Tell me the truth about love

by Hedwig_Dordt

Summary

Asexual & panromantic Q; heterosexual & biromantic Bond. Fluff.

Notes

Title and motto borrowed from the poem by W.H. Auden.

I’m working with the assumption Tanner and Bond are friends, that Bond has “arrangements” with married women (as per the books), and that Alec turned against MI6 (as per GoldenEye).

Profound gratitude to Fightyourdragon for, well, everything. Remaining problems are my responsibility.

That said: not canon, not mine, no profit, just fun.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love.

-W.H. Auden

James walks into Q-branch, takes one look at Q and says, "Come over tonight."

Q looks up, attempts something that resembles a smile, and nods. "What time?" he asks.

"When you're ready. You're meeting M later, right?" Q nods. "Just ring me when you're leaving," James says.

Q looks back at his laptop screen and nods. "I will."

"Okay, see you later." James returns to his office to go over some of the information that another agent had turned up. He sets an alarm on his phone to remind him to leave a little early. James makes a stop for some groceries on his way from home. There are a few things that could qualify as Q's favourite food, but from the stress his boyfriend was radiating in the afternoon, he knows risotto is the only way to go. When he comes home, he hangs his jacket over a chair, rolls up his cuffs and sets to work. He stores away his purchases and starts the preparations. He wets the chopping board and the knife, and while he chops the onions he lets his mind wander. Boyfriend, is that even a way to describe this... whatever it is? But then, the connection, attraction, and even trust between them was almost instant. Love at first sight, except it took him a while -and a dreadful conversation with Tanner in a pub over a pint- to realise it was indeed love.

"Just because you're in love with someone doesn't mean you want to have sex with him. Or her." Tanner had said. "Don't you remember you and Alec? You know, before..?"

And James did: they'd shared everything-before. He just hadn't bothered to label it; they were friends, brothers-in-arms, colleagues, they had each other's back. And in some respects, what happened between him and Q was like that: they shared, not everything, but a great deal. "But I'm not attracted to men," he had objected to Tanner.

"Seems a shame."

"I overheard Q chewing someone out. He said, and I quote, “amoeba is not a word a friend should use to describe another friend,” and then he went to that icy register” -James shivered a little- "and it is completely inappropriate to describe a colleague. Or your superior.” From the look on his face, it was personal, so I’m guessing he is asexual."

"Seems a shame."
"I thought you weren't interested in sex with him?" Tanner lifted an eyebrow at his friend.

"Touché." James took a sip from his beer.

"Okay, I’m going to spell this out for you." Tanner looked a bit annoyed with him. “Asexual doesn’t mean he doesn’t do relationships. He just doesn’t experience sexual attraction the way you and I do.”

“I’m not attracted to him.”

“Oh yes, you are. You’re deeply attracted to him. You’re in Q-branch half the bloody time these days. You park your car in a different spot so you can walk Q to the garage -you pick him up if you have to. HR thanks you, by the way, he’s getting better at keeping more or less human working hours. And hadn’t you noticed they practically arranged a work station for you in Q-branch? And it’s because of Q. I know that look in your eyes.”

“Okay, say that I am. Then, what do I do?”

“Depends.”

“Helpful.”

“Do you want him to make the first move?”

“Hmmmm. Possibly not.”

James chops up a couple of strips of bacon and fries them. He takes a container of broth from the freezer and puts it in a saucepan over another burner. While the bacon strips are sizzling in the pan he chops the mushrooms and adds them with half the onions. When they seem ready to soak up the liquid again he adds some thyme. He measures out the rice and puts a bottle of white wine on counter top. When he is satisfied he has made all the preparation for dinner, he checks the bathroom and hangs towels over the radiator to warm up. He checks the time on his phone, sees Q hasn’t called yet and moves to the bedroom to change the sheets. He puts the disk of Carnivale into the dvd player and puts the remote control on his side of the bed. He checks his phone again and decides to sit down and attempt to read a little. He returns to the living room, takes off his shoes and stretches out on the couch with his tattered copy of Presumed Innocent. He doesn’t get very far because his thoughts inevitably return to Q.

