To Be Swept Along By the Inevitable Tide

by kolachess

Summary

“He was my partner,” Q finally spoke, voice slightly unsteady but present, “And he was murdered.”


A man in his time plays many parts, sometimes simultaneously, and oftentimes not by choice.

Notes

There will be spoilers for London Spy, although you definitely don't need to have watched it to understand. Vice versa for Spectre. Ben Whishaw portrays both Q and Danny, thus the unholy merging of these two characters.

Past events are intended to be canonical with the exception of Danny's age: he was slightly younger here (20) when the events in London Spy happened, than in canon. There are also references to the deleted scene from the Spectre script, in which Q was kidnapped and withstood interrogation before Bond was able to rescue them.

Also, apologies on the mashing of American and British English. I tried to use Brit terms where necessary, but didn't attempt to adopt British spelling. Feel free to Brit-pick on terms
though.

More notes (and thoughts) at end.

This is un-beta'ed, and neither works belong to me. :(  

See the end of the work for more notes

The soft tune of a smooth baritone sax—a short solo interlude of a classic jazz piece—floated among the number of attendees, carrying enough of a presence to foster the general ambience of festivities, but not so much in a way that demanded attention. A hum of chatter blanketed the large ornate ballroom, soft peals of laughter and the occasional hearty guffaw rippling out every few moments. Party guests milled about from circle to circle, exchanging introductions, greetings, hugs and kisses where proper, and altogether congratulating each other on any and all manner of matters that have happened since their last reunion. Occasionally, there’d be someone swinging by the buffet table for a wide selection of scrumptious and artistically arranged hors d’oeuvrs, crafted, doubtless, from the finest of ingredients by the most experienced of hands in London. In the center of the table was an elaborate crystallized sugar swan spreading its wings in flight, tiered flawlessly on the three-foot tall white chocolate fountain, and resulting in a beautiful, if not a bit gaudy, display of the swan dancing on snow.

Perhaps it was placed there as some symbolic representation of sorts, as it was somewhat out of step with the other themes of Christmas, but James would have put his money on some event planner simply being a tad overeager. Still, what wasn’t out of place was the opulence of it all. It was a little excessive, but so was everything else here, including the location itself, though it wasn’t as if that changed from year to year. The Mandarin Oriental ballroom was a lavish and expensive venue that often catered to the high functions of the London elite, mostly weddings, but also the annual MI6 holiday party. Its massive floor to ceiling windows spanning the perimeter of the ballroom touched the intricately designed and gilded crown molding. Twisted ochre ropes held up heavy velvet curtains of pristine navy, revealing the distant glimmering lights of the Winter Wonderland setup in Hyde Park that the hotel oversaw from a distance, should anyone care to look out the window.

Well, a little excessiveness was to be expected of the MI6 holiday party… After all, if they’ve spent three million British taxpaying pounds on fully weaponized and extra-functioning Aston Martin prototypes and other like gadgets, it was only fair to drop a couple hundred grand on an annual affair that kept everyone happy. Not that the government was by any means wealthy, just… eager to maintain a lower turnover rate. And this was one of few ‘easy wins’ to keep morale high. The top brass considered it a sound investment.

James’ gaze casually swept the room as per habit as he wandered in. Powerful officials who were normally stern and taciturn were smiling as they introduced their significant others. Several newcomers, somewhat unaccustomed to stateliness, busied themselves with the alcohol until eventually getting pulled into one odd conversation or two. The agent noticed that not a small number of the newcomers were of their beloved Q-Branch.

Long since having been the smooth operator of such functions, James easily wound his way through the crowd.

Hello Ian, how is the new baby doing? Two months old, was it? Ah, splendid.
Ah Director Hammond, congratulations on the Glasgow project; excellent results for this quarter.

His usual Bond charm was at helm—the slight of a smile that balanced intelligence with good humor, the gentle crinkling at his eyes, which were a vibrant cornflower blue, conveyed amicability and a posture and gait that translated confidence. Those enticed by his sexual appeal flirted heavily, or at the very least did their best to make him linger. The rest tried to keep his presence for his entertaining stories all of which were spun of grains of truth held together by a web of lies.

For the most part, James of the international consulting firm, ‘Rowley-Greene & Partners’, legal team was an attractive, popular man who made for very good entertainment at a party. He traveled a lot as part of the legal consulting team, and so had his fair share of exciting international tales. Moneypenny did a brief stint in ‘accounting’ before her current role as secretary, and Q—‘Alex’—was a boring software engineer who was mediocre at his job. The identities of all the double-o agents as well as that of the Quartermaster were held in strict confidence, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t come out and have some fun.

It took James an hour to circulate the floor, during which he managed to greet the Head of MI5 and his wife, several of his old colleagues who had transferred from MI6 to MI5 or GCHQ, and a few other directors and department heads. He found Moneypenny and Tanner chatting away by the open bar.

