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**Forest King**

by Elphen
AU. After falling out with his sister, John ends up in a Cornwall Midsummer’s Eve celebration in the middle of a forest that’s rather…different. After the hazy night of magic and passion with a pale-eyed man, he goes home to London.
He’s in for a surprise when his stomach starts growing and buds appears on his head. Not one to just accept things, he returns to Cornwall to demand an explanation.
When he meets the forest king, Sherlock, again, he has to come to terms with not only what’s happened to him but what kind of magical world he’s been thrust into. Plus, there’s the questions of whether he trusts the antlered man and how he'll survive being apparently pregnant.
Sherlock isn’t much help. That doesn’t mean he isn’t trying to somehow make John understand his feelings, however, even if he’s greatly hampered by being Sherlock. They slowly move forward but problems beyond their control may arise from an act done with the best of intentions. How will they cope, separately and together?

Notes

This is a complete and utter experiment for me, to write and to post. It's quite a lot darker than anything that I've posted before, I think, but the idea have been rattling around my brain for at least half a year and would not leave.
So, fair warning, some serious dubcon at the start (as well as some other stuff later one) that might be squicky for some people. I hope you'll bear with me but I'd like you to know what you're getting into before you start reading :)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Midsummer Eve

He was lost. No two ways about it; he was well and truly off the beaten path and into the wilderness, with no thought to bring a satnav with him.

He did have a mobile with him, with plenty of battery to boot. He might have been somewhat unprepared for the trip, but he wasn’t quite that daft, despite everything else that had happened that evening. The general connection wasn’t all that good on it, though, and as far as the internet connection was concerned, it was quite beyond patchy, which meant that when he’d tried the satnav on it, it had loaded about half the image and then stalled completely.

Refreshing the app hadn’t done much to help, either, and so he had given up on it for the moment as it was also draining the battery and he didn’t want to have a drained battery by the time he managed to get somewhere where he could get a somewhat decent connection.

So, he continued trudging through the undergrowth of the forest, cursing his drink-fuelled decision to head out here in the first place.

Granted, it hadn’t just been purely drink-fuelled. Well, it had, but he’d been drinking because he was angry and he was angry because he’d had a flaming argument with Harry. And he had been arguing with his sister, in front of an entire pub full of people supposedly out to celebrate the summer solstice or possibly just enjoying a rare, warm summer evening, because she had not only fallen off the wagon quite spectacularly but had managed to slap her wife about in the process.

The hospital had called him as Clara had for some inexplicable reason asked for him specifically once she’d regained consciousness. When he’d heard what had happened, he’d taken the first train down to see her. That had sadly only been the next day, as it was late and it took eight hours to get all the way down to Cornwall by train.

She’d been quite the sight and not in a good way. Nevertheless, she’d smiled when she’d seen him, despite a split lip, and asked after his health, of all things.

After some time talking, where John had taken the time to do a bit of an assessment of her of his own, she’d grabbed his hand between both of hers and looked imploringly at him.

“You’ve got to find her, John,” she’d said in an earnest voice. “She’s been on her own for days, she must be in a terrible state by now.”

“Good!” he’d replied, with feeling.

She’d looked taken aback at the exclamation. “John, you don’t mean that.”

“I do,” he’d insisted in a calm voice. “With all my heart.”

“But she’s your sister – “

“She’s an alcoholic, useless lout who’s had too many second chances as it is. Now she’s fallen off for God only knows what time and she’s done this. Quite frankly, she deserves everything she manages to get herself into.”

“Oh, John. I know you’ve never approved of her choices but she has been trying, she really has. It’s just been a bit of a rough patch, that’s all…”
“If the next words out of your mouth is something even remotely along the lines of ‘it was my own fault, really’ – “

“You’ll do what, exactly?” she’d asked with a tiny, fragile smile that stopped the words in his mouth.

She’d looked so small and frail sitting there in the hospital bed in the horrible gown. Yet there had been an air about her as though nothing was going to bring her down. It was one of the reasons he’d always liked her so much and why she was so wasted on someone like his sister.

“If you would just find her, make sure she’s still alive. That’s all I ask.”

“Then you’ll leave her?”

She hadn’t answered, only looked down and to the side.

In the end, he hadn’t had the heart to wrestle a concrete answer out of her. She would have to come to the realization on her own, sadly.

But that did mean that when he’d gone out to try and find his sister, he’d been feeling…tetchy, to put it mildly.

It hadn’t taken him long; all he had had to do was locate the pub nearest to their home and then work outwards until he found one she hadn’t yet been kicked out of. He’d had a beer at one or two of them, if only because the publican had seen an opportunity and refused to give information unless he’d ordered something alcoholic.

He’d found her at the fourth one. She’d been trying to arm wrestle with a guy twice her size, throwing out all kinds of slurs to everyone around her who, sadly, had seemed to find her amusing.

Johnny!” she’d called out when she’d spotted him. “Look what the wind has blown all the way down here! What, run out of skirt to chase in London, have you?” she’d asked as she somehow managed to get to her feet in one go. The steadiness of the long-time drinker.

“Knock it off, Harry,” he’d said sharply, glaring at her from a few feet away. Any closer and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to resist grabbing her by the collar and shaking her. “You know perfectly well why I’m here.”

Something dark had flashed across her face before it was back to intoxicated jack-the-lad conviviality. She’d smiled at him as though nothing was the matter.

“Steve!” she’d called, apparently addressing the bartender. “Steve, m’brother’s here, he needs a drink.”

Like hell I do and neither do you,” he’d growled, moving forward until he’d been right up in her face, glaring daggers at her.

“Are you honestly telling me you’ve been on a bender ever since you knocked your poor wife six ways from Sunday?” he’d hissed, low so as not to alarm the pub’s patrons. “Well, of course you have, because that’s the only way you know how to deal with things. Apart from with your fists, that is, of course.”

It had taken a moment for her drink-addled brain to grasp what he’d said but when she did, her face had twisted up into a very ugly grimace.

“Oh, yes, of course she called you,” Harry had sneered back at him, her beer-breath horrible in his
“Her knight in shining armour you’ve always been, Johnny boy. Always there to help when the need arises, aren’t you?”

“Well, it’s more than you can claim.”

“Don’t try to play the saint with me, brother. I’m not the Watson with the nickname ‘Three Continents’, am I?”

“No, yours are far more demeaning!”

Her face had twisted again. “Little John with the open face and the gentlemanly ways – is that how you hook them? Is that how you made her fall for you? You must have disappointed her, then, only turning up days after I’d gone, after she’d have called you – “

“She didn’t call me, the hospital did!”

That had shut her up well and good.

“You knocked her into a wall, Harry. She was unconscious when she was brought to the hospital and she asked them to call me when she woke up. She’s still there and she will be for a very long time. Do you get it now?” He knew he’d been shouting at that point and had all the people around them staring but he couldn’t have kept it down by that point if he’d tried.

His memory on what happened after that was hazy at best. He knew there had been an attempt by Harry to sock him one, which he had easily managed to dodge, seeing as he was a full-grown man and she was too drunk to properly coordinate movements like that. His aching, reddened hand was a reminder that he’d thrown a hard punch in return, which, by contrast, had managed to land, sending her staggering.

He was sure somebody had then taken her off somewhere ‘to sleep it off’ or something of the like while he had been standing there, fuming for a few moments. Then, for whatever reason, he’d started walking, out of the village, away from any houses, away from people.

Perhaps that was it, really. He’d needed to be away from the sheer stupidity of the general populace and so his subconscious had taken him in the direction most likely to give him that.

As he hadn’t been observing as he’d walked, only concerned with his own thoughts and emotions, he had walked quite frankly completely randomly and had consequently managed to wind up in a wooded area with very little idea of which direction he had come from.

Of course, he did have his military training, which ought to help him get his bearings reasonably quickly, without the help of any electronic devices. But though he was perfectly able to tell south from north and east from west, it didn’t help him much, since he hadn’t a clue whether the village he’d walked from was to the south or north or whichever.

To go back to the town where he’d gotten off the train meant that he’d have to go north, as further south would only bring him closer to the coast. Going north, however, meant that he would be trekking through more woodlands and it was getting late.

Since it was Midsummer Eve, that didn’t mean it was getting dark, though, and so he walked on, determined to get back to some sign of civilisation before darkness finally did fall.

Even though he’d walked for long enough to early afternoon to turn into mid-evening and he hadn’t had anything alcohol to drink before that point, so he should be well and truly sober by then. Yet he was feeling a buzz running through his body as though he’d been imbibing in all that afternoon.
As everything gained that peculiar golden light prevalent on sunny summer evening, he thought he saw a human figure between the trees. They were quite far off and the light was against them so all he could see was a silhouette. Nevertheless, they were another living being that might help him locate a proper, asphalted road.

“Hello!” he called out, shouting to be sure he was heard despite the distance. “Hello there!”

The figure didn’t turn or otherwise acknowledge that what John had said had been heard. They didn’t move away, either, however.

Is my eyes just playing tricks on me then due to fatigue? the doctor wondered.

He resisted the temptation to rub as his eyes like a disbelieving child and instead picked up his pace, following the relatively easily navigable part of the forest floor as best he could. Whether the figure was real or not did not alter the fact that it was facing the direction John had intended to go in any case.

He called out again a bit later, just to be on the safe side, seeing as he was somewhat closer and might more easily be heard.

This time, the figure moved just enough in his direction to confirm that it was indeed a person and not just another silhouette of a tree that his mind had managed to warp into something else.

Once he got even closer, the black mass of the figure resolved itself into that of a tall woman with a mane of copper curls and a figure that, though somewhat curvy, spoke more of firm muscle than of soft fat.

She was dressed for a warm summer evening out but certainly not for trekking through the forest in any way. Then again, neither was John, really, so to point it out would only be hypocritical.

“Hi,” he said as he got close enough to make out her features, suddenly feeling slightly awkward at approaching her like this.

What could he say to explain his presence? That he’d gotten lost after trekking the area for hours instead of going for the drink he so wanted, all because his sister had made the biggest mistake of her life? It might be true but that didn’t mean it was something you could just offer as a casual explanation.

“Ehm,” he began, aware of her eyes on him, even in the strangely bright, golden light, “I thought, perhaps, you could help me? You see, I’ve gone and gotten myself a little lost here, which is stupid, I know, but – “

His rambling explanation was cut off as she quirked the smallest of smiles at him, reached out and grabbed hold of his hand. She didn’t say anything but once she had his hand firmly in the grip of hers, which was rough in an odd sort of way, she started walking.

Since her grip was firm to the point of unbreakable, he knew he should follow, at least if he didn’t want to stumble and fall flat on his face.

It seemed that she only led him deeper into the forest, which was worrying him quite a bit. She ignored his questions and other attempts at conversation, though, and her grip never faltered. He would have to follow her wherever she wanted them to go and would have to trust that if things went tits up when they got there, he could handle himself fine.

As they walked, they were gradually joined by more and more people. Well, they appeared to be
people, although, like with her, there was something about them that didn’t quite fit.

When they finally stopped moving, he saw that they had arrived at a clearing.

It was quite the large clearing and it had to be as well, since a frankly enormous bonfire had been piled up and lit some time before and was now burning bright and clear. Even in the still surprising amount of golden sunlight, the fire had been visible for quite some time before their arrival and in the back of his mind, John couldn’t help wondering if they would have the fire brigade come down on them at some point.

The bonfire itself wasn’t too surprising, though, seeing as it was the summer solstice. The amount of people already around it, sitting or standing or dancing, was somewhat more unexpected.

If he’d expected his hand to be released when they arrived, he was to be disappointed. Not that it was a bad thing to have his hand gripped by an attractive, if a little odd, woman but he would have liked it to be of his own choice.

“Ehm, thank you, I suppose. Not really feeling up for a solstice celebration, though, but I appreciate the – oi, not again.”

She was tugging at his hand again, leading him over to a group of people sitting in a small circle with what looked like a large bottle of wine being shared between them. There she sat down, quite in the middle, dragging him down with her.

As he sat, he could feel the eyes of everyone around him but he refused to be intimidated or feel awkward. Instead he took the time to look around the circle in turn, trying to assess the others.

They looked about as strange as the woman who’d brought him and the ones that had followed them there. One had a strangely broad, twitching nose, as though he was constantly sniffing the air and didn’t much like what he picked up. Another was a willowy girl with wild hair and a strangely hollow expression who was leaning with her back against a tree. A couple sat, the woman broad all over in a very earthly way while the man leaning against her was slender and sinewy with long, curiously wet hair and bottomless eyes.

If I’m going to be mugged by these people, it’s certainly going to be easy to pick them out in a crowd, John found himself thinking.

He was passed the wine bottle.

“Ah, no. Thank you, but no. I’m not drinking tonight.”

“It’s the solstice.” The words came from the woman who’d brought him her. Her voice sounded as though she had just found it after not using it for ages, all soft and whispery, almost like the rustling of leaves and branches. It was a stupidly florid description, yet the doctor couldn’t have helped it if he’d tried.

“Yeah, I know, and it’s kind of you to want to share with me, but really, no.”

“One should share in the bounties of nature on an evening like this,” another voice rumbled. John couldn’t tell who’d spoken.

“Like I said, very kind, but not needed. Here.” He held out the bottle for his guide to take. She did so and took a large swig of it.

He only just managed to think that at least that was a sort of indicator, albeit not too strong a one, that
it hadn’t been poisoned or spiked before she leant forward and pressed her lips against his.

In sheer bafflement over what had just happened, he spluttered and opened his mouth. Unfortunately for him, she took the opportunity to part her lips as well and the wine held in her cheeks flowed into his mouth and down his throat.

Once he’d unintentionally swallowed it all, she pulled back to look at him, offering him a very cheeky grin.

He felt anger at being manipulated like that and opened his mouth to voice it but a very unexpected noise stopped him.

It was a snort and more than that, it was one of distinct disapproval. He looked around to see who it was snorting but it clearly wasn’t anyone immediately around him and, when he strained to look farther, all he could see in the far shadows cast by the blazing fire behind him was a tall, stately shade with strangely, yet alluringly pale eyes that managed to shine in the light from the flames.

“Won’t you drink with us?” his guide asked him imploringly. “It’s a joyous occasion, it should be shared.”

“Oh, yeah? And why didn’t you say anything about all of this before you dragged me here?” Despite his annoyed and slightly brusque tone, he wasn’t feeling quite as angry as he should have, as he had been feeling.

The alcoholic, pleasant buzz he’d felt throughout their trek hadn’t dwindled, quite the opposite, in fact, and the wine he’d just imbibed must have been strong, since it had significantly increased that buzz. He was most certainly blaming that on the fact that he was feeling far less anxious or angry than he ought to.

*Think, John, think. This could turn out very bad for you if you’re not careful. You need your wits about you.*

But he was tired, sore, mentally drained and an evening just enjoying himself sounded like a better idea the more he thought about it.

“Special place,” was all she said in reply, as though that would explain everything. She leant to kiss him again, this time with her mouth staying firmly closed.

Nevertheless, John thought he could hear the disapproving snort coming from around the same area as before. More than that, it had a warning quality to it as well, which was quite impressive for a mere snort. Or maybe the warning came from a rumble just barely audible over the chatter of the gathered people and the crackling of the fire.

Whatever the case, it had the effect of making the girl sit back as though she’d been slapped.

On instinct, John reached over and took her hand, squeezing it reassuringly. She was clearly young, certainly younger than he had first thought, and perhaps a bit excited at the prospect of this evening. If she wanted to share that with him, who was he to deny her a bit of innocent fun?

But what about – oh, bugger that for a game of soldiers. I’m far too tired to argue and they seem nice enough. Anyway, it’s a bizarre setup if they’re planning to just mug me.

He felt the buzz, whether that was purely from the wine or from something else as well, as it surged through him and, he suspected, was a factor in his increasingly lackadaisical attitude towards what was happening.
They sat talking for some time, though if asked, John wouldn’t be able to say how long that was. He listened more than anything but found that he was enjoying the company and the conversation far more than he thought.

The buzz only continued to grow, even though he’d only drunk a few additional swigs of the wine, leaving him feeling pleasantly…not dazed as such, but something of that sort. He’d find the word for it. Later.

The sound of a drum broke through the low sounds filling the evening air, clear and deep, the vibrations of it almost felt as much as they were heard.

Everything stopped.

The sound came again, somehow sounding even deeper than before. Then, a beat, higher than the previous drum yet softer somehow, began, slowly increasing but keeping at a steady, insistent rhythm that pulled at every cell in the body.

John felt someone starting to tug at his hand, which was odd, since he hadn’t felt someone grab it. He looked up, blinking a little to bring the figure in front of him into focus.

It was a rather handsome man, tall and broad with wild hair and dark eyes that smiled even if his lips did not. He was, like quite a few of the others, now the blonde came to think of it, wearing some sort of mask that obscured a good part of his face. Then again, it was the summer solstice. Masks were, all things considered, quite mild.

John found himself smiling back as he allowed the man to tug him upright, even as the image of pale eyes flashed across his mind’s eye.

Once upright, his other hand was grabbed by the young woman with the copper curls and he was led towards the bonfire where most of the others gathered were also congregating.

This close to the fire, which was burning as high and bright as when they had arrived, he could feel the heat licking at his skin. Not as it would through the several layers of clothing he should be wearing on his upper body but directly onto skin.

Frowning, he looked down and saw that he was bare from the waist up.

When had that happened? He couldn’t remember taking his shirt off or anyone helping him to do the same. Midsummer Eve it might be and a surprisingly warm one at that, even given the milder climate of the Cornwall countryside, but to take your clothes off for an extended period of time was hardly the best of ideas.

That wasn’t all, though. Looking down further, he saw that his jacket, shirt and vest weren’t the only things he had been divested of or taken off himself. in the tall grass, his pale feet were clearly visible, completely bare.

He pulled a hand loose quickly and reached down to his back pocket, feeling a stupid sense of relief flow through him when he encountered the familiar shape of his wallet.

He would have checked whether everything was still in it but before he could do so, his hand was grabbed again by the man.

“Alright, enough with the handholding, this is getting just slightly unsettling now,” the doctor said. Try as he might, however, he was once again unable to pull his hands away.
Feeling unease begin to settle in over even the drowsy, pleasant acceptance he’d been experiencing, he tried harder, without much result.

The drum beat had continued in all that time but now it rose a bit in volume if not in pitch and everyone gathered around the fire linked hands and started moving.

At first it was a slow back and forth, almost more of a swaying in time with the beat. That became a few steps from side to side which in turn slowly became a dance, the kind that was traditional when gathered around a big pile of burning wood.

The beat went through the earth and up through the feet and John found that whatever unease he might have felt, the feeling was quickly swept away in the steady drum beat, the heat of the fire and the closeness of those around him.

He followed the dance as best as he could, even as it picked up speed. As they moved around and around, he thought he saw the same pale eyes from before and his head turned automatically in an effort to find their owner.

It took another round before he did so. The man to whom they belonged wasn’t joining in the dancing and didn’t seem like he would be likely ever to. Instead he was halfway in shadow, behind the dancers, sitting, or more accurately sprawling, in a high-backed chair made of dark wood. John couldn’t see much detail, partly because of the light, partly because of the speed with which he was going, but he thought the chair looked very ornate and regal. It reminded him of…something.

*Eisteddfod,* the back of his mind suddenly decided to inform him. *That looks just like one of those Eisteddfod chairs, like the one Great Grandpa won back before the war. But those are Welsh, not Cornish.*

His thoughts whirled away as his feet danced ever faster, moving much quicker and more nimbly than he would ever have thought them capable of. As they all moved, he found that the rhythm of the drum as well as the thud of the great number of feet hitting the ground got to him and worked its way into his very bones, his heart beating in tandem. Together with the heat and the buzz already running through him, his brain felt more like pleasant mush than anything else.

The pale eyes seemed to watch him throughout the dance.

After what seemed like absolutely forever and yet felt like it couldn’t have been more than half an hour at most, the fire had died down to licking flames instead of the roaring blaze it had been for such a long time and the dancers slowly stopped.

John, unprepared for it, only just managed not to stumble and fall flat on his arse, possibly helped by the hands still gripping his firmly. However, it didn’t matter much as those same hands dragged him away again, towards another group of strange but welcoming people.

This time, though, John couldn’t find it in himself to mind. In fact, he welcomed the touches the other people gave him as he sank down among them, his hands finally released. They felt too good not to like.

The woman who’d led him there in the first place was smiling down at him as she stood above him, a flush to her features and a strange, alluring light in her eyes. The doctor smiled back, just a tad dreamily. She was pretty.

All of a sudden, she let her knees buckle so she sank onto them, hovering just above his lap without touching it. He could feel the warmth from her hitting his jeans.
“Not going to kiss me this time, then, are you?” he asked in a cheeky voice.

If he was going to let his emotions and sensations be in control for the night, and it didn’t seem like he had much of a choice in the matter, he might as well get as much enjoyment out of it as possible.

Her smile turned into a grin and she raised her hands to cup his face. It would be sweet if it didn’t feel like she was holding him in place.

“You trod the dance with us,” she said, pride and wonder in her still whispery voice, as though she had not expected it.

“Yes?” he asked, confused. “Shouldn’t I? You didn’t really give me much choice in the matter, you know.”

“But you kept up with us. You didn’t falter. You danced the whole dance through.”

Before he could ask what the hell that was all about, her lips were touching his, softly yet insistently, as though she would keep it up until he yielded.

He happily did so, opening his mouth willingly. Once her tongue was touching his, however, he brought up his hands to grab at her waist, taking control of the kiss as he tried to tug her down onto his lap.

She was quite a lot stronger than she appeared, however, and so she didn’t budge from her position. Instead, the distraction brought by the determined attempt to assert his dominance was used against him; deft hands moved and opened his jeans, sliding them gently off while other hands slid over newly exposed skin, further distracting him from noticing that he had been stripped.

Only when she then suddenly let herself drop the rest of the way into his lap and only her light summer dress and his cotton underpants separated them did it dawn on him what had happened.

His lower body seemed to have developed a mind of its own, though, and so his hips immediately bucked upwards.

She allowed it, even ground down against him, but only for a few thrusts. She then drew back, not just from his lap but from the kiss as well.

If he made a slightly undignified noise at the loss, well…could he be blamed?

Something must have showed in his expression because her eyes flickered over his face and she quirked a small smile. Moving off him completely, she stood up and moved behind him.

“Oi, what – “ he started to call but interrupted himself with a strangled gasp. His skin had become progressively more sensitive while being touched, before and especially after the dance, and now the broad, calloused fingers gliding gently across his chest, and more specifically his nipples, was sending small, yet powerful jolts of pleasure running through him.

A small moan fought its way past his lips, much as he tried to stop himself. He was further losing ground when other hands slid slowly up his legs in a way that could only be described as teasing. When lips attached themselves to the side of his neck, sucking gently in just the right way, the battle was lost and he moaned, openly.

He could feel a body pressing up against his own but when he reached out to touch, they moved just out of reach. A noise of frustration escaped him when he reached again with the same result.
“Shush now,” the whispery voice said from behind him, sounding at the same time a long way off and right next to him. “You trod the dance with us, you kept up. Long time since someone managed that.”

“But – “

“Shush,” she repeated and there was an odd harmonic to it, quite apart from the normal susurration of her voice. Just let us repay you and enjoy you.”

“Enjoy me?” he asked, frowning slightly, but the question was swept from his thoughts as he was almost set upon by the people – just how many of them were there, anyway? – around him. A multitude of hands touched him, caressed and petted him and he was soon drifting back into that hazy enjoyment, willing to just let sensation without thinking rule him as he sank further beneath the waves of said enjoyment.

Fingers ghosted up his side and into his hair, hands stroked over his thighs and across his stomach while the shell of his ear as well as the entire length of his neck was nibbled gently and two separate sets of lips sucked and teased at his nipples. Someone was even snogging him heartily.

He was touched just about everywhere, not a single scrap of skin left untouched for more than a moment, but even though he was more than aroused, and his cock was touched with the same ardent amorousness as everywhere else, he did not feel at all close to coming.

Instead, it was as though he was riding that special moment where the pleasure cascades over you, just a little more stimulation and you know you’ll be right at the brink but for the moment you can just take it in and enjoy it – and it wasn’t ending.

At least, it felt like it wasn’t ending. Nobody can be held on the edge indefinitely, though, and his tipping point came when a long, wet finger slid into him at the same moment as someone’s lips closed tight around the head of his cock, sucking as they did so.

Whatever noise wrenched itself out of the doctor’s throat when he climaxed was swallowed by the person still kissing him thoroughly, just as his seed was swallowed down by whoever had their lips around his erection.

Slowly, as he came down from his orgasm, his body began to sag with the exhaustion setting in. He would have expected to be too sensitive to be touched afterwards, as that was normally the case for him. Despite feeling very sensitive indeed, however, the continued touches were not unpleasant or, indeed, unwelcome.

Something was pressed against his lips but this time, it was the cool hardness of glass. Brain beyond foggy and addled with an overwhelming amount of pleasure, he didn’t question what he was being offered and willingly opened his mouth to taste.

What hit his tongue was not the same liquid he’d been imbibing earlier. This one was sweeter and almost treacly, like the cherry liqueur his Nan had loved, but though he had gagged a bit at the sickly sweetness of it when he’d been a teen and had nicked from her cabinet, he gladly swallowed it now.

As quite a lot of it slid down his throat, it sent a certain warmth through him that seemed to ooze into every fibre of his being. By the time the lip of the bottle was taken from his mouth, it had made him almost boneless in his relaxation.

This fact didn’t dawn on him until something hit deep inside him and he realized that it wasn’t one finger still inside of him but three. They were doing a slow, careful opening-and-closing motion and
had managed to press against his prostate.

Even through his haze, he was quite astonished to find his previously softening dick twitching and ever so slightly starting to rise.

His attention was diverted from his recovery speed, unprecedented since his teenage years, by the arrival of someone new into the small gathering of people.
Chapter Summary

Sherlock joins the group, intent on having John...for more than John may be entirely aware of.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who took a chance with this. It is very, *very* much appreciated. <3 It's made me less nervous about posting the next chapters :) Here's where we get to the explicit part :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John looked up at the shape standing just a foot or two away from him, then up again until he finally came to the face, and the first thing that really struck him was those pale eyes that seemed strangely multi-coloured.

*Heterochromia,* his brain decided to return to inform him before buggering off back into the swirling haze, leaving him to think that whatever the name for it was, it was more than a little fascinating and alluring. Of course, the fact that the man’s naked body was nothing short of gorgeous didn’t exactly detract, either.

“Hello there,” he said, giving the man a grin that was meant to be cocky but may have come off a bit goofy instead.

The newcomer, clearly the man who had watched the dance from his seat on the Eisteddfod chair, didn’t deign to answer. Instead those pale eyes looked at the blond as though by just doing that, he could ascertain everything he needed to know about John.

It ought to have felt uncomfortable. Quite frankly, it should have felt downright creepy, if one stopped to think about it, especially with how long it went on for.

John would, if ever he was asked, possibly describe himself as fairly normal overall, though others would probably strongly disagree. He would most definitely not be spared a second glance by people he passed on the street, though, and so he found himself a little confused, even in his hazy mind, as to why this man was continuing to look at him, and with such undisguised, frank interest, as well.

Then, even more confusingly, a smile slowly began to spread over defined yet undeniably masculine features. It was a strange smile, the emotion behind it not at all identifiable, even in the broad strokes.

The bodies surrounding John began to move. At first, he dimly thought that they were moving away and getting up to leave. But although all the hands that had still been on his skin were removed, including the one inside of him, all they seemed to do was shift to give the newcomer as much space as possible without completely relinquishing their plaything.
John thought he heard their voices whisper behind and around him, a strange mishmash of sounds reminiscent of the normal sounds of a forest, and that he heard an answering rumble, low and deep and earthy, come from the newcomer, as though he was pleased with what they had achieved with… well, with John.

His attention was then grabbed by the rather tall man lowering himself onto his knees in a way that should not have looked quite as regal as it did. In fact, the entire man and the way that he moved had that sort of aura to it, powerful and easy.

It took a moment for the blond to register that the deep noise wasn’t just rumbling. He frowned, trying to piece the noises together into words and failed. They sounded more like Gaelic than anything and yet it was nothing like it at all.

“What is your name?” the man finally said in something that could pass as English.


“John,” the deep voice echoed, seeming to roll the word over and liking the sound of it. “John.”

With that, the tall man moved closer still, still kneeling, hovering above the doctor who was more or less sprawled across the ground as well as somewhat on the people around him.

“What’s your name, then?” John asked when it seemed like the name wasn’t going to be volunteered.

He got no answer. Instead a broad, bony, yet tangibly strong hand came up to cup the side of his face, gently, thumb immediately beginning to stroke softly over John’s skin. The man then tilted his head, as though he was making sure he would be able to reach, and leant forward until his cupid bow lips brushed against the blond’s own.

The soft, almost innocent gentleness of it was such a stark contrast to the sensual overload he’d experienced previously that it took him a little by surprise. At the same time, though, it also managed to draw him in in an entirely different way.

As the kiss slowly deepened, the surprisingly broad tongue almost licking its way into John’s mouth, his hands came up, almost of their own accord, to land on prominent hip bones. They would have been on the broad shoulders but, sprawled as he was, he couldn’t reach.

The skin under his hands was warm and soft and inviting. Yet as his fingers brushed over it, the nerve endings seemed to have difficulties; some reported smooth skin and some reported deliciously soft fur.

Still mostly hazy as he was, though, John couldn’t find it in him to be bothered. Especially not when, on top of thorough exploration his mouth was receiving, those broad hands were gliding ever so slowly over his skin.

They had started at his face and had unhurriedly, almost painfully so, made their way down over his throat, resting for the briefest of moments on his clavicle before they glided down over his chest, fingers spreading and pressing lightly against his skin as they did so.

Once they reached his nipples, they stopped again. This time they paused long enough to rub and tease at them until they were hard little nubs standing proudly from his body. Only then did they continue down, over his stomach, which sent his abdominal muscles quivering with the sudden feather-like touch.
By the time the hands were starting to smooth over the top of his thighs, after what seemed an eternity, John was fairly panting into the taller man’s mouth and his cock was once more fully erect to the point of being painful. He tried bucking to communicate his need but to no avail.

Only then did the man pull away, John almost instinctively following him, not wanting to relinquish the sensations induced by the kiss just yet. The man smiled, what could only be described as a sparkle lurking in the depths of his eyes, though whether it heralded good things or something more sinister wasn’t entirely clear.

He then leant forward again, moving forward on his knees at the same time until they were on either side of tanned thighs, boxing him in. But it wasn’t the doctor’s lips he went for this time. Instead the cupid bow lips went for just under an ear, licking gently before biting at the soft flesh.

It earned him a startled gasp which turned into a prolonged moan and hands moving up to tangle themselves in dark, thick curls when the lips then slowly traced the same path the hands had taken earlier, biting, licking and sucking as he went, marking the skin underneath him in every possible way.

Meanwhile, the hands on the top of muscled, tanned thighs started to move again, keeping the same slow pace from before. They did not travel inwards, as John might have hoped, but instead went further down his thighs until they reached his knees.

There they stopped, fingers caressing for a moment as the lips mouthed along soft skin. Then a low, pleased rumble came from the long throat, one which John didn’t even register in his haze.

He did, however, register when the hands grabbed at the back of his knees and pulled at them, both towards the pale-eyed man and upwards. The movement put John’s still soft and relaxed entrance right in contact with the man’s quite obviously large and very erect cock, the head just ever so slightly nudging the outer ring of muscles.

That was enough to bring him out of his haze, at least somewhat. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to but he hadn’t been asked and he would very much like to have a say in whether he was sodomized by gorgeous strangers with peculiar, alluring eyes.

Some of what he was feeling must have shown in his body language somehow because the man stopped, pausing as though assessing the situation before letting go of the legs completely and pulling back from his ministrations until only the fact of his position kept them in somewhat close contact.

“John?” the deep baritone rumbled, questioning and oddly concerned as a bony hand again came up to rest against the doctor’s cheek. The smile had faded completely by that point.

“That’s not what I wanted to say! “I...we’ve never met before and...you haven’t even asked.” He waved a hand between their bodies. “About this.”

At that, the smile returned, much gentler and more understanding this time.

“If I ask now, would you say no?” the man asked, equally gently, his voice still rumbling and his English still a little strange. “Will you leave?”

“Don’t know,” John said, a small smile starting to form on his own face. “You still haven’t asked yet.”

The smile turned into a grin. “Then, John, can I have you? Please?”
“Yes,” John said after genuinely thinking it over, as much as he was able to in his state. “Yes, you can.”

He was rewarded with a kiss that was a lot harder than the first had been but the blond didn’t mind. He moaned softly and tried to give as good as he got while he slid one hand back into the shock of dark curls that fell to the man’s shoulder. The other gripped onto a shoulder, for some anchorage.

He needed that anchorage soon afterwards; the pale-eyed man moved back into the same position as before, positioning his cock so the head just lightly pressed against the entrance. It was made a bit trickier by the fact that John’s legs stayed firmly on the ground but he managed it.

Something dawned on John and he intended to pull away from the kiss to point out that giving consent to being fucked didn’t entail not being prepared in any way. Granted, his hole still felt loose after the ministrations earlier, but that still didn’t mean he would be able to take what was a very substantial cock inside of him just like that.

Before he could, however, the man started to push forward, slowly but insistently, unerringly pressing into the passage.

Though he was still somewhat hazy, doctorly concerns started to crowd John’s mind and he tensed, expecting something to tear.

Nothing did. The long shaft slid in easily, all the way to the hilt. In fact, it went far deeper than the blond would ever have expected it to – and it felt much better, too.

“See?” the baritone voice rumbled close to his ear, an unmistakable tone of amusement in it. “You didn’t break. I knew you wouldn’t; I’d never want to hurt you. You’re stronger than that. Far stronger.”

He drew his hips back at that, pausing for a brief moment when only the head was still inside. Then he pressed forward again, with more force and speed than before.

John groaned deeply, his hands gripping more tightly onto their anchors as a rhythm was slowly established. One of his legs found its way around a bony hip again almost without his conscious decision.

He got a pleased, approving rumble for his actions as well as a hand sliding down to grip at his butt cheek and a hard nip to the place where throat became shoulder, which had something of a possessive feel to it, if something like that could be said about a gesture.

Not that John minded, not at all. How could he when he was being fucked so thoroughly? It certainly made him reconsider his reluctance to go farther than hand jobs and fellatio when he’d been in the army.

“Fuck, yes, that’s just…that’s…right…nnhh…oh, gods, yes!” He was babbling, the very small part of his brain still capable of forming halfway stringed-together thoughts knew, but the rest of him just didn’t care, caught up in sensations that managed to outshine even what had come before. “Please, I need more!”

So caught up was he in their coupling, in the scent and heat and sweat and sensations, that he didn’t entirely notice that the people around them had stopped being passive onlookers and instead started participating again, touching him and stroking him.

Interestingly, though, they only did so when there was no risk that their hands would touch anywhere that the pale-eyed man either was touching or looked likely that he was going to. He was
the one in charge it seemed, and they would at most play the background orchestra.

John was steadily moving towards orgasm, his need and desire climbing higher and higher while the final push over the edge was just, tantalizingly, out of reach. He was being touched just about everywhere but there and he needed... *something*. So, with a bit more presence of mind than he had had earlier, he detached the hand gripping onto a bony shoulder to reach down between their bodies and give his achingly hard cock just a stroke or a squeeze. Anything, really.

Before his hand had done much more than detach and start to sneak downwards, however, it was grabbed and pulled back to its previous position.

“Impatient, are you?” the man asked, his tone caught between amused and annoyed. He trailed a finger over a sweat-slicked brow, pale eyes reading the dazed, desperate expression. “Oh, no, wait, I see. You just need that tiny bit of extra stimulation to push you over the edge, don’t you?”

He waited, holding almost completely still, with his hips only giving small gyrations, until he got a nod, an almost minute one, in response. Then he smiled and something shone in the depths of the eyes. “Well, then, let’s see if we can’t give you that.”

With that, the muscles of the smooth-yet-furry thighs seemed to John to shift, as in preparation, and that was the only warning he got before he was being hauled upwards, strong hands sliding underneath him to support him and cradle him against a broad, also strangely smooth-yet-furry chest, his arms flung around the other’s neck to keep himself balanced out of instinct.

Somehow, the long shaft had managed not to slip out of him during his sudden move and now, straddling the man’s lap as he was, it pressed even deeper than before. In fact, it pressed a little deeper than he thought it should be able to. But then again, he was not exactly in the clearest of minds right then, so he was probably not a valid person to ask.

Whatever thoughts he did have was in any case blown into metaphorical smithereens when he was lifted slightly by the hips and then pushed down again hard, the bony hips thrusting forward at the same time so that the blond was almost slammed into.

He dimly knew that he made some sort of loud, possibly undignified noise at that. What that noise was, he would not be able to say. It all went into the maelstrom of sensation.

In the end, it didn’t matter; the first thrust was quickly followed with another and then another until he was a shaking, sobbing mess barely capable of anything other than pleads of ‘more’ and ‘don’t stop’ and pleasured moaning.

What managed to send him over the edge, however, was as much a few words whispered in his ears as the deep thrusts hitting just right inside him.

“I’ll never stop, my John, I promise. After all, you’re *mine*.”

The implications of those words, understood far more on an instinctual, base level than with any higher brain functions pushed John over into blissful release. He shook and shuddered as his orgasm tore through him, whatever sound he might have uttered swallowed by the mouth kissing him deeply.

The deep groan that the pale-eyed man uttered as his own release overcame him was slightly more audible, as it came from the ground and forest around them as much as the man himself. The cock inside John poured semen into him, his internal muscles milking it.

If he had had any semblance of thought left in him at that moment, he might have stopped to wonder
just how long the other ejaculated for or how very little seemed to seep out of his hole, not even when they eventually separated, after what seemed like an eternity.

As it was, he just hung on for the ride, starting to slowly slump and sag against the strong body still holding onto him like he was in danger of slipping away and disappearing if he was let go of for even a moment. The hands on his back slowly stroked up and down, encouraging him to just let go and let it happen, to let the exhaustion overwhelm him.

And so he did, the strong heartbeat and the earthy, musky scent soothing him into the welcome arms of sleep.

When he woke, it was morning. To be more precise, it was closing in on noon, judging by the rays of the sun streaming down into the clearing. The clearing where the remains of the huge bonfire was still merrily smouldering in solitary splendour.

It was made even more solitary by the fact that John was the only one left in the clearing to experience the remaining embers.

Though he was still feeling groggy, he was also very much alert as he sat up and looked around, scanning to see whether anyone could possibly be lurking just out of sight, for whatever reason. It sounded farfetched but then, so would the entire experience probably.

Thankfully, or not, his senses didn’t detect anyone in the vicinity.

As the events of the previous evening and night started to come back to him in drips and drops, most of the memories still strangely fuzzy and unclear even when he tried focusing on them, he found that he was involuntarily looking down at himself.

He was still naked but he had been lying in what basically amounted to a pile of clothes, which had served as a warm, soft place for him to bury into.

As the looked at them, he noted with some puzzlement that they were not all clothes from the present day but rather an odd lost-and-found box lot of the last century or two. In particular, what he had been using as his duvet for the night was something that looked suspiciously like a military greatcoat from the second world war.

He lifted it up for further inspection and noted with a sort of detached interest that the back had two rather clear, but small holes in it, which didn’t follow to the front of the garment.

A thought started to form in his mind and he frowned before he could vocalize it.

*Okay, there is no bloody way I am going to utter ‘curioser and curioser’ out loud. Rabbit hole this may be, a very deep one, but that doesn’t entail…well, no. Just no.*

It was decidedly on the odder side of things, though, he had to admit, but it seemed that there wasn’t much he could do about what had happened. He rummaged through the pile to try and locate his own clothes but sadly came up emptyhanded except for his shoes, his mobile phone, now completely dead, and his wallet, still with all his cards and a few notes inside of it.
He had to wear something besides the shoes, though, if he was to trek through the forest, never mind the reaction he’d get once he managed to get back to some semblance of civilisation. After everything, he honestly could do without being harassed or arrested.

As he then started to rummage for something that would possibly fit him, the thought occurred to him that at least he hadn’t been robbed in the process. That would have just been the horrible icing on the cake.

He tried to ignore the twinges of pain emanating from his backside as well as a very strange sensation happening in the pit of his stomach, which he chucked up to having gone too long without anything to eat.

“I bloody well ought to know better at my age,” he muttered under his breath as he held up a somewhat worn shirt that looked like something out of the 60s or 70s, judging by the pattern. “And to think I made it through the army without getting sodomized only to…”

But it had been good, he couldn’t deny that. If he was being honest with himself, he would have to admit that it had been more than good, even if what he could remember of it was distressingly limited and scattered and what was still left was very hazy.

The man with the pale eyes and wild curls in particular stood out in his memory and John had to concede that for his first time getting buggered, he could have done far worse in terms of partner. Even if the man had a bit of a dominant streak and slightly odd skin.

Eventually, he managed to locate something that he could possibly fit over his shoulders and his waist, though he could have done without the tweed trousers and the frills on the shirt but thankfully he could also wear the greatcoat. It was too big for him and rather too heavy and hot for the warmth of the summer but it would do the trick and would give him somewhere to also store his mobile and wallet.

“Right, then,” he said out loud as he set off towards the direction he thought most likely would yield him a road. “Back to the semblance of civilisation where they’ll laugh at the stupid tourist and then the next train back home to London.”

There he could hopefully put the whole incident behind him. Not just the night and what had or hadn’t happened there but everything that had transpired between his sister and him. He would make sure that Clara left Harry for good this time and then he would push the entire thing as far out of his mind as he possibly could.

As he walked, he failed to notice that his hand had strayed to the lower part of his stomach and was continually rubbing at it.

He didn’t look back towards the clearing once.

Chapter End Notes

I suppose I could end it here, sex done with and all. But I’ve got more of an idea for where to go with this which was my real motivation:) Will you join me for that?

I’d love to know what you think of it :)
Came back a little...odd

Chapter Summary

Back home in London again, John thinks he has left what happened down in Cornwall safely behind him. Things are not as clear-cut as that, however, and he finds changes going on, both around him and within himself, that gives him the suspicion that he may have gotten more than he thought from that incident.

Chapter Notes

Nope, not abandoned. Health just had to take precedent for a while, that's all.
Thank you again to everyone who's been kind enough to leave feedback, especially the comments. <3
I still hate coming up with chapter titles, sorry for this one.

Oh, and fair warning: more mentions of Harry's behaviour towards Clara. If for whatever reason that doesn't sit well with you, skip to just above the first line-cut. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I can’t, John.”

“You are joking, right? You’re not seriously staying with her?”

It had been two months since the Midsummer Bacchanalia, as he had for some stupid reason taken to calling it in his head and Clara had been back with Harry for three weeks. She’d come out of the hospital after a week and it had taken Harry another fortnight to return from wherever she’d buggered off to, promising to mend her ways and all the usual shite.

“Where would I go?” she asked, in that quiet, soft way she had that he both liked and found frustrating to no end. “To yours?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, the hand holding the phone trembling slightly.

“Anywhere else other than where you are would do. It can’t be here – I can barely fit myself in this place, there’s no chance of me housing you. But there’s other ways, other places you could go to. I heard good things about this help line called Galop, they specialize in LGBT people.”

“John…”

“Please, Clara. Just come up here, even for a week. Just some space to think without her lurking and looming. I’ll help you find a good hotel room and then we can call the branch they have here, if you like. Or find you a good, well-reputed refuge that will protect you far better than I can.”

It was quiet on the other end of the phone line for a good while after that and he was beginning to worry they’d been cut off when she spoke again.
“She’ll find me, John,” was eventually what came down the line, so quiet that if it wasn’t for the eerie quiet of John’s bedsit, he wasn’t sure he would have heard her. “She always does.”

“London’s a big place and she was never very fond of coming up here, anyway.”

“I don’t know. I don’t – I have to go. I can hear her car in the driveway.”

“Okay, but please. Call me, text me. Anything. Just…please.”

“I…bye, John.” It was whispered. The call was then disconnected.

John tipped his head back with a groan and ran a hand over his face. They’d had this conversation before and though he fervently hoped and prayed she’d get the courage to do it, he didn’t truly believe it.

“Why the hell did she have to take up with Harry, of all people?” he muttered to himself.

Then he suddenly grimaced and made a dash for the tiny shower room. He only just managed to reach the bowl before what he had for breakfast came back out of him as a torrent.

He continued to heave until what came out was nothing more than bile that burned his throat and mouth something fierce. When he felt as though he must have thrown up his very stomach, it finally stopped and John sat back on his haunches and wiped at his mouth.

Once he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror after rising back up, he had to admit that he looked like shite. Of course, the fact that he’d just thrown up was not helping the matter, but the somewhat pallid and haggard look to his features spoke of a far longer-standing problem.

Then again, he had been throwing up almost every morning for the last three weeks as well as a few times later on in the day, usually at lunch at work.

He’d suspected food poisoning to begin with but couldn’t find anything that could be said to be the definite culprit and so had given up on that notion. There were no diseases going around at the time and when he convinced Sarah to examine him, just to be on the safe side, they came up empty-handed.

“I’m honestly stumped, John,” she said as he started to button back up after the examination later that day. “There’s nothing to suggest that you’re ill, apart from the nausea and the vomiting. Even the blood samples you sent off for examination came back empty.” She held up the newly arrived results for emphasis.

He sighed. “I’d figured as much, really,” he said as he slid off the examination table. “It’s probably just anxiety or something.”

“Anxiety? You?” she asked with a frown, her disbelief written plain on her face.

He couldn’t help the small snort or the quirk of lips at that. She did have a bit of a point. He didn’t get anxious, quite the opposite. The danger-seeking aspect of his personality was hard for most women he’d known to cope with emotionally.

“Yeah…she’s still not left her, you see.”

“Oh.” Sarah knew who he was referring to, as he’d explained the situation to her when he had been forced to go down to Cornwall and had to call in time off on extremely short notice. “Oh, John, I’m so sorry – is there nothing you can do?”
She walked up to him and put a hand on his arm in a soothing manner.

“I’ve done everything I can think of but in the end, it’s her decision. She’s the only one who can make it and if she doesn’t, for whatever reason, there’s nothing the rest of us can do, however much we want to.” He snorted again, this time without any humour in it. “How did that song go again? After all, it’s not easy, banging…”

“…your heart against some mad bugger’s wall,” she finished for him, her voice quiet and soft. “You’re not, though. I know it feels like it but being scared doesn’t mean that she isn’t at all unreceptive to what you’re saying. Give it time.”

“Time? Time until Harry knocks her into something that cracks her skull open?” His voice was rising and he took a deep to try and calm himself down a bit. Then he took another and another after that. “Sorry, that came up a bit stronger than…anyway, thank you for taking the time to try and help me.”

She smiled. “No problem. Happy to help. You know, if you were a woman, I’d have pressed you on whether you were absolutely sure you weren’t pregnant. As it is, I’m writing you a prescription for some Maxolon, just to be on the safe side. Are tablets fine?”

Though the thought of taking anti-nausea pills meant for post-surgery situations and the like was not exactly palatable to John, the thought that he might get through a whole day without retching up his entire stomach content and then some won out in the end.

He thanked her for staying after work to help him out and she waved him away, wishing him a good evening and weekend.

As he went around the supermarket trying to find something to eat that he might not find too disgusting throwing back up again, he saw something out of the corner of his eye that looked familiar. When he looked up to get a better look, he got a clearer view of a mop of copper curls before they disappeared around the end of the aisle.

He followed at a distance, mostly because ginger hair wasn’t too uncommon a hair colour and he didn’t want to look like a complete creep. He had enough on his plate without having those sorts of charges levelled at him.

Once he rounded the corner, however, there was no ginger curls to be seen anywhere, despite the fact that the small Tesco’s wasn’t the most visited place at that time of the evening.

Great, now I’m seeing things without being drunk off my arse, he thought to himself, his mood souring further. Think I’ll just go home, eat and get a decent kip for once.

Yeah, because what else are you going to fill your pathetic existence with? The words came from some other place in his mind and sounded very much like his sister when she felt like tearing into him.

He made a point of smiling at and chatting with the woman at the till, who was clearly mostly just humouring him, and once he got home, he took a deep breath and texted an old army mate to see if he’d be free to go to the pub with him. Not right then, of course, but just…one of these days when he had a free window.
His phone rang just a few moments after he’d sent the text.

“John!” a familiar voice greeted when he picked up, sounding surprisingly happy. “You bugger, I did not expect to hear from you. How are you? Higher-ups still giving you hell?”

“Ah, no,” John admitted, feeling calmer about saying it out loud than he thought he would. “I was discharged – bullet to the shoulder, buggered up my hand.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. Alright, so perhaps not entirely calm about it all just yet.

It went quiet on the other end of the line and John waited for the hesitant words of condolence and then the sincere but awkward attempt to wiggle back out of any sort of meeting agreement. It had happened before, after all.

When Bill did speak again, what came out of his mouth was nothing like what the blond expected.

“Bloody hell, you stupid sod, how long ago was that and why haven’t you called me before now? No, wait, don’t answer that, I can guess why. Sodding Watson stubbornness, should come with a warning label to – anyway, I’m a bit booked right now, wife, you know, she’s only gone and invited the entire family to stay until the kids start school again. Whole house is…well, now isn’t the best of times but don’t think for a moment that means you’re wiggling out of a trip down the pub.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I’d try and wiggle out of something I suggested myself,” John answered, unable to keep his sudden smile out of his voice. God, he’d missed Bill.