After his chat with Tanner, he had invited Q to dinner -well strictly speaking, dinner and a play. Though he usually didn’t feel nervous about meeting a potential partner, with Q he had felt oddly out of depth. But the food was good, the play was excellent and the conversation flowed easily between them. He had found himself talking about people he hadn’t mentioned in years, like his parents, even Alec. They went for a beer after the play and then returned to their own homes. James had sent Q a text when he’d come home, and smiled more on the day after than he had in weeks. After another three weeks, two restaurant dinners, and three home cooked meals, Q took James to watch the stars from a proper observatory. When James had asked him how he had known they’d be left alone, Q had smiled and said, “A friend owed me a favour.” So they had taken turns watching the constellations, Q explaining how really fucking big our universe is, and James quietly enjoying his enthusiasm.

As they walked home, Q surprised James again by asking, “What am I to you?”

“What do you mean?”
“We’re not exactly normal friends, are we?”

“No, I guess not.”

“You might have heard that I’m… not exactly… normal. In the statistical sense, I mean.”

“You’re asexual.” James nods. “Yeah, I heard. I’m not gay.”

“To be honest, I assumed you were bisexual at first, but I’m guessing now is you are sexually straight, but biromantic.”

“I’m what?”

“Romantically attracted to both genders, but sexually only to one.”

James frowns and takes a good look at Q. “You’re serious,” he says, not sure what Q is getting at. But then Tanner’s observations, Q’s remark and his own feelings align and it clicks. “You mean being partners, dating, boyfriends, whatever, without sex? Are you serious?”

“Entirely. If you’re interested, of course.”

“How… how does that work?”

Q shrugs. “That’s mostly up to us. I know what you do -you know, professionally. I know men aren’t really your thing. And sex isn’t really mine.”

And so they had started their careful negotiation -no that word was for hostage situations, for bomb threats- their courtship, their dance, establishing what they were. Together. Boyfriends. Of sorts. For lack of a better word.

Q calls a good ten minutes after James has started staring at the book. He calculates how long he has before Q will be at the door and starts cooking. When the doorbell rings, he just presses the button. He doesn’t realise he holds his breath for a second when Q is due to arrive if he took the elevator. When the doorbell doesn’t ring, he just adds another spoonful of broth to the risotto mixture. He adds a bit more so that when the bell rings, he is already halfway to the door. “Hey love, come on in,” he says, as he opens the door.

Q steps in, peels off his parka, throws one arm around James, and kisses his cheek.“Risotto?”

James hums and nods at the room inside. “Glass of wine?”

“Yes please,” Q says and lets out a sigh. “You will not believe the day I had.”

James pours two glasses of wine and hands one to Q, who takes his customary spot just out of the way.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” James offers.

“Budget cuts. HR has a new type of form. Field test reports came in. It’s like everything that normally happens in a week, just happened in one day.”

Over dinner the tension starts to seep from Q’s shoulders. When he scrapes the last few grains of rice from the bottom of his plate, he is laughing again. “Thank you,” Q says. “I’ll clean up the dishes.”
James feels more than a little terrified at how much he enjoys the quiet domesticity of doing simple chores in a choreography they are still developing. “I was going to offer to rub your shoulders, but what I’d really like to do first is take a bath. Together,” he says. Q looks at him for a second. “It should help relax your muscles, too,” he adds.

Q nods. “Let’s, then.” When they enter the bathroom Q looks amused. “You really were looking forward to this, weren’t you?” Q takes off his cardigan.

James opens the tap and pours bubble bath into the tub. Half preparation, half improvisation. Would you like me to help you out of that?” Q considers it for a second, and for half a second James fears the ground is falling out underneath him. Did I push too far? But instead, Q wordlessly offers the cuffs of his shirt sleeves. James opens the small buttons and steps a little closer to undo the buttons on the front panels. Q stands straight as a dancer as James pushes the soft fabric off his shoulders. James turns to check the water temperature. Just on the hot side of pleasant.

“Trousers too?” James asks. After another second’s pause, Q nods again. James undoes the button, the hook and the flies. Q wiggles his hips and his trousers fall to the ground. As Q takes off his socks and his pants, James starts to undo the buttons of his shirt.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Q says. Surprised, James looks up. “Do you…”

“Yes,” Q nods emphatically. James drops his hands and turns towards Q. Q opens his buttons, from the top one to the lowest. James finds he does enjoy the feeling of Q’s hands brushing his chest. They are soft and warm. He shrugs off his shirt, the rolled up sleeves resisting a little. Q nods at his trousers, a question in his eyes.