“I believe the point of a company party is to celebrate with all your colleagues and promote inter-departmental relations,” he commented idly, cutting into the conversation between the two.

Moneypenny looked at him and smiled. “Well looks like someone managed to get away from his adoring fans,” she teased while giving him a hug. Tanner reached around and clapped his back.

“Eve, Bill,” James nodded. “Good to see you two haven’t strayed far from the alcohol.”

A scoff was his reply. “As if you haven’t already made several rounds of the bar yourself, James,” Eve retorted with a roll of her eyes, the smoky silver eye shadow and bold charcoal eyeliner accentuating them. She wore a matching silver dress patterned with ebony streaks that wound across her flattering figure.

“Not really my scene, if you’ll remember and forgive me of it,” Tanner pointed out with a grimace. He appeared slightly put out of place with this tux that probably ‘shrunk’ over the course of a year, fidgeting with the bowtie subconsciously.

“Speaking of not being one’s scene, guess who surprisingly made it here tonight?” Eve prompted with both brows raised, pursing her lips to hide a smile.

“…Your ‘friend’,” James teased, knowing the discussion of her not-boyfriend got on her nerves.

“Oh hush, you,” she chastised with a glare. “Leave Sam out of this. You’ll be surprised to know that our dearest Quartermaster is looking absolutely lovely this evening,” she noted innocently, though the glint in her eyes indicated anything but.

James paused. “Q is here?” he reiterated with a tone of disbelief, which only fueled Eve’s smirk. He refused to acknowledge Eve’s desperate, rampant signals as well as the way his heart gave a little lurch of excitement at the mention of the youth.

Bill nodded sympathetically, oblivious to the silent communication happening between the words. “Eve here dragged the poor man along. Been planning it for weeks, I tell you.”
“So where is he?” James questioned, looking around them for the familiar mop of brown hair.

“Probably hiding away from the crowd until he can safely leave,” Bill surmised, shaking his head. “Poor bloke turned kind of pale when he first arrived. Proceeded to make an impressive dent in the alcohol selection though.” He nodded to the table behind them.

Eve’s smile faltered. She pressed her lips together. “Q did seem somewhat… upset. I didn’t think he disliked crowds that much…” she defended uncertainly. “I even asked him if it was really bothering him, but he got this strange look then just told me he was fine.”

James frowned, trying to parse Eve’s words and quickly filtering plausible reasons for Q’s behavior. Upon seeing his reaction, Eve’s expression melted into one of concern. “Perhaps we ought to go find him? Bill and I tried earlier and did a round but only got about twenty handshakes out of it. It took me half an hour to get out of a conversation with Stanley’s mother-in-law…” she groaned.

James hummed noncommittally. “No, that’s alright. I’ll see if I can locate our Quartermaster.” Then, a flash of a grin. “ Wouldn’t be a bloody spy if I couldn’t, right?”

He found Q on the terrace, the mop of messy brown curls distinguishable even in the poorly-lit setting and despite the other’s lack of signature jumpers. The Quartermaster had his back turned to James and was leaning on the thick marble railing, arms drawn into a fold and bearing the majority of his weight. Tendrils of smoke slowly spiraled up from a cigarette sitting loosely between narrow fingers resting at the crook of the elbow. A smile slipped out of the double-o agent as he paused at the doorway, irrationally pleased at his discovery and allowing his eyes to roam over the other man’s lithe and angled figure appreciatively, before he decided to join his lone colleague and make his presence known.

“I didn’t take you for a smoker,” James noted with a faint tone of curiosity as he sauntered up from behind. Q, long since used to double-o agents sneaking up on him for fun, didn’t react in the slightest, only taking a deep drag of his cigarette and blowing it out into the crisp evening air, watching the smoke rise up, twisting and vanishing before the next speck of drizzling rain could hit his chilling cheeks.

“It’s not a habit I’m proud of. Addles my brain,” he admitted a bit dully and giving the flute of champagne—James just noticed he’d had one—a little swirl before downing the rest, setting the glass none too lightly down on the stone surface and pushing it out of the way to join a drained tumbler, the ice still barely melted.

“My my, smoking and drinking, Q? And here I thought the only vices you dabbled in were a terrible sense in fashion and an obscene amount of tea intake,” James said dryly, smirking and moving to stand beside the younger man, one hand tucked into his trouser pocket and the other sporting a scotch. “You look good without those bulky frames of yours,” he commented lightly, noticing the distinct lack of thick-rimmed glasses that normally obscured the man’s face.