“You might and all. Let me just check with the missus when I – next weekend, am I free then, love? Yeah? Okay, good. How’s next Sunday for you, John?”

Just as unbooked as the rest of my week, really, but you don’t need to know that, at least not right now.

“Yeah…yeah, sounds fine.”

“Good. No, sweetie, I’m talking to a friend, I’ll just be a moment to tuck you in. Yes, daddy has got friends, too, you little bugger. Sorry, John, I’ve got to go. I’ll text you the place, yeah?”

With that, the man hung up.

John sat there, in his tiny studio flat that should more accurately be called a bedsit and let the myriad of emotions running through him take their course for at least a few moments until he felt in control.

Then he sighed heavily, rose from his seat and went to his shopping bags to find out if there was anything he’d want to eat right then.

As it turned out, the meet up with Bill had to be postponed for another week. John didn’t get much more out of him than a rushed explanation of the mother-in-law managing to injure herself the day before they were supposed to meet.

It wasn’t too disheartening, mostly because John had spent much of the preceding week feeling even more nauseous and tired than he had before.
He hadn’t let that stop him from going to work, despite the worried looks he was given by Sarah, and had even attempted a few running trips to try and combat not only the nausea but the pudge that had gathered on his belly in the last month or so. Not that he thought that he’d been lazy or eaten unhealthily – well, any more than what he always had – in that time but the curve was unquestionably there where it hadn’t been before. Perhaps his metabolism was finally starting to slow down on him, just as his mother had warned him when he’d been gobbling down everything within sight as a teenager.

It was during one such run that he once more spotted what might, *might* have been one of the people from that night; the broad man with the wild hair and deep brown eyes. He tried to follow the person with his eyes but found it rather difficult, seeing as they were going in different directions.

Of course, London was not exactly devoid of people, either, and as such, it would be stranger for there not to be someone that looked familiar. This was even more the case when you took into consideration the fact that he hadn’t been able retain much detail about the people apart from general outlines.

*Pull yourself together, Watson,* he admonished himself as he lost the man among the throng of people out on one of the last sunny days of summer. *You’re projecting onto random people and it’s not helping. Yeah, you were part of an orgy while under the influence and the man with the pale eyes was ludicrously handsome, that’s true, but that doesn’t mean you should project any of them onto others. It was a one-time thing – which you can’t remember much of, either – and it’s just moronic pining and…*

“You alright?”

The question, which interrupted his rambling thoughts, came from somewhere to his left and it was only then that he realized he’d not only come to a complete stop but had bent over and was holding onto his knee with one hand and his stomach with the other. His stomach, which felt as though he’d stuffed himself silly and starved himself at the same time.

“Hey, you okay?”

“F-fine,” John answered and his voice was raspy and unsteady as he spoke. “Just…fine.”

The person asking, a young man who’d obviously been out on a run himself, didn’t look convinced.

“You sure? You don’t look too good.”

It was kindly meant, the doctor knew, but as he bullied his body into straightening back up, he felt an irrational urge to lash out at the boy, simply because he’d put himself into firing range.

In the end, he settled for, “Well, live to my age without beauty products and we’ll see how you fare, yeah?”

Thankfully, the youth merely got slightly flustered at that. “Oh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t passing judgment, I just – you stopped all of a sudden and started grabbing at your stomach and…well…”

John felt a small smile form on his lips. “Yeah. Thanks, mate, it was nice of you to ask. I’m alright – just got over a stomach flu and was probably a bit overly ambitious.” Well, that was close enough.

“Alright. You want me to follow you home just to be sure or –?”

“No need. You just carry on.”

The blond watched the young man start up running again, then started his own walk home.
On his way, he slowly became aware that he had a headache as well as a stomach ache; one that started just behind his hairline and radiated outwards in a dull, persistent throb.

“Doesn’t that just figure,” he muttered with a shake of his head and a small, slightly sardonic smile.

“John? Where are you, you bugger?”

The words were loud enough to be heard across the pub, even in the normal din of chatter caused by a lot of people enjoying a lazy Sunday afternoon with a few beers and whatever the kitchen deemed passable as snack food. It caused only a few turned heads and glances.

John sighed and shook his head, then lifted a hand to be visible over the back of the booth. The digits were forming the two-fingered salute.

It seemed to help. Bill was soon standing beside the booth the blond had managed to get completely to himself, for whatever reason. He suspected that nobody felt like sitting close to a gloomy looking bugger like him.

“Oi. You could at least rise your pert little arse up to greet me properly.”

“Not until you put the beers down. I like this shirt, don’t want it ruined.”

“Ta for the confidence.” Despite the words, Bill did put the beers down on the worn, just slightly sticky surface of the table. He then grabbed onto the still rising doctor and pulled him into a hug.

John felt rather squeezed and it wasn’t helping the still slightly sore and sensitive scar tissue any but couldn’t find it in him to complain; he’d missed the man more than he thought and it was good to see him.

He didn’t notice that while he was being hugged, Bill took several deep inhalations close to his skin as though he liked the way John smelt.

Once he was released, he sat back down again and his friend slid his frame into the opposite side of the booth.

“The missus and the kids say hello.” The other paused to give the blond an appraising look. “You’re looking good.”

“Piss off,” John said with a snort, unable to help a grin. “Pull the other one. I look like crap because I spent most of the morning bent over the toilet throwing up.” Not to mention everything else but that’s not really a topic for a conversation out in public.

Bill was quiet for a moment as he took a sip of his beer. “Yeah, alright, you’re a bit pale and such. Say what you like, though, you’ve got this odd, I don’t know, glow about you, I suppose.”

John took a long pull on the beer he’d bought for himself while he waited. “If this is your way of trying to proposition me again, then you could at least try some better pick-up lines.”

Bill’s eyes widened slightly. “No, no, I wasn’t – and you’re taking the piss,” he finished as he caught
onto the look in the blue eyes.

“Yup,” John replied with a smile. “So, you gonna tell me what you’ve been up to this last year?”

By the time John was back home in his tiny flat, it was well into the evening. He had been followed all the way by Bill, despite the doctor’s vocal and persistent protestations that he was perfectly capable of going home on his own, even after having drunk a few pints of beer.

Bill had decided to turn a decidedly deaf ear on the objections, however, and had kept him company for the entire trip there. What was more, he had also kept very close. Not so close that he was touching anything but it was a close thing. He claimed it was just a safety precaution so he wouldn’t trip, since John was smaller than him, which meant alcohol would affect him more than the taller and broader man.

That was utter bullshit, though, and they both knew it. John had more than once outdone the other in drinking games. Besides, there was an air about the way the man kept close that did not match up with a mate making sure his friend didn’t injure himself due to drunkenness. In fact, if John didn’t know better, he’d say there was a distinctly protective streak to it all, which would be quite odd, given their normal interrelationship.

Nothing John said even remotely made Bill change his mind, however.

“I’m not going to invite you up for coffee,” John remarked as he dug in his pocket for his keys.

“No worries, mate, I’m sure the missus would only be jealous. She’s always fancied you a bit.”

“Bill, you’ve been talking out your arse all evening, which is pretty standard for you, I know, especially when you’re pissed and that’s fine but…”

“Yeah?”

“Would you kindly take your hand off my arse?”

“Getting delicate in your old age?” Despite the words, Bill did withdraw his hand and there seemed to be no anger in the voice.

“No, I’m merely developing some taste at last. Knock it off.” He turned to face the other. “In fact, go home. You’ve done your duty and seen me home. If you want someone to bugger, go home to your loving wife.”

A noise came from Bill then and it wasn’t any sound John had heard from him before. It was a very small, pitiful, whining sort of noise, the kind a dog would make when it knows it’s done wrong but still hopes to be forgiven. That in itself was odd enough but it grew to unquestionably uncanny when he noticed that Bill wasn’t looking at John’s face. Instead, he was looking down, in the direction of the doctor’s stomach.

Only then did John notice that his hand had strayed once again to the underside of his belly, idly rubbing at the small pudge he still hadn’t been able to lose. He’d found one of his hands tended to do that now whenever he was feeling distraught or anxious and sometimes even when he was just thinking. It felt comforting to do, which was slightly disconcerting when he thought about it now.
He pulled his hand away or rather, he made the attempt. His hand didn’t move away as much as an inch, though, not even when he tried again, more forcefully.

That small noise came from Bill again. “John…” he said, almost pleadingly.

“Go home, Bill,” John repeated. He thought about what to do next. It was somewhat unsettling behaviour from Bill but on the other hand, the man had been a very good friend ever since he’d joined the army and it would be wrong to part like…like this.

So, what he did was take a step forward and give the man a hug that was reassuring and affectionate yet at the same was brief enough not to make it awkward or imply anything. He was a British male, after all.

The hug was returned with sincerity but that same awkwardness that’s not untypical of a man who’s slightly uncomfortable displaying genuine affection for another man that wasn’t made jokingly sexual.

“It was great to see you,” John said as he pulled back. “Really. Thank you.”

Whatever had come over Bill before seemed to have dissipated. “No problem at all, mate. Been too long – and you should have said you were back in London.”

Something seemed to occur to him. “That’s right, I almost forgot. The wife is having a huge get-together in about two months, can’t remember the exact date, though. It’s going to be a lot of her old friends, some couples we both know, some guys we served with, you know, that kind of thing, and she asked me to invite you. Well, no, actually, she more or less said she expected to see you there. We can’t have your looks and your charms go to waste.”

“That’s nice of you, but…” he trailed off.

How could he explain that the last thing he felt like doing was meeting up with a bunch of people he’d either never met before or only knew very perfunctory and had no intention of getting to know? He was a bit lonely, that was true, and he did enjoy Bill’s company but after coming back home, social life had lost a lot of the allure it had held in his younger days, at least when it came to larger gatherings like that.

Of course, he couldn’t just say that to Bill. Not when the man was clearly going out of his way to include him.

Unfortunately for the blond, he had lost his opening to decline when he hesitated. Bill grinned and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “That’s settled, then. I’ll text you the date when I get home, yeah?”

With that, he turned and walked back towards the nearby tube station, leaving John standing on the front step of the terrace building that housed his tiny flat.

“Bugger,” he said out loud. It seemed to sum everything up fairly well, really.

As he entered the house and closed the door behind him, he didn’t spot that there was someone else, someone familiar, standing close by on the otherwise almost deserted street, observing the whole incident.
He thankfully didn’t have a shift the following day, which was just as well, as he woke up feeling completely miserable. It wasn’t even the feeling of a hangover, which would have been odd given the relatively small amount of beer he’d had, or the by then standard nausea and dizziness. It was partly the nausea and his head definitely hurt but there was something else to it.

After he’d finished emptying his stomach out into the toilet, he shakily got back up to splash some water in his face and see whether he had any strong painkillers in his small, personal medicine bag. He strongly suspected that he hadn’t. It would fit with how the last few months had panned out for him.

Before he got to that point, however, he looked at himself in the mirror and had to stop. He couldn’t quite put his finger on what but something was wrong with what stared back at him.

He squinted and leaned closer to get a better look and then it clicked. Once it did, though, he almost wished that it hadn’t.

There were two slight but nevertheless unmissable bumps, as though he’d been hit on the head in two places simultaneously, situated just behind his regrettably high hairline, right where he had previously experienced that particularly nasty, persistent headache emanating from. Only, they didn’t look quite like regular bumps caused by ruptured veins.

He reached up a minutely trembling hand and gingerly touched one of the protuberances. It gave under the slight pressure exerted onto it, as was to be expected of such bruises, but the feel of it was very different. In fact, it felt far more like he was pressing on cartilage than any amassed amount of blood under the skin.

He moved his hand over to the other bump, with the same result. There was no doubt that they were very much real. Apart from anything else, the way they hurt as he pressed on them was plenty proof.

He went back into his bedroom, looking around for his phone. There had to be a doctor somewhere who specialized in…something like this. It most certainly wasn’t natural and it wasn’t going away.

With a sinking feeling, he realized he was once again gently rubbing at his pudge. What was more, though he had thrown up just about everything there’d been in his stomach, which had been precious little to begin with, it still felt as though it was very full of something.

Though he strongly suspected it all had something to do with what had happened on Midsummer’s Eve, he needed to know just what that something was and why it was happening to him.

Half an hour later he had booked an appointment with a specialist for the following week.

He’d get to the bottom of this.

Chapter End Notes

I cannot tell if this is a let-down of a chapter or not. I hope not. Things will pick up, I promise. That said, it was kinda interesting to let John work off several people that wasn’t Sherlock for once.
Searching for Answers

Chapter Summary

Now certain something’s up, John sets out to get his answers to both of his...problems. What he finds out may not be something he wants to know or acknowledge, though, and some things raise more questions than they answer. In the end, he heads back to Cornwall.

Chapter Notes

Wow...just wow. I did not expect that much feedback on the last chapter and it was so very positive and sweet, too. Thank you so much! Knowing that people are willing to read an odd premise like this is heartwarming.

The man he had come to see, a Doctor Neil Buchanan, was just the kind of man you would want for a situation such as the one John found himself in. He was tall but not imposingly so, somewhat broad with a hint of not too bad a physique hiding under a good layer of flab. Though greying, his face held a boyish feel that put you at ease. His hands were big, too, and when he held out one in greeting, John found it was warm.

“So, Doctor Watson,” he said once they were both seated, on either side of his oak desk. His voice not quite as deep with expected but it had an unmistakable Scottish accent. “What brings you to my clinic? Lilly tells me you sounded quite urgent when you made the appointment.”

John sighed. There was no point in trying to dally, though, and so he pulled off the flat cap he was wearing. The bumps had grown since he’d spotted them and people had begun to give him slightly odd looks. He really couldn’t blame them, as they did not look much like any sort of bump on the head anymore, but it didn’t mean they didn’t bother him.

Buchanan spotted the problem straight away. Not that that was in itself much of an accomplishment, as he was not just an orthopaedic specialist but one who had further specialized in abnormal bone growth and bone deformities. That seemed to John to be the best possible candidate to hopefully help him. If it wasn’t a bone deformity, then…

“May I?” Buchanan asked politely, looking the blond in the eye.

John bit back the sarcastic comment on the tip of his tongue and merely nodded instead.

The other man moved close enough to get a better look, putting on his glasses as he did so. He looked at them closely then motioned for John to tilt his head more towards the light. Once that was done, he leaned even closer. Then he reached out a hand and pressed on one protuberance.

John couldn’t help the wince that caused. They had not gotten less aching as they had…grown, for lack of a less disturbing word, even though they had become slightly less springy, which was
worrying in and of itself.

“When did this happen?” Buchanan asked, professionally calm as he did the examination.

“I don’t know,” John answered truthfully. “I spotted them just before I called here but I’ve been having odd headaches for at least a few weeks now. I didn’t think much of them, really, you know, not when they were just headaches.”

“And is that then the curse of the doctorly mind or just good old male stubbornness and refusal to make a fuss?” the specialist said, clearly just thinking aloud. For some reason, the blond liked that quirk and smiled.

“I can see why you came here,” Buchanan said once he had finished the examination, which had involved far too much prodding for John’s liking. “I would like to do further examination at a later date but it does seem as though you have something growing from your skull rather than some sort of internal trauma pushing at the skull or even having broken through.”

“Yeah, I figured as much myself. I did treat men in the field.”

The other man raised his eyebrows in genuine surprise. “Really? My sister is on her third tour, says it doesn’t compare to anything she did back...anyway, I wasn’t doubting your skills of observation or expertise, Doctor Watson. To be frank, I’m somewhat puzzled myself. It feels as if there’s cartilage under there – “

“Yeah, I noticed. That’s why I made the appointment.”

“Let me finish, please. That is puzzling on its own but what’s more worrying is that I can feel what can only be bone down towards the base and it doesn’t seem to be just the skull connecting with the new growth. I would like to take a few X-rays to confirm that before you go, if you don’t mind.”

John looked at Buchanan as though the man was pulling his leg somehow. “Bone?” he asked, the smallest of disbelieving smiles on his lips as his brow furrowed. “Are you seriously trying to say that I’m growing bones out of my skull?”

The specialist only raised one eyebrow in return. “You can believe the cartilage but not the bone?”

“Quite frankly, I’m still waiting to wake up any moment and find out I’ve been down with the worst fever I’ve ever had and this was all a bloody fever dream. But since I’m rarely that bleeding lucky, I would be very happy if the expert I go to could at least try not to take the piss!” His voice had risen towards the end and he took several deep breaths to try and calm down a little.

“I understand that this might be a bit much to take in, especially all at once. I assure you, though, that we will do everything possible to understand what has happened and how it can be remedied. Now, if we take the X-rays straight away, they should at least give us a clearer idea of just what we are dealing with.”

“Yeah, alright,” John said. He rose and followed the specialist out the door towards the specially designed X-ray room. “Thanks for...well...”

Buchanan smiled again. “No problem. You’re handling this far better than I ever could, I think.”

The way home went by in a sort of blur for John. He clutched the envelope containing his copies of
the X-rays that had been taken all the way, his eyes not taking any a lot of what went on around him.

They were real. There was no doubting it once you looked at the images in the envelope. He had bones covered in cartilage growing out of his skull and it was only a matter of time before they broke through the skin.

He’d scheduled another appointment before he left the clinic, two weeks from then. Truth be told, however, he had half a mind not to go. Not only because of the expense of further appointments, though the cost of the X-rays was undoubtedly going to put a bit of a strain on his finances, but because he felt reasonably certain that nothing Doctor Buchanan or anyone else could do would fix it.

It clearly wasn’t going away on its own, either, though; given that it was bone, and the X-rays confirmed that rather conclusively, the only solution that John could see was to either cut it off or leave it be.

Neither option appealed.

As he lay in his bed that night, staring up at the ceiling while his fingers traced patterns over his stomach, he thought about what he then wanted to do instead as well as what might have caused it.

His stomach was churning but he wasn’t entirely sure it had anything to do with his mental unease. He hadn’t had much to eat that it could disagree with, either, so he was at a bit of a loss to what was the cause.

Something clicked then. His stomach had been bothering him for far longer than the headaches had and he hadn’t thought much of that. They had hurt more or less in tandem when the headaches had arrived, however, which should have been a clue.

Nothing had been the matter before he had gone down to Cornwall and ever since then, he had felt…off, somehow, for lack of a better word. Then the nausea, vomiting and general stomach aches had started, intensifying the feeling of ‘off’, and the headaches had only cemented it all.

Knowing, or at least suspecting, that those symptoms were connected did not help much in and of itself. Suspecting that they in turn had something to do with what had happened on Midsummer’s Eve was slightly better but not a lot. What he needed was something more tangible.

And what exactly would you call the protuberances on your head if not horrifically tangible proof? What more do you need to know that something’s gone wrong for you and that’s it’s tied up with that whole incident?

“Proof that the things and the stomach aches really are connected, perhaps?” John answered out loud, too preoccupied to notice that he had indeed said it aloud. “The bumps are odd, yeah, but they don’t explain the rest of it – and there’s Bill’s persistent attempts to sniff me, too, come to think of it.”

Alright, then. You want more proof that something more happened that night that affected your belly? Then go and get a sonogram. That’s what you’re afraid of, isn’t it? That you have it and there’s something there besides just fat.

John swallowed then firmly pushed the thought aside. There wasn’t going to be anything in there. He was a man through and through, there was nowhere inside of him where…something could grow in the first place.

Then what was the problem making an appointment for a sonogram? If he was so very certain that nothing was going to be in there, why was he so reluctant to get it checked?
Not much point in wasting money on a sonogram if you know nothing’s in there, he thought, and I really can’t see the wonderful NHS shilling out for a man wanting one, just for the hell of it in their eyes.

But what else could he do? Go back down to Cornwall, find the mad bugger with the pale eyes and wild hair and demand to know that he had done to him?

The blond turned over onto his side, as his backside throbbed somewhat and lying on his back seemed to aggravate it.

Who even said the man would be there? For all John knew, if he went back to Cornwall now, he would find that the man had moved back to wherever he himself had come from with no plans of ever coming back, much like the doctor himself. He didn’t even know the man’s name so it was just about impossible to ask people in the area whether they had seen him. Tall men with dark hair, pale eyes and likewise skin couldn’t exactly be uncommon, even down there.

They’ll probably think I’m looking for my own Poldark, knowing my blooming luck, he mused to himself.

The only thing he was completely sure of was that he hadn’t imagined it all in his drink-fuelled haze. If his missing clothes the next morning hadn’t been a clue, then the throbbing in his backside and the countless marks left by a multitude of lips, teeth and nails most decidedly were. Irrefutably so, which he didn’t know whether was a good or a bad thing.

But it hadn’t only been the lanky git that had been there, had it? He’d unquestionably been the one in charge, yes, but there had been so many others around that bonfire. Granted, John’s memory of the whole thing was hazy at best and a good deal of them had been wearing masks, to boot. Still, there had to be someone still left in one of the villages who had either been there or had noticed something useful.

Of course, there was also the distinct possibility that he would be questioned or even arrested by the police for participation in an act of vandalism. He highly doubted it, if he phrased his questions right, but it was something to keep in mind.

That’s it, then, is it? I’ve decided to go, just like that? Not that I’ve got many other options left to me, though, so I guess I’ve got to. What the hell am I going to tell Sarah, though? I can’t just bail on my shifts at the surgery once again because I want to go play Poirot down on the coast. Not if I want to have a job when I get back, anyway.

Sarah knew he’d been having those headaches on top of his stomach issues and she had seen the bumps, equally horrified and fascinated by them. That was why she’d given him the day off to see the specialist. She also knew about the whole thing with Harry and Clara. It might not be that hard to convince her that something else had come up in relations to them and that he needed to go and stay down there for at least a few days.

For some reason, he didn’t think that the explanation that he needed to go and find a tall, dark stranger who he’d had a one-night-stand with in the blooming forests of Cornwall would go down overly well, even with Sarah who was normally very understanding.

He contemplated giving Clara a call to see how she was doing and maybe have another go at convincing her to leave his sister for good. It would probably be better overall if his reason for going was genuine, too.

In the end, he decided against it, though. The likelihood of him managing it this time was minute, to
say the least, and he didn’t want to alert Harry to the fact that he might be returning. She hadn’t taken well to the fact that he had come down the last time and, sadly, Clara had taken the brunt of that unhappiness. Again. There was no point in risking that again just so he wouldn’t feel guilty about his reasons for asking for time off.

Mind made up and mentally exhausted by the entire day, he drifted off to sleep. His sleep was riddled with dreams of pale eyes, wild curls, small grabbing hands and laughter, none of which he remembered when he woke up.

The trip down on the train seemed to last forever compared to the last time. Then again, that was hardly surprising when his mind had been filled with overwhelming anger at his sister and dread over just how bad a state Clara was in.

Now, even though he’d had time to pick the train with the shortest travel time this time around, he had neither of those to distract him. All he had was the uncertainty and the worry but they were more of an uneasy sensation in the pit of his stomach rather than all-consuming feelings.

Then again, that might just be his stomach acting up again.

It had continued to grow slowly but steadily and now, by late September, it had grown to a point where he could no longer pretend it wasn’t there. Especially not when he had had to buy a few shirts that were a size up for him and they were still a decidedly snug fit over his stomach. Thankfully, he always bought jumpers that were of good enough quality to manage the extra stretch without completely warping out of shape.

The growth had been in spite of John’s revised, healthy diet and his numerous small ways of exercising and what was more, it had been growing at such a constant rate that the likelihood of it being merely steadily accumulated fat was diminishing at about the same rate the belly was growing.

Much as he tried to, though, he had also found himself unable to stop his habit of rubbing the growing bump. It seemed to soothe it when he did so and since it wasn’t going away for the foreseeable future, he might as well just let it go and do it.

He felt something tug at his sleeve rather insistently. Blinking to clear his thoughts, he turned his head to find a small girl of five or six standing in front of the empty seat beside him, looking intently at him.

“What?” he asked, probably in more of a bark than he intended to. It wasn’t the girl’s fault he was feeling uncertain and pissed over feeling uncertain, he shouldn’t take it out on her.

She blinked then frowned at the tone. Then she seemed to mentally shrug, as if this was just another example of grown-ups being odd. She crawled up onto the empty seat beside him and sat down with her legs crossed and her hands resting on the armrest in the middle.

He was about to ask what she wanted when she smiled a big smile that would have been toothy except that she was clearly at the age where she was losing her baby teeth. Either that or the tooth fairy was getting desperate for small teeth.

“You’re lonely,” she declared. She announced it as though it was both a grand revelation and the most logical conclusion in the world.

“Yeah?” John said, sitting up properly and facing her. At least she was something to pass the time
with, and much better than his own thoughts. “And what exactly do you base that deduction on?”

He expected her to reply with something simple and obvious, like ‘you’re sitting all alone’ or ‘you don’t talk to anyone’. What she did say, however, threw him off.

“Well,” she began. She held up a hand and counted off fingers as she began to list things. “You don’t look at anyone, even when they try to look at you. No calls or text on your phone, for hours. You look out the window and you sigh –, ‘here she demonstrated by sighing dramatically herself, ‘and you don’t wear a wedding ring.”

She delivered the last deduction with an air of finality, her coup de grâce.

“A wedding ring doesn’t mean you can’t be lonely,” he pointed out. “Or that you can’t be happy without one.”

She paused to digest this, once again frowning. “I s’pose,” she conceded eventually, looking put out about it. “You’re still lonely, though – and you shouldn’t be having a baby when you haven’t got a wedding ring.”

He was about to point out that those two weren’t connected either when something she said struck him. “Hang on, what do you mean, having a baby? I’m a man, I can’t have a baby. Not on my own, at least. I’m not having a baby,” he said, with emphasis.

“You are.”

“No, I’m not.” He was trying hard to keep his voice down low so as not to alarm anyone. That and shouting at a little girl was hardly commendable, either. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you’ve got a baby belly,” she said, as if that was all the proof she needed. She leaned forward and patted his stomach with one tiny hand.

He looked down at it, guiltily noting that he still had a hand on his stomach, and then looked back up at her. He smiled, eased a bit. “Ah. No, that’s just fat, love. Men usually get fat there when they get older.”

She shook her head, her long, light brown hair flying about her face as she did so. “No,” she said firmly. “My uncle Mike has a belly like that, it’s bigger but it’s soft. A baby belly is higher and harder. Like my mother had when she had my little sister.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “That’s why I’m here. She’s making so much noise.”

“So, you decided to run away, then?” he asked with a small wink.

He tried not to let on that she had pointed out something that he had overlooked, possibly wilfully so, because he didn’t want to face the reality.

The way his stomach had grown did not look like a belly filled with only fat; it was indeed too high and with the wrong sort of give. That sort only came with a child growing inside. The evidence was right there, irrefutable and blooming visible, despite the impossibility of such a thing.

He had gone and done the impossible by getting knocked up by a stranger while under the influence of God knew only what and now he was going to find him and what? Demand to take it back?

He felt a slightly hysterical laughter wanting to bubble up.

“Millie!” a female voice came from the back of the carriage, interrupting his already scrambled
thoughts. There was the sound of shoes walking swiftly across carpeted floor and then a woman stood in the aisle right next to where John and, presumably, Millie sat.

“Millie, what have I told you about running off like that?” the woman scolded, her hands on her hips and her blouse obviously done having been closed back up.

She turned to John, who thanked whoever was listening up above that the girl had taken her hand back. That would have set off unnecessary alarm bells.

“I’m so sorry. She does this sometimes, seeks out complete strangers to talk to and doesn’t let them go once she’s found them. I hope she hasn’t been too horrible.”

“I’m never horrible!” the little girl said crossly, turning to her mother. “He was feeling lonely and so I helped him.”

“She really hasn’t,” John assured, flashing a smile that he didn’t really feel. He turned his attention back to Millie. “Best go with you mom, now, love. You don’t need to look after me anymore, I’m fine.”

The girl looked decidedly unconvinced but eventually let herself being dragged away back to where her family was sitting, in another carriage. She waved all the way and John waved back until she was out of sight.

Letting his head fall back against the headrest of the seat, he stared up at the ceiling. The encounter hadn’t quite provided the distraction he’d thought it would and what it had brought instead wasn’t something that he had particularly wanted to have confirmed.

So…I should have gotten that sonogram after all. That way I might have known whether it was at least a healthy baby or not.

When he got off at the platform at Truro, over seven hours after the train had left Paddington, his backpack slung over his shoulder, he was surprised to find that the little girl and her family also got off there. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to notice him getting off further down and so he was able to leave without incident.

Not that he disliked her. He just didn’t want her to start blabbering about him having a baby in front of a group of grown-ups. Alright, they were hardly going to believe her but he was feeling tired enough as it was without having to deal with that as well.

No, what you don’t want to deal with is just other people, his mind supplied. Never thought you’d turn into such an antisocial person, did you?

He wasn’t antisocial. He just…didn’t feel like dealing with the banalities of normal life all the time, either. There was enough of that at work.

Which you are shirking completely and have given your employer a load of codswallop for avoiding.

“It’s only going to be a few days,” he muttered under his breath, as if that was going to convince him.

As he went off in search of somewhere to stay for the night, he thought he saw the shape of someone vaguely familiar out of the corner of his eye. What to do?
On the one hand, there had been several occasions back in London, after he’d come back, where this exact thing had happened, only for it to be a mere trick of the mind when he focused on it. On the other, that had been back in London and the enormous mass of copper curls he thought he’d seen would make sense to find down here. It was far more likely that, if she wasn’t merely something conjured by his mind in his drunken haze, that she would live down here and that he would bump into her. Even if the likelihood was very small at best, given the size of the population in Truro and the distance to the forest he had gotten lost into.

He turned his head to look, slowly, but all he got was a glimpse of the curls as they disappeared, once again, around a corner. However, before he began to follow, he registered that those curls were rather more on the brown side rather than ginger.

“Bloody well losing my marbles as well as turning into a physical impossibility,” he muttered with a shake of the head. Only consolation on that score was that at least they’d match.

He pulled at the brim of the flat cap he’d taken to wearing whenever he was out to make sure it was still sitting securely. It had been a bit of an issue at the surgery, at least at first, as Sarah had taken not taking kindly to it, and he had eventually had to take it off and show her the bumps, bracing himself for her reaction.

Unexpectedly, though, all she’d done was to give a quiet noise of surprise while her expression turned to one of caring concern.

“That’s why you needed the day off for the orthopaedic specialist?” she’d asked quietly and he’d nodded. “I thought it was your knee or something.”

“I wish,” he’d said. “I’m rarely that lucky, though.”

“True,” she’d conceded. Then she’d smiled. “Get that awful cap back on, you look absolutely ridiculous with those.”

He smiled at the memory and set off to find a relatively cheap B&B for the night. It was getting dark outside and he’d do better searching if he had some actual sleep in a bed before he started the trek to general area of his search.

There was one good thing to be said for this time, though. He at least knew in approximately what area he needed to ask and search; the first village he’d come to when he’d eventually made it out of the forest had had at least a pub and a B&B. If nothing else, they could tell him if some of the people dancing around the fire had stayed with them. Hell, there might even be a face or two he recognized from that night.

Yeah, ‘cause it’s going to be a right doddle recognizing someone from only the bottom part of their face, if there was even that much.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, sir, can I help you?” the landlord of the pub answered in a voice that was too cheery to be purely to please the customer. “Hang on, I’ve seen you before somewhere. Midsummer day, was it?”

John blinked. He had been in there when he’d gotten back and since he had been wearing some rather odd clothes, he might have stood out more than the average Joe in the pub but still. Not much point in denying it, though, quite the opposite.

“You’ve got one hell of a good memory there. Yeah, it was.”
The middle-aged, though still handsome, man grinned. “Pays to have, sir. Guests feel more welcome and special if you remember their names and their face – and it’s easier to know whether the people coming were troublemakers the last time they came.”

“I bet. I’m John, by the way.”

“Hello, John, nice to see you again – and put a name to the face. As I recall, you looked a bit shaken up when you came in and wasn’t too talkative.”

“Ah, no, I probably wasn’t,” John conceded. Truth be told, he’d felt off having that many people around him so soon after all that had happened. “Had a bit of a…well, a not un-interesting Midsummer Eve. Didn’t end quite the way I expected.”

The landlord nodded slowly and solemnly, as though he understood and understood far more than just what the surface-level implied. John couldn’t tell whether that was unsettling or not.

This is Cornwall, after all, and Midsummer Eve is special, even now. I would be more surprised if you didn’t have an…interesting night of it,” he said and the slight pause was oddly pregnant, “especially given where you’d come from.”

“Yeah?” John said in a non-committal way, his face settling into a careful blank expression. “Didn’t know you had panorama windows in this pub. Must’ve been expensive to install.”

The other man frowned. His expression cleared when he worked out what the doctor meant. “Oh, I didn’t need a window to spot that you’d come from the forest. Your clothes gave that away.”

At that, it was John’s turn to frown in incomprehension. “What?”

The landlord leaned over the countertop and lowered his voice so that the scant number of punters in the pub couldn’t hear. Hopefully. “It hasn’t happened in my time, at least not as far as I’m aware, but there’s been stories about strange goings-on in the forest for centuries. Sometimes people disappear into the forest around certain times, you know, summer and winter solstice, Halloween, that sort of thing. Most often, they come back, either days or months later, but sometimes they don’t, and even if they do, they come back changed, in one way or the other.”

John almost laughed at that. As it was, he had difficulty keeping an amused smile off his face. “That’s classic folk tale warnings, though, isn’t it? Don’t go out into the unknown or you’ll be snatched by the fairy folk.”

“Perhaps,” the landlord acknowledged with a bit of a sheepish smile. “That’s what I always thought, too, even when my nan claimed it had happened to her sister who’d never come back. But then you turned up in that frankly ludicrous combination of clothes, unwilling to speak and with this peculiar look to you.”

“What, like I’d been fairy-touched? Come on!”

“Why were you dressed like somebody who raided the dress up box for every spare bit of clothing, then?” the other man countered, raising an eyebrow. “You don’t exactly look the type.”

John opened his mouth to argue then paused. “I…someone had stolen all my clothes except my shoes.”

“And just conveniently left you a greatcoat from world war two to cover up with instead? Oddly considerate thieves.”
“Yeah, alright. To be honest, I don’t remember much and what I do remember doesn’t make much sense.”

“Sounds about right from the other things I heard, yeah. Look, I know it does seem very farfetched and like I’m a sandwich short of a picnic by saying it. I fully admit that. But as I said, when you came in back then, you fit that story to a bleeding tee. If you don’t believe me, just go back to the forest and see.”

John was about to argue further but then he realized the man was going a bit far for this to be a mere prank and besides, he had been planning to go back to that forest to do some research, anyway.

He smiled to try and ease the tension between them.

“I was planning on that. I’m actually trying to track someone from that night and I hoped you might’ve seen him.”

“I see a lot of people, mate.”

“Yeah, and you’ve just told me you’ve got a memory for faces. Please help me out here, then I’ll be out of your hair, I promise.”

The landlord smiled. “Oh, no. You ain’t going anywhere until you’ve had some of the local beer, mate. That’s final.”

As he trekked through the forest once again, John was not only grateful it was only early afternoon, he also had an odd sense of déjà vu. Not that he recognized the individual trees or anything daft like that but there was a definite sense of familiarity and security that hadn’t been there, either when he’d walked out of there afterwards or when he’d been led there by the curly-haired girl.

“Probably should have asked after her rather than the other fellow,” he muttered under his breath, navigating south towards the clearing he’d been in. “Her he might have seen.”

Not that he doubted the landlord claiming not to know the man. He was merely frustrated that his pessimistic prediction that he’d ask around for a man he didn’t know the name of had indeed come true. What was more, the clearing seemed to be no nearer, despite him having walked for about as long as he reckoned he had on the way out of there.

Just as he was getting fed up with this whole endeavour and had started to turn back the way he’d come, however, he spotted a figure leaning against a tree some distance away, apparently watching him.

It wasn’t tall enough to be the man with the pale eyes and the cupid bow lips but the scant sunlight there was did dance in the mass of distinctive copper curls.

That just about did it for John. This time, she wouldn’t be able to run away or wiggle out of questions. He was going to get to the bottom of what had happened, whether she wanted to help or not.

He didn’t shout or otherwise call out to her. Instead, he just started to run towards the figure who hadn’t moved. Yet.

In his haste to get to her before she ran off or disappeared, though, he failed to take the unevenness
of the ground into account. The hard toe of his boot hit something under the dead leaves and he stumbled. He did manage to catch hold of a branch to steady himself but unfortunately for him, the branch was slippery with wet and his grip wasn’t quite firm enough.

Consequently, he went tumbling to the ground on his back, head hitting something on the way.

*At least landing on my back means I haven’t hurt the baby,* was his muzzy thought before unconsciousness claimed him.

Chapter End Notes

The return of copper curls! :)  
Still more John working off other people (the little girl was fun to write) but we're getting somewhere. Writing the whole mental progression aspect of this chapter was a challenge but a fun one. Hopefully it makes at least a modicum of sense.
Fighting for proper answers

Chapter Summary

John has finally found the people from the solstice orgy but Sherlock is not among them and nobody seems prepared to give him the answers he's looking for. They claim they don't have them but that Sherlock might, if John will just wait for him. What will Sherlock's reaction be and what about the answers? What will John think of what he learns?

Chapter Notes

Thank you for another wonderful batch of feedback. I'm trying my very best to get the chapters out on a fortnight basis but I might just struggle in the next while to do so, so I just wanted to say thank you for what you give me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When he woke back up, he registered that he was not lying directly on the ground anymore, as his back didn't register wet leaves, and the air around him was considerably cooler and wetter, which indicated that enough time had passed for the sun to have set and been gone for some time.

Given that the air was so much cooler, bordering on bloody cold, it was also much easier to detect the people gathered around him just by the meagre heat coming off the bodies.

Feeling more than a little apprehensive, given just who was likely standing around him, he tried to sit up, hand scrabbling beside him for anything that might be used as a defensive weapon against whoever it was.

As soon as he was halfway upright, though, his inner ear acted up and everything went topsy-turvy inside of his head. He uttered a choking noise and scrabbled again, this time purely for purchase.

"Easy there," a hoarse, male voice said softly as he began to sink backwards again, despite fighting it all the way. Take it easy now."

"Don’t…tell me what…to do," John growled but the effect was spoiled by the fact that he had to struggle with the bile rising in his throat while he spoke.

Oh, great. Morning sickness, now at night and all.

"You must be taking care of yourself, now," someone else said as they came closer. As he was once again horizontal, he couldn’t see who it was but the voice was familiar enough that he could guess.

"I plan to. That’s why I don’t want you near me." Even lying down, his hands still scrabbled for something, anything that he could use but they came up completely empty.

Why the hell hadn’t he thought to bring his gun with him?
Because getting caught with a weapon you’re not supposed to still own is not going to help you any and you really don’t want to be questioned by the police right now, looking the way you do.

That thought brought another, quick realization with it; though he was thankfully still otherwise clothed, he wasn’t wearing his cap anymore.

His hand went up, almost without conscious thought, until he could tentatively touch his ‘bumps’, as he’d taken to think of them, only to discover that they weren’t only out in the open, they’d grown enough to break through the skin completely. Not only that, he could feel the soft, fuzzy velvet so very characteristic of growing antlers.

Well, that about puts the lid on that uncertainty. Lucky me.

He felt a hand attempt to touch his lower arm and yanked it away. “I said, I don’t want you near me. I don’t trust any of you.”

“Then why did you come?”

The one asking was the girl who’d led him to the clearing in the first place. Or at least, the voice was the same, whispy and unusually soft. When he slowly raised his head to get a look at her, though, he wasn’t so sure.

The copper curls were the same, and there was no mistaking them this time, and the general shape of the face and body were as well but apart from that, it was all wrong. If asked, though, John couldn’t tell just what was wrong. He put that down to his head that was still muzzy both from the hit it got as he fell and the balance centre having been upset.

“Because you owe me some bleeding answers!” he growled at her and the other people around him. “For one thing, you didn’t tell me the result of dancing around with you lot would lead to these!” He pointed at the bumps on his head.

“It…it usually doesn’t,” she replied after a moment’s hesitation. Her eyes were big as she looked at the budding antlers but whether that was with wonder, excitement, a mix or neither wasn’t entirely clear. “Almost never. Not since…since I was very, very little.”

“Oh? And that’s supposed to be comforting to me? Supposed to make me feel special or something?”

“Not really,” someone else, possibly the dark, broad man, answered.

The small number of people standing around had taken a few steps backwards, possibly to show the blond that they could be accommodating. He wasn’t buying it.

“Then what?” he asked as he rose the rest of the way up into a sitting position, slowly and carefully so as not to upset anything again. Vaguely he noted small lamps and such scattered around the rock formation they were gathered at. They gave the whole scene an ethereal feel, which was fitting.

“Nothing. The point really is that it so very rarely happens. We have no more idea of what to do than you do.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Really, we do not. You are welcome here, though.”

John narrowed his eyes. “You think that I have any intention of staying here? You must be joking.”
He would have said more but his attention was diverted by the curly-haired girl. She’d slowly moved closer and closer, keeping her movements small, as though he was an animal she was trying not to frighten. With the antlers, she might have a point, too.

What really threw him, however, was what she did next; she reached out a hand and gently touched the curve that was his stomach, even more pronounced now when he was sitting down. Moreover, as her hand made contact, whatever was inside of him seemed to respond to the touch, much more than it had ever done when John had touched it in the past.

He gasped at the feeling of something moving inside of him and as such, he almost didn’t hear her gasp in turn nor did he think to swat her hand away as he would have done otherwise. He did catch it when she looked up at him, her eyes even wider than before, and this time, it was most decidedly with excited wonder.

She uttered a noise that was so odd that at first John didn’t register it came from a human throat at all, let alone her. It was a throaty, creaky noise that should have sounded disturbing, like the sound of wood when it settles and moves in the night. It did to a degree but at the same time, it sounded contented, like the rumble a large dog makes when its resting and comfortable.

The noise gained the attention of the other people and in the next moment, everyone was once again crowding around him, looking at his stomach. Nobody, apart from the girl, tried to touch him.

“You must stay here,” she said, a smile spreading across her face, lighting it up in a way that reminded him, even in the dim light provided by the lamps, why he’d thought her beautiful all those months ago.

“What? Bloody hell, no, I don’t.”

“We’ll take good care of you.”

“I don’t need to be taken care of. I can look after myself perfectly fine and if you lot can’t, or more likely won’t, give me any answers why I’m growing blooming antlers then I’m heading back home.”

“It’s dark out,” the broad man argued calmly. Nothing seemed to really faze him.

“I’m perfectly capable of finding my way in the dark.” That wasn’t quite true but they didn’t need to know that.

“You mustn’t go,” the girl insisted. She sounded distraught at the thought and what was worse, she’d begun to rub gently at his swell in much the same way he’d done. When she did it, though, it caused even more movement and a growing sensation of wrongness inside of him. Nobody was supposed to touch it.

He pushed her hand away and scrambled up into a standing position, his own hand finding his belly and caressing it. It settled down almost immediately and he breathed a small sigh of relief at that.

“Please,” the girl said.

“No,” he said, pushing down hard on his rising anger. It would be justified to get truly angry at them, after all, but it would hardly be helpful in the circumstances. Possibly it would even prove the opposite. He was the Watson with a grip on his anger, dammit, he wasn’t going to lose it in front of these people.

“No,” he repeated, voice low and vibrating slightly with the suppressed anger. “I know what’s growing inside of me, too, what you’re all responsible for putting in me, and I’m not going to let you
touch it. I came here for answers and if I can’t get them here, I’m going back to London where I can look after it properly.”

The girl looked downright horrified at the announcement as did a few of the others who started to mutter amongst themselves. The broad man looked more thoughtful than upset but there was an additional look in his eyes that was difficult to decipher.

The look also went on for longer than was standard or even comfortable. Even so, John held it moment for moment. He wasn’t going to make him back down just by glaring.

Eventually, the broad man spoke. “We can’t hold you here, we don’t wish to. But it seems to me, seems to me that you’re a smart fellow. You don’t want to be trekking through an unknown forest, this forest on top of it, in the middle of the night. Not when you’ve got a tiny one to take care of. You might trip or worse.”

John only continued to look at him, though his eyes narrowed slightly.

“We can’t explain, we do not know such complex things. But our…,” there was a pause as the man obviously sought for a sufficient equivalent word, “…our ruler, yes, ruler, he can explain. He’s busy, though, very busy, many needs, many demands, not easy to track.”

“Do you expect me to sit around here and wait for whenever he decides to wander back into this general area again, then?” John asked in a somewhat derisive, disbelieving tone of voice.

He didn’t need to ask who the ruler might be. Even if he hadn’t spotted the chair reminiscent of the Eisteddfod ones the man had sat in or the way he had been treated by the people around him, it wasn’t exactly a hard deduction to come by. Given that, though, he felt slightly more inclined to stay, regardless of the time that would take. He had a bone to pick with that man or whatever he really was.

*Just you wait ’til I get my hands on you, mate.*

The broad man, whose build was oddly similar to and yet decidedly different to that of the pale-eyed man, actually smiled at that and John was again reminded of Midsummer Eve. He’d liked the man then.

“Of course not,” he said and some of the tension seemed to drain out of the situation. “But if you will stay the night, we will send word to him and he will be here by morning. He will be pleased to know that you have returned.”

Another brief memory flashed across John’s mind, this time the words ‘After all, you’re mine’ replaying themselves. They sent a shiver down his spine but he couldn’t tell whether that was a good thing or not.

“One night spent here and this…ruler of yours will come and give me my answers?”

“Yes.”

“Right.”

To be honest, John didn’t believe a word of it. It sounded a little too convenient, a little too fairy tale as well as slightly contradictory to what had been said before. Why would the ruler be able to answer questions that none of the others could? Why would he come back just because of John?

Alright, so there was unquestionably the issue of him somehow give the doctor a bun in the oven,
but despite what the people here seemed to think, that might not be a big issue. It certainly didn’t seem sufficient grounds to stop his duties, especially not when he hadn’t had any qualms about letting John go.

Of course, John hadn’t exactly known what he’d been left with at that point so there was the possibility that that applied to the pale-eyed man as well but for whatever reason, the blond couldn’t completely buy into that theory.

On the other hand, there was a legitimate argument to be made that although John was significantly better prepared than he had been the first time, it would hardly be the smartest of moves to try and get back to civilisation in the dark. He would also need his cap back if he didn’t want to possibly freak out the people around him once he did get back.

What did he have to lose by staying? All he had left at the room he’d booked at the inn were non-essentials such as clothes and toiletries and he’d already paid for the room for the next two nights.

It was probably the best and possibly the only chance he’d get to get some answers from the source and it would be foolish to be stubborn and refuse out of pure principle.

“Alright, fine,” he eventually agreed. “Until tomorrow.”

The girl with the copper curls beamed at him. “Thank you,” she said softly, reaching out a hand in invitation for him to take. “We truly never meant any harm. It was only supposed to be…reward for keeping up with us. During the dance, I mean.”

He hesitated in taking her hand, more than aware of where that had led the last time. She seemed to pick up on that, too, and lowered her hand, a guilty, genuinely apologetic look on her face as she bit her lip.

Before she lowered it completely, though, he gave her a small, tight smile in an effort to show that he understood even if he didn’t fully approve. He made no move to take her hand but she seemed to understand him anyway and her lips quirked in a small, hesitant smile.

“Alright, then,” he said with a decisive nod. “That’s settled.”

He took a look around him. “I’m going to need somewhere to sleep that’s not the bare floor of this cave. You’ve got some blankets or something? Anything, really.”

The girl held out the hand again. “I can show you. Promise, it’s safe.”

“You know, I don’t believe that for a moment but on the other hand, what else can you do to me? No, wait, don’t answer that. I’d hate to wake up with webbed hands or branches for legs or something.”

In the end, there was a collection of furs, blankets, pillows and old clothes further into the cave that, although smelling ever so slightly musty in that particularly way that is cloth left on the ground, looked warm and inviting and as though someone regularly slept there.
This impression was furthered by the amount of trinkets and things scattered around the den, some neatly arranged while others lay as though they had been thrown about. They also ranged from simple, practical things like a penknife, some books, utensils and a pot to odd stuff like a set of scales, an old magnifying glass and what looked very much, on closer inspection, like a human skull.

“Ehm, are you sure that it’s okay for me to sleep here?” John asked, stopping dead just inside the ‘room’ and surveying it.

“Of course,” the girl smiled. “It’s good. Ruler’s sleeping area. Doesn’t sleep much but we keep it for him when he’s away looking after other parts of the forest far away. You can sleep her with no problems. It will be good for you.”

She nodded towards his stomach at that. John swallowed.

He still had a bit of trouble, alright, a lot of trouble, coming to terms with the fact that there was truly, genuinely a child growing inside of him and he most definitely didn’t want to think about what would be necessary for him to do when it came time to deliver it. If he even made it that far.

Shut up. Just, shut up!

“Well, thank you…I… I don’t think I ever got your name. If you have one, of course.”

Just as he said it, he mentally kicked himself. Why wouldn’t she?

She thankfully only giggled at that. “I do. Two, in fact, but you can’t pronounce the first one.”

He felt mildly offended at that, for some reason. “Try me.”

Once again, she giggled. Then she pulled her lips into the shape of an ‘o’ and seemed to blow out a breath, as though she was trying to whistle and failing badly.

Sound did come out of her, though, but it came from her throat as much as between her lips. It was a strange combination of wind whistling through tree branches full of summer leaves and the crack of a snapping tree branch.

John blinked. So, he hadn’t misheard the type of noise she’d uttered earlier. This all just kept on getting stranger. He shook his head. “Nope. You’re right. Not a chance, I’m not even going to embarrass myself by trying. What’s the other one?”