“Go ahead,” James says with a smirk.

“Make my day,” Q adds, grinning. He opens the button and the flies to James’s trousers, and slips his hands in then guides them over James’ arse. James exhales softly and savours the touch. He is still working to disentangle these soft, wonderful, sensual touches between them from the expectations of sex. James takes off his socks while Q tests the temperature of the water with his toe. Finding it not too hot, Q gets in. James get in on the other side of the tub, facing him.

Q picks up James’ foot and starts massaging it gently under the soapy water. James groans softly as he closes his eyes, and Q grins with satisfaction. “Weren’t you supposed to go for drinks with Tanner tonight?” he asks.

“I cancelled.” James shrugs. He opens his eyes and looks at Q. Q looks up, eyebrows raised. “You looked like you needed a bit of extra care,” James explains, a bit bewildered.

“Isn’t that what I’m supposed to do?” Q looks away. “You realise I’m serious about this? Even when there may be bridges to cross?”

“It’s starting to dawn on me,” Q says, “I’m just… Well, I’m really glad you’re here okay?”

“Good,” James says. “Can you do this one too?” He lifts his other foot, offering it to Q. Q takes it, and starts on it. James closes his eyes again, merely enjoying being taken care of for a bit. “I think I’m enjoying this being- a- boyfriend-thing,” James muses. Q snorts. “No, really, I used to think I would be terrible at it.”

“Oh, I remember,” Q grins. “I was on the other side, if you recall.”

“So tell me what you do like,” James had asked as they were taking a walk on their lunchbreak. Q
thought about that for a minute - James had noticed Q usually did that when asked a personal question. It seemed Q was still getting used to the notion that James wanted to hear his thinking process as well as his final answer.

“I enjoy being touched, by you anyway.” Q finally said. Hesitantly he added, “I enjoy talking with you. I enjoy physical closeness.”

“You mean you’re a cuddler?” James smirked. Q blushed furiously and James had thrown up his hands. “That can be arranged, don’t worry.”

“I should be getting back to the office,” Q said. “Dinner at mine tonight?” “Fine. Do you need me to kidnap you from Q-branch or can we decide a time like normal people?” Q had elbowed him and said, “If I’m not at the main entrance at six, come pick me up. People here are liable to accept it when a double oh requires my attention.” James ignored the potential double entendre and simply agreed. That evening, Q had surprised him -again- by turning out a pretty decent stew and a willingness to pick up the conversation where they’d left it.

“So, now that we’ve established what I like, what do you want?” Q asked.

“I’m still getting used to this entire label, to be honest. I’ve been having affairs… well, I’m sure they are in my file somewhere.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“I’ve had sex without being in love. I’m now really coming around to love without sex.”

Q had laughed -and really, James wanted to hear more of that. “Would any of your… mistresses be interested in continuing your… arrangement?” Q asked.

“Can we cross that bridge when we get to it?” James countered. Q frowned for a second, gauging how he should respond, shrugged, and nodded. Then they switched the subject to childhood memories.

“I don’t think my feet are going to feel any better than this. Thank you, love. Do you want to get out and into bed for that shoulder rub I promised weeks ago?” Q’s smile lights up his face. “Yes please.”

“Stay in for a second,” James says as raises himself from the tub and towels himself roughly dry. He picks up a towel from the radiator. “Okay, come on out.” When Q steps out of the tub, James envelops him in fluffy warmth and rubs him dry. “Can’t have you cool down and tense up again” he says, almost apologising. Q follows him to the bedroom, where he lays down on the bed. “Are you comfortable?” James asks.

“If I could purr, I would.” James smiles his half-smile as he fetches some oil.“I haven’t even started yet.” “Do you want clean pants?” he asks. ”No, I’m good,” Q replies. James decides that this means he’s good to go too. He takes the bottle of massage oil he put on the nightstand earlier and positions himself over the small of Q’s back. He puts a liberal amount of oil on his palms, and rubs them together to warm it up. When he is satisfied that it is warm to the touch, he sets to work on Q’s shoulders. First, broad strokes without a lot of pressure to feel out where the tension knots have set. He found them in several regular spots in earlier sessions. But for some reason, Q feels softer under his hands this time.