Q snorted, the undignified action drawing a quirked brow from James, who’d never really seen Q behave anything remotely less than professional. “Contacts, courtesy of Miss Moneypenny, in her opinion. But to quote my favorite ginger—well ok, second favorite ginger—You know nuthin’, James Bond,” he said, words taking on a slightly—Scottish?—emphasis. Q gave a slight pause, as if to swallow a hiccups, then said, “Well… sort of quote, I suppose. Since she wasn’t talking to you obviously…” He frowned, probably trying to reconnect the tail end of that statement with the beginning punch line.
And in that moment, James Bond learned two things: One, Q made vague references while drunk. And two, Q was slightly—or maybe a little more than slightly—drunk. It was quite entertaining to James and delighted him in little ways that he could witness Q deviating from his normal behavior. He took note of the familiar yet different irritable look on Q’s face—different, likely due to the target of irritation now being Q himself rather than double-o seven or six or other agent. “I’m entirely sure I missed whatever obscure reference you were aiming for,” James said, amused. He took a sip of his drink and set it down carefully next to him, the cold touch of the stone railing permeating the sleeves of his tuxedo and dress shirt as he leaned forward on his arms, gazing out at the park and distant skyline.

His comment earned him a blank stare from the other man. “Pardon me,” quipped Q, redrawing James’ gaze. “Game of Thrones is anything but obscure. You’d know if you updated yourself of pop culture or literature every once in awhile,” he snapped, clearly affronted if the color in his cheeks were anything to go by, though perhaps that was the influence of alcohol.

James’ brows rose, and the man turned to half face his companion. “Literature or pop culture, which is it? Those are two very different things.”

“Both. There are books… and then the TV happened… both’s really good…” the Quartermaster slurred, trailing off into a yawn. He made a general gesture of dismissal and slouched down further and tapped his cigarette over the edge of railing, barely checking to ensure there were no pedestrians passing below.

James chuckled as he observed Q. It was quite a refreshing take on the younger man’s usual personality. He seemed less aloof and… younger, perhaps closer to his actual age, James thought with a brief flash of sympathy. He was only a man of... twenty-seven? Twenty-eight? Yet the burden he carried easily aged him twice that, at times. It did to all of them. “First MI6 company party and you manage get utterly plastered. Well done, Quartermaster. Color me impressed,” he remarked, picking up and taking another sip of the scotch and enjoying the smooth burn down his chest, turning his gaze towards the park again. He watched the vibrant Ferris wheel flash an assortment of bright lights, each change casting a different color onto the night sky.

The cigarette that was making its way to Q’s lips paused, though James’ attention was too preoccupied with the horizon of lights for him to notice. A silence fell over them; the background flutter of music and chatter floated by from behind the balcony doors, and the distant myriad of carnival noises colored the air. James watched the people below mill about in and out of the park, not seeing the gradual change in his colleague’s demeanor and missing the way Q had stilled, eyes losing focus in a haze of memories.

“…s’not…” came the quiet, almost subconscious, admission.

“What?” The agent’s attention still half caught by the steady stream of people walking to and from the great park entrance.

“It’s not the first one I’ve attended…” Q murmured monotonously, cigarette still hovering by his lips, its tip slowly burning away, ashes crumbling forgotten onto the railing.

“Oh. My mistake. Mallory said you’ve never come since joining.” James said with a frown, referring to an offhanded comment of the man. He hadn’t thought to question the man at all, easily believing the boffin to avoid such frivolous things. At the very least, he’d never had the pleasure of seeing Q at the holiday party after the other took on his current position.

A few seconds more passed with no reply from the other man, until, “…I haven’t,” Q confessed softly, the cigarette arm now slowly lowering onto the railing. After a moment of hesitation, he added, “…not since I joined, that is.” fully aware of the implications of his statement even in his
inebriated state.

Perhaps it was the uncharacteristic tone of vulnerability, the soft-spoken words a contrast to the Quartermaster’s usual jibing retorts and snarky comments that gave James pause, and the double-o agent held off on a smart response or two and instead turned to really look.

The low but steady tone, dropped gaze keenly fixated at one spot, the noticeable slump in the younger man’s frame, which remained tense despite how weary they looked… This was not a Q that had unwittingly drunk himself into a stupor and would regret every word or action the next morning. Slightly intoxicated, perhaps, but not drunk. Not really.

This was a Q who was tired. Not the kind of tired where one feels at the end of a long shift, and not the kind of tired that one feels after an intense session of labor. It was a deeper, hollowing sort of tired... one that ran deep enough that couldn’t be chased away by a good night’s rest.

It wasn’t a look he was too unfamiliar with. He’d seen it all too often after Vesper. It took him less than a heartbeat to understand, the warmth from the liquor suddenly draining away.

He gave Q a few more beats before asking gently, “Was he your boyfriend?”

A scoff emerged, followed by a derisive chuckle. “Should I be impressed by your deduction of my sexual inclinations? Or offended that you are making assumptions about me?”

James shrugged, satisfied that his guess had been accurate and knowing better than to argue a sour, however misconceived, point. “Takes one to know one.” Not completely true, but the most placating answer at the moment.

This caught Q’s attention, his head snapping up in incredulity and eyes comically wide. “You—“

“I—“ James quickly cut off, though not unkindly, and adding in a leveled gaze, “—understand… what it’s like to lose someone you thought the world of… and to lose them in more than one way.” His voice was soft and solemn, his tone evidence to the truth in his words, because he’d already understood and connected the dots, the picture of Q’s past slowly stitching together in front of him through flashes of possibilities.