“Demelza. My mother liked the name she read in a book that had been left behind. She always said it suited me.” She looked shyly proud at that.

“It’s a very nice name, Demelza,” he agreed. “I’m John.”

Turnabout was fair play, after all, whatever else he thought about her and the others. It occurred to him that he might have told the pale-eyed man his name and she could have picked it up there, which would render his telling her rather moot. But manners were manners.

“John,” she echoed, with no indication that she’d already heard it. “It’s – “

“A name,” he finished for her. There was nothing special about his name. Not that he minded but there was no point in making more of it.

She nodded then made a small curtsy before making her way back out of the den, leaving him to it. John stared at his accommodation for the night. It most certainly wasn’t what he had thought he’d be
sleeping in when he’d gotten up that morning and he wasn’t quite sure that he particularly wanted to
sleep there, either. But he would need his sleep if he was to successfully achieve the result he
wanted, he knew that, and so he didn’t have much other choice.

_Not like you haven’t sleep on rougher terrain in much more dire situations, you ninny. Pull yourself
together._

As he lay down, burrowing into the pile of different textiles, he became aware of a smell that had
been in his nostrils for a while. In fact, it lingered in the entire den but was particularly concentrated
in the bedding, for obvious reasons, despite the claim that the occupant didn’t sleep much.

Not that John minded a smell. Live with a large group of men for an extended amount of time and
you became completely resistant to the odours they produced relatively quickly. You had to, really.

It had more to do with the fact that he not only recognized the smell, he found it comforting and
reassuring as did his midsection occupant. It felt right in a way that he was familiar with but didn’t
particularly care for.

His body was having none of his mind’s protestations, however, and he was soon slipping into a
depth sleep.

He woke to the distinct impression that someone was close by, far too close for comfort, and he
tensed automatically, body readying itself for a fight even as his brain tried to assemble what had
happened the night before, with mixed results.

One thing that did surface, though, was the knowledge that he had gone to bed alone.

Opening his eyes, he rose quickly into a sitting position. Or rather, he tried to. A hand on his
shoulder, which was unexpectedly strong and immovable, kept him lying on his side.

He looked up and saw a familiar face. At least, fairly familiar. His memory of what had transpired on
Midsummer Eve was, admittedly, hazy at best but he felt certain he would have remembered the
somewhat pointed ears, the unquestionable furriness of the chest and, of course, the impressive set of
antlers sprouting from the mass of wild, dark curls was definitely something he’d have picked up on.

The man, who was without question the man he had been with, looked down at John in turn, pale
eyes intensely scrutinizing the doctor, with otherwise no visibly discernible expression on his face.
John had the distinct feeling of being a specimen under a microscope but held his ground and stared
back. Like hell the man was going to intimidate or throw him.

After what felt like a long time of silent inspection, the man decided to speak. What came out of his
mouth wasn’t anything like what the blond expected, however.

“You left.” There were disapproving and dismayed notes in the baritone voice as well as a bit of
accusation.

Something inside John bridled at that and he only just resisted the immediate urge to say, _No, I
didn’t! I stayed right here, despite what my rational brain said._

Some other part of his brain worked faster, thankfully, and realized that it was their first meeting that
was meant. Not that that lessened the anger at the accusatory and disapproving tone.

“Of course, I bloody well left,” he retorted. “When I woke up, you had all buggered off without as
much as a ‘nice to meet you’. Did you expect me to just sit there and hope that one of you might decide to return at some point, however long that would take? You didn’t even give me a name! Why would I stay for a man who made it so very clear that it was nothing more than a rather novelty one-night-stand? You must take me for a bloody fool!”

The accusations were met with a calm face except for a slight frown.

John, growing ever more annoyed at the hand still managing to restrain him, opened his mouth to say more. The man beat him to it, though.

“Sherlock. My name is Sherlock,” he clarified at the doctor’s puzzled look.

“And you couldn’t have told me at the time? You got my name, it’s standard bloody manners to give your own in that situation.”

“Standard manners would also involve a great deal less swearing and yet you seem unable to leave it out of your speech.” The cupid bow lips quirked up into a small, slightly amused smile and the pale eyes held a small gleam they hadn’t before.

“I’m angry, it’s only to be expected.” Despite his words, John was fighting a smile threatening to break out. That was not what he had expected to hear.

“So, you always swear when you’re angry? Interesting for a soldier but then it’s stereotypical to assume that the only enlisted men to swear up a storm are sailors.”

There was a small pause after that and the hand was lifted from his shoulder, allowing him to get up to a sitting position. John sat up and moved backwards, away from Sherlock, who noticed the move and narrowed his eyes in disapproval.

His voice remained perfectly calm, however. “It’s understandable for you to be at least somewhat angry, given what you have been through and been given.”

A muscle twitched in John’s cheek and his eyes narrowed in turn, challenging the man for his words. Oh, so it was understandable, was it? But only to be somewhat angry? How dare the lanky git sitting in front of him decide how he should and shouldn’t feel!

“Well?” he asked, voice low as he moved even further backwards, hoping the distance would tamp down on his urge to sock the other in the jaw as much as anything else. “I’m somewhat justified in my anger, am I? That’s ever so noble of you to concede to, given what you ‘gifted’ me without my consent.”

Pale eyes narrowed further into veritable slits, whether because of the words or John’s further scoot away not being entirely clear. A hand shooting out to grab hold of the blond’s ankle and prevent him from widening the gap between them seemed to put emphasis on the latter but then Sherlock spoke again.

“This does not happen,” he hissed, the grip on John’s ankle almost vice-like. “One or the other, yes, extremely rarely and usually with drastic consequences to either the affected, the ones around them or even both. To have the two occur in the same person at the same time is utterly unheard of.”

Again, this revelation did not make John feel special. Nor did it make him feel like the freak he probably ought to feel like. Instead, it left him strangely…ambivalent in his feelings towards it.

He did take a small comfort in the knowledge that it apparently had come as much of a shock to the other people, including Sherlock, though. It meant that they hadn’t purposely done this to him only to
abandon him to his fate the following morning. At least, so he earnestly hoped. To think anything else left him with a coiled mass of anger, frustration and fear writhing in the pit of his stomach.

Sherlock, keeping an excruciatingly tight grip on John’s ankle, shuffled slightly closer. His eyes flicked between the budding antlers on top of John’s head and the now unmistakably curve that was his stomach, back and forth as though he had difficulties believing what his eyes were telling him.

“So…” John began, asking because he wanted, possibly needed, to be sure. “None of this was planned? I wasn’t supposed to grow any of these?” He frowned as he thought of something. “Why the hell did I get roped into the… the orgy, then?”

Sherlock, though John didn’t pick up on it at the time, inched ever closer while still maintaining his grip on the ankle, making certain that the blond couldn’t move further away from him as he got closer.

“You kept up with the dancers throughout the entire dance. Very few people ever manage that and even fewer accomplish it on one of the big celebratory dances. it is traditional that such people are rewarded afterwards.”

“Yeah, alright, makes sense, I suppose, but an *orgy*?”

Cupid bow lips quirked into a smile at the note of incredulity in the blond’s voice. “Why not? Dancing is a very sexual activity, after all, it is not that big of a stretch – and besides, it’s all in celebration of nature, of the natural order of things.”

“Which you weren’t a part of, I noticed.”

The smile faded back into the calm, almost indifferent expression. “It is not…the dance is not for me. I am not to take part of it. Nor do I normally partake in the activities that go on afterwards. Last Midsummer Eve was an exception.”

At John’s snort of disbelief and his look of ‘are you bloody well taking the piss?’, the brunet’s eyebrows rose in turn. “You seemed marginally more interesting than the normal people they drag in and it turned out that you were more than marginally so.”

The claim itself wouldn’t be too difficult to swallow if it wasn’t for the fact that John actually did remember the words Sherlock had said to him. They weren’t really just the ones of a bored man. Furthermore, the pale eyes held a smidgeon of something that told him he wasn’t being given the truth.

It seemed as though giving answers, at least answers that were in any way advantageous to someone not Sherlock, was not something the man did and certainly not voluntarily.

Lucky for John, there was more than one way to skin a cat.

“Right,” he said as nonchalantly and matter-of-factly as possible without looking at Sherlock. “You don’t know anything more about all of this than the rest of your people do. I promised I’d wait for you to turn up and explain, I did and you haven’t.” He paused deliberately. “Ought to catch a train back to London before noon, do you think?” he asked with a sweet smile.

He made a move to get up but was halted by the hand on his ankle yanking it back down. Looking up, the pale eyes had darkened slightly and there were the undertones of a growl that seemed to vibrate not just through the tall figure but the surrounding ground itself.

Just talking to him, it was surprisingly easy to…well, not forget, per se, but certainly put to the back
of your mind that Sherlock wasn’t quite human. Sitting in front of John now, though, nostrils were flaring minutely and the antlers were tilted forward. Most of all, there was the same aura, regal and powerful but with the same dangerous edge that one could imagine Henry VIII had had. If the Tudor king had been connected to the power of the earth itself, that was.

But John wasn’t a man to ever back down to intimidation tactics.

“I’ve only been given a few days off from work. If you can’t or won’t give me my answers, then I’m sorry, but I see no reason to stay here any longer. Now, let go of my leg.”

For a moment, it looked as though Sherlock hadn’t even heard. Then, he gave a minute shake of the head. “No.”

“I said, let go!” John said and yanked at his leg, to little avail. What the devil were in that lanky body to make it that inhumanly strong?

*That’s the point, really, though, isn’t it? He isn’t human. There doesn’t need to be a one-to-one correlation between his capabilities and that of a human.*

This time, the shake of the head was far more emphatic. “No. You are staying.”

“Like hell I am,” John snapped as he made another attempt to get his leg free with precisely the same result. Getting more than fed up with the behaviour, he reached down a hand to try and pry the one gripping his joint off.

He only just managed to touch the bony hand before the other captured his wrist in just as harsh a grip as the one around his ankle, pulling it away. Growling, John reached down his other hand. With both bony hands occupied, the doctor was up one hand.

Not that it helped; even though he did manage to get his fingers down to touch, he was unable to move the fingers more than a few millimetres.

Blue eyes glared up into pale ones. “Don’t think that just because you’re stronger than me and can forcibly hold me down that I’ll sit back meekly and allow you to hold me captive.”

Sherlock blinked and frowned, as though in incomprehension of the problem. “It’s for your own good,” he said. “You’re safe here.”

“What…the buggering…hell…are you…on about?”

Sherlock looked down again at John’s growing stomach, an expression of wonder and delighted tenderness on his face that the doctor really hadn’t been prepared to see when the other looked back
up. Of all things, it sent his heart fluttering slightly.

“The…the child needs to stay here,” Sherlock explained, slowly, carefully. “It was conceived on a special night. It needs the magic, for lack of a better word, of the forest if it’s to make it safely into the world.”

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger! Aren’t I a sweetie? :)  
It was really interesting to write John this time around, balancing his anger with his incredulity and everything else, really. I don't know whether I've succeeded in making it consistently John regardless. I hope so. Sherlock is interesting to write in this incarnation, too, with the same problems :)  
I'm sorry about the sorta-reference with Demelza, I couldn't help it.
Negotiation

Chapter Summary

John does not take well to the revelation and he still has plans to leave. Can Sherlock come up with a way to convince the doctor that he should stay?

Chapter Notes

Thank you again, everyone. I was worried how you'd take this proper meeting between them here and you showed me I didn't have grounds to be. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The statement passed through the doctor’s ear but once it reached his brain, it was immediately rejected. It just seemed a step too far, somehow.

His utter disbelief must have been showing on his face because Sherlock snorted, the sound resembling that of an animal more than a human.

“This is not your world, John. I would have thought that you’d have picked up on that by this point. The rules that you’re familiar with, that you cling to in order to make sense of what you experience, do not apply.”

Oh, so you remember my name, do you? How kind.

“I gathered that, ta ever so, and to be frank, just because I know doesn’t mean it’s easy to wrap your head around or that it doesn’t freak me out.”

Pale eyes searched his face, far closer than John had realized he was. He tamped down on the urge to pull his head back.

“You don’t look freaked out,” Sherlock pointed out after a moment or two searching. “Not at all. In fact, you look calmer now than you did a few minutes ago and even then, you were angry, not freaking out. Not exactly what would be considered a normal, appropriate response, is it?” The slightly bushy eyebrows rose, as though in challenge.

“And what would you know about what constitutes a normal response?” the blond shot back.

“True,” Sherlock conceded.

Silence fell between them but oddly enough, it didn’t feel much like a tense silence anymore, or even an awkward one.

“I need to go back,” John said finally, doing his best to keep a calm and reasonable tone. “I have a job, I have friends. I have a life back in London and now I also have a baby to take care of. It needs to be monitored and helped throughout the process, probably far more than even a regular baby does. How do you expect me not to do everything possible for it?”
He deliberately didn’t mention that it wasn’t much of a life he’d had, before or after Midsummer Eve. It was hardly relevant in the circumstances, was it?

Sherlock snorted again, this time sounding far more disdainful and derisive than any amused. “As though the medical profession wouldn’t use the opportunity to prod and poke at my child until they had learned everything possible and hurt the child irreparably in the process!” he said, his face twisting into a disdainful sneer. “If that is safer than somewhere it is surrounded by the magic and love that it needs, then –”

“Hold on just one moment,” John interrupted. “How dare you suggest that I am not going to love it? I’m not the one who has to travel around all the time!”

“No, you’ve just kept it from where it needs to be to develop properly for three months!” Sherlock snapped. “We should’ve been told!”

“I didn’t know I was pregnant!” John snarled back. “It’s not physically possible! I came here when I found out! And don’t you dare tell me I should’ve stayed here when you were the one to abandon me first thing, not even checking to see whether you’d caused any damage or – “

He interrupted himself with a sharp intake of breath as his stomach gave a painful lurch. Attention diverted, he glared down at his midsection.

“Cut it out!” he growled at it. Of all the times for it to start acting up! “It’s far too early for you to start misbehaving like that, you little bugger. You’re not supposed to start kicking for another month, at least! Ow!”

The hand holding John’s wrist let go and moved towards his stomach, without the doctor noticing. Only when it was just about to connect did he detect its presence.

Before he managed to push it away with his newly freed hand, however, it made contact. As soon as he did, it not only calmed the kicking or whatever it was down, it sent a jolt through John’s body, which caused him to let out a small gasp.

A jolt that was extremely, almost scarily pleasant. It felt good but more than that, it felt right. It was reassuring and horrifying at the same time and it froze the blond.

Sherlock must have felt it, too; the hand flexed in a small spasm that seemed entirely involuntary before it pressed into the flesh beneath it. It wasn’t hard or forceful but felt more like a reassurance that what he’d felt was indeed real.

John opened his eyes, not aware until then that he’d closed them in the first place, and looked up into pale ones. In them lurked the same spark of wonder that John felt.

“It’s real,” the blond whispered. He’d known it in his mind, at least on some level, but the premature kicking and the indescribable connection he felt now solidified it more than anything else had previously.

“It’s real and it’s ours,” the brunet confirmed, a smile growing on his face of the kind that didn’t seem to be done consciously. “Our child, growing in your stomach.”

The silence this time was not tense or even neutral but rather awkwardly, fragilely tender and it went on for considerably longer than either of the other times.

Hand still on John’s stomach, where it had started a soothing motion much like the one the doctor normally did himself and which didn’t feel wrong like Demelza’s touch had, Sherlock spoke.
“It really does need the forest to grow, fays always have, and so do you now, it seems. I have not heard of this happening before but that does not mean it hasn’t happened.”

*That wasn’t what you said earlier,* John thought but decided not to mention it, at least for the moment.

“So, I’ve grown antlers,” he said instead, surprised at himself about how calm he could sound about that. “Isn’t that just a variant? There’s plenty of stories of people coming back changed from an encounter with…your people. In that context, it doesn’t seem too farfetched for it to manifest as just antlers.”

“You see but you don’t observe. If it was merely the antlers, then yes, you would be right. But there is far more to it than that. You feel this earth, feel it in your bones. You might have been able to keep up with the dancers but if you didn’t feel it, you wouldn’t have been able to find your way back here. That is unheard of outside the gatherings. Furthermore, you smell significantly different.”

“That’s probably just because I’ve been sleeping in your ruddy excuse for a bed for the night. Something’s bound to have rubbed off on me.”

Not that he necessarily minded. Apart from the obvious musk of a male, there was a whiff of something earthy and warm that was quite pleasant. Sherlock didn’t need to know that it had had something of an effect on him, though.

Much like his own had had on Bill, now he came to think of it. He hadn’t wanted to acknowledge the odd behaviour but when he’d grabbed his arse on the way back from the pub, his friend had taken a few deep inhalations close to his neck that seemed incongruous at the time.

“I would leave such conclusions to the one with the vastly superior olfactory capacities if I were you.”

“Sherlock?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to leave. I don’t belong.”

“You do,” the brunet insisted, a not quite identifiable emotion lurking beneath the otherwise calm tone. “For one thing, the antlers are only going to continue growing. How long until you’re considered a subject of study rather than an ‘equal’, a freak?” There was a slight sneer to the word ‘equal’, as though mocking John’s use of it earlier.

“This isn’t the 18th or 19th century,” John felt the need to point out but even as he said it, he could feel his heart sink.

Like it or not, Sherlock had a point. He was having trouble concealing them as it was. If they were indeed only going to continue growing, which seemed more likely than not at that point, the time would come, probably very soon, that there would be no concealing them. He didn’t really want to believe Sherlock’s cynical view of what would happen but…

“You’re going to tell me you’ve got a way of concealing the…all the different things when out in public, then, aren’t you?”

“There might be,” Sherlock replied vaguely, possibly deliberately so. It was hard to tell.

John snorted. “Don’t give me that load of bull. You most definitely didn’t have antlers or fur when I
met you the first time and it wasn’t just because I was drunk or whatever that I didn’t spot them, I 
know. It would make sense for you to be able to hide them at will if you’re ever spotted when you’re 
out ruling or whatever.”

“As though I’d be stupid enough to let any random human see me or anyone I am responsible for;” 
Sherlock sniffed. Annoyingly, he completely failed to comment on his ability to mask his true 
appearance.

“You let me see you,” John pointed out. He couldn’t figure out whether it was more annoying to be 
refused answers outright or given these vague facsimiles of explanations – or whether they were both 
just frustrating in their own way.

“The solstice is…different, for a multitude of reasons. Even humans recognize the special nature of it 
and consequently celebrate it, though in a rather inferior way.”

“Yeah, because dancing around a big bonfire and having an orgy afterwards is far better and more 
sophisticated than just lighting the fire and getting drunk, obviously,” John muttered under his breath. 
If Sherlock heard the comment, and he more than likely did, he didn’t let on. Instead, he paused for a 
moment to search the face of the doctor, though John couldn’t say what he was looking for.

Whatever it was, he must have found at least part of it since he slowly raised the hand previously 
gripping John’s ankle so tightly and cupped the side of his face instead, in a gentle way that might 
even be called tentative.

It was only then that it occurred to John that this second encounter was so very different from their 
first; the physicality that had been the entirety of the first meeting seemed completely absent from this 
second one. It was as though it had been solely the result of whatever John had been under at the 
time and now that it had passed, there was no evidence that it had ever existed. No evidence except 
for the obvious, of course.

No, wait, hang on, that’s not quite right, John thought. It was vastly different, that was true, but that 
wasn’t the same thing as saying they had nothing to do with each other.

It wasn’t the burning lust of the last time but as the bony hands caressed both his stomach and his 
stubbly cheek, John couldn’t deny that there was still something there between them, something 
simmering with promise, that sent his insides fluttering and his heart beating.

Possibly that was what made him slightly unprepared for the next words out of the mouth of the 
brunet.

“You can’t go…back looking like you do and expect to live a completely normal life like you have 
been used to. You know that as well as I do,” Sherlock said in an unexpectedly soft tone of voice. “If 
I find you a way to appear fully human again – “

“Hang on, ‘appear fully human’ – does that really mean that there’s no chance I can ever get rid of 
these…these things?” John interrupted.

Though he probably should have guessed otherwise, he had thought that the concealment mentioned 
previously would only be a temporary solution until the child was born and the whole thing could be 
reversed. The possibility that it was instead a permanent, irrevocable change was one he wasn’t keen 
to contemplate.

“If you are indeed becoming fay, and the immediate evidence supports that, then no, there’s no 
chance. Cut them off and they will regrow. Stay away from any magic related area for extended
periods and your body will suffer immensely.”

“You seem to know everything about what’s happened to me already,” John said, annoyed and angry again as he interrupted. “If you’re that keen for me to stay, why not just spell out everything to drive home just how screwed – hah – I’ve been by you, make sure the desire to leave is sufficiently snuffed out? That makes the most sense by far.”

“I do not know everything!” Sherlock snapped back. Interestingly, despite the tone, his hands neither moved from their positions nor lost the gentleness of their touch. “I’m not as stupid as to pretend that I do, either. I observe and I draw my conclusions from the evidence my observations gain me, whether they be recent observations or older ones. Based on those previous observations, likelihood of outcomes is also possible to estimate. That does not in any way extend to knowing everything!”

He paused to draw breath then drew another one to try and calm down. “It is imperative for the baby’s development that you stay, that is true, but I have no intention of attempting to deceive you to achieve that.”

Yeah, that argument would work a whole lot better if you hadn’t mentioned the wellbeing of our baby, which you know I’m invested in, in the very same sentence.

Sherlock wasn’t finished speaking, however, and John turned his attention back to him. “If you’d let me finish what I said earlier… If I can find a way that will successfully allow you to appear fully human again, with no one being any the wiser to any of your changes, will you stay here, of your own free will, until I can do so?”

“And how do I make sure that you aren’t going to procrastinate indefinitely on that because that would suit your purposes perfectly?” It was a legitimate question to ask, he felt.

Something flickered across Sherlock’s face at that, something inscrutable that nevertheless sent a very shiver down John’s spine. He was playing a not unhazardous game here, he was beginning to genuinely realize, challenging and defying the man like this.

John might be the one with the immediate upper hand, with the baby as an admittedly underhanded sort of bargaining chip, but the creature in front of him was not just another man, not even just a fay, but the ruler of the entire forest and its mythical inhabitants with the palpably powerful connection to the forest and earth itself. Going too far with such a being could prove to be not only dangerous but downright perilous.

That didn’t mean that John was going to meekly comply with whatever was asked of him, of course. It merely meant that he would have to be careful and watch his step and his tongue even more than he usually did when dealing with the other.

“Kalan Gwav,” Sherlock said after a short pause that felt like a much longer one. “Give me until Kalan – Halloween. If a viable solution hasn’t been found by then…” He trailed off, frowning as though he was searching for the right words to describe it.

“I’m free to go?” John finished for him, his choice of words earning him another, minute grimace.

“As it were, yes. Will you…would you agree to those terms?”

The tone was neutral, almost exceedingly so, but there was a look in the pale eyes that almost seemed…hopeful, in some strange way. Hopeful and ever so very slightly pleading.

John considered the offer, he honestly did. On the one hand, he’d be living in a forest apparently infested with mythical beings, who had between them ended up turning him into a strange hybrid of
human and Fay, for over a month. A month in which it was only going to get colder and wetter, even
given the Cornish weather, and he would be out here without any kind of supplies or aid.

Could he trust these people, this fawn-man, to keep to their words and, more importantly, to help
keep him and his unexpected passenger safe and protected in that time? He’d begun to change in his
body, apparently because of the nature of the baby growing inside, with no sign that it was going to
let up. What else would change and would those changes stay purely physical?

On the other hand, it’d only be for a little over a month and it might indeed provide him the answers
that he sought, even if he had to go seek them on his own. He’d slept rough in harsh climates without
much viable gear before, too, and there was the possibility that there was another small, separate cave
that he could stay in for the duration.

The possibility of continuing to sleep in Sherlock’s cave he firmly pushed out of his mind as a very
stupid idea.

Furthermore, he could feel that his stomach was calmer than it’d been before he came. To stay for a
short period of time might be beneficial to the development, it was past the danger period, and the
major developments could then still happen safely within the confines of civilisation and its
hallmarks, such as hospitals.

To his own surprise, he came to the conclusion that it could prove to be far more detrimental not to
accept the offer, even with everything it entailed, than to accept it. He would have to be very careful
and constantly keep stock of himself but it should be possible. It had to be.

So, he nodded his agreement, watching the pale eyes light up in what could only be described as joy
before he got a kiss on the lips. It was short and slightly forceful but he remembered those plush lips
and they still sent a tiny tingle through him, enough so that he felt a bit disappointed when they drew
back.

So, that was now settled. There were things that needed to be sorted out on a purely practical level,
though.

“What about my job?” he asked. “My flat? If I just disappear without any kind of warning
beforehand, I’ll have nothing to come back to – and no, that is not a good way of securing that I
stay.”

“Surely you can work something out? You do have a phone on you, don’t you? Call up your
workplace and tell them you’ve been unavoidably detained.”

A small part of John wondered just how much Sherlock, and by extension the people around him,
knew about the normal world of today. That wasn’t what he said out loud, though.

“For a whole month?” the blond scoffed. “Sure, that’d go over swimmingly, I can just see it now.
Sarah will be over the moon. She’ll particularly love the part where I can’t give a sufficiently
plausible reason for extending this stay.”

“You came down here in the first place,” Sherlock pointed out. “She must have given you leave to
come down here because of a plausible reason.”

John didn’t answer right away.

It was true that he had been granted time to come here but he was supposed to be looking after Clara,
not attempting to find answers to his own problems. He might be able to convince Sarah that he
needed an extended leave for that reason, ignoring the fact that it was a lie. However, that could very
likely prove a problem if she called on Clara or even wanted a detailed account of what had transpired when he got back.

“That…is probably not going to work out. Just…trust me on that, okay? Buggering hell, she’s going to fire me either way – oi, what are you doing?”

Sherlock had leaned backwards and over so he could rummage in the jumbled mess that was his bed. His hand soon unearthed a rectangular piece of metal, glass and plastic.

He opened the phone and selected something, seeming to be quite at home with the handling of the technology. Then he held it up his ear, mindful of its length not quite fitting with the phone design meant for human ears, and waited.

“Yes, hello. This is Sarah, yes? Ah, good. Yes, sorry to bother you in the middle of your busy morning, but – oh, John? No, that’s why I’m calling you. You see, he unfortunately had a bit of an accident on his way here and I’m…well, I’m afraid he’s injured his back quite severely. Nothing broken, thank goodness, but he’s pretty much bedbound and in constant pain, you know how it is.”

Sherlock paused to let Sarah make the appropriate noises of sympathy and regret while he put a hand under John’s jaw to keep him from protesting.

“Yes. Yes, quite so. The reason that I’m calling you like this is only because the silly man refuses to acknowledge the severity of the situation and plans to get a train back tomorrow at the latest. Indeed, his stubbornness can be something of an issue. I think we both can agree that he ought to stay here until he’s no longer in danger of further injuring himself by longer journeys.”

Another pause. “Who I am? Didn’t I say? So sorry, the name’s Sherlock. I run a few holiday lets and offered John one to stay in for the duration. We knew each first year at uni, bumped into him when he arrived down here…oh, don’t worry, I’ll look after him to the best of my abilities. Yes, I’m afraid he’s sleeping right now, the pills knocked him out cold, thankfully. Of course, I’ll give him your best and I promise he’ll call you soon. Take care now. Bye.”

With that, he hung up. He did not, however, hand the phone back to John, despite the doctor’s attempts to grab for it, but instead lopped it back into the mass of bedding. It was a wonder there wasn’t a tell-tale crack as it landed, though John wasn’t entirely convinced that meant it hadn’t broken.

“There,” Sherlock said with a small nod of satisfaction. “Now that’s been sorted.”

“Why the hell did you do that?” John spluttered once the hand on his jaw was removed. “Did I ask you to take care of that for me?”

“Perhaps not in so many words but you were struggling to come up with a viable solution. I have now provided you one that does not have a fixed time on it yet is reasonably plausible and can be completely gone without visible marks when you are back.” There might have been another minute grimace at the last word.

John glared at him. He might have been struggling slightly but that wasn’t the point! Sherlock had completely taken over, without any expressed wish from John to do so, and had fabricated an admittedly good lie that seemed to have placated Sarah, or at least steamrolled her enough to keep her from asking questions, giving him ample time to sort this out…and why the bloody hell was he ending up defending what had just transpired?

He tried not to let that show on his face but he wasn’t entirely sure he succeeded. So, to cover it up,
“I’m a fully-grown man. I do not need someone else to take care of my problems for me like that. Next time you do that without at the very least asking first, I am going to punch you in the jaw.”

Sherlock, completely unfazed by the threat, merely smiled. “I’ll look forward to that. Now, you mentioned something about a flat as well?” he asked, his tone suspiciously innocent.

Oh, no, you bloody well don’t, John thought. You’re not pulling the ‘I can take care of you better than you can yourself’ stunt on me twice in a row like that. I’m not fucking well having it.

“It’s paid up to the end of next month,” he lied quickly, possibly slightly too quickly, given the circumstances.

A single, slightly bushy eyebrow rose at that, showing quite clearly that Sherlock didn’t believe a word of it. He didn’t comment in it, though.

Instead he rose, once again with a grace that shouldn’t come quite as easy to such a long body, especially not one that also had an impressive set of antlers and was standing up in a not too high-ceilinged cave. Yet it did.

As soon as he was standing upright, Sherlock held out a hand for John to take. The doctor hesitated in taking it but then he realized he was being unnecessarily stubborn and silly by refusing. Getting up would only be increasingly difficult as things…progressed, as it were, and to refuse help only to need it later without it being offered would not be the smartest of moves.

So, he grabbed the proffered hand, unable to help noting the strength in that arm as it hauled him upright. What he hadn’t counted on was the fact that the arm pulled at him at the same time, which meant he ended up standing almost pressed up against the other, their chests only barely not touching.

This close, John could of course feel the heat coming off the other body and the still unexpectedly pleasant smell. More than that, though, he could feel the power, the unearthly…energy, for lack of a better word, coming off, too, which was oddly comforting.

Funny. I don’t remember feeling that way at any point during our last meeting and we sure as hell was a lot closer at that time than now. Then again, memory’s still rather hazy on most of that event, so perhaps that isn’t saying anything. Sure feels wonderful, though.

He shook his head at the last thought, slightly appalled at himself and took a step backwards. The hand gripping his held tight and tried to prevent him doing so. Another attempt at a step, another tug, another refusal to let go.

Once it became clear John wasn’t going to stay put and continuing could end up with the blond falling and injuring himself, Sherlock reluctantly released his grip.

“Thank you,” John said after a bit, attempting a smile.

Sherlock inclined his head in acknowledgement of the thanks.

“Well, then, John. Since you have now agreed to stay here with us, perhaps you’d like some breakfast?”

“What, you people eat? I thought you lived on dewdrops and moonbeams and cobwebs and such – and the odd human, of course.”
Sherlock snorted, seeming slightly amused. “You shouldn’t believe in fairy tales, John. They’re nothing more than morality tales made for the general populace many hundred years ago, then modified with atrocious fluff to appease the people reading them to children. Come along now.”

With that, he turned and strode out of the cave.

_That’s funny coming from a spitting image of a pagan god,_ John thought.

That didn’t mean he didn’t follow, of course.

Chapter End Notes

_Kalan Gwav_ is not quite Halloween, actually, though it's close enough. It's, as far as I can work out, the Cornish name for Allantide, that is, the first day of winter. It's celebrated on Halloween as well as November 1. :) We are getting somewhere, aren't we? I really enjoyed writing this, their interaction and exploring more of what I wanted to play around with here.
Settling in

Chapter Summary

With everything seemingly settled for the moment, John joins the folklore people for breakfast. There he has to deal with the fay and their strange habits as well as Sherlock’s behaviour and how they’re viewed as a pair by the others.

Chapter Notes

Happy Midsummer, everyone. I find it a bit amusing that my schedule has just put an update on this day, considering. :) I didn’t expect the amount of new people subscribing. Thank you! Now I’m all worried you’ll be disappointed but that's me in a nutshell. Thank you to all for your continued feedback :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once they were outside the cave, John was struck not just by the surprising amount of sunlight filtering down into the forest but the true size of his companion.

Not that Sherlock was massive, as such. The build was the same that he had seen, both back in June and just previously in the cave and so was the height. It had more to do with John than with Sherlock really; the first time had been unclear and more based on sensation than anything and in the cave, he had mostly been sitting or kneeling.

Alright, so some of it was undoubtedly the antlers, rising tall and proud out of the mass of curls that begged you to run your fingers through them. John suddenly had the vague memory of encountering something other than thick hair when he’d carded his fingers through it during their coupling but having been unable to work out what it was.

Why hadn’t he twigged that something was off back then? Drunkenness, and whatever else it had been, were not sufficient to completely explain away the lack of questioning.

No, perhaps not, but then again, at the time you knew all of this was impossible. If you know that, then what possible reason could you have to start questioning and question what, exactly?

“Think I’ll go barmy long before there’s any chance the transformation is going to muck up my brain,” he muttered under his breath as he walked behind Sherlock.

The thought that even covered in fur as it was, which was another thing John very vaguely recalled having felt, the man or whatever really had the most amazing butt was one the doctor tried very hard to quash.

There was no denying that the attraction he’d felt the first time was still there but in the circumstances, it might be more advisable not to let that show.
He was not in any way confident that the fact that they’d now come to an agreement regarding John’s temporary stay would mean he wasn’t going to be manipulated in every possible way to stay. In fact, quite the opposite was the case; it was clear that the child inside of him meant rather more to the forest inhabitants than just a normal baby would and so any trick was more than likely fair game. To let on that the attraction hadn’t just been a thing of that moment was tantamount to handing the other side an unwise advantage.

Still, as he was walking right behind, it was almost impossible not to see it and so there weren’t really any harm done in just enjoying the view slightly, was there?

He did remember to pay attention to the ground he was walking on as well, though. There was no reason for a repeat performance of the day before.

After walking for a while, Sherlock stopped. He did not look around to see whether John was still behind him. Then again, he hadn’t done that during the entire trek there, so it shouldn’t be surprising.

What was unexpected, however, was what happened when John drew level with him, curious despite himself to see what exactly was going to constitute a breakfast table in these surroundings.

A bony hand reached out to rest itself on the small of the doctor’s back, itself an innocuous enough gesture if it wasn’t for the fact that it had a pressure to it speaking of possessiveness, a pressure that normally only someone very close would do.

John’s head snapped up to fix the taller man with narrowed eyes, to which he merely got raised eyebrows. In response, John bent his spine so as to dislodge the hand and took a long step into what turned out to be a small clearing. The amount of people gathered possibly made it appear smaller than it actually was.

“So…you’ll still claim that nobody notices you when they’re out here on a morning jog and see a large cluster of people sitting around tables made of wood planks, eating? Really?”

“This isn’t normal procedure.” If Sherlock didn’t approve of John moving away from him, he didn’t let on.

“So, what’s the occasion?”

He didn’t get an answer as just then, someone came running up to them, practically bouncing on their feet in obvious joy.

It was Demelza. That was to say, it had to be her, judging purely from her behaviour and her hair. The rest of her was…not strange, per se, but certainly strikingly different to how she’d looked before. He’d noticed that something was off about her the night before but what had been rather vague and hard to define then was much clearer now.

What had registered first as just a long, thin, sinewy body with a mop of unruly, very thick hair and very tanned skin now more resembled a young oak tree that had shaped itself into a woman, complete with distinctly textured skin, curiously long fingers and toes and the curls shading into every possible colour of leaves in autumn.

He dimly wondered how he could ever have thought that either of them, any of them really, when you looked at the assemblage of people, were ordinary humans.

As she smiled, there could be no doubt that it was her, though. She went to hug John carefully, being mindful of his reaction last time she’d touched him while at the same time seeming to completely miss the disgruntled, displeased expression on Sherlock’s face as she did so.
“You stayed!” she beamed. “Thank you.”

John put a hand up to give her that sort-of hug that signalled slight awkwardness but also reluctance not to do it.

“Well…yeah, sort of,” he said, with an eye on Sherlock’s expression. “I’m not going to run off for the time being, at least.” Well, that was honest enough, as things went.

“Thank you,” she repeated, detaching from him. She beckoned with a hand. “Come have some food. We were intending to celebrate your stay.”

“Really?” he asked pleasantly, smiling with slightly narrowed eyes. “That’s a bit quick, though, isn’t it? Organizing all of this when I’ve only just agreed to stay, with nowhere near a big enough gap between the two to do so. Might even be called presumptuous, mightn’t it?”

He wasn’t looking at the poor girl as he spoke.

Sherlock, however, didn’t react to the questions or the tone lurking just beneath the apparent pleasantness. He didn’t even look towards John, maybe studiously so, maybe not. It was not easy to tell but it made something inside the doctor bridle again.

“We hoped,” Demelza offered as an explanation, trying to calm the waters. “We thought…we hoped that you would stay with us. Made this so you could meet everyone here.” She tugged an errant strand of hair behind her elongated ear, clearly worried, her whispery voice gone down to a susurration.

“I think I more than met everyone last time I came here,” John pointed out but his anger wasn’t directed at her and so it dissipated in front of her.

“Meet formally, then,” she smiled back. “Will you come?”

In response, he took her outstretched hand. “At least this time, you asked,” he replied.

Sherlock didn’t immediately follow but stood watching them as they made their way towards the others and was greeted enthusiastically. His face was a mix of different emotions, from pride over joy and reverence to resentment and jealousy.

“You won’t keep him if you don’t give him incentive to stay with you,” a female voice said from behind.

Sherlock still didn’t turn, pale eyes following the movement of John and Demelza as they found space between the assemblage to sit down.

He did, however, incline his head slightly, in greeting rather than in acknowledgement of what had been said. He’d learned what it entailed to ignore her, to his cost.

“Don’t you think that you can fob me off with the barest minimum of common courtesy like that, young man,” she huffed as she drew level. “Especially not when you also ignore what I say.”

She grabbed onto the crook of his elbow with a skinny hand, tired after her excursion outside her normal territory. Without a word, he lifted his free hand to lay it over hers, making sure that she wasn’t going to lose her grip. Her smile went unnoticed by him as he still didn’t look away from the gathering.

She turned her attention towards the group, too, quickly spotting the newcomer who was being
bombarded with questions while his wooden plate was filled with all sorts of food by pretty much everyone but him. The man took the antics fairly stoically but a small smile lurked at the edge of his mouth throughout.

“So, this is the man?” she asked gently. She got no response but she had known him for a long time. The fact that the pale eyes continued to follow the blond man, for far longer than he normally did was all the answer she needed.

They stood for a few moments as she took John in, even though they were at a bit of a distance. “I see why you were upset that he left. One would have thought someone of your heritage wouldn’t stoop to kicking up a huge fuss and then sulk when he couldn’t be found in the local area, though.”

“He should have stayed.” The words, though spoken calmly, had a very slight petulance to them, even as they also held a bit of pain.

“And you should have made it clear that you wanted him to stay instead of always making assumptions based purely on your ‘deductions’,” she shot back. “But all’s well that ends well; he came back and he is fitting right in. In more ways than one, it seems,” she added with a meaningful nudge.

Finally, he looked down at her, his face contorted slightly.

“This is only temporary,” he admitted in a very low voice, as though he was afraid someone else might otherwise hear a confession that was shameful. “He does not want to stay at all. No matter what I tell him about the harm he will do to…to our child. We have come to an…agreement of a sort, at last, and he will stay here on the proviso that I find some answers for him and a way to conceal his new appendages. I have until Kalan Gwav before he goes back.”

There was the distinct impression that he was refraining from adding ‘home’ to that last sentence.

“Oh, Sherlock,” she sighed and gave his arm an understanding, sympathetic squeeze. “I’m guessing he wants to conceal them so he can go back?” A terse nod. “I see. Oh, dear, that’s something of a predicament, isn’t it? However are you ever going to manage such a thing?”

“I don’t know, Mrs. H,” he replied in the same low voice. “I quite honestly don’t but I know I have to, if I’m to persuade him to stay with us. That and convince him that this really is the best place to be, for him as well as the baby. He no longer belongs with the rest of the swarm of imbecilic things that called themselves humans.”

“You said he’s a doctor? Probably not the wisest idea to call them that in front of him, then. Just a little tip, you know. Now, off you pop, dear. Go join him. If you want to convince him that you’re worth staying around for then it’s a good start to eat with him, don’t you think?”

Again, he didn’t answer verbally. Instead he just gave a small snort and a tiny quirk of the lips. He began to move forward but stopped when he realized she wasn’t following and raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, no, you go on ahead. You don’t need an old woman spoiling your regal entrance, do you? Go on.”

Another small snort and he continued walking, back straight and head held up, gait easy yet powerful.

“You sure are a silly boy, Sherlock,” she muttered under her breath as she watched him, shaking her head. “Not that that’s my place, of course, but…well, we’ll just have to hope that you don’t muck it up. He seems a nice, clever boy.”
With that, she reached into a pocket, pulled out a newly ripened hazelnut from among its many siblings nestling in the pocket and popped it into her mouth. Chewing thoughtfully, she turned around and began her trek back. She didn’t really feel up to dealing with the shenanigans of the young ones, not at this time of the year. Besides, she had more than enough to do with tending her hazelnuts and brambles, as they were ripening.

“No, enough!” John protested, pushing at his plate. “I can’t eat any more, you hear?” He wasn’t near full but they didn’t need to know that.

There was no answer. Instead, everyone rose to their feet very quickly and made room. John didn’t notice, and consequently didn’t move, until a familiar shape sat down beside him in the space just vacated.

“Well, you decided to drop in, how nice of you,” John deadpanned. He very deliberately didn’t look at the other. “Was traffic heavy?”

There was a snort beside him but otherwise no comment or indication of what Sherlock thought.

*Well, then, bugger you, too,* the doctor thought, turning his attention back to the pair sitting opposite him.

They were small and wiry, yet they had the appearance of a pair of small, attractive boys who knew they’d get away with anything because they were charming.

John had mistakenly called them fairies earlier, before Sherlock had decided to join them after all, and they had bridled, clearly offended by the association and angrily told him they were no wicked fairies, they were pixies before shutting up completely.

He’d been delayed in apologizing to them by another helping of food being dumped on his plate and so he wanted to rectify that.

“I’m sorry, my nan always interchanged the two when she told my sister and me stories,” he tried to explain now. “I didn’t know.”

“Old biddies shouldn’t rely so much on half-remembered lies,” replied one of them but didn’t elaborate on what was meant. “It may be that they’ve crossbred where you come from but here? No self-respecting pixie would go anywhere near those nasty fairies.”

John felt a hand try to land on his hip, likely to draw him closer to the male figure beside. He shifted so that it couldn’t land. Like hell he’d let the man, whatever, claim ownership in front of his people like that.

“Why do you call them nasty? I thought fairies were small, sweet creatures that looked after flowers.”

The other pixie huffed. “Where did you get that load of rubbish from, Peter Pan? The fairies of the West Country are nasty types alright, leading people astray, stealing children. We don’t do that.”
“I find it a little hard to believe you’d never do anything nasty at all. No folklore creature I’ve ever heard of is entirely benign.”

A cheeky grin cracked the cherubic face, revealing a bit more of the true nature of the creature. “Oh, _benign_? Who said anything about _benign_? Not much fun in benign, is there?”

“Nope,” his companion agreed with a matching grin. He stood up on the bench he’d sat on so he could reach over the width of the table and get at the food accumulated on the doctor’s plate.

Just as he was about to get hold of some food, a few strips of dried beef and fruit, a hand shot out in front of John’s face. It halted the small, thieving hand, its grip obviously hard.

The pixie confirmed this by letting out a shriek of indignation and, not least, pain. It tried to pull its hand back but the grip was unrelenting.

“Let go,” the pixie finally whined. “It hurts, let go.”

“Do you think it’s your place to steal whatever takes your fancy?” the baritone voice said, calm but with clear promise of further retribution.

“I’m hungry!”

“A little hunger does not mean you’re allowed to steal the food of others like that.”

“He wasn’t eating it!” the other pixie protested. It had gotten up too and was trying to help its friend pry off the hand engulfing its wrist and most of its lower arm. “It’s letting good food go to waste not to take it.”

John opened his mouth, ready to argue that what had been heaved on his plate was far more than he would be reasonably able to consume, at least in one sitting. He didn’t get a chance to, though.

“His plate is out of bounds,” Sherlock said, his tone hard, “no matter what. It or its contents are not to be touched by you or any or your kind. Do you understand?”

The pixie squirmed, reluctant to agree to anything, even in front of its sovereign. As the grip held firm and the pale eyes slowly darkened, however, it must have sensed that it would be detrimental to its wellbeing not to agree.

“Yes!” it finally cried. “Yes, I understand, sir. I’m sorry, sir, it won’t happen again.”

The bony hand released its grip and the two pixies, still attempting to pull free, toppled over backwards and hit the ground with a harsh thump.

Concerned, John rose to his feet, slightly encumbered by a belly full of food and baby, and was about to find a way around the bench and the table when he felt a hand on his shoulder, pushing him back down.

He tried to shrug it off and remain standing but like before, it was like trying to push against a steel frame; you’d be flat on your face before that had moved an inch.

“Sherlock!” he hissed, under his breath so as not to let on to anyone that they were indeed arguing, even as he sat back down.

Like it or not, it was very, very probable that he would need some form of protection in this unknown world during the next month and to let on that there was friction to exploit could prove
“They could be hurt, they’re only small,” he continued to argue in a louder voice, trying to change
tactics and instead appeal to compassion as well as emphasize the positive impression.

“Pixies are some of the most resilient creatures you are ever likely to encounter,” was Sherlock’s
calm, almost indifferent-sounding reply. “You cannot hurt them however hard you try.”

As he spoke, the heap on the ground sorted itself back out into separate limbs and eventually became
individual bodies who looked a little disgruntled but otherwise none the worse for wear for the
experience. They turned to Sherlock, both gave him the two-fingered salute but then they grinned,
too. They ran up to the table, grabbed some stuff from other people’s plates and ran off.

“See?” Sherlock said, finally turning his head to look at the blond. “Now eat your food. You’re
going to need the energy.”

Says the man who has touched a few berries and nothing else.

“Thanks for the concern but if I eat all this lot, I’m going to be sick, which would be defeating the
entire purpose.”

Sherlock frowned then nodded in understanding. “Eat what you can, then take the rest back with
you. Just take the plate, it’s yours.”

“Back?” John echoed, frowning in turn. “Back where?”

“To the cave, obviously. Don’t be obtuse. You slept there last night and you will sleep there from
now on, too.”

“But that’s your cave.” John knew he was stating the obvious but it was out of his mouth before he
could stop it.

“Yes?” Sherlock said, eyebrow raised as though he was finding it difficult to believe John could be
that slow, which in turn made the doctor bridle slightly.

Demelza tried to negotiate again. “The scent would be calming to…you know, to the little one,” she
explained. “Helps it grow.”

“I thought it was the magic that helped it, not scent,” John countered. He wasn’t looking at her as he
spoke, however. Sherlock met his gaze steadily.

“Magic is a very poor word to describe what it actually is, much as the word ‘water’ is woefully
inefficient in encompassing the proper meaning of the word and everything associated with it. Yes,
in a way, it is magic as a human might feebly understand it but at the same time, it is so far removed
from it that it bears no resemblance. What our child needs isn’t just the magic but there is no word
sufficient to describe it.”

“Okay,” John said slowly. It still sounded like bloody codswallop, if he was being honest, but his
judgement on that score wasn’t all that good, as he’d learned. “But if it’s here, why is it not
everywhere? What makes this forest so special? Is it the people here that makes it that or vice versa?”

“The forest has been ‘special’, as you put it, for many hundreds of years.”
John waited but no more seemed to be forthcoming. Before he could ask again, Demelza spoke.

“Can I show him the oak?” she asked in an imploring tone. “That might help him understand better?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed slightly as they turned to look at her but after a moment’s silence, there was a terse nod.

“As long as you are with him at all times. Bring the food to the cave when you are done gallivanting around.”

With that, he rose gracefully from his seat. Once upright, he looked back down at the still seated John who looked back at him with a challenging gaze. It seemed to halt whatever Sherlock had been planning on doing because he hesitated for a moment too long, pale eyes flickering down to the general area of John’s midsection.

So, that’s all that really matters to you, is it? John thought. How what I do and don’t do will affect the baby? I’m just a glorified incubator with a bit of aesthetic appeal to you?

John supposed he couldn’t really be that angry for that, given their interaction in the last few hours, the lack of interaction for the first trimester of his pregnancy, as well as the obvious importance that these creatures put in the growing child of their ruler.

The fact that he was playing second fiddle at best still somehow stung, though, no matter how silly he knew it was.

In the end, what he got wasn’t what he might reasonably expect from either someone who wanted to be on good terms with him or someone who only thought of him as an, albeit unexpected, means to a desired end.

A bony hand came up and gently cupped John’s by then slightly stubbly cheek, with an air of concern. The doctor’s mind flashed back to when he had been uncertain last time; the hand had come up to rest against his cheek then and it had had the same effect on him then as it did now, calming.

It lasted for only a moment, however, then Sherlock stepped over the bench and began to walk out. He stopped briefly for a short, low-voiced conversation with someone John had never seen before, a man shockingly thin yet strikingly handsome. The man’s eyes remained on Sherlock except for the briefest of moments where they darted to look in what had to be John’s direction. A small nod from him and Sherlock was off, without as much as a by-your-leave or an indication of where he was going.

Just because I dislike being manipulated doesn’t mean I like being disregarded like that, either.

No, but then you haven’t exactly been too receptive or forgiving of when he’s attempted to get closer? If you send him contradictory messages, how can you expect him not to react poorly or do just the same?

