bed with him, but Q stayed where he was, leaning against the doorway.

“M is coming up in a minute,” he said by way of explanation and apology, and Bond nodded. They could let Tony Stark catch them and live, but if they wanted to afford M plausible deniability, they had to keep their distance on the job at all times.

“I should get up then, shouldn’t I?” Bond joked half-heartedly, and got out of bed to make quick work of himself in the en-suite. Q nodded and, to Bond’s quiet triumph, was still there, in the doorway, when he came back in to get dressed. “I didn’t know you were coming,” he picked up where they’d left off while buttoning his shirt; feeling Q’s eyes on him.

“Last-minute decision,” Q replied, perfectly steady voice not betraying an ounce of the regret he felt at each centimetre of skin disappearing from view. “We finally got through all the satellite footage and sussed out where the computers are.”

“And why did she drag you along? Normally, you’d just give me the coordinates and I’d figure out where to deposit the explosives, or which red button to hit.”

“Hitting the big red button isn’t going to do it this time, I’m afraid.”

“That would be a first,” Bond huffed, half annoyed at their targets for getting clever, half decidedly not cheering up at the prospect of having Q and Rio in the same place at the same time, for once. He was fully dressed in a sharp, dark blue suit now, walking towards the door, and Q smiled in commiseration before moving into the other room.

“Hey,” James said quietly, and Q stopped and turned back. James tugged him closer by his jumper and pressed a brief kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Not that I’m complaining.” With that, he let him go, and Q just had time to smile a little brighter before the door opened and they stepped a little further apart without missing a beat.

“Good morning, 007,” M greeted, bustling into the room—though he’d never actually dare and call it ‘bustling’ out loud. She’d tell him to stuff it and find himself another grandmother to annoy.

“Ma’am.”

“Q has filled you in on the necessary details?”

“I got the gist of it. He said that this time pushing the big red button wasn’t going to cut it?”

“Indeed not.” She nodded at Q, who led them to the table and opened his briefcase. He grabbed an
envelope stuffed with satellite photographs and a map. Spreading them on the table, he began.

“This is the area we’ve been looking at, suspecting that their command centre might be there: abandoned industry complexes, stripped buildings that are easy to remodel into anything you need them to be. Also, lots of dirt.”

Bond locked eyes with Q across the map. “Dirt?”

“Yup. To them, it’s just sand and dust. To us, it’s a tracking pattern.”

“But after a while, their car tracks will overlap, there’s no making sense of them unless you’ve got surveillance footage—which we don’t.”

“Not unless you let a few remote sensing drones fly over the area to measure how the dust has settled and correlate it with weather patterns as well as vehicle movement apparent from the physical tracks. It’s like blood spatter patterns at crime scenes.”

Bond smirked at the smug look on Q’s face. M gave them three seconds before clearing her throat. Q pointed to a seemingly derelict building just on the edge of a large complex.

“It’s in there.”

“Now that we know where it is, how do we get in, and what do we do once we have?” M prompted—for Bond’s benefit, she already knew.

“Well, of course it’s heavily protected, but that shouldn’t be a problem with enough reinforcements.” M felt 007 bristle next to her and suppressed a smirk. “Sorry, James, but they have too many outposts and not enough blind spots,” Q read Bond’s body language just right, and she knew it was only due to the man’s unbeatable self-control that he didn’t start fidgeting. “Once I’m in, I can find my way into the system and destroy it from the inside out. Depending on how elaborate their sequences are, it might take me up to half an hour.”

M nodded, but, as expected, Bond cut in. “Hold on—once you are in?”

“Again; sorry, 007, but I’m not up to coaching you through this via a live feed.”

“You mean once you’re physically in there? You must be joking.”

“Yes, and no.”

“What happened to hacking yourself in remotely?”

“I’ve tried, it’s too well-protected. If I’m to find my way in, it’s only happening from inside that room, where the defences are partly lowered while the system is up and running and at least some parts are vulnerable.”

Bond caught Q stealing a glance at M, as if saying, ‘I told you he wouldn’t like it.’ And damn right, he didn’t.

“Bond, I know you don’t like it when others steal your moment of glory, but this was inevitable and you know it.”

“It’s not about my moment of glory—my “moments of glory” always end either landing in a sinkhole in the desert or standing in a lake of crap; he can have those.”

“Well, then, if you’re worried about the operation being slowed down by a lab rat…” interjected Q
in a tone that was just light enough to prevent M from shutting them both up and placing them under arrest for getting personal at work.

“I know you know your way through an operation and around the weapons you make,” Bond growled; glaring at Q for suggesting he’d doubt his abilities, “but what if something goes wrong and you get cornered in the computer room? You can’t defend yourself and punch those keys. We need people in there so you can work without having to dodge fists or bullets.”

“Are you saying that the outposts are too much to handle for one?”