Q remained silent, not knowing how to respond, brow furrowed in a long-lasting search for the right immediate words, because he knew about Vesper, had read about her in the files. And to think about her, her and Bond, and the parallels to himself… In the end, he gave up, finding calm and solace instead on the distant Wonderland display.

A few minutes passed this way, during which James noticed a soft glisten to the other’s gaze. Although, whether that was the result of the ever changing lights or something less tangible, he couldn’t be certain.

“He was my partner,” Q finally spoke, voice slightly unsteady but present, “And he was murdered.”

James said nothing, allowing the silence as a prompt for the other to continue.

“The day he went missing…” Q sniffed, “…we’d been planning a weekend trip together,” he recounted, subconsciously tapping his cigarette against the banister, a nervous tic James had never noticed of Q before.

“He’d needed to pick up an extra battery for his laptop, so we separated and I went to meet him later that night,” he said, swallowing hard and giving his head a small shake. “I’d waited that whole night, thinking the worst.” At this, he let out a little broken chuckle and tilted his head back.
in disbelief. “The ‘worst’ being, or so I thought at the time, that’d he’d grown tired and left me,” he said self-deprecatingly. More defeated chuckles escaped Q as he shook his head, the pain tight across his features.

James resisted the urge to reach out and reassure the younger man, to tell him it was a ridiculous notion. He knew it would be in hollow welcome.

“He didn’t talk much about work… didn’t like to and couldn’t. Investment banking.” He shot James a knowing look and waved his hand dismissively. “And that’s how I’d ended up at one of these years ago. It had been our one month, and I’d felt horribly out of place, but…” He smiled briefly. “I got to see another side of him I didn’t get to see very often. He had few friends, but there were some like-minded colleagues that he got on with. Never saw him talk so rapidly about a topic. And I’d gone around, making niceties with officials and secret agents alike, knowing none the better like those others here today.” He tossed a quick nod in the direction of the ballroom. “I’d teased him about it before…” He snuffed out the rest of the cigarette and dusted it aside. “...how he’s probably a secret agent and using his tech savvyness to learn how to best seduce me,” he laughed, enjoying a point or two of irony that James knew was probably privy only to them—Q and his partner.

“But, he didn’t find much humor in that,” Q said dryly, absent-mindedly tracing empty shapes onto the railing with his finger. “And I’d suspected but… who’d really think? Honestly? And even if it were true, you—” He bit off the remark, shaking his head. There was a longer pause. “I found him… in the attic. I never even knew it existed. It had—” he cut off, searching for the words. “Well… it contained things that just wasn’t Alex.”

The name was mentioned so naturally, James doubted Q had even realized, so lost he was in his memories. There was a small pang that resonated deep within James, causing his eyes to shutter close. He wasn’t sure if it was an echo of empathy—the way Q’s voice broke slightly on his dead partner’s name, a touch of fondness threading the quiver of frustration—or the realization that there was so much more to the man beside him that he never knew, an ugly jealousy of a dead man...

A couple of deep breaths later, Q continued, voice a little shaky but strong, “I saw the blood first—on the floor. It was next to a trunk standing on its side. I recognized it—the trunk. It was Alex’s. That was about the only thing in the room that was. And I just knew… I dreaded, but I knew I would find—” He cut himself off, burying his face in his palms for a few passing seconds before continuing. “No one would believe me, at first. Just the one good friend I’d had. I’d even gone to the bloody papers,” he scoffed. “I’d suspected something more than a man gambled with the wrong crowd had gone on. I took just one thing. Looked like a lock. Turned out to be a USB later but…wasn’t sure what it was at the time. But one thing I was sure about was that my partner was murdered, and I needed to know why.”

“MI6 always did have the best recruitment channels,” James commented sarcastically, which elicited somber chuckles from the younger man.

“You truly believe, don’t you, Bond?” Q asked with a breezy tone of wonder and sadness, shaking his head. “You’ve never once doubted the organization, only the individuals. But then again, what constitutes the organization?” His eyes drifted way as he appeared to become lost in thought again. “In the end, it’s just a group of men with the power of gods...”

“It was MI6?” The double-o agent questioned darkly, frowning at the implications of Q’s statement and the ugly revelation they represented.

But Q just shook his head once, and James, uncertain whether it was a response to his question or just a request for it to be dropped, fell silent. The Quartermaster took a short breath and held it,
hesitating. “They tried to break me,” he whispered lowly, shaking his head slowly as his vision swam with unshed tears and no doubt reliving past nightmares. “It only made me more determined. They tried... you have to hand it to MI6 for ingenuity and thoroughness.” He let out an empty laugh. “If it wasn’t for Scottie, I would’ve. I only wish he didn’t…” His eyes snapped shut as he shook his head fiercely, blinking open a few seconds later.