Annoying as the inner voice that sounded so very much like his sister was, it did have a point, reluctant though he was to admit it.

He only realized he’d been staring at the brunet’s retreating back when the man Sherlock had talked to blocked his view as he followed behind the ruler. Right behind him, in fact, to the point that they should’ve been touching.

“John? Are you ready?”
“Yeah,” he answered a little absently then shook his head at himself.

When it came down to it, it didn’t matter what Sherlock did or where he went beyond getting answers for John. Whatever the doctor might feel in terms of attraction to the man, it didn’t alter the fact that he didn’t belong here, regardless of his antlers or anything else that might develop in the coming time.

_Do you belong back in London, though? Really?_

_Oh, bugger off._

“Yeah,” he repeated, shaking off his thoughts for the moment, at least.

“Let’s go, shall we?” he asked as he rose from his seat and stepped over the bench, someone unseen steadying him as he did so. He decided not to make a fuss about it this time around.

Demelza smiled happily when he held out his hand for her to take. She grabbed hold of it, stood up and then began to drag him away, at first in the same direction Sherlock had just taken.

She branched off relatively quickly, however, and went towards the general direction of where Sherlock’s cave – John adamantly refused to think of it as their cave – was located. They veered again after walking for a while, seemingly at random but he knew from experience that her sense of direction in this forest was impeccable and so he had to trust her.

After walking for what seemed like absolute ages, they finally arrived at their destination. Demelza stopped but didn’t let go of his hand, which was probably just as well; the long trek had made him slightly dizzy and his little lodger had not taken much kinder to the walk through the terrain than it had to a run through fairly flat London.

Once he’d regained his breath and his stomach no longer felt as though it was trying to force its way out through his skin, John straightened back up from where he’d been bent over.

“I’m alright,” he answered her unspoken question. “Just the baby making his displeasure known.”

“Or hers.”

“Or hers,” he agreed easily. He was about to say something else when he turned his head and laid eyes upon what they’d travelled to see. The words got stuck in his throat at the sight of the tree in all its glory.

Chapter End Notes

If it feels like nothing has happened in this chapter, I'm sorry. It more or less just flowed like this on its own and it felt right to establish a few things, too. The research for this in terms of folklore was and is a lot of fun to write - and I still love writing Mrs. Hudson, even in this completely different context.
I thank you all for your patience and for reading :)}
A few answers, quite a lot more questions

Chapter Summary

John gets to see the great oak and gets a bit more than he bargained for. After, he doesn’t see Sherlock for a long time and begins his own search for answers. He should have perhaps reconsidered that.

Chapter Notes

Well, what do you know? A chapter this soon? :)  
Turned out my worry about the last chapter was rather unfounded. Thank you! I'm glad people are enjoying this world-building it's suddenly also developed into. Experiment indeed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It might have looked even more impressive in summer when the limbs of the tree were brimming with leaves to the point where the branches would hardly be visible. Despite it being autumn, though, with a good portion of the foliage now lying in a spread-out heap, like hair round the chair after a trip to the hairdresser’s, the majesty of it seemed to have in no way lessened.

Perhaps it was the fact that the leaves that were still clinging on was a much brighter orange-yellow than was usual in Britain or perhaps it was the sheer size of the tree.

To call it big was not only an understatement, it was to miss the opportunity to use the term ‘behemoth’. What was more, it was almost as wide as it was tall and its branches stretched out from the trunk almost from the start. Down on the ground, the roots that could be seen rising above the soil were equally impressive, some of them as thick around as a huge human. They gave the distinct impression that what you could see of them wasn’t even the half of it.

It wasn’t merely that, though. It was indeed impressive and imposing in size, there was no denying it, but it didn’t quite encompass just what made it feel as utter otherworldly as it did.

Maybe it also had something to do with the way, despite it being a partly overcast, early afternoon, the leaves seemed to glow as though the golden rays of a sunny summer afternoon were shining on them. At the same time, the little lights that danced around it illuminated as they would late in the evening. In short, it seemed as if the tree wasn’t quite rooted in any time, be it time of year or time of day, but encompassed them all in one.

Whatever the deciding factor was, or even if it was an amalgamation of them all, John felt himself drawn towards the tree. Demelza didn’t try to stop him but instead just stood waiting with a soft expression as he moved forward, hand stretching out to lay it against the bark partially covered in moss.

As soon as his skin touched that of the tree’s, a shock ran through him, radiating out from the point of touch throughout every part of the doctor’s body, making every single nerve-ending sing.
Along with that more physical shock, a surge of something else, something much more insubstantial, also came crashing through him, almost sending him reeling. It was difficult to describe what it was, at least with a rational mind. However, on an instinctual level, gut level, as it were, he knew that it was a small taste of what had to be the magic Sherlock had described earlier.

It suddenly made a whole lot more sense why Sherlock had asserted that magic was a horribly inadequate term to describe it and why Demelza had suggested that he should view it for himself.

“Well, hello,” he found himself saying very softly. Given everything, including what he felt, it didn’t feel too loony to say hello to a tree. Well, at least no more than any of the other absurdities. “So, you’re the source of all of this, are you? Without you, no folklore congregation? Wonder why they didn’t dance around you instead of a bonfire, then, hm? If you’re that essential to them all.”

He didn’t notice he was leaning against it heavily, most of his body pressed up against it, until he felt a much stronger surge move through him, in particular his midsection, where his little passenger seemed to respond in kind. It didn’t quite kick as it had before but it most definitely did quiver, quite heavily, and a warmth spread through it. It was pleasant, almost excessively so, but more in a comforting, caring way than an arousing one.

Put simply, it felt as though the connection between him and his baby, previously a little tenuous due to his unwillingness to believe, grew and strengthened as it became tied to the power of the tree, of the earth itself.

He gave a strangled gasp and took a staggering step backwards to disconnect himself from the tree, which unfortunately was not only unsuccessful on anything other than a purely physical level. It also meant his foot landed on top of a root that was visible much like a vein can be on a hand, popping slightly. It was at an angle which meant his balance tipped more than he anticipated.

He shot out a hand and managed to steady himself before he embarrassed himself by landing on his arse. Unfortunately, at least in his mind, what he steadied himself against was the tree.

“Buggering blast,” he muttered, his other hand clenching into a fist that he was fighting not to slam into the bark. “Isn’t this parade of lunacy ever going to stop?”

His hand unclenched slowly and went down to gently cradle the growing curve of his stomach. It wasn’t only on the inside it was warm but it was more reminiscent of the heat of sun on skin rather than a fevered warmth.

The warmth soon concentrated on where he’d placed his hand and so did the quivering.

“Well, I’m glad to see that at least one of us are enjoying this whole bloody morass,” he said as he looked down at his stomach.

“You can hardly blame her,” Demelza said softly, coming up right behind him, putting a hand on his shoulder, the touch almost hesitant. “She’s just feeling the connection to her roots, as we all do when we come here.”

It didn’t take long for John to twig what that comment also entailed. He felt his heart sink and leap at the same time, which should’ve been impossible but he was learning that such words ought to be used far more sparingly.

It would make sense for the child – he didn’t think he’d correct Demelza’s use of a female pronoun for it, mostly because at this point it didn’t really matter and it might as well be a she as a he – to feel the innate connection to something so integral to the mythical creatures inhabiting this forest. Its
father…one of its fathers…one of its parents was not just a folkloric creature come to life, after all, he was the ruler of said forest, with the connection and power to match. It would be stranger if a great deal of that didn’t get passed on in the next generation.

What was more worrying to John, however, was the connection he’d just felt himself. It could of course just be an extension of his growing child bonding with the oak tree but since it hadn’t just centred on his stomach but had spread throughout his entire body instantly, he didn’t truly buy that explanation, much as he wanted to.

Wanting confirmation of his thoughts while at the same time bracing for that very confirmation, he asked the question. “So…if I, as a normal human being, can feel the connection, too, even to the smallest degree, then does that mean that it’s through her or…?”

Why the hell did he suddenly have a problem spelling it out? It wasn’t the right time for a mental hiccup like that. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Does it mean that these changes aren’t just… just physical?”

He looked at her and her apologetic expression which he thought might have just a smidgeon of pity. His instant reaction was indignation and anger at her daring to pity him but he just as quickly realized that to her, his reactions probably looked more like pure denial and ignorance.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I honestly don’t, John, I promise. I wish I did so I could help you. We weren’t trying to mislead you last night, we really weren’t. I’m not clever. I know about everyday things that are useful not the greater things or the reasons behind. Sherlock is clever, so very clever it’s sometimes a little…He’s a good ruler, he always has been, perhaps because he is clever and observant, but he’s so much smarter than almost everyone else, you can see it frustrates him.” John got the distinct feeling that ‘frustrate’ was something of an understatement to describe it with.

She paused to take a breath. “If anyone knows or can find out what happened and help you out, it’s Sherlock. I know that much.”

“Will he want to, though?” John asked bluntly.

She blinked at him, seeming not to comprehend the question. “Sorry?”

“He’s gotten what he wanted, hasn’t he? You all claim that it’s very rare for…for someone from the outside to get knocked up so it must be special. I don’t see him as a massive fan of children in general or I suspect there’d be a ton of children already about and someone else already sharing his cave. But he seems to be relatively into the idea of this child and was certainly dead against me leaving once he knew of It, which indicates that all that matters to him is the welfare of the child, not me.”

He closed his eyes, drawing deep breaths to keep his voice even and calm. Unfortunately, the calmness meant it was easier to feel the pulse of the tree’s energy. “So, tell me why he would actually try to help me? It might sound a little cynical, but what’s in it for him? If he strings me along instead, I’ll be a bloody freak show when I do return home if I even can. It should be possible but with you lot, I know it’s dumb to presume anything like that. That should work wonders for keeping me here until the child’s born.”

Oh, god, there’s a thought I didn’t bloody well need. Delivering a baby without a proper birth canal that’ll fit the body is a nightmare scenario if ever there was one, magic, or whatever they call it, or not. Not that the thought of getting a C-section on the ground is any less terror-inducing, mind. Oh, buggering fuck, what have I gotten myself into here?
She looked taken aback at his comments and at a loss as to what she should or could say. “He told you he would help?” she eventually asked.

“Yes, he told me. That’s not – “

“If he told you he would help, then he is going to help.” She sounded a little more certain of herself now. “I don’t really understand but I think I follow you. He’s not an easy person to know but if he has promised his help, then he will give it.”

John wasn’t convinced of that at all but regardless of his feelings on the matter, it was rather heart-warming to see her belief in Sherlock was so unshakeable.

“Right. Okay. Okay.” He didn’t really know what else to say right then.

“Why are you so against staying here?”

“But you were a soldier,” she pointed out. “Sherlock said you were. Soldiers have to go where they’re commanded to go, then go somewhere else. Can you have a proper home where you belong when you’re always moving?”

“I used to be a soldier,” he corrected, wondering again where Sherlock would have picked up he’d served.

The dog tags he’d stopped wearing almost as soon as he hit home soil for good, there was nothing of relevance to that to be gleaned from rifling through his wallet and the small tattoo would hardly ring a clear enough bell for most anyone else. So, where the hell had Sherlock gotten the information.

“I haven’t been a soldier for a while, now, and I made a home when I stopped being one.” A physical one, anyway. “A home back in London. You can’t all just expect me to drop everything that I know, everything that I’ve ever been, just because I’m pregnant with your king’s offspring. I’m a regular bloke, I can’t just do that.”

She didn’t answer but her silence said something in and of itself.

He sighed heavily. “Can we…can we just go back now?”

Biting her lip, she nodded. She tried not to show it but it was obvious she felt a little hurt, at the very least.

Suddenly, John felt rather bad. Here he was, chewing her out over something that she really didn’t have any control over or, it seemed, much knowledge of, when the one he was actually angry with was Sherlock. She’d tried to help multiple times now, despite her having no obligation to do so, and what had he repaid her with?

“Look, I’m sorry for…” he began. “Well, you don’t deserve being an outlet for my anger when you’ve only tried to help me. Thank you for that, by the way.”
She leaned in from where she was standing beside him to plant a soft kiss on his lips. It was more of a peck than a proper kiss and she had kissed him the last time but it still took him by surprise.

“You’re forgiven, this time – and you’re right, we ought to start getting back now, with the speed you go at.”

“We can’t all be bloody wood crawlers,” he shot back and she laughed, her voice as much like the wind through leaves when she laughed as when she spoke.

“Go on,” she said, nudging him. “Lead the way.”

“And get us hopelessly lost? No, thank you, I’m not stupid. You lead.”

She smiled and began walking. He followed, with only a short stroke over the bark of the tree as a parting gesture and not a look backwards as he walked away.

He completely failed to notice that the visit hadn’t just changed something emotionally and mentally in him. His antlers had not grown as such but there were now what seemed like tiny little sprouts and buds on them.

By the time they had made it back, it was late afternoon and the sky had threatened heavy rain for the last third of the trip.

John had tried several times to suggest, demand and otherwise convince her that he very much needed to have his own cave or den or even just a small overhang that he could call his own, away from Sherlock’s cave. It was probably smarter to just accept the protection and care, he could freely admit that, but the thought of being asleep and vulnerable when he now had a clearer understanding of Sherlock’s power and how easily he could crush John, should he choose to, didn’t…

No, it would be wrong to say that it didn’t sit well with him. John’s probably unhealthy relationship with danger and his calmness in the face of it was likely part of what had propelled him up the ranks in the army and it hadn’t left him just because he was now a civilian. He was no frightened deer, as it were; he’d defend himself to the best of his abilities, always, especially now he had someone other than himself to protect, too.

Why did it rankle, then? It was, practically speaking, the easiest and best option to sleep in a cave that not only wasn’t damp and covered in debris and excrescences poking through the rock, but had soft bedding, a few home comforts and room. That he would sleep next to someone else shouldn’t worry him, regardless of their strength.

Admit it, you little wuss. You were fine with being buggered but the thought that you may end up liking him enough to stay after Halloween has come and gone, regardless of the danger that might pose to both you and junior, that is what’s scaring you.

The point was somewhat moot at the moment, however, as in any case, Demelza seemed to have become selectively deaf; no matter which tactic he tried, she either pretended not to hear or merely smiled and shook her head at him.

Indeed, when they did make it back, it was Sherlock’s cave they arrived at. He was too tired after everything that had happened that day, and everything else, to argue further.
She stopped him before he made it further than the mouth of the cave by grabbing him gently by the elbow.

An errant curl was tucked behind an ear in what could be taken as a slightly nervous gesture. “If...if it’s any consolation or help, he often doesn’t come back to his quarters for days or longer. The forest is large and have many people living here, so he is always busy. He also does experiments all around and...well, if you want to avoid him, it shouldn’t be too difficult to do so.”

He snorted a small laugh. “Right, then. I’ll keep that in mind. Thank you for...well, you know.”

“See you tomorrow, John. Sweet dreams.”

Here? In this place? I’ll be lucky if I get off with just mild nightmares,” he muttered as he made his way into the part of the cave that was the sleeping quarters.

He could have done without the thought that if he did get nightmares from this, they could join the parade of all the other horrible nightmares he’d had since he’d gotten back from Afghanistan.

He was lost again. It should have been rather difficult a feat to get lost when it had been good weather at the outset of his little excursion and he had followed the same route he and Demelza had taken almost two weeks previous, quite apart from him not being completely wet and incompetent at navigating and taking care of himself, even in poorer weather.

The problem was that it was late afternoon now, in fact rather close to evening, and the clouds had just continued to steadily pour in over the sky, steadily darkening the sky as they filled it. By this point it was completely overcast and with the grey of the rocks and the grey-brown of the bark of the trees, everything had a washed-out, sketchy quality.

Was that a problem? Possibly not in and of itself but it was when it was combined with the fog slowly rising from the ground and enveloping the base of every tree, bush and rock, it made everything blend together and bleed out in front of his eyes at the same time. Nobody would be able to navigate when there were no markers to navigate by.

The fog was all wrong on its own. Fog rose like that in the morning, not in the afternoon and even when it did rise like that, it didn’t do it that thickly.

“If only I could bloody well say I had a fruitful journey.” Well, he had, but not in the way that he’d hoped.

He’d only gone in the first place because Demelza had been absolutely, annoyingly right when she said that it was unlikely Sherlock would return very often. In fact, he hadn’t been back since he’d left on that first day, at least not what John had seen, and he didn’t think he’d been in while the doctor had slept either.

It might have been all to gather as much knowledge as possible, for all John knew, and he probably ought to be grateful for that.

He didn’t. What he did feel was like a big, useless idiot.

In the end, he’d decided to try and find some answers for himself. He hadn’t known how he’d do it,
as he knew no one that could help. Any little thing was better than nothing, though, and certainly much better than just sitting around twiddling his thumbs until such time as Sherlock bothered to turn back up.

The folklore people that made their home in the surrounding area – nobody lived near Sherlock’s home which, given the exploration John had done of the cave, was probably just as well, all things considered – had not been happy when they’d found out what he was planning. They had promised to keep an eye on him and make sure that he was safe.

He had tried very hard not to lose his temper with them when he learned that little titbit. Like he was some ruddy damsel that needed protection for his own good. He’d been a soldier, for God’s sake, he’d dealt with horrible things on an almost daily basis.

Eventually the argument that he wouldn’t be safe if he went barmy from being stuck there won through and he’d left the following morning, taking the bag he’d brought with him and a solid length of gnarled wood to serve as a walking stick, ideally preventing further falls.

The trip out had been fairly uneventful, pleasant and even rather pretty. The forest was a beautiful place in its own right, he had no problem admitting it, and there was a special feel to the air among trees in autumn that felt good drawing into his lungs.

He hadn’t just gone walkabout, though, as nice as it was just to get away. It was true that he didn’t know all that much about mythology and folklore, British or otherwise, and what he did know were half-remembered bits and pieces from his childhood, especially from his trips down here to visit his Nan, so he couldn’t use that knowledge to guide him.

He could, however, try and see if he could get a feel for the place itself, for how things worked and operated when it came to the folklore population. Maybe he could talk to a few people, gain some trust, just in general reconnoitre for maximum independent information.

Unfortunately, as he’d walked, he had heard quite a few animal noises as well as noises from what sounded like nothing natural whatsoever, but he had seen no one and nothing.

At least, he hadn’t until a few hours after he’d set out. He’d gone up a small formation of rocks and had spotted a horse at the very top of it.

It was an ethereal and eerie creature with a dark coat that shone in the light that came through the weakened canopy of leaves and a long, flowing mane of the same dark colouration.

What had made him certain that it wasn’t just some wild equine that had taken to reside in the forest was its eyes; they were a luminescent gold. What was more, they’d stared right at him, with no doubt whatsoever it’d known he was there.

As he’d watched, it had begun to slowly walk towards him, its gait far too sure and elegant for the rocky terrain.

John had tensed but hadn’t otherwise moved, apart from changing his grip on the walking stick.

When it’d been right in front of him, it had stopped and looked him up and down. Then of all things, it had grinned. It should’ve been impossible for a horse to do and yet…

“You’re an odd one,” it had said, the voice clearly coming from it even though the lips hadn’t moved and a horse didn’t have the means to produce human speech.

“That’s rich, coming from a horse with lamplight eyes that talks,” John had shot back. “What are you
“I could ask the same of you, strange man. You’re not a human but you are not of this place either. Either or, neither nor. One and the other. You smell very peculiar.” It had moved its muzzle down to snuffle around John’s stomach. He hadn’t flinched. “Very peculiar indeed.”

“Yeah, alright, fine, you made your point. Now would you kindly move.”

“Manners, little un-man. They are important, even to us otherworld creatures. You might say, especially to us.”

“As far as I recall, that’s because they make it easier for you to trick people.”

The horse had laughed at that. It should have sounded like a neigh or a whinny but it didn’t. Unlike Demelza’s laugh, which fitted who she was if not entirely what she looked like, it had sounded very human and very rich, without any sort of the nasal undertones you would expect.

At least you’re a halfway clever little un-man. I do not have a name but if I tell you what I am, may I have your name in return? That is only right and proper. A tip for a tap and all that.”

A tiny part of John’s mind had gotten lodged on something sounding wrong in that last sentence but the majority had been preoccupied with rifling through his half-remembered teachings from his Nan on the supernatural. There had to be some sort of horse that wasn’t a kelpie in there.

“Oh, dear. I don’t think you could work it out, little un-man, much as you try to.”

It had shaken its mane and as it had done so, the shake had travelled through the rest of its body as well, which had blurred it and made John’s eyes itch and his antlers throb in a very unpleasant way.

When his vision had cleared, he’d had to look down slightly to see the creature, which had become something very far removed from a horse.

What it had become would be more than difficult to describe, though. The most he could’ve said with confidence was that the fur or skin or whatever was as dark as the coat of the horse and that the eyes looked the same. Other than that, it was just…it was…

“Don’t try to pin down what I look like, un-man, it’ll only give you a headache. I’m a Bucca Dhu, the oldest in this forest.” Despite its diminished size, it seemed to take up the immediate space around it as it announced that.

“And that helps me not one bloody iota so I don’t see why I should give my name for that information.” He had the irrational urge to cross his arms defensively.

Something had sparkled in the depth of those lamplight eyes, something sinister, something dangerous. “Oh, you want help, do you? What sort of help? Help not being neither nor? One and the other?” There’d been a very brief pause. “No, that’d be dangerous right now. Perhaps what you want is help appearing to be wholly one thing? Yes, that’s it.”

John had opened his mouth to question how the…the Bucca Dhu could’ve possibly known that but had remembered himself fast enough not to say anything at all.

The Bucca Dhu merely chuckled at that. “Oh, I don’t need to know much about you to see that, little un-man. Nobody can cope with being neither nor forever. Something has to give, sooner or later. So, I ask, do you want my help?”
:D I so, so enjoyed writing this, especially the tree and the Bucca Dhu. Buccas are indeed shapeshifters and in Cornish stories, there are Bucca Gwidden and Bucca Dhu. I know this is a week early compared to normal but I had a bit of a writing spree and since the fic's normal update schedule would plump right down into a trip I'm taking, I thought I'd give you this a week early instead of having you wait three weeks.
Chapter Summary

John returns to the cave at the same time as Sherlock finally decides to show up. He is not pleased that John has gone walkabout on his own, while John is fed up with the behaviour he's been subject to. Can they sort it out and come to a better understanding of each other?

Chapter Notes

I am back from holiday and what a lovely round of feedback to get back to! Seriously, you guys are so sweet and I'm very lucky to have you as readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Now, as he became increasingly uncertain of his sense of direction in the face of the child’s drawing feel of the trees surrounding him and how much he could even rely on his senses here, he idly scratched at the place on the inside of his left wrist where a small mark had developed and wondered if it would have been a good idea to have a means to contact someone, anyone from the enclave he’d first met.

*Buggering hell, no*, he then thought. *I don’t want to rely on them for every little thing, blast it. They’re not any more trustworthy than any other fairy tale monster in this forest and that includes that ruddy bastard Sherlock. I’m not saying he should be waiting on me or anything ludicrous like that but if he wants me to trust him, maybe including me in some gained information and such is not a terrible idea.*

He took a deep breath and started walking again, relying on the general direction more than the far subtler markers he had noticed on his outward journey for precisely that reason, which were now sadly impossibly to distinguish.

An indistinct shape watched him as he walked, its huge paws treading softly across the ground to follow him, the light of its eyes dimmed to the surroundings by the gathering fog.

It licked its lips once but kept its distance.

*Not yet. In time but not just yet.*

It was fully dark by the time he made it back to the small clearing that seemed to be the prevailing
gathering point for the group of people he’d been confronted by when he’d returned to the forest. It functioned as a sort of village green for the folkloric people that shared quite a lot with a human village green from the time it was used for things other than fetes and such.

There was no one there. Not one. As far as John could tell from the limited time he had stayed there, that was not customary at all.

It was now just on the cusp of mid-October and things in the animal kingdom were slowly winding down in preparation for winter, he knew that perfectly well. It only stood to reason that the same natural cycle happened here, too.

Still, it didn’t seem as though that was all that was going on.

He continued to walk towards the cave that had become his temporary home, silently cursing his by now aching feet and his antlers that were itchy and throbbing, which had probably not been helped by his occasional bumps into things, such as low-hanging branches, still unused to having a set of knobbly horns standing up from his skull.

Before he had made it further than halfway to the cave, what felt like a hand landed on his shoulder. He spun around, despite the difficulties that hand provided, raising his walking stick as he did so. Once he saw the face of his supposed attacker, though, it stopped but didn’t lower.

It was Sherlock.

He looked as regal and magnificent as ever but there was also a dishevelled, somewhat haggard look to him that looked extremely out of place on him. There was no stubble but it felt as though there should have been. The pale eyes were wild and the pupils were almost pure pinpricks.

It suddenly made sense why nobody seemed to be around; they’d all scarpered to a safe distance.

“Where have you been?” the baritone voice demanded, the tone low and ever so slightly menacing.

John still wasn’t going to be intimidated, however, and his unexpectedly long, utterly draining trip back on top of his trip out had not left him in much of a mood to deal with the temper of a forest ruler.

“I could ask the same of you,” he shot back in a low voice, glaring up at the figure still grabbing him. “I’m not the one who went bloody AWOL for two weeks and haven’t bothered to even inform anyone of where I was going. I told Demelza the general direction I was heading in.”

“You should have been back hours ago,” Sherlock said in the same register. His nostrils flared, possibly in anger, possibly to scent the doctor, possibly a mixture of the two.

Whatever the intention of the inhalation, the expression on the face of the brunet darkened further at what the olfactory receptors had apparently picked up, a ghost of a snarl appearing on cupid bow lips.

Without a word, the hand on John’s shoulder shifted down to encircle his upper arm in just as tight and irremovable grip as before and Sherlock began to walk towards the cave, his unrelenting grip ensuring that the blond would have to follow if he didn’t fancy getting his arm dislocated or worse.

For the moment, John bore it without a word. Not because he didn’t feel angry at being manhandled like that but because it would, again, be wiser to keep the arguments within the ranks, as it were.

Once they were inside, though, he did his best to stop and wrench himself free. It had about as much
effect as previous attempts but the gesture of it was something to note in and of itself.

“Alright, I’m here, all in one piece and I won’t leave. Now, would you please enlighten me as to what the bleeding hell is going through that massive skull of yours? Cause from where I’m standing it is bloody pot and kettle here, never mind one load of utter shite upon another,” John snapped, more than fed up.

There was no verbal response; all he got was that intense stare from the almost pupil-less eyes that left him feeling as if he was staring into a sheet of ice.

The hand not currently gripping his arm came up, fingers flexing as though they wanted to do... *something* but was being restrained from doing so. Barely.

“Do you have any idea how dangerous the forest is?” Sherlock eventually asked, his voice flat and emotionless. Almost excessively so, one might say, as though internal doors were slowly being slammed shut. It sent a small shiver down John’s spine, cooled his anger and made something inside his stomach clench. “To wander around exposed and unprotected like that is nothing short of asinine and you should count yourself beyond fortunate that you made it back at all.”

“I ‘wandered around’, as you put it, on Midsummer Eve, too,” John pointed out. “I was downright lost when I spotted Demelza that day and I did make it back out of that whole debacle, didn’t I?”

A tiny snort escaped Sherlock but otherwise he was still eerily calm. “That is hardly the same thing. You were not pregnant at that time and more importantly, you were fully human.”

John frowned, puzzled by the comment and very much interested in finally getting a little more knowledge on just how his new world worked.

“What difference does that make, exactly?” he asked and, when there was no immediate answer, he sighed deeply.

“Sherlock…” he began, careful to keep his voice level and reasonable. “I think I understand…well, no, I *don’t* understand, that’s the whole point, but I might just have an inkling of your point of view now. I am genuinely happy you care that much about our…our baby to put it as a priority and tolerate my presence for at least the time it takes for the baby to absorb the necessary magic or whatever.”

An odd expression flitted across the face of the brunet at the word ‘tolerate’ but John seemed to miss it.

“Therefore, I think I also get why you’re being that…well, like you’ve been. But you also have to understand that ordinary humans like me are not really equipped to just be thrown into a realm so far removed from anything they’ve known or encountered in their entire lives. Especially not when nothing is explained and everyone just assumes that you know already.”

Sherlock frowned. “I *have* explained,” he protested, his indifferent mask cracking slightly.

“No, you haven’t! Giving vague hints and general outlines is not explaining, it really isn’t.”

Coming to realize that this hostility between them would have to end if they were going to make it through the time John had agreed to stay there, the doctor took a deep, steadying breath and reached out. His hand landed on Sherlock’s shoulder and stayed. Sherlock allowed it.

“I need to know, Sherlock, and I am going to find my answers, one way or the other, regardless of whether you help me find them. If I am to trust you this soon, when I don’t know you or much about
you, you need to trust me in turn and allow me to be part of this investigation or whatever you’d call it.”

There. He’d held out the proverbial olive branch, sort of. Now to see if Sherlock would take it.

The pale eyes were at least no longer nearly devoid of pupil, though they were still very small as they roamed over John’s face, scrutinizing for details. The body language, though yet exhibiting some of the anger from earlier, had similarly shifted into something slightly more calm and approachable.

“Does the gallivanting about on your own stop if you come with me?” he eventually asked after the scrutiny had gone on for some while.

“I don’t gallivant. I’m not someone out of a 19th century novel and I didn’t do it just because I felt like a picnic. But yeah, if stop shutting me out, then I won’t go off on my own.”

The promise that if Sherlock did shut him out again, then John would do more than just seek answers on his own went unspoken, even as it hung in the air between them.

Of all things, a slow smile began spreading across the face of the brunet, eventually turning into a full-blown grin.

John raised a questioning eyebrow at that, not quite sure what had prompted the sudden, apparent shift in mood.

He got a small shake of the head in return. More than that, though, the hand around John’s upper arm, having already loosened its grip, now let go completely to instead reach upwards, Sherlock keeping eye contact throughout.

The doctor anticipated the hand landing on his cheek as before. He was therefore surprised when the hand continued upwards and instead came to rest on one of the fledgling antlers on John’s head, gently brushing against the still relatively soft cartilage.

A shiver ran through the doctor at the contact, quite unbidden and unexpected. The fact that they were as sensitive as they were, that he could genuinely feel the nerves sparking in them, was a not quite pleasant realization. Getting rid of them seemed as if it would be a rather painful experience.

Despite that, he couldn’t quite help pressing into the touch.

“Bastard,” he muttered under his breath, though he retained eye contact.

“Always,” Sherlock replied, the smile not diminishing in the slightest.

He then surprised John yet again; grabbing a slightly firmer hold of the protuberance, he tugged at it to bring the blond up close, slotting their mouths together gently yet firmly.

John spluttered for a second at the unexpected gesture but quickly began to push back. He’d give as good as he got, thank you very much, and he wasn’t going to back down from what was obviously another challenge.

It was kept closed-mouthed but when they parted, the brunet letting go of the antler, it certainly didn’t feel that way, at least not to John.

“What the blazes was that for?” he asked, fighting both conflicting urges inside; one was to wipe his mouth and the other was to grab hold of Sherlock’s fully grown, impressive bone-antlers and pull him down for a repeat performance.
“Merely sealing our agreement.”

“With a kiss?”

“Why not?” Sherlock queried unperturbed. “It does have historic precedence, after all. Quite important ones, too.”

“That’s in relation to marriages, you berk, not a simple agreement.”

There was another mental image that he wasn’t quite prepared to have pop up in his head all of a sudden.

Not that he hadn’t thought about marriage in his life, of course he had, and there’d been one or two girlfriends that he thought he might have wanted to settle down with and, at some point, pop the question to, as it were. They’d all been before his first deployment, though, and once he was out there, he didn’t really think about the possibility of a steady family back home.

Then he’d been shot and shipped home on an honourable discharge and dealing with people in general had become a bit of a chore on any long-term basis, never mind the upkeep a proper relationship needed. To put the nail on the head, he’d seen just what sort of mess Harry had managed to make of her marriage and he’d arrived at the conclusion that matrimony was not for the likes of Watsons.

Therefore, the unsettlingly clear mental image of him standing at the altar, in the forest, clad in formal attire that could barely accommodate his bulging midsection, leaves and flowers in his antlers with the entire folklore inhabitants at the service and Sherlock holding his hands as they were pronounced…whatever, took him enough by surprise that he froze, blinking and swallowing.

What was most unsettling, though, was the small part of him that actually kind of liked what the image implied.

Yup, definitely Bedlam.

If Sherlock noticed the sudden derailment of John’s thoughts, he didn’t let on.

Instead he took a step backwards then turned around and began to walk away. Before John could be puzzled by that, he settled down, though not, as the doctor would have expected had he thought about it, at or close to the heap of furs and textiles that constituted the bed.

In lieu of that he sat down, with his legs crossed, right near the wall where another heap was located. Apart from being puzzled at what had stuck out of it, John had left it well enough alone.

Now, he saw Sherlock put his hand down into it and begin to pull at something long. It turned out to be the neck of a violin. A violin of rather high quality by the look of it, rubbish assessor of such things though the doctor was. The bow came next and soon the instrument as held in proper position, the bow resting gently against the strings and the long fingers ready on the first chord.

No sound came, discordant or harmonious. Sherlock sat, poised to play and he just waited, looking at John with those inscrutable, enigmatic eyes, who could only look back.

Of all the things to have come out of that small mound of things, a violin was about the last thing he’d have expected. Even more so, he wouldn’t have expected the brunet to appear able to play it, the image in front of him rather absurd, even given what he’d had to deal with previously.

Absurd, maybe. Strangely fascinating it is, too, though, and not that more farfetched than what you
might find in some parts of Camden Town. It’s obviously got some wear and he appears to hold it correctly, so…maybe he does know how to play? Damn, I’m far too tired for all this.

As though sensing John was just about to yawn, the pale eyes flickered over the compact body and then to the bedding before moving back again, the message clear.

That didn’t prevent John from raising an eyebrow. “What, you’re going to play me to sleep? Really?”

Sherlock didn’t answer. He just looked between the blond and the bed again, pointedly.

John had to admit that he was beyond tired at this point and he wanted to sleep, regardless of what Sherlock had in mind to do. So, he sighed, walked over and laid down, mindful of his little lodger as he did so. He pulled a large fur over him that managed to cover almost his entire body, the other cloth taking up the slack, making himself comfortable.

He completely missed the satisfied expression on Sherlock’s face as he did so.

Once he was settled comfortably and had closed his eyes, the bow moved across the strings.

It should have sounded at least a little discordant but it didn’t. Nor was there any indication that Sherlock didn’t know how to play or had little experience.

It started slow, the notes drawn out and very soft. Gradually, it gained a rhythm and a melody. It wasn’t any melody John thought he’d ever heard but it didn’t really matter, as it was just the right kind of melody for winding down and going to sleep; slow, soft and sweet with just the right kind of slightly haunting undertone.

“Why are you doing this?” John mumbled, cracking open an eye, with some difficulty, to look up at the elegant figure sitting just a few feet away.

It was hard now to see why the image of Sherlock with a violin tucked under his chin had appeared absurd to him only just before. With his eyes closed, a look of serene concentration on his face as he played, the bow sliding smoothly over the strings, the fingers changing between chords with an ease and dexterity that was beautiful to behold.

After a moment, the pale eyes opened, their irises almost swallowed by dark pupils, and found John’s one open eye. Once they did, the corners crinkled in the smile that lit up his entire face.

John’s heart did an involuntary skip.

“Go to sleep, John,” was all the answer that he got, the baritone voice rumbling pleasant.

The doctor closed his eye at that, though it almost dropped of its accord. He must have been more tired than he thought, for his limbs felt heavy and uncooperative and his head was felt as though it was full of cotton wool and treacle.

“Aren’t you going to sleep?” he mumbled muzzily, already drifting off to sleep, lulled by the music drifting over him.

“Mmh. In a while. I need to think. This helps me to.”

“Right. Course that’s the…only reason,” John muttered.

As though I’m not perfectly aware that with the aptitude and proficiency you play, you could have
picked just about any tune to play that you felt like playing, concocted by you or by others. Playing something that is so unmistakably an impromptu lullaby in that specific scenario is a bit of a give-away, isn’t it?

“Go to sleep,” Sherlock repeated gently, almost inaudible over the tunes of the violin.

This time, John did, slipping into a deep sleep where no dreams could penetrate, not even ones about not-horses with sickly suns for eyes and sweet lies that promised everything or growling beasts stalking him on soft paws.

John half-awoke sometime later in the night to see long legs, or rather shapes that decidedly looked like legs, striding back and forth across the cave floor, a faint muttering coming from above.

He thought he heard something along the lines of ‘too risky’ and ‘always a price to pay’ and ‘permanent solution’ but he was still too far in the clutches of sleep to truly pay attention and file it away.

It was only a moment later that he was fast asleep again.

The next time he woke, it was still night. He didn’t need a watch to tell him that.

He went to stretch in the way you do when you’re only barely awake and you just want to find a better position to fall asleep again in and found that it was difficult to do so.

The reason why became apparent soon enough; one long, sinewy, deceptively strong arm was draped over his hip and curving around his stomach in a way that not only cupped the curve of it but also made sure that he stayed relatively put.

That theory was tested when he did a more deliberate stretch and the arm around him tightened. It was nothing that particularly hard but it did send a clear message as well as pull him more closely against the body behind him.

It was just as well that he wasn’t lying too uncomfortably on his side, then.

John burrowed deeper where he lay, unable to help noting that though he was usually ‘the big spoon’, as it were, it wasn’t a terrible experience to be the little one for once.

That was one thing he could most definitely say; whatever else was going on, between them and otherwise, the attraction was still very much present. He had thought it had been primarily a product of the solstice and the haze he’d been under then but now, still half-asleep with a long, strong, very male body wrapped around him, he could admit that there was more to it than that and that he was most decidedly attracted to Sherlock.

Whether that would turn out to be a boon or a bane for him in the long term remained to be seen.
Early the following morning, John woke to an empty space beside him, though he could surmise that it hadn’t been too long since it had been vacated from the heat still emanating from it. Indeed, he could hear quiet noises coming from somewhere in the cave that distinctly sounded like Sherlock’s voice muttering things.

Keeping his eyes closed for the moment, he took the opportunity to stretch fully, idly scratching at his ever-growing stubble that might at this point more accurately be described as a beard that was in dire need of either a heavy trim or just a proper shave.

Meanwhile, the other hand went down for its customary gentle caress, not of his morning erection but of the growing belly. It had been comforting to do so for months by that point but now that he was so much closer to the earth whatever-it-was, it had escalated.

He wasn’t due to feel the quivering that was the precursor to kicking for about another month or so and yet…ever since Sherlock had put his hand on it, it had become much more responsive and, for lack of a better word, alive.

He wasn’t due to feel the quivering that was the precursor to kicking for about another month or so and yet…ever since Sherlock had put his hand on it, it had become much more responsive and, for lack of a better word, alive.

At this rate, I’m probably going to birth a fully-grown deer or something. I wouldn’t even be surprised at this point.

Another odd yet rather logical thought entered his mind as he listened to Sherlock’s half-formulated sentences; what happened afterwards? Even if he survived bringing a child into the world, through his own body, it wasn’t just going to go away once it had been born. Well, he supposed it could but just the thought of having to give up his child made the bile rise in his throat.

But what then? If he delivered back in civilization, as it were, could he prevent his little girl or boy from being taken from him or even just turned into a meal ticket for sensationalist journalists and glory-hungry doctor? Would he ever be left to care for his charge in peace?

He could of course instead deliver it in the forest. Much as that didn’t sit well with his medical training, even given what he’d experienced in the tours he’d been on, there was a reasonable argument to be made that it might go easier, being in proximity of the magic, and returning home with a baby could be explained away. Well, okay, it wasn’t likely to be straightforward and uncomplicated to do so either but it would undoubtedly be better than submitting himself to the scrutiny of other doctors. He could certainly come up with a story to explain that it was his own baby and the mother had passed away and he’d be able to be a single parent without any difficulties.

Going back to London afterwards didn’t absolve one rather major problem, though. The child had two parents, not just one. Sherlock had a right to see his little bairn as much as John had and the child had a right to know both of its parents.

Would Sherlock have to journey up from Cornwall for visits, then? Would he want to leave Cornwall at all? Could he? He hadn’t mentioned leaving the forest at any point, disguised or not. Did that mean he couldn’t even leave the forest? Would John be denying him the means of seeing their child if he did stay in London?

What little of the weak, grey, early morning light managed to filter into the cave was somewhat blocked by the body suddenly looming over John’s prone body, breaking him out of his jumbled thoughts. He opened his eyes and saw the oddest silhouette looking down at him.

“You’re awake? Finally. You’d think a military man would be better at waking up quickly.”
“It’s no more than half six in the ruddy morning, keep your hair on,” John said, pointedly not getting up. “The sun isn’t even properly up yet. That’s another thing, come to think of it – do you people hibernate?”

He very purposely didn’t mention any of what he had just been pondering. They had only reached a modicum of…not friendship, per se, but certainly an agreement to make the best of it and it would be stupid to risk jeopardizing that by raising questions and undesired possible scenarios.

The look he got from Sherlock at that gave him his answer; even in the low light the derisive expression was more than clear. “Hey, with all the blooming codswallop you lot have been feeding me since I got here, the notion that you lot hibernate is beyond tame, quite frankly.”

Sherlock made a small noise and said, “I would strongly advise that you disassociate the people living here from regular animals. They take almost as much offense to that as to being compared with regular humans.”

“Right. I’ll keep that in mind them. Good thing I only got back here when I no longer qualify as human.”

The brunet wasn’t biting. “Quite but then, you have some sense.”

Pale eyes raked over the prone body, seeming to pause at a few places. A bony hand was then held out and, realizing the implications apart from the obvious, John’s lips quirked slightly and he reached up to grab the offered hand.

His grasp was deliberately firm, the message received and returned. An amused snort was his answer as he was hauled upright.

Once again, the action resulted in John standing right up against the taller man, the heat and scent coming off the skin and the fur pleasant and inviting this time rather than something to push away from. He didn’t notice long fingers sliding over his wrist and jerk when they encountered a tiny mark.

Looking up at Sherlock, he saw the pale eyes glow with…something. Then Sherlock grinned cheekily.

“Right, then, John. Shall we go?”

Chapter End Notes

I know you were probably expecting/hoping for more elaboration on the whole Bucca Dhu encounter. I have not forgotten it or am just teasing you for the hell of it. It will come back into the story. I promise, and it will play a large part. I hope this chapter hasn’t been a letdown as a result. I really liked writing them in this, finally moving them forward significantly.
Information, compromise and possibilities

Chapter Summary

Sherlock takes John along but it's not where the doctor expects. Instead, he's brought to see Mrs. Hudson. Things get cleared up, things get explained, things get decidedly muddled up.

Chapter Notes

First off, I'm so sorry for being a day late on this. I had my posting schedule all worked out but then, I had to spend yesterday in hospital because my heart acted up. They took good care of me, though.
Secondly, I want to say thank you to those who commented in particular. I was genuinely worried that it'd be boring but then you all proved me wrong. Thank you!

Also, WARNING: Mentions of birth complications and possibly unpleasant descriptions. Nothing really graphic but just...fair warning. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If John had expected the explanations to just then come tumbling out of Sherlock as they walked, he was to be sorely disappointed. The taller man walked ahead as he had before, at a brisk pace, without saying much of anything. The difference from that first day lay in that he had a firm grip on John’s hand as they walked, the hold firm to the point that it felt almost possessive. Or maybe like if he didn’t, he would look back only to find that the blond had disappeared from his sight.

Given the way he had reacted the night before when he’d confronted John about apparently having disappeared, it perhaps wasn’t too surprising.

John had to admit that if was being honest, he hadn’t expected that from Sherlock. Not that he knew the man that well but he’d already sussed that there was a streak of the dramatic running through him. The doctor would be told at some other time, he would make sure of it. Right now, there was no reason to push it and risk tipping the balance.

Thankfully for John’s still sore feet, they did not walk for hours. Instead they stopped after a mere hour, though it was a little tricky to immediately spot why they had stopped.

John closed the few steps between them to stand beside Sherlock so that he could see the reason they’d halted. As soon as he drew level, though, the hand still in his pulled him so that he ended up right beside Sherlock, their hips barely not touching.

I wonder if that is just going to be a thing that he does. Apart from two small kisses, the pulling in close is about the closest we’ve gotten to anything...not sexual, but intimate. You can’t count the octopus-grip since that happened while he slept and could just be a thing he does. If he was actually asleep then, of course...and now my thoughts are running around in circles. Brilliant. Just bloody brilliant.
Before John could open his mouth to ask about either that or why they’d come here in particular, as there didn’t seem to be anything distinctive about the thicket they’d arrived at, apart from it being unusually large, Sherlock uttered a strange noise.

It was clear that it was a call of some sort, given the shortness and volume of it, but as it sounded more like an enormous amount of pebbles or nuts falling to the ground, cracking as they did so, than anything one might have expected to have come out of Sherlock’s throat.

Then again, when he had a kingdom of such diverse and, to John at least, unconventional subjects, it would only follow that he would have need of knowing so many different customs and callings. It might even help endear him to them, too, who knew?

Whatever the case, the call was answered shortly afterwards. Not by an answering call but by a rustling of dead and dying leaves as something, someone, emerged from the thicket of hazel trees and bushes, mumbling something under their breath.

At first, John had trouble understanding what he was seeing. Not so much because the creature, the person emerging was indescribable, as such, but because there seemed to be two parts that did not, should not overlap.

One was that of an elderly woman with messy yet stylish hair that was surprisingly deep in colour for her apparent age, with clothes that looked very…bohemian chic, for lack of a better descriptor, and, somehow most incongruous of all, what looked like a long, white pipe of the type that you otherwise only saw in old woodcuts and engravings. Smoke rose from it in a thin stream that waved slightly as she walked.

That on its own was perhaps not expected but not outside the realm of the feasible, especially not in the context. What threw him was the other image that seemed superimposed over it.

The image that overlapped was…well, to be quite honest, it was eerily like Aunt Sally, off the show ‘Worzel Gummidge’ he had used to watch as a small kid, rather than the doll they threw sticks at in pub gardens and on fairgrounds. The nose was there. So were the large eyes and the lavish, overly done makeup that seemed oddly faded at the same time and the rather distinctive dress was there, too, overlaying the other clothes.

John blinked, trying to clear his vision. It helped and he saw Aunt Sally through and through, complete with bonnet and reasonably young face. Then it blurred and there was the elderly woman with the pipe.

He considered rubbing at his eyes but thought that would probably come off as rude and so he refrained, much as the urge was there and the image played havoc with his vision.

Seemingly oblivious to what she was causing, the elderly woman stopped as she came up to them, taking in the men facing her. John saw her gaze quickly flitter over him before swivelling to look Sherlock in the eye, her previously soft gaze hardening slightly.

Something happened between them, then, some sort of wordless communication that appeared to hold a significant amount of information. John didn’t know whether he ought to feel annoyed at being left out of the conversation or grateful that he didn’t have to deal with that, too, on top of the sight issue.

Once they seemed to have finished, the woman turned to John. “Hello there, love. Sorry I didn’t introduce myself properly straight away but Sherlock here can be ever so demanding, can’t he? Oh, no matter, we’ll soon put him to rights, won’t we?”
She smiled and John found himself not only smiling back but holding out his hand in greeting. “I’m sure we will. I’m John Watson, ma’am, pleased to meet you.”

“John, is it? That’s a nice name. I’m Mrs. Hudson, dear, though Sherlock calls me Mrs. H. Has done since he was a wee nipper, really, it seemed easier for him to…well, anyway, if you want to, you can call me Mrs. H, too. Since you’re staying and everything.”

John gave his taller companion a sideways glance, trying to gauge his reaction to that comment. There was none, or at least none immediately readable on those features. There might have been just the slightest glimmering of colour on those high cheekbones, however.

Somehow, that made John feel quite a bit better about the entire thing.

“Oh, I know you’re not fay, dear,” Mrs. Hudson continued as she pocketed her pipe, probably picking up on John’s unspoken worry. “I may be old, as they often delight in telling me, but I’m not quite that blind and daft yet. One could spot you a mile off, I reckon, even with your antlers growing in so very nicely – and of course this tiny little treasure.”

She reached out her skinny hands to lay them both on his slowly expanding stomach.

Oi, John thought. I do not remember signing anything that allowed all and sundry to just come up and grope my midsection whenever they felt like it. It’s more than enough that I’ve got to share my body with one other, I don’t need everyone else to join in.

He didn’t say anything out loud, though.

He may not be too well-versed in the customs of the folklore people, but he did sense that doing so might upset what appeared to be a slightly dotty but sweet old lady, or something approximating lady, one that Sherlock was fond of, much as he didn’t show it right then. She was the only one who had spoken of Sherlock with any sort of fondness rather than purely respect or even slight disdain and the doctor couldn’t see her do that without having been shown some kindness in return.

That thought might also be slightly influenced by her still blurring into the Aunt Sally visage, though.

Quite apart from that, however, there was also the fact that her hands had a distinct effect on his stomach, much like Sherlock’s had. Unlike his, though, hers felt soothing, like a balm administered through dry, surprisingly soft palms on…

“It’s okay, John,” Sherlock said quietly. He’d stepped behind and was looking over the shoulder of the blond, though, interestingly, he was in no way touching John. With his almost demonstrative touching previously, that seemed significant somehow. “She needs to.”

“She doesn’t need to,” John protested, staying still with effort. “Why would she need to touch my belly in the first place, let alone under my clothes?”

“Oh, would you shush now,” Mrs. Hudson said as she looked up at him, shaking her head in exasperation. “Don’t be such a baby. I’m only touching your skin because I can’t very well feel what I need to feel when you’re all covered up like that.”