“I’m saying that this job is heavily dependent on one man not getting shot.”

“Aren’t they all?”

Bond was drawing breath to answer when M cut in; her voice showing that steely edge that even Bond dared not cross. “Enough. 007, Q is the centrepiece of this operation, accept it or you’ll find yourself on a plane to London faster than you can say toodle-pip. Q, when is the best time to move in?”

“Tonight at 7pm, between security checks.”

“See to it.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“I’m going to have a nice long talk with the Brazilian head of intelligence now. You two, Jeeves and Wooster—sort it out.”

“Ma’am,” they managed in unison; and as soon as the door closed behind M, they turned towards each other, perplexed.

“Who’s Jeeves and who’s Wooster in this scenario?” Q asked. Bond shrugged, not meeting his eyes. “Look, I know you don’t like it; but this is the only way it will work.”

Bond sighed. “I know that. And I know you can do it.”

“Then what?” There was a tone to Q’s voice that poked and prodded at something at the very back of James’ mind; as if he’d found something at the back of a cupboard and wondered what forgotten piece of junk it was, but not quite dared to just yank it out, lest the rest of the cupboard’s contents came crashing down upon him. Bond wanted to turn and leave the room, but for some reason he stayed where he was. (That’s because you don’t run from arguments with Q and live, his mind readily supplied.) He shrugged again, but raised his eyes to look at Q, ready to defuse the situation with a stupid joke.

“I guess I just don’t want to find out if you’re actually better than me,” and although his smirk didn’t reach his eyes, Q let him off the hook and rose to the bait. When M returned, Tanner in tow, ten minutes later, they were bickering about the amount of explosives they would carry with them.

If anyone had asked James, he would have denied that he and Q had any sort of ritual before he left on a mission. He always made sure to promise Q he’d come looking for him when they parted at either of their flats or after staying at a decommissioned safe house, but if you asked him about any form of good-bye at MI6 while picking up his gear, he wouldn’t know what you were on about.
That was why Q knew exactly what they were doing each time James left.

He knew that they went through an unspecified dance of banter, giving and receiving orders, gadgets, or weapons that were needed, Q giving Bond a run-down of whatever pertinent data he had on the main screen; and then an awkward moment of silence and itching to reach out though neither could, settling on a handshake and always the same words.

“Don’t break anything that can’t afford to be broken, 007.”

“Just don’t fall asleep underneath your desk and lose my signal, Q.”

Every time. Q suspected James wasn’t aware of doing it, but there they were, each time; and now they were standing in an empty basement, strapping on bulletproof vests, checking their guns, and securing knives in ankle holsters side by side. James still didn’t know why he didn’t like it.

When they were done, the operation was given the go-ahead by M, and the teams scattered across the compound responded, their eyes met and there was nothing left to say.

“Let’s go.”

They worked their way in, taking out watchmen and goons left and right, drawing in circles closer towards their destination. With enough people, a job like this was over in a matter of minutes; but there was always one who managed to alert his chums, and they knew that more were coming to protect the computers doing their really dirty work.

As soon as Q was in, typing away, flanked by what one might call bodyguards, Bond circled back to help round up any operatives that were still conscious or, at any rate, alive and who could be taken in for questioning. Not that he wanted to—M had ordered him away, insisting he keep himself busy instead of hovering about Q “like a puppy.” Clenching his teeth, he was making his way towards the last few teams when, suddenly, the constant clicking in his ear stopped—Q wasn’t typing. Bond stopped in his tracks and cocked his head—the next second, shots ripped through the air over the comms, and M hadn’t finished her next sentence before Bond had turned and was racing back towards the command centre.

Over the feed in his ear, he could hear the unmistakable sounds of hand-to-hand combat, of knives being drawn from sheaths and tearing through clothes and skin, and, as his blood ran cold in his veins, a crash and a thud and Q groaning in pain. He was leaving dust clouds behind him, yet his legs seemed to move more slowly than they ever had. There was no room for thought in his mind, no room for what-ifs and fear, just the ground stretching under his thundering feet. When he was finally only a few metres away from the building, three shots rang out in quick succession, Bond’s eardrums going up in flames, but he didn’t care. He skidded to a halt and wrenched the door open, his heart so fast it felt as though it had stopped. What he saw next hit him like a bucket of ice.

In the middle of the room, next to the main computer terminal, stood Q, his Walther PPK drawn but already pointing at the ground. Lying on the floor around him were the bodies of his bodyguards, along with the three men who had attacked them, dropped to the ground like flies. Q was breathing heavily and wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, scowling when he found blood on his skin. Then, he turned his head and met James’ eyes.