James took note of the new name even as a worm of unease began to form in the pit of his stomach. He breathed in heavily and hesitated before asking, “Did M—“

“Don’t ask questions you’re not prepared to hear answers to,” Q interjected, eyes pressed shut and letting a couple of silent tears fall.

James nearly bristled at the patronizing remark, but upon noticing the glistening streaks down pale cheeks, gradually settled, mind heavy with thought. He of all people knew better than to push for answers to a past rusted with painful memories.

A small bubble of laughter emitted from Q’s throat, and he sniffed once, raising his head high and letting the cold evening wind dry his tearstained cheeks. “It’s funny. I pursued computers and MI6 in hopes of getting an answer to Alex’s murder, and quite foolishly, getting them to answer to Alex’s murder. Didn’t even own a laptop before that. Didn’t understand the first thing about them. Hadn’t been interested.”

“You’ll have to excuse my inability to imagine that,” James said with an air of disbelief, to which Q shrugged.

“People change, contrary to what most people like to believe. It’s comforting to think the person never truly changes, that a person’s personality always remains the same at its core. The old me probably would have agreed.” A small smile flickered over his lips. “Soulmates were my favorite theories about the human being.” He cupped his hands into a ball, one wrapped around the other. “Alex thought differently, of course. Couldn’t tell that I’d just wanted him to bloody well agree for the sake of romantic atmosphere,” he complained, rolling his eyes, though there was only fondness in his voice.

“And what do you think now?” the older man inquired lightly, observing Q.

Q bit the inside of his lips and parted them for a full two seconds before speaking, “I think people change. But,” He shook his head. “I think I used to be scared of the idea. But Alex saw things differently and…” He shot James a smile. “I think he’s right. It’s not a bad thing. Not necessarily. Sometimes, it’s good…” he trailed off again, the brightness of his features flickering a little. Sucking in a deep breath, the younger man straightened his posture and put on another smile, this time a bit sadder. “Sometimes, I feel like I never really knew him. He and I saw the world in such opposite ways. I saw the individual person, understood what they wanted in the moment, felt what they were like… he saw the their interactions, the patterns, motivations and behaviors, the imprint they left behind… even if he didn’t always understand the meaning behind it all. My world consisted of the few people in front of me. His always consisted of something... bigger. The world, I suppose. He knew everything about me, even though in the end, it’d seem I knew very little about him. Yet even with all that…” he wavered, losing the voice to continue.

“…you still love him,” James finished for him gently, ignoring the small cavity growing in his chest. It was a bittersweet realization that only made him feel deeper for the younger man. He laid a comforting hand on the Quartermaster’s trembling shoulder while the latter let out small shaky nods. Large hands continued to rub soothing circles onto the youth's back. Q remained silent, stifling even the smallest of sobs, until the shaking subsided.

“I’m sorry,” the other man apologized. “It’s been years since——” He drew a shuddery breath and
sighed, shaking his head again. “I hated it when people called me naive, emotional, a romantic as if it were an insult… Why should those things be considered bad? After Alex though, a part of me couldn’t help but start to detest those traits of mine…” He leaned forward on his elbows, forehead touching tented fingers. “I was twenty, lost, and desperate to understand Alex’s world which was so different from mine… Sometimes, I’m ashamed of how I’ve tried to change myself, hide the qualities I used to be proud of. But… Alex changed, because he wanted to understand me. Is it so strange to think I’d changed because I wanted to understand him?” He sounded so vulnerable, and James didn’t have the heart or voice to answer.

“I ended up getting wrapped up in something completely beyond my scope… I’d been sucked into the world my partner left behind, and even after everything was over…” He sighed, and then let out a short laugh. “Who knew I’d end up working for the same people responsible for my partner’s death?” His tone was rueful, glazed with a thin layer of bitterness.

A sudden terrible thought occurred to James. “…Did you come to work for MI6 under duress?” he asked quietly, not liking the question but not naïve enough to put the department above such measures.

The threatening and protective tone came as a surprise to Q, who gave James a small appreciative smile. “Things are hardly so black and white though, wouldn’t you agree, Bond? You could say I wasn’t given much of a choice, at the end of the day. ‘If you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you’ and all,” Q commented lightly. “You know as well as I do that people like us would never fit back into normal society. Not completely. There’s a divorce between our world and the normal one, and it’s evident in the little innocent things that happen everyday.”

“What Alex discovered,” he continued and then hesitated. “It was powerful. Too much so. That much, they all agreed on.” Another broken laugh. James didn't bother asking who 'they' were. “I understand that now. I hate that I do, because the me that Alex knew… that me wouldn’t have. And that was who Alex loved, and sometimes I feel like I’m betraying him—” He buried his face in his hands again, frame visibly shaking.

James said nothing as a whole half minute passed in silence.

“Fuck… I’m sorry,” Q bit out self-deprecatingly, dragging his hands over his face.

“Not at all,” came James' reply. Q flashed him a weak smile.