“Feel what, exactly?”

“The baby, of course. Good grief, Sherlock said you were a doctor, you must know something about this! Honestly, you’d think that men were past being squeamish by this point in time, especially when it’s something that happens to your own body.”
John was about to argue that it wasn’t being bloody squeamish when someone you didn’t know put their hands, completely uninvited and without prior warning, underneath your clothes and onto your skin, that was just having some damn sense of propriety.

He was stopped by the hands doing…doing something that sent his insides lurching and caused his little lodger to kick. Not a flutter or a quiver as before, which had already happened much sooner than normal procedure, but a downright kick that hit him hard.

Bony hands grabbed onto his shoulders, steadying him as he wobbled with the unexpected pain. Despite that, John did have the presence of mind to flash Sherlock a quick look of appreciation of the gesture, even as he was aware that Mrs. Hudson wouldn’t be doing it if Sherlock hadn’t approved in the first place.

“What are you doing?”

“Feeling it,” she repeated, sounding more than exasperated.

“That’s not feeling it, that’s pulling it out through my…my damn navel.” It didn’t quite feel right swearing in front of the woman.

“I’m feeling it, to make sure that it’s developing properly, poor lamb, and thank goodness that it is. More than fine, it seems. I don’t need any of your electronic nonsense to tell that but I need you to hold still for a minute. Goodness, you’d think I was attempting to deflower you or the like.”

“No, of course not, silly of me,” John said, resorting to snark in the face of the absurdity. “You’re just trying to ultrasound and ascertain the wellbeing of my utterly, nature-defying baby with your hands on my skin and suddenly, the foetus is downright kicking, which a normal baby shouldn’t be able to do so for at least another month. Hell, it shouldn’t even be properly kicking at that point, either. Don’t know why on earth I would be slightly upset by that, oh no.”

The bony hands squeezed on his shoulders, not hard or reprimanding. It felt more like an attempt at comfort and reassurance but an uncertain, hesitant one, given the gradual way they squeezed, the movement like clicking gears.

Mrs. Hudson also looked up at him, her face now radiating concern and her hands gentling considerably. “Oh, love, you should’ve said that you didn’t know. I thought that…but never mind, doesn’t matter. I’m a midwife, dear – well, technically, I’m not quite but one learns a thing or two when…anyway, I’ve seen a lot of people into the world. Saw this silly boy into it, too, oh, dear, such a frail little thing when he came, he was, his mother was afraid he wouldn’t make it. Wouldn’t have credited it, his brother was a big, healthy baby, came out antlers first and everything. That one, though, oh, dear.”

Interested in hearing something about Sherlock from someone who had been a large part of his life, it seemed, John said, “Oh? What happened, then?”

A small sound of warning came from behind him but John didn’t care that Sherlock might not want him to know. It seemed only fair that he got to know something about the father, other father of his child, regardless of whether Sherlock and he became…close or not, and it didn’t seem as though the brunet was going to volunteer a lot of information on his own. Besides, what could a little, old lady possibly know that Sherlock wouldn’t want John to know?

“Feet first he came, didn’t he?” Mrs. Hudson said in a sad tone. She’d taken one hand away from his stomach to put it in her apron pocket, seemingly fiddling with something, though nothing was brought out.
“He’d got the umbilical cord around his neck because of that,” she continued, “and once we finally got him out, oh, dear, it was horrible…he was all purple and he wasn’t breathing. Not that you could tell that anything was wrong from the way his mother behaved, she was as calm as anything, but then again, she’s always been…but it was his older brother who was all to pieces. You really wouldn’t credit it now but back then, oh, he was so excited to have a baby brother so when he saw the little thing not breathing when he came out, he went into…well, I wouldn’t call them hysterics, per se, but it was a close enough thing.”

John had paled significantly as the telling went on. Of course, he knew there was always risks associated with birth, quite significant and dire ones. He’d done his stints on the maternity ward as a junior doctor, after all, and what he hadn’t seen himself or read in the textbooks, the midwives and nurses were happy to divulge. So, he knew the horror stories, he thought he knew the score.

But knowing on an intellectual, detached level that it could happen to someone else’s baby was completely, utterly dissimilar to having one of those scenarios become concrete like that and it hit hard.

It had happened to Sherlock, someone who seemed in control of everything and very powerful, to boot. Someone like that, someone who had become the ruler of an entire forest of mythological beings, had almost not made it into the world. It didn’t follow that those troubles would manifest themselves in the next generation, of course, but it still sent a nasty sensation running throughout the doctor’s body.

The hands on his shoulders began rubbing in a soothing motion that helped, even if only a little. It might have helped more if he could see the face of the brunet, possibly, or it might not.

Mrs. Hudson’s face, on the other hand, he could see and she looked very guilty and apologetic. “Oh, dear, are you alright, love?”

“I’m…fine, I’m fine. Just took me a bit by…”

“Of course, dearie. I didn’t think – ” she began but was interrupted.

“I think we’ll take our leave now.”

“Are you sure, Sherlock?” A look passed between the two fays that John couldn’t decipher.

“Yes, I’m afraid so. We would love to stay but we have quite a few things to oversee today and with John’s health to consider, we cannot move too quickly.”

“I’m not a ruddy invalid,” John mumbled but it was a weak argument and he knew it. They might think that the news of Sherlock’s…problems getting into the world was all that had thrown him but it had as much to do with whatever she had made happen inside of him with her…whatever it had been.

Of course, it might also be him acting just slightly worse than he felt while putting up a front that he wasn’t. Not because he liked being fawned over or that he no longer wanted to take care of himself. He did but when that attitude seemed to push Sherlock into a more controlling, slightly domineering attitude, it seemed advisable to go with the other approach.

That, and the touch of those bony hands and heat off that body wasn’t a bad bonus, either.

*Oh, good grief, you're going to bloody well swoon at some point during all of this, aren’t you?*

Shaking off that thought as well as the others occupying his mind as best he could, John tried to
sidestep so he wasn’t standing between the two people. The hands on his shoulders tightened for just a moment then slowly, almost reluctantly, loosened and let go.

One did, at least. The other ran up to rest at the side of John’s neck, the movement making the blond have to suppress an involuntary, yet pleasant shiver. It wasn’t appropriate, given the circumstances.

“It’s okay, John,” the baritone voice said softly right next to his ear.

“No, it’s not okay!” John didn’t bother lowering his voice. He turned his head so he could at least look the taller man in the eye. Liking him or not, it still pissed John off royally to be babied like that, especially when it was so inconsistent.

“It’s not okay that there might be a threat to my baby like that, that you kept this from me, along with every other bloody thing that could be important for me to know in the circumstances, and that you flipflop all the time on whether you want to treat me like I am a nuisance to put up with or like I’m someone that should be monitored and smothered at all times because I am incapable of looking after myself!”

“I don’t do that.” To Sherlock’s credit, he did look as though he did not at all comprehend what John was accusing him of. His brow had drawn together in a frown and his lips had parted slightly. He was also blinking more quickly than before.

“Yeah, you do.”

The anger drained from John as quickly as it had flared up and he felt tired. Too be honest, he ought to be more surprised that he had as relatively few happenstances of clear mood swings during this first trimester than he was that it had happened now. The times where he’d been angry, he’d felt justified in being so. That of course didn’t mean that he had been justified, come to think of it, but there wasn’t much to be done about it now, either way.

Nothing, except try to be conscious about it now and not let it dominate and possibly poison what they did have. They had to make it work between them, at least as cordial friends, if for nothing else, then for the sake of the child. Nothing excused feuding parents as it always, always brought the child pain and frustration that it shouldn’t have to cope with.

He would have to deal with things as calmly and reasonably as he possibly could; he was going to be a father, after all.

He sighed as he took a step sideways, away from both Sherlock and the increasingly worried-looking Mrs. Hudson. “Just…let’s just get on with it, yeah? You said we’ve got a lot of things to do, yeah? Best get on with it, then.” He turned to give the elderly woman a small smile. “Thank you for your time and your help, Mrs. H. I’m glad to know that my – our baby is doing well, it really is. I’m very glad I got to meet you and I look forward to seeing you again.”

Mrs. Hudson smiled, an understanding look in her eyes as she looked at him, even as her worried expression remained. It was a real pleasure meeting you, John. Come by next time without your big, scary chaperone over there and I’ll fix you a small pick-me-up – all herbal, of course. Good for you, herbs. You take care now.”

“TI will. Thank you.”

With that, he turned around and started walking, back out the way they had come. He had no idea whether it was the right direction to walk or what Sherlock might say to it, but he’d find out soon enough, he was certain.
Indeed, he hadn’t made it more than a few hundred yards before a familiar voice called out his name. For a fleeting moment, he seriously considered ignoring the call but he decided against it almost as fast as he thought of it. If he was going to be sensible and responsible about all of this, a key step would be to confront his problems. He just hadn’t wanted to do it in front of Mrs. Hudson.

So, he stopped and waited for Sherlock to catch up to him. He didn’t have to wait long; the long legs meant that the brunet was beside him quickly.

Once he was, John expected him to say something. Anything, really. He didn’t.

Instead he stood there, looking at the doctor as though he didn’t quite know what he was seeing or how he should deal with what he was seeing, which was possibly a first for him. The pale eyes roamed over the entire stocky body more than once, apparently searching for any tiny little thing that might provide a clue and seemingly not finding it. The bony hands made several different small gestures, all of them aborted almost as soon as they began. The cupid bow lips opened only to close again.

John stood there, letting himself be inspected, for whatever good it would do. When nothing seemed to come of it, he sighed again. It looked as if he would have to be the one to hold out the olive branch, once again. Then again, someone had to, it didn’t seem like Sherlock was capable of doing it and John was as much to blame in all of this, after all.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock,” he began, slightly uncertainly, searching for the right words even as he spoke them, wanting to get it right this time.

He was determined to look the other in the eye as he spoke, though, even as he was struggling through the sentences slightly. It wasn’t the vocabulary or anything but he was a British male; putting his thoughts, his feelings into clear words that laid him bare, even if only to an extent, did not come easy to him when he wasn’t fuelled by alcohol.

“I…I’m trying to wrap my head around all of this but it’s not exactly easy, and that’s putting it extremely mildly, and I know I’m not helping by getting angry all the time, for no reason, but I am trying. I’m guessing that you are, too, in your own strange way but I don’t know that for sure, because I’m not a bloody mind reader and that only adds to the anger. I want to make this…whatever this is, really…work. Somehow or other, we need to make it work. Together.”

He stood still, letting the words sit in the air between them, watching as they settled over Sherlock.

The brunet swallowed, the Adam’s apple clearly seen to be bobbing in the long throat. No other sound came.

Eventually, Sherlock closed the small distance between them, with slow, careful steps, as though John was a frightened creature that he had to take care not to spook. The blond tried not to use the words ‘frightened deer’ in his mind.

When he was right in front, he looked down, hesitating as if he was contemplating what precisely he wanted to do at that moment. Then he reached out and grasped one of John’s calloused hands in both of his bony ones, running long fingers over all the rough patches, the scars, the lines and everything else that had marked the extremity, as though he was trying to map out the life of the doctor that way.

“I…I want to show you somewhere,” he said after a few moments, slowly raising his head. “Will you come with me?”

It was not in any way what John had expected to hear after that but he held his tongue and merely
nodded his consent, watching as a small light ignited in those pale eyes. After all, what was one more small concession?

The trip was relatively short but as it was getting into increasingly rockier terrain, John was still glad that his hand was held in a firm, unwavering grip throughout. The footwear he’d brought with him coming down here had been intended for walking, yes, maybe even hiking. Hiking did not mean climbing crumbly and slimy rocks with a forest god pulling him along.

He’d tried asking where they were going but every time he did, he just got a squeeze of his hand and an uncharacteristic pleading look.

As he tried navigating one particularly moss-covered rock onehanded, the other man above him, holding on but otherwise letting him do the work himself, John had a fleeting thought; it wasn’t fair that he was the one covered in several layers of comfortable, practical clothing right for the season and all Sherlock had was skin and fur, with the thick yet curiously soft fur covering only some of his body, yet John was the one who was occasionally shivering in the cold, damp air. Then again, it did sort of figure, didn’t it?

“I hate to sound like a child in the backseat but how much further is this place?” he asked after he’d made it onto the next plateau beside Sherlock.

“Just a little further.”

“Fine. You know, if you wanted to distract me from what we were discussing, there are easier ways.” Despite the words, he couldn’t help smiling a little. They’d been a rather good team coming up here and it had been sort of fun.

His smile wasn’t returned but the slightly pleading look remained.

It was just past noon by the time Sherlock finally stopped. He didn’t say anything but left John to take in where they were.

Why Sherlock had wanted him to experience this place wasn’t hard to grasp. They had climbed steadily upwards and were now not only up high, they were high enough to observe most of the forest, which spread out below them, extending far beyond the area that John would’ve estimated it’d cover. Then again, he’d gradually come to learn that, like it or not, his logic didn’t always, or even mostly, apply.

This high up, only the treetops were visible, spreading the crowns of their branches and foliage out in an almost un-British arrayal of colours, the sun enhancing the shades with its rays, turning it into a sea of jewels.

The oak that John had visited with Demelza rose above the rest, the majestic centrepiece towering over them, almost rendering them background.

“In a minute or two, I’ll turn my head to find Christopher Robin and Pooh sitting at the bottom of this tree here,” John said quietly after what seemed like ages. It certainly felt as though they would’ve fitted right in there.

“Who?” Sherlock asked from behind him.
So, you know how to operate modern phones and about the practices of the medical profession, despite you being what you are, but the classic children’s stories of Winnie the Pooh have completely eluded you? That’s…interesting.

“No one,” he said out loud. “They’re not important right now.”

He paused to let his eyes sweep over the frankly beautiful view one more time before turning back to face Sherlock, vaguely noting his hand was still being gripped by the larger one.

Sherlock, for his part, looked as though he was waiting for something, something from John, but the blond was not at all sure what that something was. He could hazard a guess, though, given the anxious look lurking at the bottom of those pale eyes.

“This is your spot, isn’t it? Yours all on your own?” he asked softly. He got a small nod in return.

“And how many have you brought up to share it with?”

“Counting you…one,” was the answer he eventually got.

John didn’t say anything. He’d suspected as much; people around here respected Sherlock, at most. He was their ruler and he had a duty to see that they and the forest itself were all looked after properly. That didn’t mean they liked him.

Sherlock took hold of John’s free hand.

“I wanted you to see it, John. I wanted you to see because this is what I see when I take the time to look, to contemplate rather than just deduce or think. This is my world, my reality and I…” he hesitated for a moment, then swallowed and continued, “I want you to be part of that. For the sake of the baby, yes, but more than that. For the sake of myself, for having you be part of my life.”

He paused again but continued before John could speak. “I’m…not good with emotions at the best of times. I usually abhor having to deal with the tedium of people outside my duty. I know you’re not a mind reader, I never expected you to be but that doesn’t mean it’s easy for me to communicate emotions. I want you to stay, wanted you to from the first night. I try to…” he trailed off, seemingly uncertain as how to phrase it.

The silence reigned between them for a while.

“You were the one to leave me after that night,” John said finally, quietly. He needed to say it, even though it might not be a smart move. “I never even knew your name. How was I to know any of that?”

His hands were brought up so the brunet could kiss them. “I’ll tell you them. I don’t know why this happened but I’ve tried to find you your answers, John, truly, even though I haven’t wanted to. Finding them would mean that you’d leave, after all.”

“So…it’s not just the baby?”

“It’s the baby and it’s you, John. So, will you please…stay with me?”

Chapter End Notes

They're getting somewhere! About time and all, wouldn't you say? I hope I've done
justice to them in this part in particular. I've been getting a little tired of writing them angry or distant. :)

Also, I still adore writing Mrs. Hudson. I know she might come off a bit weird here. Her appearance is based on a mix of the Hudders we know and another character Una's played, Aunt Sally from Worzel Gummidge. In here, she's also a churn milk peg, a fay who inhabits areas of nut trees and scares children off eating the unripe nuts.
Chapter Summary

John makes up his mind to stay. He settles more comfortably into his new world, with Sherlock at his side this time. As they gradually grow closer, tending patients and solving 'cases' and Sherlock continues to work on what he'd promised, the thought of his deal with the Bucca Dhu continues to churn in John's mind.

Chapter Notes

I...I really am blown away by how kind you all are. Thank you for the sweet encouragement.
I also highly encourage you to look up the things I mention in the story. There's a lot of fascinating mythology out there :D

Since he was looking at Sherlock’s face as the man asked the question, John could see the emotions playing themselves out on the fine features. Not that that helped much, since they were one big muddle that all vied for the dominant and clear position with none emerging as a definite winner.

A few were slightly clearer than the others, however; apprehension, resignation, fear, tentative hope and what might be caring. All of them tugged at some part of the blond’s heartstrings and tugged hard.

Putting that aside for the moment, though, or at least attempting to, John had to pause and consider the question seriously. He owed Sherlock that much, at the very least.

His own initial reaction was something of a mess, too, if he was honest about it. There was relief that the baby wasn’t the only thing that mattered to Sherlock and that it didn’t matter just because it’d be the child of the ruler of the forest. There was joy that, apparently, he hadn’t been the only one to feel a spark of something, something that wasn’t merely carnal. Sadness that Sherlock was so unsure of himself in this situation when he was otherwise so confident, almost annoyingly so at times, wondering what might have caused that uncertainty in such situations.

Then there was wariness, because even though it was...good to hear this and John wanted to believe Sherlock, he honestly did, could he really? More than that, was it wise to stay? Beyond the pure knee-jerk reaction of not belonging, therefore wanting to get out of there, beyond the worries of what might happen to him or their child between now and his due date, could he make a life for himself here? With or without Sherlock as a partner, was it feasible?

As John contemplated the dilemma, he was aware that the expression on Sherlock’s face, muddled as it was, became gradually...not lesser, per se, but something to that effect. Retracted, was possibly a better word to describe it; the emotions withdrew slowly to be replace with a certain blankness, as though the man thought he knew the answer already and was shielding himself from it.
The ache that caused in John’s chest, strong and somewhat unexpected as it was, ultimately made the decision for him.

“Yes,” he said, voice as firm and decisive as he could possibly make it, fervently hoping that would be enough to at the very least halt the emotional withdrawal evident on the features.

It didn’t seem to have any immediate effect, at least not positively. Heart sinking slightly but hoping that it was merely a case of having not been heard properly, John repeated himself.

“Yes. I’ll stay with you.”

Pale eyes narrowed, searching for even a small indication that John was lying or otherwise attempting to deceive him. Knowing what he’d been contemplating earlier, the doctor tried not to feel a little guilty at that and most certainly didn’t flinch under the gaze. He made sure of that.

Eventually, the eyes stopped roaming and the expression cleared, the shield slowly dissolving back into emotions, though there were fewer of them and they were somewhat easier to distinguish.

One of them was quite definitely joy, though.

Which was just as well as John found his face grabbed and then he was being kissed. Not a chaste, hesitant kiss or the challenging sort that he’d received before. It was closer to a full-on snog, except that it was still with closed lips.

*Well, bugger that for a game of soldiers. If you’re gonna kiss me like that, let’s have a proper snog and I’ll show you.*

With that, John reached up to grab the back of the long neck, pulling the man down while he began to lick at the seams of the cupid bow insistently, demanding entrance.

It was granted, a small noise accompanying it, and John grinned inwardly as his tongue pushed inside with the same firm insistence. He started to map the inside of the mouth, running his tongue along curiously sharp teeth but then the momentary stillness of the brunet was broken and the tongue came up to battle with John’s own.

Not that he minded, not at all.

He groaned into the other’s mouth and tightened his grip on the neck, letting his fingers sink into the small curls there. His other hand reached out to grab hold of a bony hip so he could pull Sherlock closer to him. In the end, he only managed to pull himself closer to Sherlock but the net effect was the same, so the only part he could complain about was that they weren’t flush against each other as had been his intention.

When they eventually parted, the hands still on John’s face made sure that he was only a short distance away. It meant that his entire field of vision was full of Sherlock’s face.

“You…bloody tease, Sherlock,” he panted. “You can’t kiss like that and then not follow through.” His decidedly more snugly fitting trousers agreed.

“I wasn’t the one who turned it into a tongue-kiss, as I recall,” was the reply.

“French kiss. It’s called a French kiss.”

Sherlock snorted. “Irrelevant. What need do I have for names when you can show me?” He leaned in and gave another kiss, this time short and chaste. “But you will stay?” he asked, voice calm but
eyes betraying the minute disbelief and fear.

“I just said I would, didn’t I?”

“You’re human. You lie.”

“Not quite human anymore, am I?” John countered, a little annoyed by the accusation when there were so many stories of fay people tricking, deceiving and otherwise manipulating humans. Granted, they often had legitimate reasons for doing so but that was hardly the point. “That’s one thing, though. Don’t think that you’ve gotten out of finding me a way to conceal these…things, just because you’ve gotten me to agree to stay here. That’s not gonna happen.”

At that, one of Sherlock’s eyebrows rose. “It will hardly be relevant here, will it? Or are you making a rather indelicate remark about my appearance?”

“Give over, plonker. You look great and you know it perfectly well.”

More downright gorgeous, really, but there’s no need for you to know I think that just yet, John thought, firmly pushing the niggling suspicion that this whole thing was merely a stunt to get out of finding such a solution to the bottom of his mind.

“That wasn’t what I meant. You’re used to looking like…like this but I’m not. If I need for whatever reason to go back,” Sherlock made a slightly pained face at that but John elected to ignore it, even as it helped diminish the previous suspicion to some extent, “to London or somewhere else resembling civilization and I don’t want to be dragged off to become a scientific curiosity because I’ve got headspikes, I want to be able to hide it.”

“I don’t see why you’d need to.” The tone was calm and slightly disdainful but the aloofness was betrayed by the fear flickering back to life in the eyes.

John snorted. “No, you wouldn’t. Of course, you bloody well wouldn’t. I’m not using it as an excuse to leave, idiot, I’m merely pointing out that there just might be times where even Mrs. Hudson and her undeniable skill at midwifery is going to fall short, no offense to her, and in those circumstances, it’d be downright stupid not to have the option.”

Sherlock had pulled back a bit, though not so far that John’s hand on his hip couldn’t maintain its grip. His face was slightly contorted but he kept his mouth shut.

“Look, I know that it’s not something you want to think about. I don’t want to, either, trust me, but like it or not, we do need to consider it. Yes, you survived your breech birth but that isn’t to say that it’s given you survive it and certainly not without problems later. Then there’s the tiny little detail that you were, I at least imagine, born to two completely fay parents, yes?”

He got a nod. “Right. See, that’s where part of my worry stems from. I’m not fay. I may be partway to becoming one but I wasn’t born as one. Who’s to say the magic here is completely reliable? I know I shouldn’t rely on fairy tales but in every story I’ve ever been told, magic has always been just a little bit capricious, benign or malignant. What if the human part wins out on some crucial point and rejects whatever magic is supposed to help it? What then? I’m also a man. Fay or not, you can’t seriously expect me to birth it like a normal woman would and I don’t really want to think about having a ruddy caesarean on the floor of a cave.”

He paused at the look on Sherlock’s face and sighed. “We’re going to be parents, Sherlock. A small, new life is going to be entirely dependent on the two of us for its survival, never mind its proper development. We have to consider what might happen to it, including possible dangers. Ignoring the
issues because they’re unpleasant to contemplate doesn’t mean they go away.”

“I am perfectly aware of that,” Sherlock said, sounding decidedly sullen.

“Are you, though? Are you willing to accept that it might require something of you that you’re not entirely comfortable with, that you can’t easily agree to? Like having to go to London to get help for _—“

“I can’t go to London!”

The outburst shut John up very effectively, his mouth clicking audible shut while his eyes opened wide, then narrowed. “You what?”

Sherlock looked as though the outburst had surprised him as much as it had John and furthermore, that it was something he wished he’d never divulged. The nostrils flared slightly and the face went stony as he took a step backwards.

“Sherlock?” John asked, pitching his voice low and gentle in the hope that it got through.

It took a while but eventually the brunet spoke, the words sounding as though they were dragged from him.

“I...I can’t go to London…or anywhere else that is not part of these woods. I am the ruler of the forest. I am as dependent on it as it is dependent on me and that will be the case until my dying day.”

“Surely, that doesn’t mean that you can’t leave, as such, even for a limited time? That doesn’t make any –“

“I told you before, you should leave any semblance of your inferior human logic far behind in this place. It does not apply. No, it doesn’t ‘make any sense’ but that doesn’t alter the fact that it’s true. I cannot leave the forest any more than you could rip your heart out and expect to live. It is my lifeblood and without it, I die!”

As Sherlock had continued speaking, the same power that John had felt in the cave when they’d first met properly had slowly made its presence known. Growing steadily until it thrummed through everything surrounding them, it now made the air crackle and hum as though a storm was imminent, despite the sun high in the sky.

His little lodger felt it, too, and the blond had to fight the sudden nausea and rolling in his stomach. Despite all that, though, something clicked inside his brain.

“So...when you said that the baby needs the forest to...to develop, it isn’t just because it’s beneficial to the part of it that’s...earth-bound but because without it, it’ll die?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock admitted. “It’s a distinct risk but I don’t know for certain.”

He stepped closer again, the crackle abating slowly, and grabbed John’s shoulders. “I meant it when I said it doesn’t happen, John. Either or, yes, that has happened. Mrs. Hudson was human once, hard as that can be to believe, but that was many years ago and she claims hardly to remember the time before she came here.”

“Yeah, that’s another thing – what exactly is she? I know I’m ignorant of fay but I can’t work out what she is.”

“Churn milk peg, they call her,” Sherlock answered, then continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted.
“The point is, she is an admittedly fairly rare example of a human becoming fay. I have not personally come across any human impregnated by fay but people I’ve asked assures me that it has happened multiple times, though they failed to mention it going well for anyone involved. There is no reference map for this thing. It would be significantly easier if there was but I can’t just magic up such a thing.”

John snorted despite himself. “You can magic up everything else, why not an easy time being a parent?”

He smiled, feeling a little worn out after the morning they’d had. “So…now that you’ve brought me all the way up here, you’re not getting out of showing me a bit more of all this. I doubt that sitting up here is the only thing you did in the – how many years have you lived, anyway?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow and smirked. “I don’t give out that kind of information to just anyone.”

“I’m carrying your ruddy offspring, which is probably going to prod its way out of my stomach with its little antlers when the time comes and you say that to me.” John gave a theatrical sniff. “And here I thought we had something special.”

Bony hands moved down from the doctor’s shoulders and John had to suppress a noise of surprise when they unexpectedly swooped down to grab hold of his arse cheeks and pull him up and against the taller body. His hands automatically came up and tangled themselves in the fur on the chest.

“I’ll show you special,” Sherlock rumbled, voice deep and slightly playful, sending a shiver down the spine of the blond.

“Challenge accepted,” he whispered back, pressing their bodies together firmly.

In the end, they didn’t get any further than a healthy snogging session. Not because they were interrupted, as such, at least not by anyone from the outside. John got the impression that nobody would dare try to disturb Sherlock, except for emergencies, especially not up here.

The interruption instead came from their little, ever-growing clump of joy who decided another kicking session was in order and commenced quite the workout.

John grimaced and clutched his stomach, breaking away, Sherlock gave a half-smile and laid his hands over the blond’s.

“‘It only proves that it’s healthy and developing as it should,’” he said.

“A little piece of advice you might want to heed,” John countered. “Never try to tell a doctor what’s wrong or what the body should be doing. At least not if you value your kidneys.”

“Hereby noted. Now, perhaps we’d better get back. I still have things to attend today and you should get some rest.”

When John shot him a glare at that, Sherlock merely raised an eyebrow and gave a little smirk.

“Git,” the doctor mumbled but didn’t pursue it. “Alright, then, lead the way. I’ve learned my lesson
about walking around in this forest on my own, I think.”

As they started their trip back down, John felt the small mark from the Bucca Dhu itch again. He resisted scratching at it, worried that Sherlock would pick up on the gesture and take a closer look at it, no matter John’s protestations.

Truth to tell, he’d wondered why the taller man hadn’t spotted the mark yet, what with all the hand holding they’d been doing. Granted, it wasn’t exactly the largest or most immediately visible but it couldn’t be confused with just a beauty spot, either, and John somehow knew that Sherlock would’ve commented on it if he’d spotted it.

He was rather glad he hadn’t, though, mostly because it might cause another rift between them. When Sherlock had promised he’d find a way, where was the fairness, the consideration to the effort that was purportedly being put out when John so soon afterwards made an agreement like that?

Could he renege on it somehow? Would that be at all advisable? Moreover, did he dare risk telling Sherlock about it?

On the one hand, it would be better, if things went to hell in a handbasket, to have the ruler of the forest on his side to help him. On the other, if he told Sherlock, he felt there was a distinct risk the man would feel betrayed and not unreasonably so, either. Why would he help, then?

Pushing the thought firmly out of his mind, John mentally vowed to throw himself into further mending the bridges between them.

Far enough behind them so as not to be spotted, a large, black, furred, four-legged shape followed them, its huge paws making its walk utterly silent.

Very soon.

The next fortnight passed relatively peacefully.

Sherlock, slightly unexpectedly, held true to his word that he wouldn’t leave John out of the loop anymore; he got to go with him on the trips he made around the forest to make sure that everything progressed as it should, be it with the regular animals or the fay. He let John meet a lot of people that way, even though he never did anything as normal as introduce him. That the doctor had to do on his own but he found that he was learning a lot and he knew that Sherlock was at least trying, so he made sure not to complain.

The ruler of the forest didn’t need as much sleep as John, apparently, and was more likely to stay up thinking or reading while the other slept. At some point, though, he must have gotten tired. At least, he’d lain down beside John and stayed there for some time because even when the doctor woke up alone, there was heat coming off the place beside him.

Sometimes, John also woke up in the middle of the night to find an arm curled around him, unquestionably holding him, while a nose was buried in his hair, the deep breathing tickling ever so slightly. If the doctor tried to move, the arm tightened like it had the first night they’d shared a bed and there was a distinctly disgruntled noise.

Whatever the case, however, once day came, the touches was far less overt and frequent. The ones
that he’d noticed since he’d arrived remained, mixed with a few new ones, but there still seemed to be a hesitation and uncertainty to them that wasn’t present in the night.

Then again, in the night, it was Sherlock’s body and subconscious mind making the decisions rather than his conscious mind. John had sussed that though the man was quite clearly intelligent, possibly extremely so, that same large brain would be very likely to trip him up by overthinking things.

One advantage that tendency towards overthinking might have was that Sherlock seemed to deliberately take John to areas of the forest that seemed to be off the beaten path somewhat. However, when they got there, it turned out that there was someone or something that needed John’s medical expertise.

Sometimes the thing he was brought to was a dead body the brunet wanted to know how had perished. John would give his observations after a thorough examination, in his mind thankful that he seemed to be mostly over the time of morning sickness, and Sherlock would listen attentively, then nod and move on.

It was only later that John would learn of what those observations were used for, in the evening when Sherlock would rattle off the deductions and conclusions he’d reached about what had happened.

Other times, it was a person who was still alive that John was brought to see. They’d often be rather cautious, if not downright suspicious, when he approached, something he couldn’t really blame them for. But after some soft words from Sherlock, who was curiously gentle and patient with them, they eventually softened and told what they thought was ailing them, in a variety of sounds and noises that made it out for speech.

John felt frustrated at not understanding but was assured by Sherlock, who’d been translating what had been said, that he would in time. John didn’t believe him but chose not to say that out loud.

Of course, diagnosing without the proper equipment, on creatures that could only broadly be said to have anatomy resembling humans, was anything but easy, even considering the experience he’d gained from his time in the army. Treating them without the equipment or anything approximating the medicines he had access to at the clinic was even worse but he persevered as best he could.

It wasn’t exactly difficult to work out why the brunet was doing this. John had said repeatedly that he didn’t belong in the forest, in the community of folklore creatures living there, so now here Sherlock was, trying to integrate him into said community, to show the blond that he could belong. That he could make a living, have a purpose of his own, away from Sherlock, within the confines of the woods without sacrificing what he was and what he did, at least not significantly so.

Despite the rather obvious purpose, though Sherlock never seemed to acknowledge this, John found himself appreciating the effort immensely and the glimpse into what he suspected was the genuine personality of Sherlock beneath all the pompousness and aloofness. More than that, he found he was enjoying the time spent, not just with his companion, though that was an ever-increasing factor, but with the fay he was brought to examine.

They were weird, they were curious, they were so far removed from anyone he’d come across before in his life and yet, they were surprisingly human. Not that he would ever be stupid enough to mention that to their faces, as they’d undoubtedly take offense, but nevertheless, there were quite a few similarities to be found.

There was, among others, the mother water sprite convinced that John couldn’t possibly have any better idea of what was wrong with her precious offspring, despite it having a nasty cough, which
could develop into something worse if left untreated. Despite her continued verbal protestations, the little one took the examination with quiet acquiescence. When it came to what ought to be done, though, John was stumped for the moment, mostly because how do you tell a water spirit to wrap up warm and drink something hot?

In the end, they worked something out, though the doctor couldn’t quite remember what it was.

Even though they were making a rather good team, got on progressively better and the blond gradually began to settle into the life Sherlock helped carve out for him, John hadn’t forgotten the promise he’d made; that he would find a way for John to conceal his appendages, especially since John thought he could begin to feel something pushing against the backseat of his trousers from the inside.

That said, he was hesitant in broaching the subject with the other. Not so much because he was anticipating another argument because of…well, that wasn’t quite true. He very much was but that had less to do with the promise itself, as they’d been over that, and more to do with it might coming to light that John had made a deal with the Bucca Dhu.

He wanted to go back on the deal, he honestly did, because he’d made it when he was annoyed, fed up and convinced that Sherlock was somehow trying to pull one over on him and never fulfil his end of the agreement they’d made. Thus, he’d made a rash decision when the apparent shapeshifter had come appeared out of the blue.

He’d cursed himself for falling into that, when he had been so very careful about what the rest of the fay people he’d encountered said and did…apart from Midsummer Eve, obviously.

Apparently, all you had to do to get John Watson fall hook, line and sinker for something was to make him beyond angry with someone else and then overwhelm him somewhat. It’d been with effort that he hadn’t gotten angry or needlessly sarcastic when that revelation had dawned on him.

Apart from that, there was another problem to consider. He had no idea how you summoned the creature, if you even could, so how the bloody hell was he going to negotiate the deal, anyway?

Asking Sherlock about it would hardly be a good idea, when part of the point was not to alert the brunet. Additionally, though, now that they were spending so much more time together, it was hard to get a conversation going with any of the ‘local’ fay without Sherlock being within hearing range.

In fact, the ruler seemed to make a point out of being close to John whenever other folklore people were present, especially if the doctor was going to interact with them. If John didn’t know better, he’d suspect a streak of jealousy from the man.

He would have to find some way, though, whatever he would have to do to accomplish it. The time limit on his stay in the forest may have been lifted, as such, and he continued to ignore the vague, nagging feeling that that might’ve been a mistake, but there was still the time limit on the deal he’d made with the shapeshifter to consider.

The worst of it, the absolute worst of it, was that he was somewhat hazey on exactly what his end of the bargain had been. He could remember the meeting, the shift from horse-creature to whatever it’d been, its glowing eyes and its end of the bargain. When it came to his own part, however, it lingered just out of reach of his conscious mind, no matter how hard he tried to grasp at it.

Was that done deliberately on the part of the Bucca Dhu? Probably, it was fay, after all. But how? Could John reverse it in time? How would he manage that?
All these questions churned inside his mind, a small knot forming in the pit of his stomach. He tried to be sensible and calm about it but didn’t quite manage it.

Perhaps he could ask Mrs. Hudson? The jealousy couldn’t possibly be a factor with her and he could visit her on the pretext of being worried about the baby. Then he could find a way to ask about it casually and –

“John. You’re not listening.”

John blinked, coming back to the here and now. “No, sorry, mind went…what were you saying?”

Sherlock sighed heavily. “You’d think you’d try to listen when I tell you something important.” Despite the words and the annoyance at having to repeat himself, there was a gleam in the pale eyes. “I said, I may have found a way to solve the problem.”

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger? Not really, is it? I hope it's sorta satisfying, nevertheless. I did say we weren't done with the Bucca Dhu, though, and we aren't. All in good time. :) Also goes for the one following them ;) ^^
Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock discuss the solution Sherlock mentioned. Then, Sherlock makes an effort to bring them closer, physically and otherwise. John doesn't mind except he's no passive partner.
What will they find when they get to where the solution may be located?

Chapter Notes

Surprise! I've had a few writing sprees and I've felt bad about dragging things out, so I thought I'd 'treat' everyone to a chapter a week early.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John blinked again, trying to get up to speed and push his thoughts out of the way for the moment at the same time. “Problem?” he queried, shifting his weight where he sat leaning against the cave wall.

Sherlock gave another sigh and fixed the blond with an exasperated, slightly disbelieving look. “Yes, John. Problem. The problem you keep going on about.”

He was sitting sprawled against the adjacent wall, his violin in his lap as he plucked at a few strings intermittently. It was probably designed to look aloof and composed but to the doctor it more looked like collapsing after a long day. Then again, it had been. Several long days, as a matter of fact, where Sherlock hadn’t seemed to get very much sleep.

“Mentioning it occasionally, a few times, at most, as I recall, does not equal ‘keep going on about it’,” John protested. “But really? Just like that? Nothing for weeks and suddenly?”

“Just because you fail to observe and remember information that are divulged in your vicinity does not mean that nothing has happened,” Sherlock retorted, plucking a string too hard and making a sickly ‘twang’. “What I haven’t been able to gather myself has been gathered by others who owes me a favour. It’s not certain at all that they can help or that they want to even if they can but it is the most tangible possible solution that we’ve been able to find.”

“Yeah?” John sat more upright, showing that he was listening attentively. Not only was he too tired for even a small row, he was far more interested in hearing just what the solution could be and why the ones meant to help would possibly not want to.

“So, who is it, then?” He’d learned not to say ‘what’. After all, no sentient creature liked to be addressed or described like a non-sentient one.

“We’re going to the dwarves.”

“There’s dwarves here? No, wait, what am I saying, of course there is. It seems like every mythological being ever imagined, sorry, born, has decided to congregate here so I don’t know why
I am even surprised.” He paused for a moment to take it in. “So…dwarves. Don’t know a lot about dwarves but we’re going underground to see them, I take it?”

“Of course, we are.” Though he was obviously trying, Sherlock couldn’t quite hide the ‘must-you-be-dense’ note to his voice. “They are connected to the earth more than most. That and they are very practical and methodical.”

“Being closer to the minerals they need for crafting and so on,” John said, conjecturing from what he knew.

“Indeed.”

“You sound like there might be a problem with going to see them, though.”

Sherlock made a noncommittal noise. “It’s not certain that there will be a problem but dwarves are notorious for their stubbornness, in particular when it comes to their craft. They’re very proud of their craft.”

“They ought to be. Some of the best magical items in stories were made by dwarves, it must have some basis in reality. Most of what I vaguely remember seems to have.”

Sherlock smiled, as though John had pleased him with what he’d said. “True. The fact that they’re proud does present a problem because they demand a high compensation for their work.”

“That’s only fair, though. If you do an excellent job, the price you’re paid should reflect that. That can’t be the real reason, surely?”

“Compensation can be other things than purely money, John,” Sherlock pointed out. He stopped idly plucking at the string of the violin and instead put it up into the proper playing position. “Now, I suggest you get some sleep. It’s been a long day, after all, and the dwarves do live quite far away.”

John blinked, then raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms. “Nice going there, Sherlock, that was such a subtle way of diverting my attention from the question that you didn’t actually properly answer that I might have never noticed.”

“You’ll see tomorrow, John,” the brunet said calmly. “No need to deal in hypothetical situations at this time of night.”

“You just did!” John exclaimed in exasperation.

Sherlock didn’t answer; he merely leaned over to grab the bow, then pushed it across the violin strings slowly and deliberately.

John glared a little but to little effect, as Sherlock had closed his eyes and furrowed his brow slightly, giving a perfect impression of someone utterly immersed in what they were doing.

“Fine, then, you git. Have it your way this time,” John grumbled. He’d learned that it was completely useless to try and continue the conversation, good or bad, when Sherlock did that. All he’d achieve was wasting his breath.

So instead, he got up, went to get some of the furs from their usual place and placed them further towards the back of the cave where he’d piled up the small amount of things he’d brought with him to Cornwall when he’d come down for his answers.

To his surprise, the pixies who’d attempted to steal his food had volunteered to get the stuff he’d
unintentionally left behind at the pub for him. It had happened only a few days after he’d agreed to stay, well within the period he’d booked the room for, so they’d faced no trouble getting hold of the things. To be honest, John had been more surprised that everything seemed to be there when they returned.

They’d grinned and run off as soon as they’d given him the stuff and he had only occasionally spotted them afterwards and even then, never for long enough to say thank you. He knew that their willingness to help had most likely been because Sherlock had coerced them but he still wanted to say thank you.

Now he settled down facing his small bundle, with his back to the wall, mindful how he laid his head down so he didn’t accidentally bump his still growing antlers. They’d grown steadily in the past month and had by this time grown to the point where they not only looked like the real thing, they reached past the side of his skull. Consequently, he had to think more about them as he moved and especially when he laid down on his side.

Tired as he was, he’d started to doze off to the slow playing and therefore, he didn’t notice that the music had stopped until he felt arms slide around him, a leg pushing between his and a cold nose tickling his ear, causing him to somewhat wake up.

“Well, this is new,” John commented sleepily, not turning his head to look at the other. “Normally you make sure I’m asleep before you lay down yourself, never mind the whole wrapping around me. What, are you afraid that I’m going to sneak off in the night and you’ve got to box me in like this to prevent it?”

It would make sense, seeing as he’d moved away from their usual spot. Not that he was, mind. He had grown to like being there, quite apart from not fancying becoming a freak attraction at the next fair. Leaving was no longer on his agenda. He’d merely wanted a bit of space without moving outside. It was getting far too cold at night, even for the sensible clothes he’d decided to bring.

“Nothing of the sort. You merely looked…lost.”

“Lost?” John snorted, snuggling closer into the furs and the hold those long limbs had on him. It was nice and the broad hand that caressed his belly each night had only grown more pleasurable as he grew. “Pull the other one, it’s got bloody bells on.”

Sherlock merely hummed in reply, nosing further under John’s ear. The tip of a tongue lapped softly at the spot just behind the ear.

“Sherlock…”

“You still smell good, John. In fact, your scent keeps getting better and better.”

“Still probably because I smell like you and the more time I spend in your very close vicinity, the more it rubs off.”

The snort ought to tickle, not send a shiver down John’s spine, but that was what it did. “You see but you don’t observe. I can identify my own scent without any problem and yes, some has indeed rubbed off on you. But since you insist on bathing at every opportunity, the amount left is minimal.”

He paused to let his nose trail from the doctor’s ear across his jaw line, prompting another shiver.

“You even shave again. Yet you have a distinct scent that has only grown stronger since you arrived here. Whether that is linked with our growing child, your continued transformation into fay, a combination of the two, or something else entirely, however, I don’t know.”
The tongue then licked a long, slow stripe all the way down John’s neck, nipping at his skin where it stopped. “In any case, the fact is that you smell divine, John, even if you have to get up close to appreciate it properly.”

“That why you’ve been…ah…been noseing and sniffing that area more and more?”

It would certainly tie well into why there’d been a hint of jealousy in Sherlock’s behaviour. If he smelled good when the fay got close, there was a much more tangible risk of them being overwhelmed and doing something they shouldn’t.

“Mnh…” Another slow lick, this time upwards, and at the same time, the hand on the blond’s stomach trailed its way upwards, too, the long fingers leaving extra sensitive skin in its wake.

John had the odd, yet not completely unfamiliar experience, of sporting an erection almost at full mast that was just lightly poking the underside of his belly. What was more, he was also feeling a slowly rising cock at the small of his back.

“I thought you said…we had a long day ahead of us…tomorrow.”

“We do.” The touches didn’t stop. Instead, the hand previously unoccupied slid down to caress the inside of John’s thigh, infuriatingly close-yet-far from his now fully erect cock.

“Sherlock…” the blond moaned softly, pressing into the touches.

“Just relax and enjoy it, John,” the brunet murmured.

The words helped break John out of his momentary stupor. “Like hell,” he growled and turned over in the hold.

Sherlock looked a little surprised at the sudden move. He was even more surprised when John reached out and grabbed hold of the back of the brunet’s neck, firmly without being forceful.

“If,” John began, looking the other straight in the eye as he spoke, “if we’re going to do this…If we’re going to transition into being more than parents-to-be and well, I’d say friends, then there’s a few things that need to be made clear. One, this is not going to be a singular occurrence or even just a sporadic one whenever you might feel like it. Two, it's not going to be like last time, at all. You might be the ruler around here but in this, we’re bloody well equal. Is that understood?”

A small part of John expected Sherlock to resent being addressed like this, to be told what was going to happen outright. That he was used to getting his own way had been clear from the start.

Therefore, he was rather surprised when what he got in reply wasn’t a frown or a denial but a broad, satisfied grin.

“I knew it, right from the start.”

John tilted his head. “Knew what?”

“That you’d be a perfect match.”

“No, you didn’t. Give over, you couldn’t possibly know that, especially not that early.”

“I’ve warned you before that you should no longer try to apply your human logic.”

“I’m not going to just let you fob me off with mystic bullshit all the time.”
John was about to argue further when Sherlock bent his head and kissed him, deep and hard.

Once he pulled back, he smiled again. “Not mystic bullshit. Just very apt at deductions and I had plenty of time to observe you both when you danced and afterwards. I wouldn’t have joined in otherwise.”

“Yeah, that’s another thing. You said something about you never normally did and that the dance isn’t for you. What did you mean?”

“I’ll tell you later, John. Now, I believe you said something about being equal?” He raised an eyebrow in challenge.

*Sodding git, you did that on purpose!* John thought but kept his mouth shut. That was mainly because the eyebrow wasn’t the only challenge; a bony hand had reached down again to glide softly across the bare skin where John’s hip joined his thigh.

The doctor had taken to sleeping naked because if he didn’t, he’d wake up with his shirt around his armpits and his pyjama-trousers at least down to his knees. Sherlock understood the need for clothes during the day but thought them utterly redundant at night. More than that, they blocked access to the feel of the baby, he claimed. John had grumbled but decided it wasn’t worth the fight and had taken to go to bed without. For warmth, he had the enormous bundle they slept in as well as the unexpected furnace that was Sherlock.

Now he was oddly grateful for it in another way. His erection had waned slightly as they’d talked but he hadn’t gone completely flaccid. The cock in front was as hard as before and it only took a slight push forward to bring them into contact, however light that was.

*So, you don’t believe that I can actually take charge, you antlered bastard? I’ll show you.*

Grinning in acceptance of the challenge, John moved his free hand down to grasp one shapely buttck firmly and press the other closer to him. This, combined with a tilt of the hips from the doctor, pressed their dicks together fully, John’s swelling back into full mast at the sensation.

“See, last time, you had an unfair advantage,” John said calmly, sliding his hand from buttck to hip to grip it firmly and prevent it moving. He then began thrusting, deliberately slowly, making sure that he slid along the entire length of the other’s cock. “I think it’s only fair that we…even that out a bit, hm?”

He knew perfectly well that if Sherlock didn’t want to be held down, there was nothing John could do to stop him. Thus, the power still technically lay with the brunet. But that wasn’t the point. The point was to see if Sherlock was going to let him be the one in charge or not.

At his third slide, a small noise came from the taller man. It was hard to say what kind of noise it was, apart from being strangled and short, almost as though it hadn’t been intended.

*Good.*

“Like that, hm?” John asked in a hum. “That’s good. Let’s see if we can’t make it a little better, though.”

With that, he once again let his hand slide. This time, he slid it past the hip and down to circle both erections with it, which he could just about manage, pressing them together more firmly. This caused a small groan from both, which grew as John drew his hand up at the same, slow pace he’d used before, brushing his thumb across the heads when he reached them, smearing precum in the process.
“John.” The voice was a deep rumble.

“Mmh?”

“John.”

“Yes?”

“Do something.”

“You don’t think I already am, do you? Should I just hurry things along, then? No, I don’t think so.”

He tightened his grip slightly, biting the inside of his cheek at the added friction that caused, in combination with the dryness of his hand. The precum was helping minutely but he’d have to do something more.

It wouldn’t do to just use spit and he hadn’t thought to bring anything with him that would be significantly better than the spit but he –

His train of thought was derailed suddenly, mostly by the long finger pressing between his buttocks, which made John let out a small noise of surprise. It traced around the outer rim of his entrance several times but didn’t make any attempt to push inside.

John opened his mouth to ask just what the hell Sherlock thought he was doing when the finger then withdrew and the hand was instead brought up between them.

What are you doing? Hang on, what the hell is that?”

“Slick.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Why is that coming out of my…my hole?”

“Magic,” Sherlock said simply and started to bring his hand downward.

John gripped the hand to stop it. “That’s not a good enough explanation. I’m not supposed to produce anything clear and viscous from that end unless I’m seriously unwell, so why?”

“It’s the best, the only explanation I can give you. You’ve taken to the magic from the moment you arrived here. It’s not too strange an idea it’s going to help you produce something that’ll help you delivering the baby when the time comes. Now…”

With that, he shook off John’s hand and lowered his own to grasp their erections, slicking them up properly.

Once that was done, though, he let go again to grab John’s hand and bring it down. “…I believe you had something to show me?”