“Did the bath do you good?” James asks.
“I suppose. Why?”

“You feel... I’m not sure, it’s like you’re more relaxed.”

“I am.” Q turns his head to the side so that he isn’t muffled by a pillow. “I’m starting to get used to it; well no, I’m more comfortable with it.”

“Your dance trainer is going to be very happy tomorrow.”

“I,” Q says with emphasis, “am very happy now.”

James attacks another regular knot with slightly more vigour. Q tenses up for a split second before releasing the tension with his exhale. James works his way along Q’s spine, from his neck, rubbing gently where the skull meets the spine, and all the way down to the small of his back. He feels a little accomplished that he is developing a feeling for this. Q is going almost boneless under his ministrations.

Q makes a satisfied sound into his pillow. he turns his head, “Thanks a million, I needed that. Come over here, love.” James finishes of the final movement and stretches out next to Q. They pull up the duvet, Q curling up against James, James with an arm around Q.

“Good night, James.” Q says quietly.

“Good night, Q.” James synchronises his breathing with Q’s until he drifts asleep.
James figures that one day, Q will tell him where he goes on Monday nights. After sort-of committing treason together, and saving each other in big ways and small, Q deserves to tell him in his own time. So James doesn’t pry, ask leading questions, and absolutely emphatically does not follow Q after hours on Monday. At least, not after Q eats at a small noodle place. He just… waits. There is nothing to prepare him for Q’s earnest look over dinner on a Saturday evening at his flat when Q says, “James, I want to ask you something, but before I do, I want to emphasise that it’s perfectly fine if you say no.”

He chews on his bite of green beans longer than strictly necessary as thinks of at least three comebacks for that. After three seconds, Q is still looking very serious and James goes into quiet panic. They are good together, he thinks. It’s not perfect, but he seriously thought they were in for the long haul. Surely Q doesn’t want to change anything? Or worse even, break up?

“Tell me,” he says as he puts down his fork on the table. “I won’t make a scene.”

“I have tickets for a dance theatre group. It’s a contemporary dance company, and they perform in London for one night before they go off to the US as part of the international tour. I thought maybe you’d like to come?”

“To a dance show?” James is more relieved than he’ll ever admit to anyone.
“Contemporary dance. Abstract. Not everybody’s cup of tea.” Q looks smaller than James has ever seen his Q, either as boyfriend or as the quartermaster.

“Sure. I’d like that,” he says, trying for casual. “Anything I need to know?”

“Not really. Unless there’s something you’d like to know?”

“How long you’ve been waiting to ask?”

“A week,” Q mumbles.

“When is the show?”

“Next week.”

“I’ll make sure my suit is back from the dry cleaners. Do you want any more mashed potatoes? Because if not, I’m finishing them for you.”

And that’s that: crisis averted, they’re not breaking up. They are going to watch experimental dance. Whatever: he’s faced down terrorist groups.

They’ve been an item for a little over four months but James is still not used to his boyfriend dressing up. Q’s regular wardrobe choices can best be described as studied casual. Expensive, well-made, and completely horrendous. Tonight, though, he dressed up for their date: jacket and trousers that are tailored to his body. Even if he’s not attracted to men, James can understand why Q regularly gets interested looks.

They walk arm in arm to the restaurant next to the theatre and eat in relative quiet. At one time, James had thought the point of being in a relationship was to have someone you can talk to all the time. Maybe he is growing old, but the longer he is with Q, the more he finds the fact that they don’t always have to be entertaining one another is… pleasant.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Q asks for the fifteenth time.

“No, dear, I want to go. With you. And when have I ever done something I absolutely hate?”

“Good point. No, these people are really good, and I wouldn’t want their audience to suffer through.”

“I’m not suffering through. Q, why is this bothering you so much?”

Q just shrugs and takes another bite of his venison.

The show is magnificent. James doesn’t understand what’s happening, there’s not much of a story as far as he can tell, but it’s gorgeous: the technique and control the dancers display is fantastic. In the break he gets drinks for Q and himself. Q accepts the slightly oversteeped tea with a smile.