“I wanted to understand him. And at the time, I felt that to do that, I had to understand his work. A friend said Alex did it for me,” he admitted softly, voice sounding momentarily lost. “So I read books, took courses, learned to program… Who knew I was actually smart? Granted, it’s not like I was ever given the chance to try.” He snorted. “It’s hilarious that everyone automatically assumes I graduated with double doctorates from Cambridge or MIT or some equivalent… you lot couldn’t be farther from the truth.”

A golden eyebrow rose substantially on the agent’s face. “Did you not? Later, that is?” There had often been whisperings of the Quartermaster’s actual academic accomplishment, and they’d ranged from the young teenage boy who’d earned his doctorate at the age of nineteen to the man who juggled three doctorates by the age of twenty-three. Of course, anyone who attempted to pull up the Quartermaster's records was met with empty results.

Q grinned, hazel eyes flashing mirth. “Nope.” Then he leaned in to whisper conspiratorially, “Don’t even technically have a bachelor’s since I never officially finished,” before pulling away with a smug expression. “Never thought uni was for people like me, until I’d blazed through two years of computer sciences in one. Automata theory, statistical analyses, applied maths… started there and…” He made a gesture upwards. “Somewhere along the way, other branches of
computers stirred my interest. Although, to be honest, I will say the paranoia of watching my own back also spurred me along the paths of networking and security. It started out as small programs to protect myself.” He paused. “Defensive,” he clarified. “Stuff on my local computer. The local network. It wasn’t long before I figured… why not be pre-emptive. Harmless, of course.” He shrugged.

“I’d managed to get myself off the MI6 radar after a few years, but after a while, I thought, what was the point? I said before, once you step into this world, it becomes a part of you. In the end, you could say I had nowhere else to go. And part of me also wanted to—” He broke off, shaking his head.

James frowned, trying to ignore the small curl of disappointment at the near revelation. Whatever the other had been about to say was cut off with a bit more vigor than a simple loss for words.

“I’ve run around so many circles so many times… there are moments I’m not sure what the purpose of it all is anymore. It’s why I’ve come to like computers,” he confessed. “They’re precise, clean, predictable and do exactly what you tell them to do—provided you are telling them what you think you are that is… Alex was real good at that. I mean really. People heralded me as a genius but… Alex was the real one. I may be the Quartermaster of MI6, but he could have just as easily been, had he had the drive and ambition.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” the double-o agent remarked, drawing a questioning frown from the Quartermaster. “It takes a special degree in witty snobbishness to deal with us agents. Did your Alex have that?” he teased, smirking.

A laugh escaped Q. “Oh dear god, no. Alex was never one much for talking. He’d… he’d probably just stare at you speechless if you started throwing banter in his direction,” Q surmised, greatly amused by the imagery. “And if that was supposed to be an insult at my charming personality, Bond, you can kiss your exploding pen prototype goodbye.” A glare was thrown in for good measure.

It had no effect on the blond man as a mischievous glint entered his eyes. “Would that be because the pen explodes upon a kiss?” he dared to joke, leaning in briefly with a faint touch of flirtation.

The younger man stared at him in slight horror. “Double-o seven. I didn’t think you had it in you the capacity for such cheesy humor.”

James smirked. “I strive to impress.”

They settled into a comfortable silence, the air feeling a tinge warmer than before. Behind them, the music and chatter had died down and the sounds of a speech floated out, though both men were too deep in thought to pay it any mind.

“My partner died, because the country that he strove to protect suddenly decided his intellect was more of a threat than an asset. They didn’t even have to pull a trigger,” Q scoffed emptily.

“...how do you not hate them?” James asked quietly, a low simmer of anger and despair coursing through him on the Quartermaster’s behalf. He scowled at the thoughts of what he would have thought of M, the former M, if he’d actually known Silva and been close friends with him, only to realize the institution had turned on a man who had only ever done them service. It was all too personal, and he couldn’t remain blind to the fact that M had probably knowingly sanctioned such decisions. It hurt to think of the woman closest to a mother for him that way, but James knew firsthand the myriad of facets there were to a person.

Q smiled, eyes twinkling in a too innocent manner. “If I said I do, what would you do?”
James paused, then shrugged. “Nothing, I suppose.” And he found it odd that he was surprisingly comfortable with that.

Q raised a brow. “So much for Queen and Country, double-o seven. Someone admits to hating the British secret service and you brush it off? And that someone being in a position of actual power?”

James shot him an exasperated look. “First, they wouldn’t have hired you with your background if they deemed you a threat. Second, you didn’t admit to it. And third, even if you did feel that way—which you don’t, for whatever odd reason—you wouldn’t betray us,” he stated confidently, the you wouldn’t betray me going unsaid. Q wouldn’t, not after James had witnessed the proof of that fierce loyalty in the cold interrogation cell in Austria. Something had been born that day. It was as strong as it had been small—the roots of trust anchoring the fledging of a new relationship between them.

This quieted Q for a moment. “Thank you,” he said softly. “For trusting me.”