John growled and rolled, bringing the brunet with him so that Sherlock ended up on his back, with John above him, braced on one hand while the other still holding them pressed together.

“I’ll show you alright,” he growled, thrusting quite a lot more forcefully, the new lubrication easing the way.

Sherlock grinned and pushed back, one of his hands going to grab onto the back of one of John’s thigh. John responded by lowering his head and starting to lick over the skin that was exposed, the laps short and teasing.
They fairly quickly established a rhythm, one that soon had Sherlock panting and John moaning into
the piece of flesh he was nibbling at that moment.

Then John stopped, completely. He got a displeased growl for his trouble but nevertheless, he let go
and sat back so he was straddling the others furry, strong thighs.

“John!” Sherlock growled and there was that undercurrent to the voice that could be felt in the earth
itself.

“Not done yet,” John said, refusing to be intimidated by it. “You’re going to like this, I promise.”

He lowered himself again, somewhat, but it wasn’t so that they could continue their hand job.
Instead, what made contact with the long shaft was the curve of John’s growing belly.

The reaction was immediate and rather strong. A shudder ran through the brunet’s entire body.

“John…!” Sherlock moaned deep in his throat, his hips bucking involuntarily.

“Mmmh, figured you might like that,” John whispered. Truth to tell, though, he was feeling the
connection, too, very strongly, at that, and it was a wonder that he didn’t come right there and then.

He stretched, making sure that his stomach didn’t move, so that he could reach the cupid bow lips,
which were parted slightly with panting, with his own. As soon as they touched, there was a rumble
from the taller man and the doctor’s mouth was practically plundered.

At the same time, bony hands reached down and grabbed hold of John’s buttocks pressing him
closer.

The rhythm was quickly re-established, albeit rather faster than before. It shouldn’t have made that
much of a difference but it did and both were panting into their increasingly frenzied kissing.

John finished first, groaning deeply into Sherlock’s throat as he began to shake through his orgasm. It
felt as though it was pulled from every point inside of him and almost whitened out his vision. Feeling
and hearing Sherlock climax shortly after only added to the feeling of pleasure as semen shot across
his sensitive belly.

How he managed not to collapse on top of the other, John had absolutely no idea. It was just as well
that he didn’t, though, and when he came to, as it were, he was being cradled in sinewy but strong
arms. Soft lips were pressed against his forehead and fingers were gently stroking at the base of his
antlers, which was oddly comforting instead of upsetting or alarming.

“You were right,” Sherlock murmured after a few moments.

“Think that’s the first time I’ve heard that from you out loud,” John replied, even more sleepy than
before. “Right about what, though?”

“That I would like that.” Sherlock seemed slightly shocked, yet amused by it himself.

“Yeah, amazing, isn’t it? Being a stupid, human doctor and all – “

“Shut up and go to sleep, John.”

“Not just yet.” John tilted his head upwards so he could claim a goodnight kiss. “There. Thank you.
For…you know…”

“Yes.”
Silence. Then, “Night, Sherlock.”

“Goodnight, John. And thank you, too.”

As he drifted off to sleep, John could have sworn he heard the murmured words, “Please don’t leave, John. Whatever happens, promise me that you’ll stay.”

Given that he’d been just about to nod off, however, it might have been something else entirely that he’d heard, if he’d heard anything at all.

They didn’t end up going the next day, after all. This was in part due to Sherlock having to leave in the middle of the night to deal with a complication that could turn dangerous if it wasn’t dealt with as quickly as possible.

He had been sensible enough to wake John, not to get him to tag along but to let him know that he was going in the first place. The doctor appreciated the gesture, watching the tall, imposing figure of his…boyfriend? Lover? Partner? Whichever, walk with his customary, confident stride and his head held high into the darkness of the forest, though he was swallowed by that darkness soon enough.

*You have to admit, that’s a rather marked improvement from when I first agreed to stay here, him actually making an effort to include me and inform me,* John mused sleepily, one of the larger furs draped over him to keep him moderately warm as he stood by the lip of the cave, leaning a bit against the rock.

Well, there was that and then there was the parting gesture; a long, one might say loving caress of John’s midsection while they had a thorough snog. That was something that most definitely wouldn’t have happened a month previous, for several reasons.

Just because Sherlock had to leave, though, didn’t mean that John had to stay up. Whatever sort of domestic ‘bliss’ they might enjoy at the moment, John was no housewife. He wasn’t going to have the buttered scones, crumpets and a pot of tea ready and waiting for his return.

“As a matter of fact, a pot of tea and some scones with clotted cream would go down a treat right about now,” John muttered around a yawn. It wasn’t that he was dissatisfied with the diet that he’d had, as such, it was all very healthy and nutritious. It was probably doing him the world of good, and the baby too, but at some point, a man could have enough of healthy eating and long for something sweet and buttered.

“Wonder if the pixies could be persuaded to make an errand or two to the nearest village for some provisions?” he murmured as he got back into bed, failing to notice that he’d begun to shiver under the furs, drifting off into a rather deeper sleep than what was normal, even for John.

By the time Demelza came in to check up on him, it was late afternoon and John had yet not stirred from the position he’d fallen asleep in. Worried after calling his name several times with no answer, she rushed over and shook him.

“John. John, can you hear me? John?” Her whispery voice would’ve been difficult to discern even if the doctor wasn’t deep in the clutches of fevered sleep.
She felt for his pulse, breathing a sigh of relief when she found it. She then checked his forehead, worried when it felt warm and clammy, even to her slightly less nerve-based touch. Though she still didn’t know much, she had tried to get John to teach her the rudimentary skills necessary for a caretaker, if not an actual nurse.

“John, please.” She shook him.

He groaned and muttered something that sounded like a slurred string of curses. When he was shaken again, he woke up sufficiently to open bleary eyes at her.

“Go away,” he said grumpily.

She shook her head.

“Go away,” he repeated, burrowing deeper into the furs. “I’m tired.”

“John, you’ve got a fever. I can’t go.”

“S only a cold,” he muttered, already starting to sink back into sleep. “Lemme sleep, I’ll be fine.”

“John, please,” she begged. “Sherlock won’t ever forgive me if something happens to you.” All she got in response was a displeased, sleepy huff. “Can I at least call Mrs. Hudson?”

“Mmh. Fine. Now, bugger off.”

With that, Demelza ran off.

When she returned over an hour later, it wasn’t just with the elderly woman, however. Right on the heels of the women came a tall, familiar figure who had returned as Demelza was dragging Mrs. Hudson into Sherlock’s area of the forest.

Not that John noticed. He was still sleeping deeply and therefore he also failed to notice the thunderous expression heavily mixed with genuine worry and anxiety passing over Sherlock’s face as they spotted the sleeping figure. In truth, it was a wonder that he didn’t push past the two others to get there first.

As it was, he seemed to be keeping an awful lot of emotion in check as he stood off a little way, watching the midwife and young girl bent down to examine the prone figure; his jaw worked, his hands clenched and unclenched and his eyes had widened.

After what felt like a very long time but in truth wasn’t more than ten, perhaps fifteen minutes. Mrs. Hudson straightened back up, her back to the brunet.

“You can breathe again, Sherlock love,” she said. “He’s fine. Got a bad case of pneumonia, poor soul, but nothing that we can’t handle, eh, Demelza?” She smiled at the girl.

“He isn’t coughing,” Sherlock pointed out, sounding accusatory and almost offended.

“Pneumonia isn’t merely a nasty cough, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson replied a little sharply, turning to face him. “It can be pretty serious. I’ll have him better soon enough, don’t you worry this time, but you have to be more careful with him and not just because of the little one.”

“I know that!” He sounded a little hurt, now, too.

Her expression softened. “I know you do, dear. You just need reminding exactly what entails sometimes. I’m glad to see you seem to have gotten closer, even with you and your big mouth, and I
won’t have you mucking that up. Now be a dear and fetch me a few things. I’ll need them to make this love well quickly.”

“I can do that,” Demelza volunteered, ever the peacemaker. “That’ll help me learn more, wouldn’t it?”

“It most certainly would,” Mrs. Hudson smiled as she turned towards the girl, though she shot the brunet a meaningful glance out of the corner of her eye. “Well, then, sweetie, here’s what we’ll need…”

While the women moved away a little to talk, Sherlock made his way over to the figure under the furs, still sleeping, though a bit more fitfully than before. There he hunched down, reaching out to gently caress John’s antlers.

A soft moan was his reward, though it was hard to hear whether it was a positive or negative one.

“I have enough trouble leaving as it is. I can’t believe I’ve…” Sherlock whispered but stopped before the rest of the sentence passed his lips.

It wasn’t just that he had a bit of trouble actually putting into coherent thought, though that was a major factor. Another was the fact that Mrs. Hudson had a very keen ear when the situation called for it and he didn’t really want her to know and yet another was that when he did say it, he wanted it to be while John was awake and coherent enough to understand it.

So, instead he leaned forward further and planted a soft kiss on the doctor’s burning forehead. “I’ll tell you later,” he whispered. “I promise.”

It took a few days for John to get well again, under the stern yet loving care of Mrs. Hudson, with Sherlock a frequent visitor, though he left to take care of a few things he’d neglected while John had been going with him.

By the time John had grumbled, groaned and sworn his way back to full health, it was the day before Halloween. Almost at the end of the agreed-on time for the original negotiation of stay.

Though nothing was said out loud about it, as they prepared for the trek to the dwarves, John noticed that something was undeniably setting Sherlock on edge, the knowledge of that ‘deadline’ coming up being the cause. It could of course just be tied to John being ill and whatever he might, might feel was his part in it but though that was a perfectly reasonable explanation, it didn’t quite seem right.

John couldn’t help the worrying, nagging thought that the behaviour was caused by Sherlock having discovered the little mark. It kept rattling through his mind as they started walking, the doctor wrapped up warm and with a very sturdy length of wood for a walking stick, though with Sherlock keeping a firm grip on his other arm, the stick was hardly necessary.

That it was a long trip with very little being spoken wasn’t helping.

That said, it didn’t mean that John couldn’t appreciate the sight of the home of the dwarves when they reached it. It was nothing like he’d expected but –

“There you are, finally!”
More of a cliffhanger this time and what do you know, sex! The sex was a bit different and rather fun to write this time (whether or not it went well I leave up to others to judge), though I have no idea if getting off against a belly, pregnant or not, has a specific name.
We'll get somewhere with all this story, too, I promise. Soon. Thank you for bearing with me.
Forging

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock meet the dwarves. They argue about what they're asked to make and a few things come to light, among them one that'd hardly going to be well received.

Chapter Notes

Happy Birthday to me!
Felt I couldn't leave you without a chapter for that reason, though, so here you go. If it feels rushed or similar, apologies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A figure walked towards them, their steps brisk and sure even in the light that was already weak and fading towards twilight given the time of year.

Like with the entrance itself, though, the dwarf didn’t look like what John had thought of as a dwarf but then, he had to admit that he was likely influenced by the more modern portrayals rather than the traditional ones.

The beard was there, certainly, and the swarthiness of the hair, too. Despite that, the skin itself was rather pale, in that special, slightly luminescent way that suggested its owner very rarely saw genuine sunlight, and a very clear suggestion of strength and power hiding beneath sensible clothes meant for hard work with metals.

What there was not, however, was any feeling that someone had taken a big, burly northerner and shrunken him to half size, while the dimensions were kept as though he was still big. In fact, though John had to admit that he himself wasn’t the tallest of men, he was a little shocked to see that the ‘dwarf’ was about his height and in proportion, too, though the muscles did lend him a broader appearance than the doctor.

“Seen your fill, have you?” the dwarf said to John, the rumbling voice caught between gruff and faintly amused. “I ain’t a ruddy statue for you to ogle, son.”

John blinked and opened his mouth to apologize for staring, wondering why the dwarf had addressed the blond without giving his ruler even a cursory formal greeting and why Sherlock was keeping silent.

“I know, I’m sorry, I just – “ he began.

The dwarf grinned, “Humans. Always so easy to rile up, one way or the other. First time you’ve seen a dwarf, is it? Must be, the way you were staring. You’ve come to ask a favour from us, I gather? Well, then, only fit and proper that you give me your name.”

John’s eyes flicked over to try and gauge Sherlock’s reaction to that. He’d only ever been introduced
to the other residents they’d gone to visit by name when they had been vouched for by Sherlock beforehand and even then, the brunet had been the one doing the introduction.

Granted, there had been that very first time on Midsummer’s Eve where he’d given up his name to Sherlock willingly. There were two differences, however, and major differences at that; John had thought that Sherlock and the rest were people in masks, so it would hardly be stupid to give your name to regular humans, and he had been very…under the influence, though of what exactly he wasn’t certain.

_The dwarf isn’t the first mythological creature that’s asked for your name where you’ve been fully aware of them not being human, though, is it?_

Sherlock didn’t return John’s look but he did come to his rescue anyway, in his own way. “Why should he bother being proper when you ignore it so wholeheartedly just because it suits you?” he said, drawing the dwarf’s attention to him.

“I’m not the one asking for a favour, though, am I?”

“No, and neither is he. I am.” For what it was worth, Sherlock did look the part of a ruler then, tall and imposing and regal, his chin raised and his stance strong.

The dwarf wasn’t fazed, though. “Didn’t turn out well for you last time you bullied us into making something for you, did it?” he said, a small smirk on his lips.

Sherlock’s face went hard for a moment and his eyes flickered uncertainly towards John. “That was a long time ago, I was young and foolish. This is a completely different situation,” he said in what could only be described as a frosty tone.

The two glared at each other for a few moments, neither willing to back down. Then the shorter fay chuckled and shook his head. “You never change, do you, Sherlock?” he said, his dark eyes sparkling.

He reached out to grab hold of Sherlock’s hand, pulling him into a brief, yet bearlike hug. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you,” the brunet returned, a small smile also on his lips.

The dwarf turned to John. “I don’t envy you, mate, being lumbered with this one for a fellow parent.” He nodded towards the doctor’s stomach then held out a hand to John as well. “My name is Sindre.”

“John,” the blond said in return, grasping the calloused, broad hand in his, feeling the power in that grasp. “Cinder? A little apt, isn’t it? For a smith, I mean.”

“Sihn-drah,” Sherlock corrected. “It’s not an English name, the pronunciation doesn’t automatically carry over.”

“It’s Norse,” Sindre said, sounding a little proud. “Now that we have been properly introduced, let’s go inside. Can’t really help you out here.”

With that, he turned and walked back through the entrance that looked more like that to a dolmen instead of something out of Tolkien. He didn’t look back to see whether they followed or not and John had the fleeting thought of whether that was just a characteristic of mythological creatures or not.
He then felt a broad hand settle on the small of his back, in a gesture that seemed both protective and possessive at the same time.

“Well done,” Sherlock said softly into John’s ear as they followed the dwarf.

“Thank you. No idea what you’re praising me for but thank you.”

“He likes you. It ought to help smooth the negotiations.”

“I thought you said you’d already gotten them to agree to this,” John said, unable to help bringing it up.

“They’re dwarves. An agreement does not equal a binding contract and this is not the easiest of tasks, even for them. There are lots of elements to it, which is another reason why we’ve needed to come. If it’s to work properly, they need something from you personally. I didn’t think you’d appreciate it having just been taken from you without consent.”

“Having what taken, exactly?” John asked, feeling slightly confused, which wasn’t helped by them venturing further and further into the dwarven home, which was hardly lit. The small pools of dirty, warm light that could be seen only served to muddle vision, as they stole night vision without giving enough light to truly see by.

He had to rely on Sherlock almost entirely as they made their way deep into what had to be the bedrock of the place, holding onto his arm. He still didn’t want to rely on anyone more than he had to but there was pride in independence and then there was pure idiocy when stumbling in the dark could prove hazardous.

“Something identifying you as you,” Sherlock explained, “irrevocably so.”

“What, you mean like a hair or something? DNA?”

During their trips round the forest kingdom, John had learned that the fay had a lot of concepts and ideas like those of modern humans without them lapping over entirely. This could be one of them.

“In that same vein, yes, only as much on a spiritual level as a merely physical one.”

“Makes sense, given how you all seem to work, and I’d hazard a guess what ticks both boxes there would be blood.”

“Quite so.” There was a brief pause. “You take such revelations very stoically, John, dealing with it in a practical way.” Sherlock sounded, of all things, somewhat proud of the fact.

John shrugged. “Anger doesn’t help me much, does it? Besides, the more I learn of this place, the more it does make sense. Unless, of course, it’s just me that’s going barmier and barmier by the moment. I still sometimes expect to wake up and find myself in Bedlam.”

“Bedlam doesn’t exist anymore.”

“You know what I mean – and anyway, how would you know? I thought you said you can’t go outside the forest.”

“I can read, John, it’s hardly brand-new information.” Well, at least it seemed that Sherlock had gotten over some of the nervousness that had plagued him on the trip. Whether that was a good thing or not, the doctor had no idea.
“It could’ve been rebuilt, for all you know.”

“Now you’re just being querulous.”

“Of course, it’s me that’s being querulous, obviously,” John said dryly. “But it is blood, then? Isn’t that a rather big infection risk, especially with the baby to consider?”

“Not if they do it right. They’ve done it many times before and they’re aware of your…situation.”

“Yeah, ta, I did gather that. If the pointed look at my bump wasn’t a clue, then I might have twigged at the word ‘parent’, I think. Does everybody in the forest know?”

“It is something to celebrate and people do love to talk so the news have been spreading ever since you arrived here. That said, dwarves aren’t the most sociable of creatures at the best of times. They didn’t know until I informed them that what I was asking for wasn’t for me.”

“What was it you asked for back in the day that made them so adamant not to help you?”

“Oh, look, we’re here.”

“Sherlock.”

The taller man completely ignored both the question and the disapproving tone. Instead, he went properly into the large room they’d just arrived at, over to where Sindre had joined some of his fellow dwarves, each as swarthy as the other. In fact, distinguishing between them was almost impossible, especially given the small amount of light coming mainly from the fire of the forges that dominated the space. Only the fact that John had noticed a scar running from Sindre’s ear to the middle of his cheek marked him out.

Tired of being left out of things just because he was human, sort of, John walked up to stand beside Sherlock, not touching him but standing close enough that he had to notice him.

Sherlock did indeed stop whatever he was talking quietly with some other dwarf about and turned his head towards the blond. John lifted his head and met the gaze evenly, cocking an eyebrow. In response, Sherlock gave the smallest of smiles, then straightened up and took a step back, so that John was touching him.

The dwarf Sherlock had been talking to turned his gaze towards the blond, his dark eyes almost as penetrating and scrutinizing as the pale ones.

After a few moments of staring, the dwarf nodded, as though in approval of what he’d gleaned. Then, without a word, he reached out and grabbed John’s wrist, thankfully his right one, not his left. Turning it up so the inside was visible, he then bent over to scrutinize that, tracing the veins.

John looked at Sherlock, who nodded in return, mouthing the word ‘blood’.

The dwarf pulled back, looked over at Sindre, who gave the briefest inclination of his head, and then looked at John.

“Agreed,” he said, his voice rumbling so deep that it went through John’s bones as much as through his ears.

“Agreed?” John echoed, eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Agreed to what, exactly?”

The horrible thought that something had just been negotiated right over his head that he wasn’t in
control of ran through his mind.

“We’ll help you.”

John couldn’t help it; he snorted in disbelief. “Just like that? Pull the other one. I’m not letting you help me, in any case, not without some idea of just what that help entails and what the price is going to be.”

The dwarf looked between Sherlock and John. “You said he already knew,” he said, addressing the ruler.

Something twisting in the pit of his stomach, John turned to Sherlock.

“You what?” he asked, his voice low and deceptively calm. “You didn’t say anything about there already being an agreed-on price for this. You specifically said that there wasn’t.” Something struck him. “Is…is this the real reason you’ve been fidgety and on edge the last few days? Because you knew you’d be selling me off?”


“You said that they demand a high price for their wares!” John interrupted, feeling angry and betrayed. “And that compensation doesn’t have to be money. What else is there but me? The only thing I have here, in this place, that is of any value to someone besides me is myself and my child!”

He backed away from both Sherlock and the dwarves, hand reaching out in search of something he could use as a defensive weapon. I’m telling you right now, I’ll kill you all before I allow you to harm my baby. Do you understand?”

The dwarf that had examined his wrist frowned. “Why would we ever want to harm your child?”

“ Mythological creatures that live underground is associated with the netherworld. Some things I do remember.” His hand had finally closed around something, which felt like the handle of a small hammer.

Sindre snorted. We are not agents of Hel and if you are going to quote old beliefs, perhaps you’d do well to remember that dwarves in human mythology is associated as much with life as with death. We have no intention of taking you or your child.”

“Then what did you just agree on?” John asked, still very much suspicious. He kept hold of the hammer.

“That the price Sherlock proposed originally, then raised just now will be sufficient payment for the task asked and that we can help you,” the other dwarf said. “This is delicate magic and it will try to work against us if your blood is not compatible.”

“And, of course, you can tell that my blood is compatible just from tracing a vein, that just makes the world of sense. Don’t tell, me, it’s ‘magic’.”

“No, it’s part of you,” Sindre said, a snap in his voice. “You’re not human any more, son, even if you aren’t all fay yet, but you began as a human. A human’s life is tied to blood far more than fay is and therefore, what has changed you has targeted your blood to make the change easier. If that isn’t considered, it might react and do so violently.”

“. . . Right,” John said, utter disbelief dripping from the word. Even with what he’d already experienced and Sherlock’s constant belittling of his attempts to use regular, human logic in these
cases, that whole concept seemed utterly ridiculous. Targeting magic or whatever or not, his blood was his blood and that was an end to it.

“You don’t have to believe me,” Sindre said, shrugging one shoulder. “It works whether you believe it or not. It’s the earth, not a parlour trick relying on belief.”

“John.”

It was Sherlock. He was standing between John and the dwarves, having watched the interactions between them. His expression was caught between hurt and worry, looking uncharacteristically vulnerable.

“You swear that you weren’t going to – “

“No,” Sherlock answered before John had finished the sentence, swallowing thickly. “No…I’d never…no. I swear.”

“Okay.” John put down the hammer, carefully, and walked back over to Sherlock, grabbing his hands and squeezing them. “Okay.”

They gazed at each other for a moment. Then Sherlock turned to the watching dwarves.

“You still haven’t told me what exactly you intend to make.”

Sindre smiled at that. “Do you want to see the design for it?” he asked, seemingly calm, though the small glint in his eyes revealed some pride.

“Design? What, you don’t just make it from mental images?” John asked, interested despite himself.

“Normally, yes, we would. When Sherlock decided to come ask for our help a few weeks ago, however, he was very adamant that whatever we were going to make, it should have a design that reflected the intended wearer.”

The first thing John felt was appreciation, that Sherlock had been that thoughtful, mixed with affection. The second was a moment’s confusion as to the ‘intended wearer’, since he remembered the exchange from when they arrived, until he twigged that that could of course just have been Sindre needling Sherlock for the hell of it, which didn’t seem out of character. The third was also tied to confusion but that wasn’t quite as easily solved.

“Wait a moment – weeks ago? You didn’t say anything about already being in contact with the dwarves as early as that,” he said, addressing Sherlock, intent on keeping his voice calm and reasonable this time. “Why not?”

“Because of you.”

“Me?” John asked, frowning.

“Yes. I needed to be sure that it could work as you wanted it to, with no ill effects to either of you, now or later. I will not have any harm coming to you or the baby. That and every other possibility also needed to be explored.” Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “If I could possibly avoid dealing with dwarves, I would.”

The comment only elicited snorts from the assembled dwarves.

“I thought we were supposed to be the ones to keep grudges.”
Sherlock made a face and threw out an arm in response but beneath the slight theatrics, John seemed to discern some genuine pain lurking in the pale eyes. He made a mental note of it, so that he could ask Sherlock about it later.

Out loud he chose to just lightly squeeze the brunet’s hand. “So…what did you have in mind for me?” he asked the dwarves.

What they did have in mind was a ring. John was rather incredulous that of all things, it would be a ring they’d picked. Then Sherlock pointed out that there was a reason it cropped up so often in different modern depictions; dwarves were master smiths, be it with the harsher or softer metals, and rings, armlets and necklaces could be worn by either females or males. It was not without reason the most magnificent, marvellous magical items in Norse mythology had been crafted by dwarves.

The decision to make it a ring was made on the demand from Sherlock that it be sufficiently masculine, discreet and easily slipped on and off. The possibilities after that were relatively limited.

Having been told that it was a ring and taking the designs of the jewellery he’d already seen, John thought that he had a good idea of what exactly the design would be.

It turned out that he was halfway right. There was a definite Norse look to it with several intertwined bands twisting around it but it was a lot more streamlined and flat than he would’ve thought it to be, giving it more of a clean, art deco feel that appealed to the blond. Furthermore, one of the bands became a small snakehead gripping what looked like a rod between its teeth.

When he traced a finger across the drawing, Sindre followed it. “Ah, yes, the snake. Sherlock was quite adamant about that – and the rod, of course. It’s not what I’d usually do but I have to admit, I’m rather pleased with how it turned out.”

“It’s…” John began but trailed off. He looked up at Sherlock, who stood behind him. “I never said anything about being a – “

“You were trained as a doctor and you’ve been a soldier. It’s hardly a difficult deduction to make, is it?”

“No, I suppose not. But that doesn’t explain how you know of the badge.”

“You’ve got it tattooed, John. Again, hardly that strenuous a deduction. But this way, it won’t attract attention if people do notice you are wearing a ring.” The defined face was carefully calm.

John smiled and elbowed the taller man. “Give over, you plonker, you could’ve just asked them to make a plain ring if that was all you were after.”

Oh, bloody hell, I did not expect him to do that for me. Breathe, John, breathe, damnit.

He turned his attention back to the dwarf. “And you can make that?”

Sindre looked offended at the implication that he couldn’t. “Of course. The design itself isn’t the difficult part. That is making the magic take to both the metal and the blood.”

“How do you do that, exactly?”
The dwarf pulled the drawing of the design closer to explain. There was something very familiar about the dwarf’s apparent delight in showing off skills to someone else.

“Traditionally, we make rings in gold, as that’s the most receptive to the magic in small quantities. However, as we also need to bind it to a specific person, we use the blood and mixes it in with iron.”

“Makes sense, there’s iron in blood, after all, it’d probably bind easier.”

“Mmh,” Sindre replied, looking only slightly annoyed at the interruption. “These two metals do not work well together so to balance it out and strengthen both, we need a third metal, which is silver.”

“Why not copper? It’s a better conductor.”

“Not for strong magic. You want to appear other than what you are whenever you wear the ring, you need the most precious metals available, apart from the iron. The other metals cannot handle the magic for long.” Sindre looked mildly frustrated at that, as though he’d spent a lot of time on trying to make it work himself, without much luck.

“Okay…I suppose that makes sense,” the blond conceded. “So, the intertwined bands actually have a purpose beyond the purely decorative, then? They help strengthen and bind the three metals together so the risk of them separating at a later point is greatly diminished?”

“Precisely.”

Sherlock, still standing a little behind John, shared a brief look with the dwarf over the bent over doctor’s head, a pleased and proud look evident in the pale eyes.

“Okay. How long does it take to finish, then?”

“Depending on how well it takes, at least all night.”

“All night? For a ring?”

The size of the object is not the issue, nor the details. As I said, what creates the possible complication is getting it to bond. That is a delicate procedure which takes time if you want it done properly.”

“We do,” Sherlock said. “We’ll wait for it to be completed.”

With that, he grabbed hold of John’s arm and began to drag at him. The doctor stood his ground only for a moment, then sighed and followed along.

“Are we going back, then?” he asked.

He got no reply.

Instead, he was dragged along, through the network of caves and tunnels that had the underside of enormous tree roots as part of the ceilings, apparently deeper into it rather than out of it. It shouldn’t be possible for there to be anything remotely familiar about tree roots, yet that was the distinct impression he got.

“Is that the…is that the tree? The roots from the big tree?”

“Of course, it is, John, do keep up,” Sherlock replied, not looking at John as he navigated back through the maze. “You’ve been told already that the entire magic of the forest is tied to the tree, yes? That is mostly true. The roots furthermore have connections with the earth and what lies beneath that,
“Right. Care to also tell me where we’re going?” The very sparse amount of light present still wasn’t helping John keep track.

“Don’t you trust me?” The words didn’t come out quite as flippant as they were presumably meant. Do I? John wondered, then realized, to his own surprise, that yes, he actually did, and what was more, he’d more than likely trusted him for a lot longer than he’d have thought. It probably ought to have been a terrifying thought but it wasn’t. It was anything but.

“I do,” he said out loud. He only heard the very small, sharp intake of breath because of the silence around them and because he was listening for it. “But trusting you isn’t the issue.”

“Of course, it is. Anyway, it doesn’t matter, since we’re here.”

They’d finally stopped, in front of what looked like a set of doors that seemed quite out of place compared to the rest.

“What is this place?” John asked.

“It’s going to be a long night. You’ll need your rest.”

With that, the doctor was dragged through, into a surprisingly well-lit room, and almost pushed onto a rather grander collection of furs and bedding than they had, in an actual frame. He got a pointed look and a nod in the direction of the bed, then the ruler went over to sit down on a stool that was far too short for him, facing John.

He actually went to the trouble of finding me somewhere to sleep that’s not the ground while we wait, John thought, a little dumbfounded. Who the hell is this and where is Sherlock?

“What about the blood?” was what he asked. “Didn’t you need to draw it?”

“Later. Sleep now.”

“No.”

Sherlock’s brow knitted together at the statement.

“I’m not waiting for that. I want to be fully awake and alert when the blood is taken and it seems like they’re going to need the blood sooner rather than later.”

He rolled up the sleeve on his right arm. Despite the tremors in his left hand he’d had since he’d come home, he figured he’d be capable of making a small cut that’d yield sufficient blood without the risk of cutting anything major.

“You’ve got anything in particular that it should be kept in?” he asked as he pulled the small folding knife he’d brought, and which the pixies had gotten back for him, out of his belt. He was glad he hadn’t used it much in the intervening time and that it was therefore clean enough that the risk of infection was minimal.

When he didn’t get an answer, he looked up and saw the brunet had gone a shade paler, which made no sense. Sherlock had seen plenty of blood, just in the time John had known him, there was no reason this should alarm him.

“Sherlock…?”
The man rose abruptly at that then, without a word, went over to rummage through what was clearly a dwarf’s belongings, eventually coming up with what looked like a small silver hip flask. He walked back to John, handed him the flask, a minute grimace flashing across his features as he did so, and went back to his stool, this time not facing the blond.

John, though confused, carried on with what he was doing. He went for cutting the tip of his right thumb. It would bleed well enough for the task but be relatively easy to cover, possibly with his mouth to start with, minimizing the risk of infection.

It took a bit to get the blood, partly because he wasn’t quite sure how much the dwarves would need and asking Sherlock yielded no answer. Once what he estimated as quite a decent amount that wouldn’t risk him becoming woozy had dripped into the flask, he closed the lid of it and stuck his thumb between his lips, sucking.

He belatedly realized that he was missing something to close it with properly but even as he thought it, a strip of cloth appeared in his vision before his thumb was pulled out of his mouth and wrapped in it quickly.

John opened his mouth to say thank you but got a kiss on his forehead instead. At the same time, Sherlock took the flask from him. Then, flask in hand, he strode over to the door, pausing at the door to look back at the blond.

“Will you get some sleep now?” he asked. He didn’t wait for an answer, though, and John was left staring at a closed door.

*Sodding idiot, what are you playing at now?* he wondered. Then he sighed and laid down.

By the time John woke up, it was well into the next morning and there was a familiar figure sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Lemme guess, you lemme sleep because it was easier not having me hanging on?” the doctor muttered sleepily and just a tad grumpily.

“Nothing of the sort. I let you sleep because you were tired and there was no reason for you to stay up just to sit around waiting.”

John sat up, feeling an arm go around his waist as he did so. “Alright, then. Does this mean that it’s all done and finished, then?”

“Not quite. They are still working on the last details.”

“Oh? Such as?”

“Such as making sure that your antlers won’t be hidden and yet able to bump into doorframes or the like.”

“Ah.” That did make a lot of sense. "When do they reckon they’ll be done, then? There’s the celebration tonight, after all.”
Sherlock huffed but didn’t answer. He didn’t look at John either, though.

“Oh, come on, Sherlock. It’s one of your largest celebrations, you’ve got to be there.”

“Don’t need to. Don’t want to.” There was a hint of sullenness to the baritone voice but there was something else there, too, something that John had heard before. Something that tied in with the nervousness from the day before.

He reached over to grab a bony hand. “Sherlock, look at me. Hey, now, come on. Look at me?”

Eventually, he did. The face was the same careful mask that the doctor had seen before.

“I’m not going anywhere, okay?” he said gently. “I know we’re getting this ring made and everything but that’s for emergencies, alright? Emergencies only. I promise.”

The mask crumbled a little. “I’m not going to leave you, okay?”

“When the child is born – “Sherlock began.

“Still not going to leave after that.”

Pale eyes began to show a small flicker of light. John grinned, shook his head and leaned up to press a soft kiss to cupid bow lips. “Stupid sod.”

“Not stupid,” the brunet muttered. “Genius.”

“Alright. Genius stupid sod, then.”

“Mmh.” Sherlock pulled back and lifted an eyebrow. "Still not going.”

John wasn’t fazed, though. “Oh, yes, you are. You know why? I promised Mrs. H we’d both be there.”

Sherlock groaned.

They were called to the forge a few hours later. When they got there, there was no immediate indication that anything had been done, as the dwarves were still working.

When they were spotted by Sindre, however, the dwarf stopped what he was doing and beckoned them over. John went first, very curious to see what they’d made, Sherlock keeping deliberately behind him.

The dwarf didn’t say anything. No speech, no needless flair. He just smiled slightly, reached into a pocket in his apron and pulled it out, something held between thumb and index finger very carefully.

Despite the low light and the merging of metals, the ring gleamed. There was no other word for it. The design had been good on paper but it couldn’t hope to compare to how it looked in three dimensions. The strands of iron, silver and gold twisted and weaved around the band, individual yet coming together to form one interwoven whole.

As Sindre wordlessly handed it over to John, the doctor took it with a slightly trembling hand and
saw that the rod in the mouth of the snake was made of some red stone as were the eyes of the snake. He could feel the magic in it, a faint pulse very reminiscent of what he’d felt from the tree.

“Carnelian,” the dwarf explained as John ran a finger over it. “Not too common here but it fitted with the iron.”

“It’s…well, it’s…”

“Go on,” Sherlock said from behind him. “Put it on already, see if it fits.”

“Of course, it bloody well fits!” Sindre said, indignant. He turned back to John. “It should go on your dominant hand for the best effect.”

John did so, trying to push the thought that the left ring finger was more commonly used for another ring out of his mind.

The moment he slipped it on, though, something happened. That was only to be expected, of course, but apart from the tingling and the odd intensifying of the pulse he’d felt earlier, there was a sharp pain in his left wrist. He hissed and clutched at it, his fingers spasming involuntarily.

“John?” Sherlock asked, still behind him, sounding confused and worried.

Sindre stood, a frown marring his face, grabbed hold of John’s wrist, despite the blond’s attempts to avoid him, and tried to pull the ring back off.

As he did so, the inside of John’s wrist became visible and so did the mark of the Bucca Dhu.

The dwarf gasped, almost dropping the hand. Sherlock, who had just come right up next to them, saw the mark, too, and there was a sharp intake of breath that sounded almost like a choke.

“John.” The forest ruler grabbed the wrist himself to examine it, pale eyes examining frantically, as though unwilling to believe what they were seeing. He then looked up, eyes wide. “John, tell me you didn’t.”

John, still in pain and somewhat confused, tried to reply. “Didn’t what?”

“Make a deal with a Bucca Dhu.”

Chapter End Notes

Proper cliffhanger this time? :D Aren’t I a sweetie?
A tiny bit more on the dwarves, mostly because I’ve drawn more on what I remember from growing up on Norse Mythology. Sindre/Sindri does come from the mythology; he and his brother Brokr are renowned for their smithing. They smithed Draupnir, Mjoelnir and Gullinbursti, the boar.

Dwarves in the mythology are generally a bit more...calm and composed than the gruff and no-nonsense version we get from generic fantasy - and they’re linked with both death and life. Which is why they live where they do in this. God, stop me.
Preparations

Chapter Summary

John admits that he's made the deal. Now they have to work, both on figuring out what to do about the outcome of that deal and on the trust between them that's suffered.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the kind birthday wishes! <3 So sweet of you all.

John’s stomach dropped at the words as well as the expression in both pale and dark eyes. He opened his mouth to explain or at least say something but the words stuck in his throat.

It didn’t matter much, though, as Sherlock had the proof that he had right there in his hand. Furthermore, he could undoubtedly see it in the doctor’s eyes, much as he attempted to tamp down on it.

John instinctually tensed for the reaction that was without a doubt about to come. One that would be anything but pleasant and might completely shatter what they’d built in terms of companionship and trust between them, which would be understandable; after all, who could ever trust someone who’d betrayed them?

He waited, refusing to look away or flinch under the presumed coming outrage. He’d made the mistake and he would have to live with the consequences of that mistake, whatever they’d be.

It didn’t come.

Sherlock, keeping a too firm grip on John’s wrist, had gone completely still, his face a stony mask. The pale eyes held a variety of emotions, though they were flickering past too fast to pinpoint, and therefore there were none that John could grab onto and ascertain what the ruler thought.

“Sindre, go and prepare!” Sherlock suddenly barked at the dwarf, turning his head to look at him.

The dwarf paused for only a moment to assess the expression then gave a short, brisk nod and walked off.

“Prepare?” John couldn’t help asking. “Prepare for what?”

The pale eyes swivelled back to him. “Prepare for dealing with a Bucca Dhu that is bound to arrive for its part of the agreement you’ve obviously made with it!” Sherlock snapped, his temper partially cracking the mask. “Along with whatever it’s…What the bloody hell possessed you to enter into any sort of deal with such a completely unreliable creature?”

It was the first time John had heard Sherlock actually use swearwords. He was normally perfectly capable of delivering sufficiently cutting insults without resorting to base swearwords, so to hear him
use some were jarring enough to tip John off something more than just anger and betrayal was plaguing the man.

“Because it wasn’t the only apparently unreliable creature I had to deal with at the time!” The words were out of his mouth before he was even aware of it.

Sherlock’s face went a few shades paler at that and his mouth made small, involuntary twitches. His eyes narrowed. “I am not dangerous!” he hissed.

“No, I know that now! I didn’t, then. You weren’t exactly giving me any reasons to trust you and especially not trust that I was being manipulated for your own reasons or even just amusement.”

“Still, how could you ever think that – “Sherlock began but stopped himself, apparently with considerable effort. “What was the – no, no need to answer that. You gave it your name, didn’t you? You must have, it wouldn’t have entered any deal without it. How could you be that stupid?”

“I didn’t.”

The grip around the doctor’s wrist tightened uncomfortably. “Don’t lie to me, John. The evidence that you did is right here.”

“I only gave it my first name. I’m not that daft.” However angry I was and how stupid, I do remember a little bit of what my Nan said, thankfully.

For whatever reason, that information served to soften up Sherlock’s face slightly, the anger at least draining from it. Pale eyes searched John’s face. “There are lots of Johns in the world. Exceedingly dull and common, as names goes.”

“Oi!”

“Why would it ever be content with just your first name? It doesn’t enter into deals on such a tenuous basis. There must be something else that it was after to agree to help you.”

“If there was, it didn’t tell me.”

“No, of course not, that would hardly be advantageous to it.” Sherlock narrowed his eyes and frowned as he thought. “But if the contract hasn’t…then it must…why would…unless, of course… the timing is…I did feel…how did I not spot…” he muttered to himself, only articulating very small parts of what he was thinking.

“Sherlock?”

John was glad that the row seemed to be, perhaps not over, but at least shelved for the time being but it didn’t quite manage to alleviate the knot that had settled in the pit of his stomach. He reached down with his free hand and rubbed at it. The motion soothed the feeling as well as the baby who was surprisingly receptive to whatever mental state its parents were in.

“Sherlock, what is it? What have you figured out?”

It took a few more moments before he got an answer. “It comes tonight.” Or at least a vague semblance of one.

“What? The Bucca Dhu?”

“Yes,” Sherlock answered, sounding both pleased he’d worked it out and agitated about what it
meant. “Tonight is a night of boundaries, of crossings. It needs that for the successful execution of what it’s planning.”

“And what is that, exactly?”

“To trap you.”

John frowned, nonplussed. “Couldn’t it just have done that when I met it?”

“Yes and no. It must want you specifically rather than some unexpecting, unprotected human because you are now both fay and human. The perfect crossing of two things with ties to both. The energy, the magic that you harbour would be tremendous.”

“Come off it, I’m not a magical creature. Even when I do finish becoming fay,” – and wasn’t that a very odd thought, still – “I’ll hardly be a wizard.”

“Not a wizard, who said anything about wizards? You’ve got a connection to this earth, this forest. You feel it, don’t deny it. Yet you possess what no pure fay does, what a changed one can potentially lose.”

“Don’t say it’s something soppy like emotions or a soul.”

“No. It’s much more undefinable than that. Possessing both renders you interesting to the Bucca Dhu but it can’t just get to it on its own. But it can coerce you into making a deal, where it’ll seem to make you appear human as its part of the agreement, when in truth it’ll be latching onto that magic and drain you dry.”

“Hang on, drain me dry? What, like some ruddy vampire?”

“More or less, except it isn’t blood.”

“Bloody hell,” the doctor breathed. “Still doesn’t explain why it didn’t just do that at the time. It seemed perfectly capable of using magic, why not just employ what it had back then?”

“As I said, it can’t do it on its own. It needs this night, not just for the weakening of the boundaries between the living and the dead, fay and human, but for who’ll arrive through those weakened boundaries. That’s why you were marked. Its mark is quite distinct – which is also why it somehow managed to shield it from my eyes, though I did feel it once and should’ve known, until the ring broke that protection – and it’s used as more than a calling card.”

“Oh?” John asked, taking in all the information. “What else does it do, then?”

“It is, for lack of a better word, a tracker.”

“Tracker? Tracker for who, exactly?”

“For the Cwûn Annwn – the Hound.”

John was about to ask about that, too, since of all things, a dog seemed oddly ordinary in the context, but at that moment, Sindre re-entered the room.

Sherlock’s attention turned to the dwarf. “Well?” he barked.

“No sign of it yet but that’s hardly surprising, as it’s only the afternoon. I’ve told a few of the others, though. They’ve agreed to help and have gone through the networks. We’ll find it.”
Sherlock gave a brief, sharp nod at that. “I expect to be kept informed. We’ll be taking our leave now. Thanks for your help.”

“We’ll be collecting our payment soon enough, don’t worry,” Sindre replied, a raised eyebrow somewhat at odds with his otherwise serious expression. “I’d take the western passage, if I were you.”

“You’re not,” was all the reply he got from the brunet.

Nevertheless, when the two parents-to-be headed out right afterwards, it was in what John’s internal compass deemed a westerly direction.

“Why west and why are we leaving here?” John asked, as he was once again pulled along.

Silence. “Sherlock, you can’t just keep leaving me in the dark when there’s something you don’t feel like answering.”

“I’m still mad at you, John.” Indeed, Sherlock wasn’t even turning his head slightly as he walked and the grip around John’s wrist was still uncomfortably tight.

“I get that and I’m… well, I didn’t mean to, okay? It was a mistake, a far bigger one than I thought it’d be, but it seemed the only option at the time.”

“You didn’t trust me.”

“Did you trust me?” John shot back.

Once again, all he got was silence.

Pausing mentally to gather his thoughts as best he could, the doctor tried to explain. “I just wanted to protect our baby, same as you, and here was an opportunity to do that. It told me it could get rid of the antlers for me, for good, which would mean I could go back.”

“So, you still want to go back.” The sentence came out flat, as a statement of fact.

“No! I told you earlier, I want to stay here. I like being here. But I didn’t, not then. You’d pretty much abandoned me at the time, two weeks where I heard absolutely nothing from you, if you remember.”

“I was trying to help.”

“I know that. Now. Then, you were a mercurial bastard who didn’t seem to give a toss about me one way or another and the baby was just because it was such a rarity.”

“If you believe that, then you’re far more stupid than I’ve given you credit for.” Sherlock finally stopped and turned to look at the shorter man. His eyes burned in the low light of the tunnel they were in.

John had learned a lot about the minute parts of Sherlock’s expressions, though, and he saw something else in there, too. “I believed it,” he said softly, keeping the distance between them but reaching out his free hand. “Past tense. We’ve come a long way since then, though, haven’t we?”

A bony hand slowly, almost reluctantly rose and John grabbed it, squeezing it. The ruler let him but didn’t return it.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock,” the doctor said, pouring as much sincerity into the words as he could. “It was
a mistake, a huge one, I know that now, but it wasn’t with the intention of buggering things up. For anyone.”

Sherlock held completely still for what felt like ages, only the slight crease between his brows giving away that he was thinking. Then he nodded, though seemingly to himself more than to John, and pulled at the blond’s arms until they were right up close to each other, the very visible baby bump preventing them from being flush.

It had surprised John a little to see just how much it had grown in the month he’d been living in the forest and not just because he wasn’t used to having a belly that was undeniably pregnant rather than just fat. He hadn’t said it out loud but the growth seemed a little excessive, even for an 18-week belly.

“You’re an idiot,” was what Sherlock finally said. “But only giving it your first name, that wasn’t too shabby. Might be helpful, if we use it properly.”

“We? As in ‘the two of us’ or as in ‘we proper fay’? What ‘we’ are we talking about here, exactly? God, I never thought I’d fear not being allowed near him, not being included in his ‘we’ ever again.”

“So, you’re not throwing me out?” The words sounded slightly nonchalant, which was about ten times as nonchalant as he felt.

“No, clearly not. I mean, why else would you decide to disappear on me after our first night together without telling me you wanted me to stay, or any word at all, really, if not because you wished for me not to leave? Makes perfect sense.”

Sherlock huffed and looked away at that, with no clever comeback on his lips.

“I…wasn’t prepared,” he muttered at last. “I – “

“Let’s agree that we’ve both been idiots, yeah?” John interrupted and squeezed the hand he held. This time he got a squeeze in return. “Now, how do we deal with this mess?”

“Depends.”

“What?”

“On what?”

“On what else comes through tonight. The Bucca Dhu needs help to fully realize what it plans and the most likely for that help to come from is the Cŵn Annwn.”

“You know, I’m not even going to try to pronounce that. I like my tongue knot-free.”
“It’s also called the yeth hound or simply the Hound,” Sherlock explained as he tugged at John’s hands and they started walking again, though the doctor wasn’t dragged along this time. He guessed they were walking again because they only had so much time.

“Alright. I’m guessing it’s a bit more mystical than just a large dog prowling the forest?” John asked and got a nod. “Is it connected to the whole boundaries being weakened at Kalan Gwav that you mentioned? It can get through?”

“It is connected but it’s not true to say that it can only get through at Kalan Gwav. It’s a messenger between this world and the underworld, a bringer of news and omens. Being restricted to only getting through one time a year would severely hamper that role, don’t you think? It’s more accurate to say that it’s at its most solid and powerful on this night. It can interfere freely with the living and the immortal as well as the dead or soon-to-be-departed.”

“And the Bucca Dhu needs that one in particular why, exactly? There must be other beings with connections to the underworld, surely?”

“Travelling freely between the two realms doesn’t mean it only brings messages to and from the dead, John, do keep up. It has its own magic, related to the transition between life and death. A form of severing.”

“Severing of what?” John asked, though he didn’t really need explaining. He could guess.

Oh, gods. That’s what it meant when it said it could help me get rid of the antlers permanently. It didn’t mean just getting rid of the physical evidence of my change or even simply killing me. It meant severing my connection to the magic entirely. Perhaps including…

“Sherlock.” The note of worried urgency in John’s voice made the brunet stop, even though it was clear from the light ahead that they were almost outside. He didn’t turn around, however, his body only kept from being ramrod straight by the fact that there wasn’t room for him in the tunnel to stand completely upright.

“It means to kill my…our baby, too, doesn’t it?” John asked, his voice suddenly small. “Severing me from the magic so the Bucca can get its hands on that special sort of magic you claim I have, that…that’ll sever the connection between me and the child, won’t it? That will kill it?”

“…Yes.” The answer came as if it was being dragged out of Sherlock’s throat and had hurt all the way up.

“Evil bastard,” John said quietly but with feeling.

“No.”

“No? What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“It isn’t evil, John. It’s just its nature.”

“That’s a pretty piss-poor excuse.”

“Do you blame the owl for using its skills to hunt the mice?” Sherlock asked, turning his head. “Do you call a fox evil for finding a nest full of eggs and eating them? There are rarely clearly defined sides in the world, apart from what humans set up themselves inside their heads. Useful things for them, I grant you, but useless when it comes to dealing with animals or fay. Elves that dance under hills are not evil because the humans that very occasionally join them are danced to death, nor are kelpies sadistic because they return to their realm with humans on their back who attempted to ride
them."

“You’re not seriously telling me you’re okay with this creature potentially killing our child, and all as collateral damage?” John’s anger was simmering in the depth of his voice. “Because if you are – “

“Of course, I’m not!” the brunet snapped. The air crackled ever so slightly. “I’ll strangle anyone who as much as thinks of harming either of you. I am merely pointing out that you cannot apply such broad, simple terms to any creature in this forest.”

“Not quite knowing what to say to that, John merely said, “Thank you.”