“They are really good,” James says encourageingly to Q. Q goes starry-eyed, to James’ amusement. Something clicks in James’ mind. James leans back, studied casual and drops his tone of voice a couple of grades: “Have you ever danced?”

“A little,” Q says with a dismissive hand wave.
James realises he has struck gold. “How little?”

“My mother enrolled me in ballet as counter training for karate. I didn’t like karate much, traded that for the computer club after two years. Stuck with ballet, well, modern really. But not at this level.”

“Seems like a good way to keep in shape, with combination of strength and flexibility,” James says casually. Q squints at him as if to assess the truthfulness of that statement. James produces his best ‘I’m being earnest face’, and adds, “I take it not everyone responds like this?”

Q makes a face as if he’s bitten a lemon. “Not really, no. And yes, I have a practice group. We’re all either too old for performing, or we have professional ambitions elsewhere.”

“What do they think you do?” James asks, figuring he’s done enough prying for one day.

“Something in IT. I bore them with technical specs if they start asking too many questions.”

“What do they think I do? Do they know about us?”

“They sort of assume you’re in sales, because of the international travel. But since we’re an IT security firm, we’re not allowed to talk about our jobs.” Q makes air quotes on that last bit. “So, go ahead and ask.”

“Ask what?” James plays at innocence.

“If you can watch. That is what you’ve been wanting to ask, right?”

“I wouldn’t mind watching. At all,” James smirks.

Q hums noncommittally, nods and doesn’t reply.

Now that he knows, James notes that does have a few subtle tells: sometimes he catches the smallest movements that are out of the ordinary pattern of movement when Q is supposed to be coding or dealing with paperwork. James assumes that some part of Q’s brain is dancing in those moments.

A good month later, Q revisits the subject when they share lunch at MI6. They split a quiche and a platter of fries between them. “My dance group has open class next week. If you’re still interested, you can come and watch.”

“Sure. When?”

“James. Bond,” Q says in his warning tone, “if you’re trying to tell me you haven’t worked out my dance group convenes on Monday evenings, I don’t know you at all.”

James tries to look scolded, shrugs and says, “Monday it is. What should I wear?”

“Doesn’t really matter,” Q says, and then amends, “something casual, by your standards.” Q dips a fry in mayonnaise and eats it. He looks thoughtfully at James. “I forgot to ask the other day, do you dance at all?”

“Ballroom dancing is not optional for a field agent,” James says. “Otherwise not really.”

Q nods the way he does when he is filing information away for further examination later.
A little after six in the evening, James swings by Q branch to pick him up. Q looks him over and smiles approvingly at his outfit. Blue pullover over a white shirt, instead of a button-down and grey slacks.

“I think we should get stir-fry for the full Monday night experience,” Q says. He pulls a backpack from under his desk, presumably containing his clothes. Q puts on his coat and cocks his head. “Ready when you are.” James offers his arm and they leave MI6 together.

James feels a bit jittery at being given this new insight into Q’s life. Q steers them to a stir fry place, where Q is greeted as a regular by the man behind the counter.

“Peter, good evening! Who’s your friend?”

“This is my partner, James. James, this is Iskandar. He owns this place.”

“Tasharrafnah, assaid Iskandar,” James says without batting an eye. “Pleased to meet you, sir.”

“Forgive him for being a bloody show-off, please,” Q says, obviously torn between amusement, pride, and embarrassment.

“Tasharrafnah, assaid James,” Iskander replies. “Where did you learn that?”

“I’ve been sent to Arabic speaking countries on occasion. I find it helps to learn basic courtesies.”

“Too few do,” Iskander agrees. Tilting his head at Q, “What can I make you tonight?”

“Hokkien mee, please.”

“Mango juice?” Iskander asks, and Q smiles his agreement. “I don’t know why I bother asking,” Iskander grins, turning to James. “And for you, sir?”

James looks over at Q. “Any recommendations?”

“Asam laksa? It’s the kind of spicy you like,” Q says.

“And to drink?”

“A beer, please.”

“Hokkien mee, asam laksa, mango juice, a beer. Coming up, grab a seat.”

James and Q pick a table, and a teenage girl brings them their drinks and cutlery.