James assessed him with a look then replied, “Likewise.”

Q scoffed. “I must be drunk.”

An amused look flitted across James’ features. “You’re not.”

A grimace. “All’s the pity, then,” lamented Q as he toyed with the empty glass beside him.

James shot him a grin. “Shall we rectify that then? Not too late to get roaring drunk,” he noted.

Q groaned. “If only I didn’t also have to get up early tomorrow to guide double-o nine through the server farms of Sao Paulo… Now that I’ve actually sobered up, I can’t reasonably drink the night away.” He looked irrationally displeased at the fact. “Can’t knowingly leave poor double-o nine all on her own even if the rest of the bloody department is curing their hangovers… especially double-o nine,” he mumbled. “I mean, did you know this is the third year in a row she’s missed the holiday party? It’s like MI6 is doing this on purpose to spite her. Poor girl.” He sniffed.

James looked fairly amused for a few moments and was about to make a retort when he suddenly stopped, whatever he was about to say dying on the tip of his tongue, the smirk gradually fading away. A soft realization crept over his expression, which swiftly flashed through the emotions of pain, anger, admiration, sadness, and understanding before finally settling on one of gratitude mixed in with an echo of sorrow. “You were always looking out for us,” he muttered softly, his tone lined with a faraway sadness.

“Sorry?” Q asked, frowning at the words he couldn’t quite catch. “...Bond?” he inquired again with a quirked brow when the other continued to stare at him with an unfathomable expression.

Finally, James snapped out of his thoughts, the faintest of smiles spreading across his face, and Q was momentarily taken aback by the sudden depth of sincerity in those light blue eyes. After all, he was so accustomed to the suave gentleman looking everything from confident, to exasperated, to angry, to happy, to loving… but always with a degree of intensity and firmness to it. It was the first time Q had ever seen the agent look so gentle, and open.

“Bond, I…” Q shifted uncertainly under the honesty of the gaze.

“Thank you,” he said simply.

Q blinked, bemused. “What for? Was it something I said about 009?” he asked with a frown, eyes darting aside as he mentally revisited the past couple of minutes. His face transformed into one of
horror. “Oh dear lord, Bond. If you are thanking me on behalf of 009 because the two of you secretly have something going on…”

James laughed aloud, blue eyes twinkling with mirth. “Oh, Q. Please don’t ever change.”

The younger man appeared slightly affronted and murmured something about it being too late, sending the other another glare.

“I mean it. I’m glad you became our Quartermaster,” James spoke in low tones, voice carrying more emotion than Q could name. “Thank you for coming back.” It was the most honest confession James had had in years, and the feeling only grew after the words left his mouth.

Q stilled, the look of disdain waning from his face, leaving only a weariness fringed with grief. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, before opening them again with a small smile, nodding. “Well, you couldn’t do without me now anyways,” he quipped, bringing a lighter note to the conversation.

A scoff sounded from the agent. Then, “No… no I can’t,” James noted with interest, realizing the truth behind the statement and unintentionally catching the younger man’s eyes. Q’s eyes widened barely. A rush of pink colored his cheeks before he broke contact and pushed himself away from the railing.

“Well… perhaps we should head back inside before both of us start to grow our own morning dew?” To illustrate his point, he started to flick off the specks of drizzle that had slowly accumulated on his tuxedo, pivoting to face the balcony entrance. And as if he’d only now become aware of the frigid temperature that was typical of English weather, the man gave a shudder and quickly folded his arms into his chest.

A flash of disappointment accompanied by a near imperceptible wince of self-loathing crossed the James’ features, and it didn’t go unnoticed by Q. An apology was writing itself on the agent’s face before he even opened his mouth to speak, but Q beat him to any words by suddenly turning to face him and saying, “Bond.” He then stopped, brows stitching together and face an odd mixture of curiosity and hesitance. Tilting his head to one side, he wet his lips before looked up again and meeting James’ eyes. He took a breath, “James,” he tried again with a single nod, earning a reaction from the other man. “How would you like to grab a drink sometime?”

James’ visage darkened, a look of discomfort passing through. “Look, Q… I don’t want you to fee—”

“God help me, James—” the younger man muttered with a brief flutter of lashes hiding a roll of the eyes. “You said you trusted me.” It was a statement, an affirmation. He nodded at the agent, brows elevated.

“Yes,” the answer.

“So join me. For drinks. For a toast to all love—past, present…” His eyes darted aside for a moment. “…and future.”

“Q…” James began slowly with raised brows and small curve to his lips.

“Oh shut up,” Q groaned, cheeks flaring up and ears turning pink. “I went from picking up guys at nightclubs while I was drunk or high or both straight to bantering with you lot with your snarky attitudes and fancy politics. The particular mix of flirting with words and smooth lines was not something I’ve ever really attempted,” he admitted gruffly.