“Mmh. Come on. We’ve got a lot to do before night fall.” The words came calmly but as the taller man turned his head back, the doctor could see the slight colour creeping up the long neck.

Making it back to Sherlock’s cave in time for nightfall and the celebrations that were due to start in earnest around that time had always been a bit optimistic but as they were now trying to get back before sundown, it had become an almost impossible task, especially as John was still mostly human and didn’t possess the knack for moving through the forest quickly and quietly like all the fay seemed to.

That said, he knew he was moving quicker than he normally did. Whether that was connected to no longer having to constantly adjust for the weight of the antlers as he moved or just because Sherlock was relying more heavily on his magic and at the same time, holding onto John’s hand, he had no idea.

As they walked, or more accurately almost ran, over the uneven ground and through the sometimes rather dense underbrush, Sherlock ignoring greetings and wishes for a great Kalan Gwav coming from folkloric creatures all around them, John had the thought that someone was following them.

He tried to look around to see if it was just paranoia talking but at the speed they were moving, it not only put him in danger of falling, it would be almost impossible to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of an outline. Nevertheless, he was certain that someone was following them; despite not having picked up on it consciously the previous times, he knew for certain that it wasn’t the first time that he’d felt it.

“Sherlock.”

“Not now, John.”

“But – “

“Not now. I’m concentrating.”

Only then did the doctor look at the other. Even though he could only see the side of his face, as they were running side by side this time, it was more than obvious than he wasn’t merely running. Everything about him seemed a little more haggard even as the eyes clearly blazed and everything around him crackled with power.
That said, the power that John normally felt emanating from his partner, the one that he’d felt more and more strongly and easily as he had spent time in the forest and his fay characteristics had grown, now felt dulled, as if he was poking at a piece of skin that had gone numb a while ago and wasn’t keen on waking back up.

Realistically, logically, he knew that it must have something to do with the ring. It was still throbbing from the first, initial stab of pain he’d experienced when he put it on but it had lessened somewhat and when he’d attempted to take it back off once they got out of the caves, he’d immediately been told to keep it on by Sherlock.

When he’d asked about it, all the ruler had said was that it would make it harder for John to be tracked if he was wearing it. Any attempts to get him to elaborate had been met with silence. John could guess, though.

Even though he knew the inability to feel the magic, the power from Sherlock as he usually did almost certainly stemmed from the ring and its power, it did nothing to quell the odd sense of dread bubbling up inside of him at not feeling it anymore.

He’d grown accustomed to being able to detect the magic around him and not only that, he suspected that as his antlers, tail and child had grown, so had the magic inside of him. Consequently, being cut off from it was a disorientating and discombobulating experience, especially when it had happened so abruptly.

Suddenly, although they were still no more than halfway back home, at most, and there was not a lot of sunlight left of the day, Sherlock stopped abruptly and so did John a moment later, managing not to stumble at all. Nor did he stumble when the hand in his let go and the arm instead wound round his waist, pulling him close.

John immediately became alert, sensing the tension, grabbing onto Sherlock’s hip in turn while his other hand went down to grab hold of the handle of his knife. He wished that he had his gun with him instead but the knife would do. At least they’d stopped in a part of the forest where vision wasn’t hampered significantly, even in the fading light that was dimmed further by the surrounding trees.

The fact that he was the only one who was armed didn’t alarm John. He knew for a fact that no matter what he could possibly arm himself with, Sherlock would be by far the more formidable and dangerous foe.

Why they had stopped instead of continuing on was something he wanted to ask but was interrupted when he tried to.

“Don’t take off the ring,” Sherlock said softly, so softly that John almost didn’t hear it, “no matter what happens, understand?”

“Yes.” It wasn’t the time to argue.

“Promise.” There was an edge to the baritone voice that was linked to the tension making the entire body thrum.

“I promise,” John said quietly, solemnly, meaning it wholeheartedly. He paused, scanning the surrounding forest for any hint, without any luck. “Anything else I ought to know?”

“Yes. Keep your wits about you at all times and do not move away from me at any point.”

“Who is it?” the doctor asked, pulling the knife out of its sheath to have it ready. “The Bucca?”
“No, not yet. It wouldn’t go after you on its own like this. It’s the Hound.”

“That’s what been following us all the way here?”

Sherlock nodded, glancing at his partner out of the corner of his eye before resuming his own scan of the surrounding area. “Yes. You felt its presence, despite the ring?”

“Yeah. Think I might’ve picked up on its presence before, subconsciously, which is probably why I can still do it.”

That earned him a full look from Sherlock. There was a quick flash in pale eyes suggesting anger at not being told that but it was quickly replaced by a softer, more unidentifiable look.

“You said it can still pass between worlds outside of Halloween, yeah?” John asked. “Would it make the deal with the Bucca Dhu then?”

_Why would I not?_

Chapter End Notes

Another cliffhanger? Well, what do you know? I hope this makes sense for everyone (and was okay to read, too, of course) without being too much of an exposition dump, either. I have tried my best to make sure it works but feel free to ask if there's anything that doesn't make sense. :) Or comment in general, of course :) ^^
The Hound

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John finally meet the Hound, whether they're ready for it or not.

Chapter Notes

Sorry! It's late, I know, and I'm sorry. It's been hell and I've tried so hard to get it done with on time but I didn't. Apologies! Only positive is that the tone is at least appropriate for October.
Some may have noticed I've changed the summary for the whole story. I've been meaning to for a while and I hope the new one reflects the story a lot better.
Thank you to all my sweet readers, old and new, and especially to the commenters. <3

The voice came from behind them. Actually, that was an entirely inaccurate way of describing it, as the voice seemed to come through the rest of John’s body as much as through his ears, and consequently it was even stretching it to classify it as a voice. It was also very difficult to pinpoint any definitive direction that it came from.

John started to turn around to face whatever had spoken but the hand on his hip tightened to stop him.

Soon enough, what had to be the speaker came into view, appearing gradually between the trees in front of the two parents-to-be even though there was no underbrush or fog to hide behind.

It was indeed a dog or at least a dog-shape. It was massive in comparison to even an Irish Wolfhound, though, and far bulkier than them, though its movements were as silent and graceful as if it had been the daintiest of whippets.

That might partly be because of the huge paws that made sure it had a firm standing no matter where it placed them and had almost certainly assisted in the creature’s successful tracking of them while it itself had been difficult for them to see.

Aiding in the blending into the landscape gradually being swallowed by the darkness of the autumn night was the fur. Long, dark and matte, with no real indication of individual strands, it made the whole creature look like one giant shadow. Only the hint of teeth, white and decidedly pointed, and the softly glowing eyes gave any contrast and three-dimensional shape to the apparition.

In a way, it looked very much like the Bucca Dhu when he’d first encountered it, apart from having been a horse rather than a dog, and John might have mistaken it for that. Or he would have, if it wasn’t for the fact that he could tell the difference between creatures much better now than when he’d first arrived. It was something in the eyes that gave them away, no matter what shape they were, and these weren’t the ones of the Bucca Dhu, much as they resembled them.
“No growling?” was the first thing Sherlock said to it and, to John at least, it seemed a tad random.

Hardly. The lips parted slightly in an approximation of a smile that showed off more of the teeth. *I think you must have me confused with someone else…sire.*

It turned its attention back to John and there was no mistaking that it was grinning now. *Quite the little specimen you have found there, I have got to say.* A long tongue, almost too long a tongue, came out to lick around the muzzle once, slowly, deliberately.

“He’s not yours to appreciate,” Sherlock said. His tone was calm, almost regal, as he stood completely straight and looked at the creature as it slowly drew closer. “He’s not yours at all.”

The glowing eyes glanced back at the ruler. *Possessive of your little toy, are you, Sherlock?* it asked, clearly amused by the notion. *Tut. Tut. Here I thought you should be above personal attachments like that. But then again, it is not every day that you manage to actually impregnate a human, is it?*

The smile stretched, far beyond what a canine muzzle should be capable of, rendering it even more unsettling than it already was.

“Leave. You do not belong here.”

*Oh, but I do. Especially tonight. You might even say that on this night, I belong here rather more than you do.*

“This is my forest. I rule here,” and that was the first time John had actually heard him say that out loud, “and you have no power over any of my subjects.”

Something flashed in the glowing eyes, something dark and portentous. It sank down on its legs slightly as it moved but instead of getting closer, it started to circle around them, still low so its walk was more reminiscent of a cat stalking its prey. *I do when they choose to make deals with me.*

“He never made any deal with you. What deals you make with other creatures don’t concern anyone else. You cannot touch him.”

*Can he not speak for himself? Or have you already managed to cow him so completely that he will not oppose anything you say?* The tone was derisive and mocking, yet amused.

“I’m not easily intimidated,” John said, ignoring the minute twitch in the fingers on his waist. If they were in this together, they would face it together. It was clearly searching for an opening, a crack it could use and he had felt the tensing the words had caused in Sherlock.

He could understand why; John’s autonomy had been a bed of contention, after all.

“ Especially not by you,” he finished.

*Is that so? Why don’t you step out from under the shadow of his majesty, then? Put some action behind the brave words?*

“Because I’m not stupid, either, and I’m not going to be goaded.”

*You were when you made the deal in the first place, little un-man.* The smile had faded from the dog’s face and there was the taste to the air that signalled an approaching lightning storm. *I am*
merely collecting on what has been promised me.

“It was promised you by the Bucca Dhu, who had no right to promise you anything,” said Sherlock. “There is no deal.”

It does not work like that, sire. You know that as well as anyone. He has been marked, the deal has been made, it must be fulfilled, one way or the other. There must be balance.

“Balance has nothing to do with this. He’s not part of the fay world and its rules do not apply to him.” The bony hand on John’s hip tightened further and the doctor got the distinct impression that if he could, Sherlock would dearly like to shield John completely with his body.

Really, Sherlock? I know you are trying to deceive and delay me but I would not have thought you would be that uninspired and blatant about it. Perhaps he is dulling your wit. Should I not take him off your hands for you? Stop you from going completely to the dogs, eh?

The muzzle pulled into a grin again and the dog-shape began to move closer once more. It didn’t get further than a yard or two, however, before it stopped. Or rather, it was apparent that it was forced to stop. John turned his head a bit to see that Sherlock had raised his free hand, spreading his fingers slightly.

The Hound snarled, its claws digging into the dry earth and the hard rock alike. It crouched lower, as though attempting to bypass the barrier that Sherlock erected between them by going low. It failed to do so, which caused it evident pain and made it growl deep in its throat.

You cannot stop me indefinitely, it snarled, its calmer, mocking façade melting in the face of its pain. It is only a matter of time, sire. This night is not meant for the likes of you.

“When it affects my forest, my subjects and my child, I don’t care about the established rules. You will leave now or I will make you pay.”

The last word was uttered in such a deep, threatening tone that for a moment, John was convinced that the thunder had arrived earlier than expected.

Oh, yes? You and whose army? Your little dwarf friends were not much of a challenge as they attempted to stop me, I am afraid. The tongue ran over the white canines again, pointedly, as it ‘spoke’. Or have you enlisted your brother to come and help you this time?

“I do not need help for dealing with scum like you.”

Scum? You are calling me scum, little deerling? I, who roam this land for ages before your mother once again failed to keep her legs together and bred another freak to contain the chaos of the forest? I, who know more about this forest, this world and the next than you could ever hope to learn? I, who has the ear of Arawn himself? You are calling ME scum?

It had seemed to grow as it had spoken, possibly aided by the weakening of the barriers as the light continued to fade, and its already huge body now rose almost as tall as Sherlock himself. The ruler didn’t seem fazed, however, even though the glowing eyes now bathed him in their ghostly light and its breath was visible in the ruffled curls.

“You’re scum and you will always be scum. You are not fay, you are not protected by what fay nature dictates. You toy with your prey for nothing else than your own amusement, regardless of what deal has or hasn’t been struck.”
As do cats and killer whales. I do not see you persecuting them. It paused, contemplating, Or is it because you succeeded in impregnating this one? Is that what makes him special to you?

John tensed further. He liked neither the notion that he was ‘special’, as that hadn’t tended to bring anything positive his way, nor the implication that it was his pregnancy that made him important to the brunet rather than he himself as a person.

He knew perfectly well that wasn’t the case, since Sherlock had gone out of his way since they’d come back from that special place to make him feel wanted. That didn’t mean it was completely unable to affect him.

The possibilities connected to the term ‘this one’ he very purposely left alone. To think that Sherlock wouldn’t have had anyone else in his apparently rather long life before John stumbled into it hurt far more than the thought that he’d had several lovers in the past.

John couldn’t tell whether the fact that Sherlock felt as tense as he did was a good thing or a bad.

“The pregnancy is not the issue here.”

Oh, but it is. One could say it is the crux of the entire situation. Or part of it, at least.

The glowing eyes flashed as the Hound started to circle again, its movements slow and obviously still pained. Do not think that that ring is going to protect him or that I cannot detect the illusions those halfwit dwarves have managed to implant into it. They are halfway competent, I will grant them, and they have certainly improved greatly since the last I saw their handiwork but I can see you just fine, little un-man. Antlers, ears and all.

Sherlock might have said something in response to that but if he did, it was drowned in the deafening clap of thunder that echoed through the entire forest, threatening to split John’s eardrums.

It died down and there didn’t seem to be another one on the horizon immediately afterwards.

This is not your night, Sherlock, the Hound repeated. The longer you wait, the easier it will become for me. I will have my part of the agreement and your little pet will be free of the burden of child and magic. It does not suit mere humans to be labouring so.

“He’s no mere human and you will not harm him. Now go away!”

Another peal of thunder sounded at that exact moment, immediately following a blinding bolt of lightning, and when John’s senses stopped screaming at him in protest over it, he was surprised by what he saw.

The dog-shape was no longer standing or walking close to them. Instead it lay on the ground some yards away, a deep, painful-looking gash running down its side, which was already starting to bleed, though whether it was blood or something else wasn’t clear. It didn’t seem as though it was likely to rise back up any time soon.

John turned his head, a small smile starting to form on his face. He opened his mouth to voice his joy at it being bested. Before a single syllable passed his lip, however, it died in his throat at the sight of Sherlock.

Whatever he had done to cause the severe wound on the Hound’s side had taken its toll on him as well. Bruises that were visible even in the very small amount of light left had formed in several places all over the brunet’s body and a line of blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth, its
movement slow but steady, worryingly so.

“Sherlock?” he asked hesitantly, starting to lift his hand from the hip to try and assess the damage as well as offer some support, even if it was merely emotional.

As soon as he began to move them, though, he got a small snarl from Sherlock and his hand was pressed back into place.

“I said, do not move away from me!” The strange harmonics that John had felt previously when they’d had arguments, that had made the air crackle, were there but those times had been pebbles in comparison to the boulder present now.

“I wasn’t going to! I was – “

“I am trying to keep it off you and it’s doing everything in its power to get to you. Do not move, at all. Do not stop touching me. Any wrong movement and it will pounce on you.”

“You just cut its flank right open! It’s not going to be able to move, let alone pounce.”

“Wrong.”

John opened his mouth to argue but at that moment, there came a sound that sent spikes of unease all the way down his spine.

The Hound was laughing. It wasn’t a snicker or even a demonic cackle like you’d expect. It was a full-body laughter, of the sort produced when you are utterly amused by something. What separated it from the laugh John could vaguely remember hearing from the Bucca Dhu was that it only sounded very remotely human, in that its cadence resembled that of a human laughter.

The sound itself bore a closer resemblance to a combination of the echoes off a deep, mostly empty water well and the rasping of heavy slabs of stone sliding against each other, mixed with something almost entirely alien.

As the laughter rose slowly, so did the Hound. It should have been unsteady on its feet as it stood up. In fact, it should have been unable to get up, in John’s professional opinion. Yet, stand it did, its pose steady and confident despite the liquid clearly seeping from the still wide-open gash.

“Now that is better,” it grinned, blood clearly visible on his teeth. Still nowhere near what you could be but decidedly better. Care to try again?

Its glowing eyes flickered downwards, towards John’s hand on his knife, which had tightened around its handle. Well, well, little un-man, I must say. Want to join in the fun? And with only a knife to protect you. Think you can handle it…John?

The use of his name threw the blond off for only just a moment. “As well as you can, at any rate,” he said, keeping his voice calm. “And no, I’m not scared by you using my name. Lots of people are called John. It’d be like revealing my last name was Smith. You can’t bind me with just that or you’d bind a huge part of the British population. Practically speaking, it means absolutely bugger-all. The deal is null and void.”

The grin faded only slightly. Not…quite so. The dog-shape grew momentarily more insubstantial.

“Enough!” Sherlock boomed, the depth and power in his voice enough to compete with the thunder yet only threatening another peal. “You persist with your prattling, your empty promises and threats and you’re boring me. You have your part to play, possibly, but if you try to harm my…family,”
there was only the very briefest of pauses to that statement, “one more time, I shall not hold back.”

**Holding back, were you? Oh, you are precious. Even if you were not, even if you had your entire family to assist you, you cannot begin to harm me. Not for long.**

Indeed, as it spoke, the bleeding wound covering its flank could be seen to slowly heal and close. John couldn’t help staring, even though the complete dark made it difficult. He had learned his logic and rules didn’t apply and could wrap his head around quite abnormal things by now but the sight of a wound healing and closing on its own at a rather worrying speed, he still had trouble with.

**I am neither human nor fay, like you, little un-man,** the Hound said. **Yet, I am not of this earth, either. Nothing earthbound can hope to harm me permanently. Your little…mate can wave his arms as much as he likes, see what it grants him.**

It paused, closing its eyes. When they re-opened, they were still glowing but in their depths, something dark had started to pulse. **But he is right about one thing. This is getting rather tedious. I was planning to wait, but…needs must.**

Neither John nor Sherlock had time to ponder what that entailed; as the last words stopped reverberating through their skulls, the Hound pounced again, its enormous bulk illuminated by another flash of lightning whiting out the now dark sky.

Sherlock shouted something that was once more drowned out but John didn’t have the presence of mind to think about it. His attention was occupied fully by the leaping monstrosity that was about to collide with him, magic barrier or whatever it was be damned.

Acting mostly on instinct, he pulled the knife out of its sheath and brought it up just before the rather corporeal-for-a-ghost creature impacted with him. The movement dislodged his hand on Sherlock’s hip but he didn’t have time to spare for that, either.

The Hound, still grinning, immediately went for his throat with its teeth. John snarled and jammed his now free hand up into the creature’s jaw, hard.

It did prevent the teeth from closing around his jugular but they still managed to drag along the thin skin of his throat, making angry welts and drawing a bit of blood as they went. The blond hissed under his breath.

The Hound also made a sound as it attempted to wrench away from the fist pressing up into its jaw but John’s hand wasn’t going to be removed that easily. If he could, he’d dislocate the jaw entirely but he didn’t dare try it, in case it failed and the jaw was free to move again.

Unfortunately for John, the creature had more weapons at its disposal than merely its teeth and far more than the former soldier could hope to have. The claws on the huge paws were long and, as they pressed down into John’s regrettably soft flesh, there was no denying their sharpness. One front paw had landed on his left arm, which held the knife, while the other was pressing down on the middle of his chest, making it more difficult for him to breathe.

The fear only truly materialized, however, when the paw on his chest trailed quickly downwards, its claws ripping into his clothes as it went, its intended target clear.

**No. Not that. Anything but that. You do not touch my child, you fucking, bloody, sick bastard.** He would have uttered the words out loud if he’d had the air.

He redoubled his efforts to pull his left arm free of the hold, which only succeeded in moving the
paw slightly closer to the scar tissue on his left shoulder. It did, however, also make it possible for
him to lift his lower arm somewhat and, twisting his wrist, he made sure he had a good hold of the
handle, then plunged the blade deep in between the lower part of the radius and ulna, turning it as he
went.

He was hoping to cause at least some modicum of damage, so that the Hound’s attention would be
diverted away from getting to his baby.

It didn’t. The paw reached its destination, the claws resting softly, almost mockingly on top of the
exposed curve of John’s belly, the very tip of them pressing minutely into the flesh, the promise
clear.

**You insist on trying to postpone the inevitable.** Despite the creature’s jaw still being pressed shut, it
had no difficulty speaking, which perhaps wasn’t surprising, since it wasn’t using traditional vocal
chords to talk. *Very commendable but ultimately futile, little un-man. If magic from a fay powerful
enough to become and remain ruler of a forest such as this cannot harm me, do you really think
that your puny, human knife would have even the glimmering of a chance? I will have my part of
the agreement. You and your offspring will be a tasty morsel.*

The claw pressed harder.

A roar, made of equal parts nature and baritone voice, tore through the air, followed by a blast that
hit the Hound.

Up close like this, John could see exactly where the blast hit and, luckily, it was concentrated around
its throat and head. That did mean he took some of the blast as well but at least it held no risk to his
midsection.

The blast was powerful enough to send the creature flying again. Its unexpected, forceful, and
sudden movement was enough to pull John’s hand holding the knife still embedded in the leg with it,
at last wrenching the weapon out of his hand as the creature went flying.

Much worse, the claws on the doctor’s body didn’t merely lift as they moved but skidded across
what they had been under, cutting as they went. It was only because of the speed and force with
which it was moving that the claws hadn’t the opportunity to sink in anywhere.

The body of the creature landed on the ground some distance away with an audible, almost sickening
cracking thud that confirmed how much it had solidified as the boundaries had weakened.

John, reeling slightly from what had just occurred and completely oblivious to the body on the
ground, ignored the pain in his left hand and arm and immediately moved both hands to his stomach,
hoping like he’d never hoped before that the searing pain he felt in that area wasn’t an accurate
indicator of what damage had been done.

As his hands reached his belly, though, they collided with something that was alien and he
instinctually began fighting it off until he realized that it wasn’t anything hostile.

It was one of Sherlock’s hands. John’s eyes travelled up to take in the brunet’s appearance. It was far
more gaunt than usual, looking haggard and almost panicked, with laboured breathing and eyes as
wide as they could go.

Despite the obvious panic, the eyes themselves seemed at odds with that; the pupils were almost
entirely gone, only the smallest pinpricks of black in a sea of frosted colours, the normal pale
kaleidoscope drastically faded.
John realized he’d seen something similar happening previously when Sherlock had been more strongly in touch with the magic that was such an integral part of him. That it this time was so pronounced shouldn’t be too surprising, seeing the amount of magic that had just been employed, the traces of which still hovered in the air all around them.

Seen in that light, the oddness of it disappeared; it was how Sherlock’s normally so well-hidden powers apparently manifested.

Those same eyes were scanning the blond’s midsection in an almost frantic manner, the hand clearly trembling as it ran over John’s now exposed skin, bumping into the doctor’s momentarily stilled hands.

“Sherlock?” John asked, his own worry unmistakable.

A strangled noise was his answer. Then came another one, even more choked, making it more apparent that his voice had deserted him, at least for the moment.

Sitting up a bit more to see better, John moved his own hands again, doing his best to try and ascertain the damage.

He breathed a tremendous sigh of relief when he found that although there were indeed cuts bleeding, the deepest of them went no further than the lower layers of skin. There was no harm done, to anything important.

He had to convince Sherlock of the fact, too, though.


Pale eyes turned to him, questioning, uncharacteristically looking for assurance. John grabbed the still roaming hand, squeezing it. “I promise. I can feel it moving about, despite the ring and all.”

“Are…you…?” the ruler asked, finally managing to get a few words out. The panicked, questioning look remained.

If that isn’t proof that it was me as much as the baby that he cared about, I don’t know what is.

“Yeah, fine. Fine.” John smiled, though it turned into something more akin to a grimace. Nevertheless, the panic faded somewhat to be replaced with a familiar, soft look. The hand John held squeezed back.

Their small moment was interrupted by the same sort of laugh that had come from the Hound before, the difference between then and now being a stronger feeling of ghostliness and a slight rasping gurgle, despite the words not coming out through the throat.

They both turned their head in the direction of where the Hound had fallen. It hadn’t gotten back up this time, which was hardly surprising, as half its face was one huge, bloody mess and a bleeding wound covered its throat and chest.

Despite this, it had lifted its head and was smiling, its long teeth caked in blood.

**Well timed, sire, I must admit,** it rasped. Just solid enough to truly feel it. It will not matter for long but I commend you for the forethought. More than most of your family has ever managed, even that clever brother of yours.

“I neither need nor want your approval,” Sherlock replied, his anger towards the Hound seemingly
enough to overcome his trouble speaking, “and your comments about my relatives don’t concern me. My family is _here_ and I’ll take them home where they belong.”

With that, he stood up, pulling John up with him and into a tight hold once he was upright.

Only then did the blond notice the surrounding area looking decimated, as though every ounce of life and power had been sucked out of it. It didn’t take much thought to work out just where that energy had gone.

*You think…enough…defeat me?* The gurgle was significantly more pronounced. Despite its cocky words, the Hound had fared significantly worse than it let on.

“No,” Sherlock said bluntly, staring at the ghostly creature with his still frosted eyes. “Not entirely. But it is enough to render you harmless for tonight to pass and your time to collect on the ‘agreement’ is over, invaliding it.”

There was no answer from the creature nor any more movement.

There was, however, another peal of thunder that felt even more charged than the previous times, now that they weren’t distracted by other things. Sherlock tensed and cursed fiercely, which confused John, as he didn’t spot anything significantly different and the strength of the swearing was still very unlike the brunet.

“What? What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I’d forgotten. Stupid. Stupid. _Stupid!_”

“Forgotten what?”

It took a moment before Sherlock seemed to hear him. “The Bucca Dhu might’ve been the one who made a deal with the Cŵn Annwn for this night but it never comes alone. It’s a – “

“Messenger, yeah, you said. What difference does that – “

“Not merely messenger,” Sherlock snapped, sounding rattled. “Herald. It doesn’t come alone, not on Kalan Gwav. I should’ve known, should have _remembered_.

John wasn’t quite as dense as the other pretended he was. "And the ones who come are tied into the thunder? That’s why you’re reacting to it?" He got a short, sharp nod in reply. “Alright...Alright. So, who or what is it that comes?”

*What exactly has you rattled so?* John wondered. He didn’t voice it; he would know in time.

Sherlock scanned the surrounding area again, pale eyes lingering only briefly on the still motionless shape of the dog.

“The Wild Hunt,” he answered.

Chapter End Notes

...I really hope you won't hate me too much for putting another thing on here with the Hunt. The Cŵn Annwn is indeed a messenger and associated with a form of the Wild
Hunt so I'm not just pulling it out of my arse.

The Cŵn Annwn itself is a Welsh version of the creature of hell hound, known more broadly as the Black Dog, a ghost and (normally) bad omen, usually that you're about to die - and for the Cŵn Annwn, it's said that its growling grows softer the nearer it comes. It's got many incarnations throughout the British Isles, some of which have cropped up in popular media. The Grim, for instance, from Harry Potter, and the Hound of the Baskervilles itself, too. :)

I have enjoyed writing this a whole lot, I have to say, especially the speech pattern of the Hound. I have no idea whether I mucked up the 'action', though. I have so little experience with it. Apologies if I have
The Wild Hunt

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John face a new danger in the Hunt. What can they do against such a dangerous foe?

Chapter Notes

HEADS UP! Seriously, this is a chapter that might not be too pleasant for you to read. Might not be. I don't know. Put the tags up in case but still, for those who don't read them, here's fair warning - to those who even read this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The what?”

“The Wild Hunt or Wilde Jagd, known also as Herlaping, Woden’s Hunt or, more locally, the Devil’s Dandy Dogs,” Sherlock explained, speaking unusually quickly, his eyes still panning. “They are riders of the underworld, most often led by the king of the otherworld himself, Arawn.”

“Oh, come on!” The words were out of John’s mouth before he could help it. “First the Bucca Dhu, then the Hound, now this? This bloody well isn’t a ruddy video game where you go on to the next boss when you’ve defeated the first.”

“The Cŵn Annwn has always been associated with the Hunt and Arawn, John,” the ruler replied, moving them both along, an ear twitching as he listened even while he talked, likely trying to work out what direction the next thunderclap would come from.

“It is a messenger but as said, it’s also a herald of the people it sends messages for and on Kalan Gwav, the barriers are thin enough for all of them to come through. The Bucca Dhu merely took advantage of the Hound’s ability to come through at other times to enlist someone who could harvest the power that it wanted. The Hunt will inevitably follow the Cŵn Annwn.”

“Allright. Fair enough,” the doctor conceded, brow knitted in concentration as he took in the new information, not questioning it. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Hm?”

“The plan, Sherlock. What’s the plan?”

Pale eyes turned to look at him as they continued walking briskly; they were brimming with what could only be called gratefulness at what had just been said. What he didn’t give was an answer.

John couldn’t help noticing, though, that they were moving even faster now than they’d been when they’d thought it had only been the Hound on their heels. He was surprised he could still talk without panting or otherwise having difficulty breathing.
“Sherlock?” he prompted after he’d given the other plenty of opportunity to answer. “The plan?”

“Haven’t got one.”

John couldn’t help snorting, mostly in disbelief.

“I more than appreciate your faith in my skills but I have no plans, no ideas. I can hope that the Cŵn Annwn was lying when it claimed…but that still doesn’t alter the fact that I can’t think of anything.”

“There must be something.”

“Then tell me!” John was slightly shocked to hear the note of vehemence in the baritone voice. “Tell me how you’d deal with an entire group of otherworldly beings that are tearing through the entire forest, bringing devastation and upheaval with them as they ride through! I would dearly like to know!”

For the briefest moment, John could feel himself getting angry in turn, but he did manage to rein it in once he realized why he was being snarled at.

“You said they make use of the weakened boundaries on…on Halloween,” he said instead, trying to defuse the tension and find a way in, some sort of solution. “That the Hound often comes through here, on days other than this. Why makes this time any different than the other times they must’ve come through? What did you do then?”

“They haven’t.”

“Oh, come on, pull the other one. They must have. If they’re otherworldly, they’re bound to be immortal, too. That leaves quite a lot of years, even if they do only ride on Halloween.”

“They have almost never come through here and the times they have were long before I was born. The kingdom of Annwn lies beneath more than just the British Isles and the Hunt has been seen riding through almost every European country over the centuries.”

“Then why here, now? It can’t be because of just our baby, surely?”

Sherlock simply grimaced at that along with giving a small shrug, which John took to mean that he wasn’t sure at all but that he suspected and feared that it might be. He felt his heart sink.

“What can we do? Is there anyone in the forest who has been around long enough to have seen them?”

“No. Fay are either immortal or, more often, just extremely long-lived. But relatively, this forest as it exists now is young.”

They’d kept periodically turning in another direction, as though that was going to dissuade the otherworldly creatures possibly hunting them.

“Okay. So, no creaky, old men dispensing opportune wisdom that’ll save the day. Then how?”

“I don’t know! To keep asking me isn’t going to magically produce an answer or a solution.”

“I know that!” John shot back. “I’m about as in the dark as you usually leave me, all I can do is ask questions, isn’t it? If they’re indeed after the child…” he trailed off for a moment. “I’m going to maul every single one that as much as tries.”

He knew perfectly well that the possibility of him managing to even as much as hurt creatures from
what sounded like the netherworld was farfetched and ludicrous and that was the best-case scenario. Whatever the people around him had claimed, he was still nothing more than a simple human. A human with antlers, a tail and a fay baby growing in his stomach, granted, but that still didn’t translate to being anything special.

Perhaps sensing the meaning behind the words, Sherlock didn’t comment on the bravado. Instead he squeezed the hand he was holding.

They continued their dash through the eerily empty woods in silence for a while after that. Or rather, comparative silence. The lightning still periodically split the sky open and the thunder followed right on its heels. Most of the time, at least.

What was frustrating and, more importantly, very worrying, though, was the fact that unlike normal thunderstorms, there was not only no rain, there was no indication of it either getting progressively closer to them or further away, either. Sometimes, the thunder seemed to be right above them, coming directly after the fingers of electricity illuminated the sky, almost deafening the doctor with its powerful peal. Then the very next one might do the same or there might be a significant gap between the two and when it did come again, it was an obvious distance to the sound.

John suspected that it had something to do with the Hunt and was the reason why Sherlock’s ears still kept on twitching and turning every time the heavens crackled and boomed.

Well, no shit there, genius. It’s clearly magical, something tied to yet different from what he’s used before and he’s very obviously spooked, even if he doesn’t say it. I wonder what else could possibly be the reason?

But he used the thunder before, during the standoff with the Hound, John argued back in his head, at that point past the point of caring that it wasn’t the sanest of things to do. What’s the difference between that thunder and the one associated with the coming of the Hunt?

You see but do not observe. The voice that normally sounded like his sister when she felt like needling him was suddenly a familiar baritone rumble. Look at the next lightning.

John did, trusting in Sherlock to keep him from stumbling and falling as he turned his head upwards. He didn’t have to wait long before another crackle of light sped across the sky and this time, he did pick up on what was different, even though the glare of the light made it extremely difficult to see anything.

“St. Elmo’s fire,” he breathed.

Indeed, as the lightning struck, there were several balls of light surrounding the streaks of plasma, all of which had a tell-tale violet glow to them.

But that makes no sense. They should be happening around pointed structures, not appear like little balls.

Everything else about it fit, however, and something associated with a saint seemed oddly appropriate, even if a saint was supposed to be connected to something more heavenly and positive than the term ‘netherworld’ usually denoted.

If Sherlock heard John’s comment, he didn’t acknowledge it. Then again, he had other, far more important things on his mind and was likely perfectly aware of what it was.

John couldn’t help wondering, even though Sherlock said that there wasn’t anyone that could help them, why they weren’t heading towards someone they knew. It wasn’t that there was safety in
numbers, not as such, especially not when it came to fay or…other creatures, but it couldn’t hurt. That’s discounting the possible harm the Hunt could do to all the people John had come to care about. Just the thought of harm coming to Mrs. Hudson or Demelza or any of the others…

It seemed like Sherlock has the right idea of staying well away from them, even if was probably as much a result of his personality as anything else. It would also explain why there hadn’t been any attempt to call on anyone, either.

_Bloody hell...we’re caught between a rock and a hard place, aren’t we? I have never, ever seen him spooked before, not like this. Gods…_

Another clap of thunder rang through the night, close and ominous in its ear-splitting bellow. Below that noise, though, there was another; a noise formed from a multitude of throats coming together to make one combined sound that was caught between mournful and exuberant. More worryingly, the cacophonic unity sounded even closer than the thunder.

Sherlock stopped dead in his tracks, eyes going wide at the realization before they narrowed into slits and started looking around, even though absolutely nothing could be seen now that night had completely fallen. At least, John could see nothing but it didn’t follow that Sherlock couldn’t either.

He must’ve seen something, at least, because the hand that John was holding squeezed his tightly, almost crushingly.

“Why have we stopped?” the doctor said, keeping his voice down low. “Why haven’t we just continued running? If we can’t hope to fight them, I mean, it’d make the most sense.”

“I don’t want to encounter them at all,” came the answer, baritone voice very tense, “so I need to work out where exactly they are and what direction they are heading.”

“We can hear them beneath the thunder because they’re getting close, right?”

“Yes. Very close.” Pale eyes kept moving about. They stopped momentarily, focusing on something before they turned to John. The blond wished that they hadn’t; he never wanted to see his partner looking like that. “They’re heading right for us.” There was a sliver of panic in that statement.

John paused to take in the information, then nodded, as though something had been settled. “Right. Okay. So…how do we avoid them? Can we, if they’re searching for us?”

John’s calmness seemed to rub off on the brunet. “Possibly. Possibly not. They’re pulled by something particular to us but they cannot leave the forest.”

“Why? They’re not bound to it,” the unspoken words ‘_like you are_’ hung in the air between them, heavy and slightly uncomfortable, “so why would they care whether they’re terrorizing a folkloric forest or the middle of London? I’m guessing that they can’t be seen by someone who’s not fay so there’d just be another unexplained incident in the city, which is frankly ten a penny.”

“They can move slightly outside of it,” Sherlock amended, “hence the likelihood of them turning up in some villages. But their passage is connected to the trees that are the heart of the magic and therefore also the forest. They need it in order to come through, much as the dwarves wield as powerful magic as they do because they live and work beneath and between its roots.”

“But once they are through, what does the tree matter? Can’t they just pass through and then rampage to their heart’s content wherever they want?”
“Yes, if they want to be turned to nothing when dawn breaks!” Sherlock snapped. “The boundaries are weak tonight and the magic flows more freely. Sever that, sever your connection when it is literally what’s sustaining you right at that moment and see how well you do!”

His voice had risen as he’d spoken and unfortunately, it seemed someone had heard his suddenly raised voice, in the deathly quiet of the forest between the thunder claps.

A yell that was quite separate from the thunder but was nevertheless too close to the earlier sound not to be connected to the Hunt echoed through the small clearing they’d halted in. Almost immediately afterwards, something that sounded like hooves alternately hitting the ground softly or harshly, even sometimes not hitting the ground at all yet still making some sort of noise.

The already pale figure of Sherlock paled further. His eyes darted around, frantic to see where they’d emerge from. At the same time, however, they also kept flickering over to John, the panic and internal conflict more evident in them every time they did.

“Sherlock? What are you thinking? Sherlock?” No response.

John couldn’t quite figure out whether it was the certainty that the Hunt was coming or the abject panic in Sherlock’s eyes that sent his heart into a stammering canter.

Why was he afraid of the Hunt, though? So, they ran amok but nobody had ever said they killed anyone. Granted, Sherlock was clearly more than spooked by them and he’d never appeared outright spooked before. Granted, the Hound was connected to it and that thing had attempted to sever him from his child and whatever magic he apparently possessed, killing him in the process, but that didn’t necessarily translate into the Hunt having the same idea.

No, but if it’s something that can do that and it takes that much effort from Sherlock to incapacitate it, how dangerous do you think the people are that such a monster serves? It doesn’t take much to imagine what they could do.

“Sherlock!” he repeated, trying to get through to him by reaching up to shake a shoulder.

Before his hand could connect, however, it was grabbed and instead brought up to cupid bow lips where it was softly and gently kissed.

Nonplussed at the incongruous, yet undeniably loving gesture at such a time, John tried to find answers in the pale eyes gazing at him but came up emptyhanded. The panic had faded but there was something else in its place, something that was harder to identify but had traces of determination and defeat in it at the same time.

What came out of the brunet’s mouth only intensified his confusion. It was delivered as softly and gently as the kiss and was almost lost in the small space between them.

“Goodbye, John.”

“Goodbye? Goodbye?” John spluttered, completely thrown, by the note of resignation in the baritone voice as much as the words themselves. “What do you mean, ‘goodbye’? Do you think that…like hell I’m going to say goodbye to you because you think we’re going to kick the bucket!”

“You are not going to die.” There was a vehemence to that statement that had been absent in both expression and words just before.

“We are not,” the doctor corrected, matching the vehemence and adding anger. “Don’t think I’m going to allow you to play the hero all on your own, you great idiot. We’re in this together,
beginning to end. There’s got to be some way to dodge this, keep them at bay until morning. You said that they’d disappear if they’re still in the real world when dawn breaks. Can’t we find some way to hold out on them until then?”

Sherlock shook his head. “That only applies when they’re outside the influence of the tree.”

“But they’re not running around all year round, are they? Something’s got to make them stop, make them go back underground. If we can hold out until they do, we should be fine, shouldn’t we?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know. I’ve never had to deal with them before and everything I’ve ever heard about them only emphasizes that they bring destruction. I don’t want to risk it. I’ll make sure you are safe, no matter what.” The implications of both statements were clear enough.

“Do you want to risk hurting all the other people you’re in charge of because you’re fixated on one?” John shot back, coming to realize just what his partner meant. “You’re the king of this forest, Sherlock. People depend on you, like it or not. It’s your duty to protect everyone, not merely your… your family. You can’t do that if something happens to you. That has to take priority over personal entanglements.”

“No.” The voice was flat calm and resolute.

“Sherlock, love…” The fact that it was first time he’d used any term of endearment towards the brunet escaped John in the circumstances.

“No. You are important to me, John. I am not leaving you to the mercy of such… things to save my own hide.”

“And I am not allowing you to bring that many people in peril, yourself included, in an attempt to protect me!”

“I have magic running through me, John, we all do, I can protect! You don’t, not properly, not yet! What will you do? Tickle them into surrender?”

“That’s not the point, you ruddy arse!”

Their argument had brought them almost nose to nose, glaring at each other, but it had also, unfortunately, taken their minds off listening for the approach of the Hunt.

By the time they did think to listen for it again, there almost wasn’t any point; it was practically on top of them, the sound of the ghostly hooves and the chatter almost eerily loud.

John swore, wishing he’d had the presence of mind to take back his knife from the corpse or at least incapacitated body of the Hound. Not that it was likely to have been any help, not when it had done so little to the monster ghost dog, but since he didn’t possess any magic that he could use, he would’ve liked to have something, at least.

Wait, hang on. The blade was steel. Steel is an iron alloy. Iron is supposed to hurt magical creatures, isn’t it? That’s almost in every story I’ve ever heard so it must have its roots in something of reality. Why the hell didn’t the blade have any real effect on the creature, then? it ought to have at least felt it.

But the dwarves clearly handled iron, too, and on a regular basis. He’d seen their handiwork in their home, there was no mistaking it. If it hurt all magical creatures, why weren’t they screaming in agony every time they handled it?
Not important right now, the voice that sounded like his sister hissed in his mind. You haven’t got the knife in any case, remember? More pressing issues, yeah?

What could he use, then, beside his limbs? His antlers, perhaps? It sounded silly but in fights you were rarely given the privilege of being picky about the weapons on hand.

John didn’t realize he’d started to slip off the ring before Sherlock stopped him.

“I said, do _not_ take off the ring!” the taller man said and there was a note of steel in his voice. “No matter what.”

“But – “John was prevented from saying more by a bony hand suddenly pushing under his chin, pressing his jaw shut. Blue eyes glared up into pale ones.

“Listen, John. Please. Listen.”

The former soldier wanted to argue but was wise enough to keep quiet.

“That ring protects you. Not much, not on this night, but just enough, hopefully. At least enough that you can get outside the forest, outside their influence if you run.”

“But you can’t.” The words were muffled and almost unintelligible behind the hand.

“No. That’s unimportant. I will stay here while you get away.”

It took only a split-second for John to work it out. Once he did, he went completely rigid, his face going equally stony even as his eyes first went wide and then narrowed. A glint of steel appeared in the depths of those eyes.

“No,” he said, voice low and dangerous in its flat calm. “No fucking way. There’ll be no bloody martyring on my part, that’s for certain.”

“John, now is not the time. Please. _Go._”

“Not without you, no. Whatever we do, we do together, do you hear me? We’re in this together!”

If Sherlock planned to say any more, it was drowned in the arrival of the Hunt.

It was loud. It was boisterous. It was a nightmare on a multitude of legs. They were everywhere and nowhere, swarming towards them.

John couldn’t help staring as they approached, even as his vision blurred most horribly and he felt a very strong sense of terror.

Despite this, he could discern some shapes in the mass of bodies that came towards them. Among them were warriors, great brutes of what might once have been men clad in heavy armour, their weapons raised high above their heads, their eyes nothing more than holes of utter darkness. There were skeletons, some nothing more than bones that shone bluish white, some in various stages of decay, the bones showing through rotting skin. There were even what looked like normal, young men and women, fresh-faced with happily laughing eyes.

In amongst all these were ghosts and demons, everyone that it was possible to imagine and maybe even a few that went beyond what was possible and the rest blurred into a horrible mass.

Only the animals were easy to see. If you could call them animals. The steeds did resemble horses but they were closer to the steeds that appeared on metal albums or perhaps larger, more frightening
versions of what the Bucca Dhu had first appeared as when he’d met it. In fact, he thought he might have spotted it in amongst the others, tellingly without a rider.

They snorted, huffed and neighed, bucked and danced and galloped as they came, their teeth bared and their mouths frothing.

In front of them ran dogs, as befitting for a hunt. They weren’t as massive or as horrendous as the Hound itself but they still bore a horrible resemblance to the monster they’d faced, their tongues lolling out of their mouths, their teeth glinting and their paws ripping up the earth. They ran in front of the steeds but also behind and between, their barks unmistakably joyous even though they sounded as much as wailing children and dark despair as they did anything canine.

In the midst of this jumble of creatures rode one figure that stood out above the rest, with his long, silver grey hair that flowed around him together with his equally long beard. His clothes were varying shades of shadow and most of his face was covered by a large, wide-brimmed hat. In his stretched-out hand was a sword, or maybe a staff, pointing towards the direction they were going. Possibly straight at John, he couldn’t be sure.

Sherlock grabbed hold of him, spinning him around so that he wasn’t looking at it anymore and only then did he realize that he was trembling. He tried hard to pull himself together because getting frightened right then was not a smart option. The trembling didn’t stop completely.

The pale eyes were back to frosted colours and the air around him crackled, as a sort of counterpoint to the thunder of the Hunt.

“What are you doing?” John couldn’t help asking. He could feel the magic thrumming through him from Sherlock, despite the numbing effect from the ring.

“Delaying them,” Sherlock answered through gritted teeth. His face was drawn, strained and his entire body was tensed to the point of trembling. “It’s…difficult, to say the least…and it won’t work for long. They will…devour you, John, slowly…painfully. I can’t…can’t…lose you…so, please. Get away, go.”

The expression on Sherlock’s face and the pain and panic in his voice were almost enough to convince John to go. What clinched the decision for him was the look of what he could only describe as love deep in those icy pools.

Another cacophonous noise echoed through the forest. Sherlock shoved at the doctor and John turned.

He began to run, his steps at first halting and reluctant but they soon picked up speed. He didn’t stop to go back when he heard and felt a…it wasn’t even a noise as much as a sensation going through every single sense and bone in his body, even though he wanted to.

Every step away from Sherlock felt…painful, as stupid and clichéd as that sounded. It was a step away from what he had come to associate with home and comfort and yes, even love.

He almost did stop when he heard a noise of utter agony, a noise undeniably that familiar baritone. Heart thudding, he forced himself onwards and only turned his head to see what had caused that noise.

What he saw shocked him; it was a wonder that he didn’t fall.

He could see still see Sherlock despite the run distance but only just. The antlers and dark curls were visible in the ghostly light the Hunt emitted but apart from those, it was nigh-impossible to make out
anything else in the jostle of the riders, many of whom seemed to be writhing in pain themselves. It wasn’t difficult to work out who’d inflicted that.

But despite his obvious efforts, it was clear that Sherlock was no match for the combined Hunt. Even as he thought that, John witnessed as the curls and antlers sank out of sight and didn’t resurface.

Tears stinging his eyes, his brain short-circuiting and his heart threatening to choke him, John turned his head and ran. He ran until he was dizzy and sure he’d die and still he ran.

He didn’t stop until dawn, well outside the forest. There he collapsed, sobbing.

Chapter End Notes

This ended up being rather fitting for the day it goes up, huh? I’m sorry if this has either been dull or very unpleasant. I promise it’ll all work out well in the end. Give me some time. :) 
I enjoyed writing the arguments here, though, if anyone cares.
How do you pick up the pieces?

Chapter Summary

No matter what happens, life goes on. John hasn't much wish to do so but for the sake of their child, he has to. He cannot stay in the forest, not while he isn't completely fay and with the Bucca Dhu still at large. So, he makes his way back to London, broken-hearted and lonely.

Chapter Notes

Thank you, everyone. For taking the last chapter so well and for your very kind comments. I promise it'll all have a point. Bear with me. :)

The next thing he could remember was sitting, what turned out to be two days later, in the snug of the inn he’d booked into when he’d arrived, what seemed like ages ago, staring blankly out in front of him. He had a mug of tea liberally spiced with some sort of liquor cradled in his hands, which he hadn’t touched at all, while the landlord’s kind wife fussed over him.

He had no idea what he’d said to them to explain why he’d been gone for over a month, why he’d arrived back with only his wallet and his completely dead phone, both of which he’d remembered to keep in his pockets almost always while he’d been in the forest, or where exactly he’d been.

Whatever it’d been, however, it must’ve been enough to satisfy the curiosity of the two people who’d been kind enough to take him in. He could only imagine how awful he must’ve looked when he’d arrived at their door for them to take him in and take that much care of him, however well he’d gotten on with the landlord when he’d arrived.

Not that he had much presence of mind to imagine or even think. It was mostly white noise in there right then and what wasn’t white noise he very much wished was.

In some deep part of his brain he knew he was in shock, reeling over what had just happened, and that he ought to pull himself together. He couldn’t manage it, though, no matter how hard he tried. Every time he tried, the image of Sherlock disappearing in the horde of creatures swarming around came across his inner eye and he was back to square one.

He vaguely registered that time passed and he was eventually bundled up into a previously unoccupied single room, the landlord promising that he’d get some things sorted for him. So, John must’ve also talked to the pair but he couldn’t quite recall that he had.

Once in bed, he was met with the jarring feeling that this was all wrong. What he was lying on was far too soft, the covers were stiff rather than soft and smelled too clean to be right. Most important of all, his back felt cold and bare, even though he’d been lent a spare t-shirt to sleep in, and no matter how long he waited, nobody came to take up the place behind him.
He ought to have been completely dried up, with the sobbing he’d done once he’d left the forest. Nevertheless, his eyes were moist as they stared into the darkness of the room and tears slowly started leaking out of them. He didn’t notice them at all.

“You utter, fucking selfish bastard,” he said out loud, though quietly and vehemently, into the silence of 3am. It was the first time he was aware he’d spoken and the first coherent thought that wasn’t merely a mental verbalisation of his immediate, visceral pain. “How bloody well dare you?”

Would you rather that you’d both been mauled and they’d taken every ounce of magic that’s housed within the tiny body of your baby? Would you rather they had managed to kill three instead of one?