“Thank you Zara,” Q says. “How is math this period?”

“A breeze,” the girl beams proudly, “thanks for asking. French remains a disaster.”

“We’ll watch Les Revenants in your break for practice.”

Zara looks pointedly at James, “Don’t you think your boyfriend would mind you marathoning a series with someone else?”

“James is a very mature and self-confident adult, aren’t you James?” Q drawls.
“Very. Plus, she’s too young for you,” James says, ignoring a little pang of jealousy at the easy relationship between Q and Zara.

“I’m almost eighteen!” she protests.

“Actually, James, I think your French is good enough to watch along. If you don’t mind, Zara.”

Zara looks James over, and shrugs. “Sure,” she says, “I have to attend to the other customers, sorry.” Zara returns to the counter to tend bar.

“She’s a very bright girl,” Q says, with almost familial pride. “I helped her through a few bumps with math class a couple of years ago. She’s considering studying IT next year. I’ve even thought we might keep an eye out for her. Our business can always do with that kind of talent.”

“Speaking of, what name do you use with your dance class?”

“Peter Burton. Senior IT staff. You’re under your regular Universal Exports cover.”

“When lying, at least lie consistently,” James approves.

Zara brings them their food, which is every bit as good as Q promised. The beer goes well with it, taking the edge of the spice. Q pays for dinner and they make their farewells.

“So, how do we get to your dance classroom? Rehearsal space? What should I call it?”

“We walk.” Q says simply. So they walk through London, holding hands, talking about food, weekend plans and secondary school experiences. James feels something funny bubbling up inside him, a kind of lightness that he had almost forgotten about since Venice. They stop before an unassuming door, where Q stops and presses on a bell.

“Who is it?” a tinny voice asks through the intercom.

“Peter and James.”

“He came!” The tinny voice sounds excited. “Come on up.” The door buzzes and Q pushes it open, letting himself in first and holding the door for James, who follows him. The door leads to a small hall, from where the stair rise to the next floor. Q seems to get more elated with every step he takes up the stairs. When Q is two thirds up the stairs, a door opens from the hallway. An older black man is standing in the doorway. “Peter!” he greets Q with genuine affection.

“Yonah!” Q takes the last stairs two at a time to hug the man, while James follows him at a more dignified pace. “Yonah, this is James. James, Yonah, formerly of the National English Ballet.”

James extends his hand, mutters “pleasure,” and looks Yonah over, Yonah accepting and appraising him in return. James must have done something right, because Yonah smiles, lets go of his hand, and pats Q on the back, leading them inside to a hallway, where there are coat hangers and benches lined against the walls and even a few lockers. There is some vaguely North African music playing softly through the door.

“Shoes off,” Q instructs, as if James hadn’t noticed the several pairs of shoes. James dutifully unties his shoelaces as Q takes off his shoes and socks. “Word of advice: lose the socks,” Q says. James smirks at him, and Q realises his error. “Oh, stuff ’m in your shoes. Wouldn’t want to lose your alpaca woolens.” Q puts his phone into one of the lockers, and puts up his hand. James smirks, and stuffs his socks into his shoes as Q waits for him, making a show of being patient.
James gets up and hands over his phone. Q leads them to a big room, one wall completely covered in mirrors almost seven feet high. James estimates there are about fifteen people inside, and Q greets a number of the with hugs and how-are-yous, and introduces James, and is in turn introduced to other people.

When the clock approaches seven thirty and the headcount is up to almost twenty, a short woman in her forties turns off the music and calls them to attention inviting everyone to sit down.

“Welcome everyone, especially our guests. I’m Donna, if I’ve missed you in the introduction, and I’m one of three people who run this troupe. It’s a tradition of sorts, open class somewhere in our season, to share our love for dancing with our loved ones. Or apologise for being unavailable on Monday nights for whatever it is other people do on Monday nights.” That earns her some grins and nods. “So, we’re going through the warming up, and we’ll do some of the things we normally do. You’re all invited to join, but if you’d rather watch, that’s fine. Unless you’re a regular dancer, that is.” Some more grins. James wonders if she gives this little speech every year. She returns to her MP3 player and puts on another piece of music, and puts the volume up loud. James sits down against one of the mirrors, since he has no idea what is going to happen, and prefers not to make an ass of himself.