A light entered James’ eyes as he chuckled. “Flirting with words isn’t your thing, hmm? That’s
“Alright,” he hummed, leaning in a little closer to whisper into the other’s ear, “I speak the non-verbal language too, as you’d know.”

Q’s breath hitched, and he swallowed hard. “Why…” he started, eyes fluttering close. “…is it that you can say an equally sappy thing and just sound so much more smooth?” he finished in almost whining exasperation, eyes flying open in annoyance. And as unbecoming as it was, the younger man may have pouted.

James smirked. “It’s all in the delivery.”

Q muttered something unintelligible, but James laughed anyways.

“Don’t be sour, Quartermaster. As long as you’re certain—” A threatening glare cut him off, but James simply held up a placating hand, then placed it over his heart, “I’m happy to be yours, six o’clock next Sunday?”

Q failed to fight off a smile. “Of course. I don’t suppose I need to notify you of my preferences…?” he inquired lightly with a curious look.

James smiled. “I would be insulted if you thought I did.”

A cheeky grin overtook the younger man’s features. He then pivoted towards the direction of the ballroom. “Shall we? I’m certain Moneypenny’s been ensuring our privacy for us for the past half hour. We most definitely owe her a drink or two?” he suggested, shooting a glance in the direction of the party.

“Indeed we do.” And they both turned to walk inside.

Just before they reached the doorway, Q halted, half-turning. He drew a breath, holding it for a second before saying, “Danny. My name. That's what it was. Or still is, I suppose.”

James raised his head in acknowledgment. “Danny.” The name rolled off smoothly as he tested it, nodding slowly, as if savoring a sip of fine red wine. A gradual smile spread over his face. “It suits you.”

Q rolled his eyes in good humor, fighting a grin and failing. “And if I had a name like Boris?”

The agent raised both brows. "Have you something against the mayor's name?"

The other man pursed his lips and frowned. "Hmm... now that you mention it, I'm not sure if I'm adverse to the name because of the name itself or its association with idiocy."

James stared in amusement. "Really... never knew you to be so political. You're just a bag of surprises today."

"Someone has to keep you on your toes, double-o seven," Q pointed out.

The other man hummed noncommittally. "Well I suppose if you really were named Boris, you’d just have to change your name to Danny now, wouldn’t you?"

Q laughed. “Arse. Right. Well, I’m ready to head inside before my insides freeze over.”

“That’s alright. I’ll be sure to warm it right up,” James countered saucily.

Q responded with another roll of his eyes before pushing his way back inside, taking care to ensure the door slammed back in the other man’s face and heading towards the buffet table before
the other could catch up. The warm and welcome rush of air enveloped him instantly; the dazzling lights, entrancing melodies, tinkering of glasses and hum of conversations assaulted his senses.

Upon reaching the table, he swiftly poured himself a cup of mulled wine, and then turned around to observe the room. A flash of memory, a snatch of spoken words, the faint impression of an aroma... Impressions still flittered through Q's mind, and faint images of a tall handsome blond man still snuck into the scene at the corner of his eye. Earlier, that was all he could see. The memories had overwhelmed him to the point of leaving.

Now, there was calm in the chaos, a small anchor he could hold onto tightly, without fear of it breaking. He let his eyes wander, jumping through reality and memories alike, until they settled on a young male couple—one of whom he recognized as a Q-Branch minion.

He watched the way the minion's partner stared at him with adoration as the latter animatedly chatted with a coworker. He watched the subconscious exchange of comfortable touches. He watched it all with a twinge of nostalgia.

“Like you and Alex?” James' voice, soft and understanding, drifted up next to him, the agent having caught up and followed his gaze.

Q spared him a glance before considering his words and replying, “No. Not like me and Alex.” He watched the boffin smile as his partner tilted his head back in laughter at something double-o-six said. A ghost of a smile, sad yet hopeful, appeared on Q's face. “Not like me and Alex at all.”

James observed Q for a moment before raising his head in understanding.

He was their Quartermaster, after all.

End Notes

Whew that was long. I didn't want to write any major thoughts before you all were given a chance to read the story. But now I can say whatever I want!

My first contribution to 00Q, and it's honestly sort of meh to me. I guess this is what happens when you try to shove two very different characters together due to their commonality in the actor portraying them.

I knew that going into this, of course (see my tumblr rant here) and it became a sort of character study challenge to me. I had fun with it, as it was extremely difficult to balance an accurate portrayal of both characters, but also somehow show they are the same person. I did the best I can, but still feel it could have been better.

I also still struggle with wording, word flow and imagery, and balancing between showing versus telling. Some parts feel kind of stunted to me, so feel free to give me pointers!

The ending kind of fell apart on me. I had trouble figuring how to have it end. XD And it also grew into a monster of a fic... whoops.

Lastly, I have no views on the mayor of London, nor am I trying to be mean to the Boris's of the world. :o)
Anyways, all in all, I hope someone still enjoyed it a bit! Reviews are love, kudos are my sugar cubes and Ben Whishaw is one hell of an actor.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!