Unbidden, six words came crashing down in 007’s thoughts, each slamming home with a finality that struck like bullets: I love you. Don’t leave me.
He stared at Q, Q stared back, both ignoring M’s demands for a situation report in their ears. Neither of them said anything, until, eventually, Q cleared his throat and reported their status. He tucked the gun into the waistband of his jeans and turned to complete the programming sequence that would save the world.

James did the only thing he could. He ran.
It's Between You and Me

It's in the water, baby
It's in the pills that bring you down

When Q was finished writing the sequence, effectively annihilating the terrorists’ plans of killing millions of people and throwing the world into chaos, he turned towards the door. Just as he expected, James was gone. He briefly closed his eyes and let out a deep, long breath, letting the tension ease from his shoulders. His ribs hurt, though he was pretty sure none of them were cracked, and there was a cut running down his arm, still bleeding. He felt, though, as if the bulk of the pain was still to come. He reported back to M, and the other teams were called in to begin the extraction process.

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He didn’t see James again until they were back at the hotel to clear out. James wouldn’t look at him as he absently pecked him on the cheek when they had a moment alone; and he didn’t say a word when he rucked up Q’s sleeve to take a look at his arm. Q didn’t ask how he knew and tried not to hiss when James prodded the skin surrounding the cut none-too-gently.

“It’s not too deep, just a nasty length,” James said, brushing his fingers down Q’s side in silent apology. “Take it easy for a week and you’ll be fine.”

Q nodded and James went back to packing his things.

On the plane back to London, they sat side by side, opposite M and Tanner, who were discussing the fall-out. James was looking out the window, and Q remained silent, staring at his hands in his lap. What he had seen in James’ eyes as he’d stared at him scared him still, because he didn’t know how to read it. His gaze had been wild, focused and yet lost, as if staring at something only he could see. He’d seen that look on James only once before, after a particularly intense nightmare.

‘What did you see?’ he’d asked, because he couldn’t help himself.

James had turned on his side and wrapped Q in his arms, swallowing him up so he wouldn’t see his face when he answered: ‘Death.’

*

Back at MI6, they’re debriefed separately. Q is ushered into medical first, the doctors there confirming James’ diagnosis, stitching him up, and prescribing a week of rest—and, apparently, that means rest; because M debriefs him for as long as necessary, but shoos him out with a firm, “I
“don’t want to see you using that arm again until next Wednesday.”

Q nods, grabs a few things from the lab to work on at home, and is temporarily stalled by his interns, demanding whether he’s alright. Q has to remind himself that they’re brilliant at what they’re doing, but that they’re young and still in training, and that they heard every bloody thing; and although all he wants is to go home and crawl under the covers, he stays for another half hour, filling them in on the details they weren’t able to tell just from the audio.

When he finally makes it to his flat, he puts the kettle on and pads into the bathroom to take a shower. Leaning against the tiled wall, he forces himself not to let his thoughts wander to James. Which, of course, doesn’t impress his thoughts at all.

*It’s in the water, baby*
*It’s in your frequency*
*It’s in the water, baby*
*It’s between you and me*

James is running—again. After being separated from Q at MI6, then being thoroughly debriefed by Tanner, he’d been sent on his way. Now, he is running through Hyde Park, running to clear his head, running from what happened today. His steady breathing is out of tune with the way his heart jumps every now and then for no good reason, and the even rhythm of his legs pounding away at the ground underneath his feet is doing nothing to help him forget what he can’t remember.

He can run miles and miles like this, never stopping. Usually, he doesn’t think when he does it, it is part of his routine when he’s in London, but now it’s not just his body that’s making miles an hour. His mind is racing, away from him, and no matter how fast he runs, he can’t catch up with it. He’s too late now, just as he was too late in Rio. If those three shots hadn’t been Q’s, he couldn’t have saved him.

*It’s in the water, baby*
*It’s in the pills that pick you up*

‘I love you.’

The thought echoed through James’ head and reverberated down his spine, and James felt numb, as if paralysed from the waist down, except his legs were still moving and the trees were rushing past him as he ran. Ran away.

*It’s in the water, baby*
*It’s in the special way we fuck*

The entire time, he hadn’t known. Had been with him, had enjoyed himself, had found comfort and fun and trust, and he hadn’t once stopped to consider what it was that he was feeling. He’d been fond of him, protective, had balked at the idea of another agent touching him, had lavished his body with attention he hadn’t given to anyone since Vesper, and he had been so fucking dumb. And he asks himself, when had the fear of losing him become greater than the pain of being lost by him?

*It’s in the water, baby*
*It’s between you and me*

The worst thing is, he’s sure Q loves him, too. Hell, he’d seen it. It had been there in the way he’d asked James to be careful, it had been there in the way he’d offered his past and present to him, had allowed him to ask any questions he wanted to make up for the imbalance of knowledge. It had
been there in the way he’d worn pyjamas for… fuck, for their first anniversary. It had been there in the way he’d feverishly taken him at Stark Tower. It had been there almost since the beginning, and James had taken and taken and Q had let him without saying a word. That was the thing, wasn’t it? Q had offered him his past and present, but had rarely spoken of the future—because he knew. James forced his legs to go faster. Far, far away.