“Okay, walk around!” Donna instructs, “get to know the space, feel the your body inside it, be aware of the other people in it.” The men and women walk around, not all milling in one direction, but actively seeking out other directions. James tracks Q, who seems to be walking in completely random directions. Donna leads them through a series of warming up stretches, that James recognises about half of from his own workout routines. When she deems everyone sufficiently warmed up, Donna looks over the group and asks, “So, technique first?” Her proposal is evidently accepted, as the people spread out in front of the mirror, some looking a little self-conscious. Donna tells the guests, “We usually start with a technique bit. Today, we’re doing some basic ballet exercises.” She returns to her group. “Okay, first position.” Everybody shuffles their heels together, stretching their spines. “Crown up, chin in, very good.” She leads them through a set of pliés, and then up their toes. They practice striding across the room in a straight line and on the diagonal. Quietly, James gets a little bored with the synchronised movement. Looking at the other faces of the people on the side, he is not the only one.

“Okay, the next time, we’ll do more technique, but for now, let’s change gears.” The dancers sit down next to their guests, as Donna announces the next part of the program. "As you may know, the members of this group have very diverse backgrounds. Tonight, we're showcasing a little of that. Anna and Alexis are starting off."

Two women get up: a blond woman James recalls is called Anna, and a woman with a piercing stare that vaguely reminds him of M. His M. Donna covers the mirrors with curtains while Anna fiddles with the iPod. When the mirror is covered, Anna looks up at Lix, who gives her a nod and with a hint of a smile. Donna is just sitting down as the music starts. The women approach each other as James realises the piece is a tango. He leans over to Q. "Isn't that supposed to be danced by a man and a woman?"

Q grins at him as if he is naive and, shakes his head, gesturing he'll explain later. The two are really good, James realises: in contrast to what he learnt about tango -man leads, woman follows- these two women take the cues from each other. He applauds enthusiastically when the


choreography ends. While applauding, Q leans over: “There’s a long tradition of tango being danced by pairs of men, so there’s no reason to assume women never danced it.”

The second performance is by four people performing salsa in two pairs, changing partners twice throughout the choreography. One of the women performs a Thai silk-weaving dance. Finally, Q gets up, with Yonah and another woman he had seen Yonah talking to. Rebecca, he recalls. Yonah puts his mp3 player in the docking station. He checks in with his partners, who nod at him, anticipation glinting in their eyes. James sits up straight, ready to pay attention.

What starts is incomprehensible modern music. For very large values of music, he adds mentally. Q, Yonah and Rebecca start with their backs pressed against each other. They start pushing against each other, swaying to the beat, pushing each other into motion with hips, legs, shoulder, rolling along, over, with each other. They seem completely absorbed in each other, not minding the audience at all. The sensual, slow moving of their bodies shows off their differences: Q is sinewy, controlled. Rebecca leads with her hips, providing a new impetus. Yonah is the strongest, even at his age, which he demonstrates by lifting Q.

James tries to process how he feels about two other people so sensual, so physically intimate his boyfriend. To confuse matters, his boyfriend with a very attractive woman. And another man. He takes a breath, and compartmentalises: enjoy the performance now, analysis of feelings: indefinite future. The song finishes, and somehow they have managed to stand pressed against each other, faces inwards, hands on each other’s middles.

There is a polite round of applause, which the dancers accept with a bow and a smile. Q settles with his back against James’ torso. James pressed a kiss against the back of his head and breathes, “That was fantastic, love.” He can feel Q’s smugness radiating off him.

Donna walks back to the centre of the room, and announces a short break before the last part of the program. Rebecca walks over to them, and Q gets up to greet her. “Rebecca! That went well, don’t you think?” Rebecca wraps her arms around him, and squeezes for a second. “Peter, we were brilliant and you know it.” She lets go of him, and looks over his shoulder, and nods at James. “Is that your man?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Yes, this is James. James, this Rebecca.”

Rebecca extends her hand to James, and James gets up to take it. Rebecca looks him over appreciatively. “I know what you see in him.”

“Wait until you get his risotto, then you’ll really envy me.” Q grins.