_Bite the hand that feeds_
_Tap the vein that bleeds_
_Down on my bended knees_

James is numb and on fire, and he’d sworn himself never to feel anything again. He doesn’t want this, has never wanted this. That first promise he’d made to Q is a paradox, it was his trial and his sentence, a penance that swiftly became another sin.

_I’d break the back of love for you_

In that moment, he wants to end it. Wants to go to Q and tell him that it’s over, that they can’t keep doing this. He has no idea which bullshit excuse he’s going to use, but he knows he has to.

_I’d break the back of love for you_

_It was always going to be me_, he thinks. If anything, the risk had always been his, his own life had always been the only one he’d had to worry about. And now the odds have turned, the wheel is spinning, and death is gunning for them both.

_I’d break the back of love for you_

An hour later, he arrives at Q’s flat, showered and changed and determined. He knocks quietly and briefly considers pressing his ear to the door to listen for footsteps; but then he hears a loud crash from within the apartment and abandons the idea. He is about to knock again when the door swings open, a dishevelled Q standing before him.

“What did you drop?”

“A couple of books,” Q mutters, moving aside so Bond can come in. He keeps his head lowered as James brushes past him, and they make it into the living room without another word. James eyes the books suspiciously, leaning down to read some of the titles.

“I’ve never seen these.”

“They were in some boxes in the closet, I’ve… I’ve never gotten around to unpacking them after moving into this flat.”

“That was two years ago.”

“I’ve been busy.” Now, it’s Q who won’t meet James’ eyes.

“When I heard ‘crate of books,’ I thought for a moment you were moving,” James’ tone is teasing.

“At 2 in the bloody morning.”

“I—”

“With an injured arm,” and James’ voice is sharp now. As James steps closer to him, Q swallows. He wants to say something, wants to tell James that it’s alright, that he understands. He knows James is here to end it, he knows that they have flown too close to the sun and that they’re both
dropping out of the sky, for good this time. He finally raises his eyes to look at James, and when he does, he doesn’t even have time to think before James is kissing him and slowly directing him towards the bedroom.

James carefully undresses Q and tells him to lie down, then he steps back to get out of his own clothes as quickly as he can. He joins Q on the bed, kneeling over him, braced on his arms, boxing Q in as he leans down to kiss him again. Q knows not to speak.

Licking into Q’s mouth, James uses his left hand to softly caress a slender neck, shoulder, and chest. He trails his hand down to Q’s stomach, moaning appreciatively when Q arches his back. He breaks the kiss and pulls back to look at Q for a moment. His eyes are dark and quiet, but then he smiles and shuffles downwards on the bed. A few moments later, his tongue and his lips are warm and wet on Q’s cock; and as he moans and writhes, Q can pretend that this is all he needs.

* 

The next morning, James is still there, wrapped around Q from behind, and Q finds his left arm resting on an extra pillow at just the right angle. Q listens to James’ breathing, steadily brushing his neck, when he realises that this isn’t the pattern he hears when the agent’s asleep. He turns his head.

“James?”

The mattress shifts behind him, and then James is leaning over him, head propped up on his elbow so he can look at Q without the younger man getting a crick in his neck. He’s smiling.

“Good morning.”

“You’re still here.” It’s the last thing Q wants to say, but he has to if he ever wants to look at himself in the mirror again.

James’ gaze turns serious, and Q knows this is it.

Then, James is pushing his face into the crook of Q’s neck, breathing deeply. He brushes his nose against Q’s temple as he comes back up again, presses a kiss into his hair before he speaks.

“I know I fucked up, Q.”

“James—”

“Wait, let me say this.” James is looking at him now. “I went into this without any idea what I was doing; I only knew I couldn’t let you go. I never stopped to think. I knew this mattered to you, but I never once asked myself whether it mattered to me enough.”

“I know,” is all Q knows to say, and James nods, lowering his eyes.

“You waited for me.”

“It was worth it.”

“Is,” James corrects him.

Q’s expression runs from shock through disbelief to wonder and, damn him, awe; and James has to
lean down and kiss him quickly. When he comes back up for air, he finds a smile on Q’s face that he’s known for two years and only now recognises for what it is.

“I love you.”

“I know.”

*I’d break the back of love for you*

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**End Notes**

Disclaimer: I own nothing, I get nothing. (Except fandom hugs. Hint, hint.) I also don’t have anything to do with Placebo’s *Post Blue*. And, shit, yeah, I’m giving them bulletproof vests, because I can’t remember James ever wearing one. James is an idiot.

Crossposted on ff.net.

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