Rebecca shakes her head. “It’s not fair. Gorgeous and a good cook.”

James smiles pleasantly, putting an arm around Q’s back. “I try to keep him happy,” he admits, because it is the truth. “I loved the performance. You were excellent.”


“A bit of ballroom,” James shrugs, “but it’s been a couple of years.”

“Ballroom! That has been a long while for me. Did you train for an occasion?”

“Job that requires shmoozing.”

“International trade?” Rebecca recalls. Q smiles and nods, supporting the story.
“It’s not the same since the internet came up, but the shift towards IT has its advantages,” James nods at Q, every inch the adoring boyfriend.

Rebecca smiles at him fondly.

“Okay ladies and gentlemen, back to work!” Donna says. “And spread out across the room.” Obligingly, everyone shuttles around, spreading through the space. “What you just saw,” Donna starts explaining, “is a choreography developed in part with contact improvisation, and we’re going to do that here now.”

Oh goodness, James thinks to himself, reluctantly getting up. He tries to recall what he knows of his earlier dance lessons, and thus misses what Donna is saying about the point of the exercise so when the music starts, he gets completely confused. While he is trying to come to terms with the measure of the music and tries to figure out what he is supposed to be doing, Q is pushing against him. It’s years of combat practice that prevent him from toppling over, and Q is already rolling against him.

When he presses flush, chest against his back, Q whispers into his ear, “You’re supposed to move along with the momentum. Wait, you start.” Q returns to stand in front of him. James takes his hand, but instead of following his lead and mirroring the movement in synch, Q follows the direction with… his ribcage? Around them, some of the others seems as puzzled as he is, but other pairs are moving in some semblance of harmony.

“Who is supposed to lead?” he whispers to Q.

“Lead? You’re supposed to respond to the moment,” Q says as if it’s the simplest thing in the world. “I’m told it’s like sex: it’s not about being the boss, but about creating something together. Feeling the other. So when my shoulder bumps into yours like so,” Q says, bumping his left shoulder again James’ right, “you can either push back or move along.”

James pushes back on principle. He can almost feel Q grinning, as Q bends backwards and turns sideways to bump into James’ hip. James steps aside, breaking contact.

“Remember to keep touching each other somewhere!” Rebecca says over the music, “it doesn’t really matter where: feet, hips, head.”

That last bit confuses James. He extends his hand to help Q up. Q takes it, and leans back, forcing James to do the same. But when James is finding their balance, Q tugs at his arm, dragging him forward. Q catches him on his chest and lets go of his hand.

“That usually helps,” Q says. For a few moments James is confused, but shifting his focus from his hands to the rest of his body means he pays more attention to Q pressing into him and letting go. Cautiously, he pushes a hip against Q’s hips and finds Q responding to it. They move together better somehow, the less he thinks about it, and the more he tries to respond to Q, the music, the moment. When the song is over, he is a little disappointed.

“Can we do another song?” he asks loudly. He expects Q to nudge him in the ribs, but instead, Q is grinning widely.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” Rebecca smiles, “gather around, tell us how that felt.” The pairs gather round in a circle without prompting.

“Like sex,” James smirks. The observation is met with a choir of wolf whistles. “No really,” James says, “you have to respond to what your partner is telling you non-verbally. And you have to tell what you’d like, and hope it gets picked up.”
“Actually, you’re kind of right,” Rebecca says with a grin. “Anybody else had fun-sexual or otherwise?”

The other guests in the group offer their perspectives, how it felt to ask without words, to move without a plan, how it’s scary and exhilarating. Rebecca leads them through another set of stretches to cool down and the class is finished with a round of “thank you” from the participants.

“Thank you for sharing,” James says softly.

Q slips his hand into James’. “You’re very welcome. Thanks for coming with me.”

“Can we do this again sometime?”

Q breaks in a grin. “I could be persuaded.”

Chapter End Notes

Peter Burton is one of the actors that has played Q in the past.

There is in fact a Yonah Acosta in the English National Ballet. Les Revenants is a French horror drama that I have on my Netflix to-watch list.

The warming up music is Dellali by Cheb Mami. Anna and Alexis dance to Peligro by the Gotan Project; Q, Yonah, and Rebecca dance to I Got a Woman by Nicholas Jaar.

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