He wouldn’t. Of course, he wouldn’t, but that still didn’t…

Your life is no longer your own, Johnny-boy. It still sounded like his sister and he didn’t much care for his washed-up, alcoholic sister making that much sense, even in his own head. Whatever you want, whatever you feel comes second now. Your priority now has got to be your child, making sure that it arrives in the world safely and gets the best possible upbringing you can give it.

“I know that,” he whispered, needing to say it out loud to get out of his own head, if only for a bit. “I bloody well know that, don’t I? I know why he did it, too, and all. Doesn’t change the fact that he is an unfair, selfish, ruddy bastard. Who or what the hell gives him the right to just die on me? Who… who…”

The words got stuck in his throat, frozen by the lump that had lodged in there. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his hands into tight fists, his fingernails pressing hard indents into his skin, as hard as he could make them.

What also pressed into his skin, however, was something he’d completely forgotten about, despite everything that had been associated with it since he’d gotten it.

Slowly opening his eyes, he lifted his hand up in front of his face. With the light out, he shouldn’t have been able to see anything in front of him but over a month in a place that only had what light the natural world provided, his vision had been honed tremendously and he could see his hand rather.

The ring on his finger was difficult to look at for different reasons. He stared at it nevertheless, feeling a growing urge to take it off the longer he stared.

He knew perfectly well why he had gotten it in the first place and why it was important that he didn’t take it off now that he was back among regular humans. Even in this private darkness it wasn’t safe, in case someone decided to poke their head in and see how he was or he forgot and fell asleep, coming downstairs with an unintended, nasty surprise for them.

The thing was, he’d grown used to feeling the magic inside of him as much as around him and it hurt even more to feel cut-off from it now that Sherlock and the thrum of his power, subdued and suppressed but steadily more noticeable to John as he grew and they grew closer, wasn’t near him anymore.

Just a little while wouldn’t hurt, though, right? If he was going to go away – and he hardly thought it wise to stay in the area, in the circumstances, quite apart from the sundering heartache – for good, he wanted to feel the forest and the magic properly once last time.

Slipping the ring slowly from his finger, he was suddenly glad he was lying down.

Not only was it overwhelming to feel the connection once again, which came back to him not as a
trickle that slowly leaked back into his body and his consciousness, as he had expected, but instead as an incoming flood, almost burying him in its overpowering onslaught. It was also a very strange sensation to feel his…fay traits coming back.

Technically speaking, they’d never gone away. As far as he’d been told, the ring couldn’t do that. The dwarves were gifted but their talents didn’t stretch that far, at least not in that short amount of time. What it did was conceal what was there. So, he shouldn’t be able to feel them coming back, just as he shouldn’t have been able to feel it disappearing.

Yet, despite all that, he could most definitely feel something happening, among them sensitive antlers pressing against the pillow when they most certainly hadn’t been before.

Although they were still small compared to Sherlock’s impressive set, they’d grown quite a lot faster in the time spent in the forest than they had the three months previous and were now rubbing against the soft cotton. He moved his head up and down so that they could continue rubbing against it, an insufficient imitation of the caress he’d so often received from…

Closing his eyes again, he moved the hand not holding the ring down to rub at his stomach, where his little passenger also seemed to be able to sense the increased connection and was squirming heavily about in his belly. He let it fill him up from the inside, basking in the feeling for one last time. Once last indulgence, you could say.

He remembered to put the ring back on before he slid into sleep but it was a close-run thing. It felt utterly wrong and almost sickening to have the connection dampened to the point that he was unable to sense it.

His state of shock, temporarily seeming to have abated in the night, returned to him in the morning, though not quite as severe as before.

The landlord, who turned out to be called Iain, noticed him as soon as he came downstairs and herded him towards a more secluded part of the otherwise surprisingly crowded room. Once sitting down, it didn’t take long before a plate laden with a full English breakfast was put in front of him, despite him not remembering to have ordered.

Since he’d subsisted on a very different diet for a while, the smell of the baked beans, the bangers and the bacon was both tantalizing and a little bit revolting in its sudden unfamiliarity. He only stared at it.

“Get that down you, love,” said the wife of the landlord, Brenda, sitting herself down opposite him. “Do you the world of good, I reckon. Poor thing, you’d think you’d seen a ghost the way you looked yesterday. Not that that’s unlikely down here, of course, but…well, you just tuck in, dear.”

He opened his mouth, though what he intended to say, he had no idea.

“Oh, don’t you worry, on the house,” she said before he could say anything, giving him a warm, encompassing smile. How one could be matronly motherly while small and bone-rattlingly skinny he had difficulties grasping.

“We were both worried when you didn’t return, especially after you’d gone…well, that way and with what Iain told me you’d said and all.” She made a noise. “Yesterday, seemed like we were right.
to be right worried when we saw you. It’s not right, it’s not.”

“Cops?” he asked, vaguely feeling worried beneath it all. If they’d been genuinely worried for him, it would only stand to reason that they’d gotten the police involved in it at some point.

Trying to explain away where he’d been for the last month to his own landlord and even to Sarah would be difficult enough without getting grilled by police officers who would dig a lot deeper than the others.

“No, no,” she replied quickly, reassuringly “no fuzz. Hardly ever see them down here. Wouldn’t understand a thing, would they now? They all like their logic so much, they wouldn’t see reality if it bit them on the arse.”

He must have stared at her at that because she smiled and gave him a small wink. “Where do you think a Northumberland bloke like my Iain learned anything about seeing the signs happening all around in these parts from, eh? Born and bred, I am. Not just on the human side, either, mind.”

Some little memory flashed a fin. “He said his nan – “John began.

“Oh, yes, his family’s from here, but his mum met a Geordie at university and well…took him a while to find his way back down here, didn’t it?” She stood up and gestured towards his plate. “You eat your breakfast now, I’ll go see whether the boys have managed to sort out the damage the storm caused yet.”

She started to walk away but stopped and turned after only a few steps. Don’t you worry. We’ll get you sorted out.” A self-conscious grin bloomed across her face. “I know we’re being interfering busybodies and it’s really not our place but – “

“It’s…fine,” John managed to reply, answering her smile with one of his own, though his was rather wobbly and weak.

She seemed to understand, though, and gave him a nod before she bustled off, shouting and calling out to, presumably to her husband.

John stared down at his artery-ruining food, honestly not feeling up to eating anything. Eventually he did clear the plate, though, even the fried bread. The grease of it stuck to his throat and he almost wished he was still at the stage of pregnancy where vomiting was normal.

That would hardly help his body, though, which hadn’t received much nourishment in the last few days, either, and consequently neither had his little passenger. He wasn’t quite at the point of eating for two yet but neither could he skip eating anymore.

The food stayed down, somehow or other.

Something occurred to him while he was sitting there, staring unseeing out in front of him; every half-formed thought he could muster about his time in the forest and especially Sherlock filled him with pain and despair and white noise, but when his thoughts instead turned to their child, they became considerably more focused and practical.

The pain and everything else mixed up with it didn’t go away or even diminished, as such, but nevertheless, it somehow became more manageable, as though it slid down into the lower tiers of his conscious mind, there but not taking full and utter control.

Focus on the practical. Not quite a unique way of dealing with –
Oh, shut the hell up. I don’t want to deliver my child in a ruddy psychiatric ward, ta.

All this might just send you there in due time, anyway, doctor.

He looked out the window at the landscape that rolled by as the train made its way back to London from Truro, hardly taking it in. Not that there was much to take in, seeing as he’d taken the afternoon train and it was early November. The most that would be visible would be dark trees and houses against a slightly lighter dark sky. On the seat next to him sat the small bag containing some clothes he’d bought and a few provisions. There was nothing else in there.

The last few days had been spent organizing and planning in a determined attempt to get his, for lack of a better term, old life back and in some semblance of order. He couldn’t arrive back in London with only the clothes on his back, no home and no job. He had to have something to go back to, now that he had very little, if anything at all, to stay, even if that something seemed rather empty in comparison.

The landlord couple had been a right godsend in that respect. Not only did they take care of him in an immediate, practical sense, they had seemed to understand that he’d been changed, though they didn’t seem to have sussed how exactly, and therefore needed some extra TLC. They had also called both the police to report that he’d been found.

He hadn’t been reported missing by them but it turned out that Sarah had become concerned when she’d called him up a week after she’d spoken to Sherlock, just to see how he was doing, and had only gotten a dead line. Her worry had only increased when she’d called Clara, instead gotten Harry and had been shouted at for her trouble. Nobody else she could think to call had heard from him, either, and so she’d gone to the police.

Once she learned that he was alive, she’d given him verbal hell for roughly half an hour before he had a chance to explain himself. When he could, he told her the truth. Well, part of it, anyway. The whole fay thing he kept very much to himself but he did hint that he might need a bit extra space in a future home.

Surprisingly, she not only seemed to get what he was hinting at, she wasn’t fazed by it. Maybe that was because she thought he was pulling her leg but it didn’t sound like it. In fact, once she understood, or at least seemed to, that he would soon be a father, she mellowed considerably – she even offered to put him up in her box room temporarily when he came back.

That wasn’t the only things needing to be taken care of, of course, and though he’d normally prefer to do such things himself, he was grateful this once to have help. Being kept busy helped other things, too.

So, now he was going back. The knowledge didn’t fill him with any emotion whatsoever.

Once, he’d called it going back home, much to Sherlock’s chagrin. He had thought of it as home, even though there hadn’t been much, if anything, tying him to the place. Now, though…even in the relatively short time that had passed, he had begun thinking of the forest as home.

He’d first thought it was because he wanted to be wherever Sherlock was but then he’d had the
realisation, tending to a young wood troll’s head injury while Sherlock rattled off the deductions of the case they’d just solved, that it was so much more than that.

Sherlock had given him a life in the forest, a sense of belonging, despite everything, and some form of purpose, both of which he had never had in London. They’d become a team, facing whatever was thrown their way, together. There was bickering and disagreements but there were also laughs and tender moments.

In short, there was love.

It sounded ridiculous, he knew that perfectly well. Calling it love when they had known each other, in more than just body, for a month and a half was ludicrous. Something that sounded straight out of a ruddy fairy tale.

“Not a fairy tale,” he muttered to his reflection in the train window, a mirthless smile playing on his lips. “Folklore. Completely different, don’t you know?”

Whatever the case and however absolutely, utterly absurd and possibly sad it sounded, it didn’t alter the fact that it was true.

He loved Sherlock. He loved him and he had nothing to remember him by, apart from the ring and the obvious, at least nothing that was tangible that he could let out. Taking the ring off in the middle of the night in a small inn down in Cornwall was one thing. People seemed reasonably understanding of the more…peculiar things in life.

Taking it off in the city…London may be a multicultural melting pot but even then, he didn’t think a thing like was likely that people would turn a blind eye to that sort of thing. The argument he’d had with Sherlock over that topic was quite real and relevant.

“Best make the most of what we’ve got, then, haven’t we?” he said quietly, his breath fogging the window as it hit the glass.

There was nobody in the compartment with him, nobody who could hear what he said and take umbrage with it.

There was nobody.

“John! John, over here!”

The blond didn’t realize that it was him being addressed until someone pushed their way through the meagre amount of people on the platform that late at night and consequently, he didn’t turn towards the voice. John was a very common name, after all. If he turned every time someone said John, he might as well become a spinning top.

“John!” the voice called again, much closer and he could see who it was.

“Sarah,” he greeted her. His voice was completely calm, almost flat, as he still didn’t feel much one way or the other. He was therefore somewhat unprepared for the hug she gave him right there, on the
platform, squeezing him tightly.

His immediate thought was to be careful of the baby but at a little over four months, it was still far from being anywhere near the surface and a normal hug shouldn’t do anything.

She pulled back before he collected himself enough to return the hug. In the light from the overhead lamps of the station, she paused to take him in. Firmly ignoring any comparison to others, John let her.

“You stupid sod,” she said finally, shaking her head. “You can’t be left on your own, can you? Good grief, just look at the state of you.”

“Always such a pleasure, Sarah.”

“Oh, give over. I’m allowed to be a little snarky when a friend, a male friend, I might add, comes back from being missing for over a month without any real explanation for where he’s been and he’s got a bun in the oven.”

Once upon a time, he might have shushed her for the comment. Now, he didn’t much care. Nobody would believe what they heard even if they managed to pick up on the last part of that sentence.

She took his arm and lead him out of the station.

“So…” she began once they’d arrived at her flat and sat down in the living room, each with a glass of wine in their hand, “is it a boy or a girl?”

It was so far from what he would’ve expected out of her, if he’d had the presence of mind to think about it, especially as the that startled him a little.

“I…I don’t know,” he answered, truthfully. “I haven’t been to any check-ups or had a sonogram.”

“What?” She had the cheek to look incredulous.

He merely stared at her in reply. To her credit, she smiled sheepishly when she caught on. “No, of course not. You didn’t know. It’s not really the go-to assumption for a bloke. Not much opportunity to do so in the intervening time, either, I suppose.” She smiled. “Well, then, not to worry. I’ve got a friend who’s an obstetrician with her own clinic. We can get to use the sonogram there, if we bribe her.”

“You’re…taking all of this really well,” John said slowly, carefully. “It’s not exactly the – “

“The most compos mentis claim ever made by a man?” she finished for him before taking a sip of wine. She seemed to contemplate while she did so. “I don’t know, really. I probably should want to section you for just suggesting it but I don’t. In all the time I’ve known you, you’ve always come across as level-headed and practical, not really the man hellbent on getting children. If you were going to go mental and claim something ludicrous, I can’t see why that’d be the go-to for your brain. Quite apart from the way you’re bulging in the midsection in a rather tell-tale way.”

“Still.”

“Point,” she conceded after another sip. “Put it down to me just liking you, then.”

She paused, then shook her head, seemingly at herself. “I must do, seeing how I didn’t find a permanent replacement for you when – that’s another thing. Who was that bloke I got through to on the phone when I called you that time? Shylock, was it? You do know him?” The implication of that
last question was clear.

The mention of Sherlock, albeit slightly misnamed, made John stiffen completely for a few seconds and he had to fight to keep everything in some modicum of check. His composure, still born mostly from shock, was not up to the task when it came to straight-up mentions of the man’s name.

Somehow or other, he managed to answer.

“Sherlock, not Shylock. This isn’t Venice. Yeah, I know him. He…” He had to swallow to get rid of a sudden lump. “He’s the father. But he didn’t…he isn’t…” A new lump formed and refused to be gotten rid of, even after repeated swallows.

To her credit, once again, she seemed to read the situation rather well. She kept her mouth shut and instead just leaned forward in her chair to give his thigh a gentle, single squeeze. He appreciated the small gesture.

“Well, you’re back. for good and for ill. I don’t know what happened and it’s not my place to pry. But now that you are and have a baby-on-the-way, well…we’ll do the best we can with what we have.”

“We?” he echoed, nonplussed.

“Of course,” she said, giving him a soft smile. “You didn’t really think you’d be all on your lonesome, did you?”

“Sarah – “

“Relax, it’s not like I told anyone. But people like you, John. They want to help. Let them.”

He considered that. It was a good point.

He would need all the help he could get.

Chapter End Notes

God, this hasn't been easy to write, for several different reasons. I hope that doesn't show too bad. I really did try. It was a bit cathartic, too, though, and felt necessary to write.
Coping & Meeting.

Chapter Summary

Back in London, though he's still grieving, John has to find a way of rebuilding a life for himself and his child. One day, he comes home to find a stranger on his front step, who knows an awful lot about the world he's been forced to leave behind. He brings information for the doctor but some of it is anything but encouraging.

Chapter Notes

Whew...this is now into a length that rivals a proper novel. That's tripping me slightly, I have to say. I'm happy that you've all been sweet enough to stay with it this long. Not long to go now. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The following week was something of a blur to John.

There was, of course, the practical things to deal with, such as looking for accommodation, as his landlord hadn’t been quite as understanding of his sudden absence as Sarah had and had decided to evict him as soon as the next rent payment wasn’t made.

That also meant that John’s belongings, what few of them there were, had been thrown out once a new tenant came. Or rather, they were scheduled to be but before the landlord could do so, someone had turned up to take them.

Understandably, John was rather disbelieving of this fact, especially when there no name had been given. He’d never asked anyone to help, both because he hadn’t known he’d be evicted that rapidly and because he wouldn’t have anyone to ask, even if he’d known and, more importantly, wanted anyone to help.

Nevertheless, the things had been taken by someone. The description, given by a somewhat grumpy landlord, of that someone amounted to ‘normal-looking bloke with stubble, brown eyes and salt-and-pepper hair’, which was...unhelpful, to say the least.

What worried John most, however, wasn’t that someone had run off with his personal stuff, since he hadn’t kept much that had any sentimental value. It was that someone had found his pistol in among the possessions, whether that was the new tenants or the mysterious person. An unlicensed sidearm would be hard enough to explain but one that was issued to a British Army officer which hadn’t been returned once he’d been discharged…

Without anything more substantial to go on than some generic descriptions of a man, there wasn’t anything he could do, nothing to proceed with. He couldn’t pull clues and leads out of thin air. He wasn’t Sherlock.

So, he was left with another thing to worry about as he and Sarah worked on finding him somewhere
else that he could afford. She’d been adamant that the box room sofa bed solution was temporary and he agreed wholeheartedly.

He hadn’t been the most socially minded creature before he’d ended up in the forest and now, after everything, he was bordering on asocial. The sooner he could find a flat, however small, that wasn’t a health risk and could accommodate both a bed and a cot, the better.

There’d been a wealth of other things to sort out, among them getting John back onto the roster as a doctor. It was only a few shifts at first, which was just as well.

At one point during that week, he did wonder somewhat why he was handling everything so well, comparatively speaking. Then he realized that he was keeping busy, as busy as possible, to avoid thinking about anything except what needed sorting next. That and keeping as large a mental lock on any thought related to Sherlock.

Handling everything didn’t seem that big an accomplishment, then.

It should have been almost impossible to find a bedsit he could afford, let alone a flat. He’d been downright lucky when he’d gotten the one he’d been thrown out of. Getting a new one, in London, at such short notice…getting antlers had been the thing far more likely to happen.

So, it was with very great surprise and deep suspicion that he found himself, in the middle of November, moved into not a bedsit, but a surprisingly large one bedroom flat with an open kitchen-diner. There had been eerily few issues getting to rent it and it was within a feasible price range.

Sarah called it a stroke of luck, told him not to worry and just be glad that something good was finally coming his way. He ended up agreeing, at least out loud, not wanting to spark an argument when he’d done more than enough to rightfully piss her off and he did need a job, preferably with someone who understood his…situation, as it were, if he was to support his single-parent family.

In general, he’d found it wise to go along with most of what she suggested, though admittedly that was as much because they made sense as anything else.

There was one point which he didn’t agree with her on, though, no matter what she said; he wasn’t going to go have a sonogram or any other check-up. He knew that she had the best of intentions but even if they could somehow get to use the necessary equipment, friend willing, neither of them were obstetricians or even just paediatricians.

On top of that, though, there was also the risk that the results they got would end up stored on some sort of server, despite all precautions. It was very unlikely that even if it was found out, it would lead the people looking back to him but it wasn’t worth the risk.

Compared to being outed as a pregnant man with otherwise no feminine traits or female hormones and potentially paraded around like some sort of freak of nature, getting to know what gender the child was before it was born seemed unimportant.

For everything else about its progress and wellbeing, he had Mrs. Hudson’s word and assurance after thorough assessments throughout his time spent there. Slightly batty the woman might be but he had to admit that he trusted her judgement.

He couldn’t really tell Sarah that. How would he do it, exactly? Just say that in the time he was away, some elderly woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to Aunt Sally, at least some of the time, checked up on him but not to worry, she didn’t do any harm because she checked everything by the feel of her hands? That would go down swell.
The trouble with that was that though he was adamant and his apprehension was understandable, it
did bump up against the otherwise reasonable argument that he needed to be sure that his baby was
healthy and developing right and on schedule.

At the moment of his moving into his new flat, they had reached a sort of impasse. However, he
knew perfectly well that that was mostly because she’d changed tactics.

Once in the flat, sitting on his newly bought bed, he had the strangest sense that everything that had
happened in the forest had been nothing more than a dream.

_Oh, come off it. You’re no bloody Alice and that ain’t a beer belly you’re lugging around. Like it or
not, it happened. You might wish it hadn’t, now, and wouldn’t it being a dream be such a wonderful
excuse for that to be true, but do you really want to be without all the things that’s happened in
between?_

“I suppose not,” he said into the empty air. He moved both his hands down to the by then somewhat
substantial curve of his belly, rubbing over it in soothing circles. “You’re certainly not a dream,
whatever else happened then.”

Since he was outside of the forest and still wore the ring as well, his ability to feel the magic and
consequently the surges and trembles that Sherlock had, for lack of a better word, kickstarted in his
belly with his touches to it should have faded back to almost nothing, if anything at all.

That wasn’t what had happened at all, though. Granted, it wasn’t as strong as it had been, quite
obviously, but it was still there, pulsing gently under his hands.

“Guess you soaked up quite a bit more magic than I thought you would,” he said, speaking out loud
as much to fill the silence that was now bothering him like it never had before as anything.
“Shouldn’t be surprised, really, should I? You are his child, after all, it would only figure. Gods,
there’s a thought. How are you going to look when you come out? I’m telling you right now, if you
have fully grown antlers when you do, there is no ruddy way I’m delivering you through any type of
canal.”

There was a tiny noise from his stomach, as though a protest was made. “We’ll rope Sarah into
reading up on performing a caesarean section, don’t worry. Nothing’s ever going to harm you, love.
I promise. Not while I’m around.”

Now that he was here, on his own, with no one around, except for the millions of people living their
lives all around him, it didn’t feel too odd to talk to his little passenger like this. He wouldn’t be the
first pregnant person in history to do it and it gave him another link to his child, one that needed to
feel more than ever, now that so much else had crumpled.

He fell asleep like that, lying on his side on the bed, muttering every little thought he had out loud
while caressing his growing child from the outside.

The ghost of a long, pale body seemed to occupy the space just behind him at some point but he put
that down to a sleepy mind and an unhealthy amount of wishful thinking.
The days of November passed by in dribs and drabs, a routine quickly established and adhered to very rigidly. He would get up, shower, get dressed and eat before leaving for work. Since the common diseases of the season didn’t steer clear of doctors, it was easy for him to get shifts even when he wasn’t actually on the roster. After the long shifts that left him purposely tired, he’d go into the nearest Tesco’s, buy the things he’d need and go home, eat, stare out into space for a while then head to bed.

It was beyond monotonous but that was rather the point.

The only thing that deviated was when he went to Huggle or, more often, John Lewis to look at baby-relevant things, mostly prompted or nagged into it by Sarah. She’d even come with him once or twice, to make sure that he wouldn’t just browse and not actually buy anything.

He’d tried to point out that buying things was premature, since he had around four months left of his pregnancy left. That was of course providing it followed anything resembling a regular gestation period, which he wasn’t completely sure about. That ought to be plenty of time to sort out all the practical things.

She’d looked at him as though he was barking. Then, without a word, she’d shaken her head and dumped all the small pile of various ‘essentials’ she’d accumulated into his arms, nudging him towards the smiling shop assistant.

All in all, it seemed like a perfectly normal, if a little humdrum existence, at least on the surface. The blond was even able to smile and laugh on occasion.

The way John’s head would turn after every tall man with dark, curly hair and the wistful and slightly pained expression that would flash across his face a moment after realizing his mistake told another story altogether.

Sometimes, when he allowed himself to think about it, he wished he’d taken a picture of Sherlock with his phone before it had lost its battery entirely. He would have had something apart from his own memories to go on, something concrete to focus on, to make sure that as time passed, the man would never fade from or get distorted by his memories.

Not that he thought it likely but even discounting that, it would have been good to have something to show, both to others who might ask after the child’s other parent and for the child itself when it grew up. It deserved to know its father, to see just how beautiful he’d been, how fascinating. To understand where its own looks came from. It might not even have been born yet but despite that, he felt almost dead certain that it was going to be the spitting image of the brunet.

Whether that was a good thing or not, he had no idea.

All that said, however, he had no idea whether fay would even show up on a screen or whether that sort of thing was reserved for vampires. He wouldn’t be surprised if they existed, too, though. To be honest, they would almost seem tame in comparison.

Since that avenue was closed off to him, he went, after a little too much deliberation, for the next-best thing he could think of; he went to see a professional portrait artist that could, hopefully, manage to recreate something that looked enough like Sherlock from the descriptions John could provide. It would hardly be perfect but it would be better than the nothing that he had now.

So, he somehow managed to get someone commissioned to do it. At first, he’d been a little dubious as to their actual skills but after a meeting face to face where the compact, dark man had made a rough sketch of John while they’d sat there, he’d been convinced. He’d even been a bit flattered by
how well the guy had made him look, despite the ‘beer gut’ he sported.

On his way home from that meeting, limping slightly as he walked, he thought he saw a very familiar shock of copper curls out of the corner of his eye, made all the more vibrant by the late November greyness and people’s equally dark coats. He’d learned his lesson by then and didn’t try to call out or chase after the person.

It was not going to be Demelza. There was no reason it would be, not when they’d have more than enough on their plates, and he’d only manage to make himself look ridiculous by following it. On top of that, running on wet and possibly slippery pavement would be one thing on its own but doing it when there was a little lodger along would be needlessly dangerous.

Feeling even more tired than before, though he didn’t question just why he’d been feeling increasingly faint over the last few weeks beyond the thought that he’d been working himself too hard in that time, he continued his trip back…back to the flat.

It wasn’t back home. It was never going to be home. Home was one place and it wasn’t London.

By the time he reached the front door to his flat, he was too tired to be as observant as he should have been. Therefore, he almost bumped into the figure standing right outside of it, clearly waiting for him.

Taking a step back automatically to regain his balance, John raised his head and looked the other square in the eye. His hand shifted its grip on the small bunch of keys he was holding and then…he stopped.

It was the man who’d taken his things.

Or rather, that was the immediate assumption John had. The frustrating vagueness of the description he’d been given ought to make it impossible to know it for certain. The slight stubble was there, certainly, as were both the chocolate brown eyes that were unexpectedly large and the salt-n-pepper hair. Those were hardly unique features and apart from them, the only thing that made him halfway sure was the aura the man exuded and that was just downright stupid, whatever else had happened.

The face was serious, though not unfriendly, but in any case, it brightened into an easy-going, rather nice smile once he seemed to recognize who John was, somehow.

“Well, hello,” he said, his voice as easy-going and forthcoming as his smile. “I guess you must be John. I…I did try knocking but there was nobody home. Obviously not.”

“Who the hell are you?” John asked with a frown, suspicion and wariness crystal clear in his voice.

The smile faltered slightly but only for a moment. “Sorry. I’m Detective Inspector Lestrade.” He held out a hand, his warrant card held in the other.

The blond’s frown deepened. He didn’t take the outstretched hand. “A DI? What the hell does the Yard want with me? With my things? I was gone, yes, but that hardly warrants taking all my stuff like that and especially not failing to return it when I come back.”

The inspector blinked, seeming a little nonplussed. “What?”

“Someone matching your description came and took the things in my old flat before they were chucked out by my former landlord. Now you show up here, at the new place I live, with no sign of boxed up stuff, which would be right if you’re ending an investigation. So, I ask you, what do you want and where are my things?”
John didn’t realize it but he was still holding his keys as though he was ready to test their cutting ability.

Lestrade took a step backwards, holding up a hand placatingly. “Woah, easy. You’re not under suspicion or even investigation.”

“Oh, no?”

“No. Not at all. I took your stuff, yeah, but that was for safekeeping.”

John narrowed his eyes but then paused. This discussion should be done in private. He wanted to keep the flat, after all.

He pushed past the other man, pushed the key into the lock and opened the door. He gestured curtly for the inspector to go in, following right behind him.

His little passenger kicked him hard, as though displeased with having a visitor, and it was difficult to keep the grimace contained.

Lestrade didn’t notice, though, as his back was turned as he walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa.

John took a chair. He didn’t bother offering anything. He wanted the man out as soon as possible.

“Safekeeping?” he asked with false pleasantness. “Didn’t know the Yard was that hard up it needs to double as a voluntary storage.”

“What? Uh, no. It doesn’t. It’s not related to the Yard at all, it’s…oh, bugger. Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot. I’m not here in my official capacity at all, I just showed you the card so you knew I wasn’t some sort of creep trying to…”

“So far, you haven’t really convinced me that you’re not a creep, even with the card.”

Lestrade snorted at that. “Fair point.”

“So, what do you want, Detective inspector? Just thought you’d find somewhere to pass the time?”

“No, I…I’m here on business.”

“You just said you weren’t here in your official capacity.”

“I’m not. Well, I am, but not that capacity – no, it’s nothing dodgy.” He paused and ran a hand through his hair. “Bugger, why the hell is this so difficult all of a sudden? It isn’t normally.”

“What isn’t?”

“I’m not just a Detective Inspector at the Yard. I’m also the main person in charge of looking after London fay.”

“Excuse me? London’s what?”

John kept a mildly puzzled but otherwise completely unaffected expression on his face at that. There was no way he was going to let on he knew what the man was talking about.

Nobody knew that he was, if not quite fully fay, then at least partially fay. He hadn’t told a soul and he couldn’t think of anyone from the forest that’d tell someone in London, even if they were, unlike
Sherlock, able to leave.

So, why would some detective inspector mention fay to him, without any prompting? It wasn’t exactly a regular topic of conversation and there shouldn’t be anything about the doctor that gave him away as fay.

At least, nothing apart from the ring. Someone who was fay themselves might reasonably pick up on whatever the ring exuded. The dwarves must have put quite a lot of magic into it, it wasn’t implausible some of that was detectable to other who were sensitive to it.

That still didn’t explain why the man had taken his things for ‘safekeeping’ or why he’d decided to show up; the magic wasn’t that strong, surely.

The inspector frowned, looking a little puzzled by John’s reaction or lack thereof.

“London fay,” he repeated. “There are problems that arise which are unique to some segments of the population and I help them deal with that, whenever the job allows, of course.”

“Fay doesn’t exist.”

Lestrade’s frown deepened, as though in incomprehension of what John had just said. “I’m an easy-going fellow but it’s been a long day with a bloody gruelling workload and I’m not really in the mood for more bullshit. Fay do exist and you know that as well as I.”

“Look, I don’t – “

“I was told to keep an eye on you by Mycroft, alright?”

Mouth clicking shut, John blinked. That name rang a bell, was connected to something but what?

“Mycroft?” he echoed.

“Yeah. Sherlock’s brother.”

That shut John up. Sherlock was an uncommon name if ever there was and it’d be a little too coincidental if this man just happened to know someone else of that name, especially when he also mentioned fay. No one was that lucky fishing in the dark.

The mention of Sherlock’s name wasn’t helping a lot in keeping him calm, either.

Lestrade must have noticed his involuntary but very small intake of breath. He was a policeman, after all, and an inspector, at that.

He also had enough empathy to give a soft, sympathetic and understanding smile.

“Yeah… that’s why Mycroft told me to keep an eye on you for him. He… well, he can’t leave his patch, as it were, so he asked me to make sure that your things would be kept safe while you were down there.” He paused, raising an eyebrow. “A bit dangerous, leaving a Sig Sauer out in the open like that, wasn’t it?”

“It was in a locked drawer in my bedroom,” John protested but he’d spotted the light in the other’s eye. “That’s hardly out in the open – and you haven’t reported me for keeping it, I notice.”

“No. Not much point, really, seeing as I was told you’d stay down there. Not that I blame you for coming back, of course, after… ” He trailed off, grimacing as though he was aware of having put his foot right in it. Not that that helped much.
Uneasy silence descended between them.

After some long moments, John spoke again. “That’s one question dealt with. You still haven’t answered the other one, though. Why are you here now? To keep an eye on me, check on Mycroft’s behalf whether the child is developing properly?”

“Child?” Lestrade echoed. He sounded rather baffled by the apparent revelation.

“Yeah?” John was equally puzzled. “Sher—Sherlock must have told his brother that, surely, if he told him about me at all. How the hell did they—no, wait, I’m being stupid. Magic is how they communicated.”

“Sherlock rarely told his brother anything. Didn’t want to have anything to do with him if he could help it, really. I think he only told Mycroft you were there out of spite.”

That information didn’t sit well with John, the thought that he’d been used as a sort of bargaining chip in an apparently ongoing feud between siblings. Not that he doubted the sincerity of Sherlock’s feelings; he could still see the light and gentle tenderness in those pale eyes even when no words were spoken. It shouldn’t matter but somehow, it still did.

Lestrade was speaking again, quickly. “No, not like that. Spite because Mycroft’s always been needling Sherlock about his struggle with connecting with anyone. Think he wanted to make the point that when he did connect with someone, it wasn’t just anyone, you know?”

He paused, seeming to contemplate for a moment. “Not that Mycroft minded. In fact, he seemed pleased. Well, I think, anyway. Never been easy to understand either of them, to be honest. Minds the size of planets and the magical powers to match. Poor sods.” He shook his head.

“How do you fit into all that? I can’t imagine a regular human being allowed to take care of such things. You don’t look fay but I was told that it’s been a long time since someone human became fay, that it’s rare.”

“It is. I’m not—well, I am, but. I’m human and I’m not.”

“Oh, right. Clears up everything, that. Silly me for not spotting it earlier.”

“Ha, ha, funny. I’m what’s known as a changeling. Well, half a one, anyway. My mom was a changeling, married my dad, a human. She returned to the forest eventually, of course, but then, they always do, sooner or later.”

“Changelings are when human babies are switched with fay ones, right? The human child gets adopted into the fay family while the fay is left in the care of the human parents.”

“Right. Broke my dad’s heart when she left but—well, anyway, I inherited a few skills from her which has been useful for my job as a detective and then some bright spark thought it’d be a smashing idea if I took care of whatever grievances the otherworldly people in London has as well. Only positive thing there is that there aren’t a whole lot of them left.”

“Because of the lack of trees?”

“Sort of. It’s a bit more complex than that but it’s part of it, yes. The decline has been steady the last few hundred years and by now, we’re a very small minority. Still has got to be dealt with, of course, which is where I come in. Care in the community and all that.”

“Makes sense. Sense for this whole thing, anyway. But why did Mycroft tell you that I’d come back
if it wasn’t because of me being pregnant? I’m not causing any trouble.”

And since Sherlock is no longer…alive, I would’ve been completely irrelevant to someone who’s more than likely the ruler of his own forest and therefore powerful and important. The words hung between them, unspoken but nevertheless felt.

Lestrade hesitated then made a small grimace. “This is only a guess but I think it was an effort to make sure you were protected.”

“Again, why?”

“You were very important to Sherlock. He asked Mycroft for help on how to conceal…well, your fay traits, for lack of a better word. He’s never asked his brother for anything as long as he’s been an adult.”

And I can draw my own, significant conclusions from that, John thought. I do remember Mrs. Hudson mentioning Mycroft, that he was excited about becoming a big brother. Wonder what happened in the intervening time, however long that was.

“Right,” he said after another few moments of silence, standing back up. “Well, now that you’ve made sure that I am, indeed, alright, I won’t take up more of your no doubt valuable time. Thank you.”

He knew he was being a little curt and rude. The man had been perfectly civil, even helpful in clearing up a few things for him, and he hadn’t reported him for having a pistol he shouldn’t still own in his old bedroom, but he didn’t want to be reminded of the folkloric creatures if he could possibly help it.

The sooner the inspector left, the better.

Lestrade didn’t take the hint that he was expected to leave, however. He couldn’t have missed it but despite that, he made no move to get out of his seat.

John crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow.

“Sit down, John. Please.”

“Why?”

“Just, sit down. There’s something else that might be a problem.”

“Look, Inspector, I appreciate the thought, really, but I don’t need to be reminded of what I lost just because Sherlock’s brother decides to send his lapdog along to check up on me. Once is more than enough and you’ve done that. There’s nothing more for you here. So, please, get out of my home.”

“There is. Something more, that is.”

“Oh? Do tell, then.”

“You’re pregnant, right?” He only got the smallest of terse nods in reply. “Right. And Sherlock’s the father? Alright, just making sure, no need to get hissy. So…halfway fay, at the very least, and full fay, and powerful. That’s not good. Not good at all.”

John sat down, puzzled despite himself and a little worried. He hadn’t forgotten the story Mrs. Hudson had told him on their first meeting and while he could remember a lot from his textbooks on
the progress of pregnancy, he still knew so very little about the mythological side of this whole thing. So, the mentions of anything ‘not good’ in relation to his child filled him with both dread and a fierce protective instinct.

Whatever was wrong, he’d fight to make sure his child was safe.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because…well, it’s not just because the folklore people are moving out of the city that the fay population in London has dwindled so much in the past. For all of us it’s true that we need the connection to the…well, magic, I suppose, to survive. How much we need isn’t universal, of course, but it functions a bit like blood for humans, in that it’s our tether to life. To make life, you need more than just keeping it going, though, a lot more…”

He paused, seemingly at a loss.

“Sher – someone said something about the baby needing the forest, needing the magic to grow and develop,” the blond said, “but it wasn’t clear how long for or how much that was true when it isn’t a fully fay child.”

“Like hell it isn’t,” Lestrade muttered with a snort.

At a look from John, he clarified, “Mate, Sherlock wasn’t just anyone. His offspring is going to be fay, regardless of who or what he impregnated. Besides, you’re hardly human anymore, either.”

The doctor narrowed his eyes but didn’t comment. It was a discussion to have later.

"So, why’s that a problem? There must be some magic in London if there are still folklore people here. If I’m fay, then can’t it get the nourishment it needs through me, like regular food?”

Lestrade shook his head. “If there’s not enough for ordinary fay, then the grandchild of a god’s going to be in real trouble.”

“Meaning what?”

“That there’s a risk it won’t make it to its due date. “

Chapter End Notes

Another cliffhanger. Sorry, everyone, I know it must be frustrating. It has a point, I promise.

Lestrade was a godsend to write, after everything else, and it was nice finally getting to him after knowing he was going to show up for a very long time.
To keep a child safe, whatever it takes

Chapter Summary

John and Lestrade do the best they can to try and combat the problem the inspector outlined, a problem that is confirmed real as John feels the magic slowly ebb. They grow to a tentative sort-of friendship in the process, even as John seems to slowly fade. However, Lestrade isn't the only one with connections to the fay world that the doctor's going to bump into unexpectedly in London...

Chapter Notes

Thank you to every kind soul out there still reading.
I saw 'Over the Garden Wall' between last chapter and this and the Beast's eyes...:D ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No.” The word came out flat, decisive. Final.

“No? What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“There won’t be any risk. Whatever needs to be done to make sure that I carry this baby to term will be done. I…” John paused to forcibly swallow down a lump, “I lost Sherlock to something beyond my control, something otherworldly in nature. I won’t lose our child to something like that as well. That is not going to happen.”

“You can’t just decide that,” Lestrade protested, waving a hand. “The magic isn’t going to miraculously return in a great flood just because you want it to.”

“Of course not.” John’s tone continued to be flat calm but there was a small glint in his eye and, unbeknownst to him, there was a small crackle in the air around him. “But there’s got to be other, viable solutions that someone like Sherlock’s brother must be able to think up. So, go talk to Mycroft and tell him that he had better come up with something good, if he doesn’t want to lose another family member.”

“I’m not his messenger or a ruddy errand boy.” The inspector sounded decidedly annoyed. “Look, I came ‘round to help, fair enough, but that doesn’t mean you can just send me on errands willy-nilly, whatever your connections are.”

John paused at that, only then seeming to realize how it’d come across, then sighed heavily and pressed at the inner corners of his eyes. “Sorry. Didn’t mean for it to come out like that. I’m just… I’m sick and tired of feeling so bloody useless in all of this. Nothing has been under my control for… since Midsummer, really, and the thought that…that I don’t – “

A hand landed on his shoulder. Opening his eyes, he looked up to see the inspector leaning over him, his brown eyes softened and understanding.
“I get you, mate,” he said quietly. “That’s what I actually came to tell you, that I’ve got your back, if you need it, in matters fay. I’m glad you’ve got something of Sherlock with you, even though I’ve no idea how that…anyway, I can understand why you want to protect that by every possible means. We’ll sort it out.”

He straightened back up. “Don’t appreciate being ordered about like that, though. Just so you know.”

“You’re a policeman that made it for long enough to become a detective inspector and you managed that without being ordered about? Impressive.”

Lestrade snorted a laugh. “I’ll see myself out, shall I?”

He walked to the door but paused when he reached it. He turned around to face John who still hadn’t moved.

“I’ll let Mycroft know tonight, see what he can come up with,” he said. Digging into a pocket, he produced a card, which he flicked over to the nearby countertop. “Both my numbers are on there. If it’s fay related, call the bottom one.”

With that, he turned back, waved a goodbye and let himself out, leaving John alone with his worries.

——

If John expected to hear from the elder brother straight afterwards, he was to be disappointed. Close to another fortnight dragged by without any contact from anyone or anything.

Now that he was aware of what could happen when the magic his body and his baby had absorbed in the forest ran out, as it were – which it had to eventually, seeing as he’d originally been…implored to stay in the forest because of the baby’s need of the magic – John thought he could feel the energy slowly ebb away.

It was a ludicrous notion for several reasons, chief among them his, at best, patchy awareness of the magic, especially when it came to his own body. Besides that, he didn’t feel any significant difference apart from the ‘ebb’.

Granted, his little lodger had gotten notably quieter as November turned to December but that could be for reasons that had nothing to do with the magic. It was outside the norm but then again, so had the very premature kicking been. Not that he wasn’t worried, of course he was, but it made it difficult for him to definitively say when something was genuinely off.

As the days tickled by, though, the sensation of the magic ebbing away slowly but steadily increased, much to his distress.

In no way content to just sit and wait, especially when the worry about the baby and the fading magic burned in the back of his mind constantly, he was still wary about calling Lestrade and ask, as the inspector had made it clear he wasn’t to be pushed. Not that the blonde was afraid of him but it would hardly be a smart move to anger the only source of help you had, not when it was this important.

So, to try and keep his mind occupied with something else, something potentially helpful, John tried to do some research on his own.
Checking the internet for information was something of a mixed bag. When it came to pure folklore, there was a surprising amount of relatively sober, interesting information to be had. He learned more about most of the people he’d spent time with, noting that only about half fitted with the mythologies connected to the British Isles.

When it came to genuine, useful clues as to where there might still reasonably be some magic left in London city, however, it proved rather more useless. There were plenty of theories, of course, on a gradient scale of sane.

One of the most common ideas was that the Elfin Oak in Kensington Gardens was magic; that the tree wasn’t a hollow lump but alive and the pixies and gnomes carved into it came alive at night and made sure that it was kept and nurtured, providing the entire Gardens with its lushness.

“Yeah, like hell you’d get any pixie to stay still for entire days on end,” he muttered under his breath, then clicked away. It was amusing, in its way, but ultimately useless and so it only served to frustrate him.

Speaker’s Corner was also pushed as the hiding place of a Blarney Stone-like thing and of course, the gift of gab had to be supernatural in origin.

Neither seemed particularly likely nor did any of the others he looked at, be they fairly reasonable or extremely farfetched. It only fuelled his frustration.

So, he instead had to turn towards an older way of gaining some insight. There had to something somewhere. There had to.

The London Library was his first port of call. There wasn’t much direct, easily available information but there were several tomes of lore and newspaper collections that looked promising. A bit of charm applied when approaching the young, sweet librarian and he managed to convince the man that he could take material which was meant to stay inside the building home with him.

Somewhat encumbered by the weight of the literature he was carrying, he didn’t pay much attention to the people around him and therefore, he failed to spot both another glimpse of copper curls and a car that was trailing him.

Once he got home and had put the bag of books down, he stopped and stared.

There, on his small living room table, sat what looked very much like an ordinary, though extremely well cared for bonsai tree. He slowly moved closer, his eyes scanning the area to try and spot whether the person who’d broken in to deliver him the tree was still somewhere in the flat.

Once he got up close, he could see it wasn’t just any tree in miniature.

It was an oak tree. An oak tree which looked uncannily like the one in Cornwall, the majesty of it retained even in its vastly diminished version. That, of course, wasn’t to say that it had anything to do with that oak. Oaks were often majestic in themselves, regardless of whether or not they were magical in origin.

Reaching out, his hand shaking slightly as he did so, John could feel the power emanating from the small trunk and its equally tiny branches. Even through the severe numbing qualities of the ring, there was no mistaking just what was responsible for that power.

His fingers brushed slowly, hesitantly against the bark and as they did, a shock ran through him. His hidden antlers throbbled hard at that and his little lodger gave an almighty roll and squirm, as though it greatly appreciated the sudden surge of energy. He grimaced, his other hand shooting out to grab
hold of something to steady himself against.

“Bloody hell, you little tyke,” he mumbled. “Do you have to react that strongly every single time we come into contact with that tree or apparent offshoots of it? Removes any doubt that it’s not the genuine article, I suppose, but still. That hurts.”

Not that he minded. In fact, he had to blink rapidly to hold back the tears that suddenly threatened to spill. This was both his proof that his perception of the magic ‘ebbing’ had been right, which was worrying, and that he was capable of drawing on what magic the little tree provided, which was a relief like he hadn’t been properly aware of until now.

As he tried to pull himself together, he noticed something. A piece of string was wrapped around the trunk and a letter was attached to the string.

Removing his hand from the bark, inwardly thankful that the surge inside of him abated like it had back when Demelza had taken him to see the large oak, as that meant it was working properly, he gingerly picked it up.

It was certainly addressed to him, the letters spelling out ‘John H. Watson, MD’ surprisingly elegant and flowing. The paper was a little odd. It was old-looking rather than crisp and white but it didn’t feel like the old paper he’d handled when he’d done research back at university.

Opening it carefully, mindful of there still possibly being ways for the Bucca Dhu or something of a similar ilk to get to him, he pulled out a single sheet of paper and saw that the elegant, flowing yet relatively small hand continued there.

‘Doctor Watson,

We have not met and I intended for it to remain that way. However, it has come to my attention that your connection with my brother has been more serious and a great deal more…intimate than I had previously assumed and that there is now a…fruit of that union that needs further help.

John paused reading, noticing that the whiff of distaste dripped from both ellipses. Apparently, there was something inherent Britishness in everyone, even when you were a supernatural being.

I am…tied up and unable to come deliver this in person. However, I trust that it will be delivered to you safely and will help you in providing for my nephew or niece. Once it has been carried safely to term and is healthy, I expect to see it with my own eyes.

If you have any further problems, I expect that you will let Detective Inspector Lestrade know.

Mycroft’

Well…if nothing else, that most definitely was believable as coming from a brother of Sherlock’s. There was the same sort of tone, albeit with that peculiar overtone that signified a perceptibly elder sibling, one who thought they automatically, categorically was the one who was right.

Very gently brushing his fingers against the bark again, John felt the by then familiar thrum of the magic run through him. He did it again as he closed his eyes, relishing the connection in a way he’d never properly allowed himself before. Not only could he feel the magic, it felt as though it was giving him back just the tiniest bit of Sherlock, however utterly daft and soppy that sounded.

Sherlock might have disliked his brother intensely, possibly for legitimate reasons, possibly not, but there was no real doubt that the elder brother still cared for his younger sibling very much. Cared enough to risk sending what was unquestionably a precious offshoot of the life oak all the way to
London, where it could have been snatched by just about anyone, because it’d be the magical source
Sherlock’s baby needed to live.

Granted, a seemingly ordinary bonsai tree wasn’t exactly the most sought-after item on the black
market, but even a normal human being ought to sense that there was something more to that tree,
that it was far from ordinary. Even if someone didn’t steal it or potentially cause an unwanted stir
because they somehow recognized that the tree was magical, it could’ve been destroyed on the way
there or even perished because it was surrounded by iron and steel and so far away from its life
source.

That was one thing, though.

Oh, wonderful. He didn’t bother telling me how I keep this thing alive. It’d be too much to hope that
all it’ll take is regular stuff needed to keep plants alive. Bloody hell, what am I thinking? I don’t even
know how to do that. I’m going to kill it, one way or the other.

He would just have to hope that he could keep it alive long enough for his child to be born. He’d
been handed a lifeline, literally, and he wasn’t going to muck it up.

It didn’t make sense.

Why were so many people insistent on propositioning him? He couldn’t remember ever getting
flirted with or asked out even half as much before he’d gone off to Cornwall to find answers and
now it was an almost daily occurrence.

It wasn’t just women, either. Male or female, he’d get smiled at, chatted up or touched until he was
about to scream.

He didn’t want the attention! He didn’t want to have to go on dates with them. He didn’t want the
hassle of someone else right now.

He was still grieving, for crying out loud! Couldn’t people see that?

Apparently not. Once he calmed down, though, he remembered there was no way for them to see it
and so he learned to ignore it. Mostly.

It was made somewhat harder, though not for the reasons it had otherwise been, when an otherwise
very sweet and rather lovely-looking woman took one look at his left hand as he sat listening to what
her medical problem was and stopped talking.

“She must be very special,” she said after a moment, her smile kind but somewhat wistful.

“Sorry, what?”

She nodded towards his hand and made a gesture with her fingers to indicate a ring. “Your wife. She
must be something special, to get you to marry her.”

“Why do you say that?”

Of all the things to ask about, why did she pick that one? She hadn’t even made any come-ons
before that or references to his apparent attachments, nothing to give any indication that such a
question was coming.
More than that, it sent an odd sensation through him that he couldn’t work out whether was good or not. The ring had been made and given purely for practical reasons, as far as he knew, but nevertheless, he couldn’t shake the thought of it as a sort of wedding band once it had been put into his head.

She smiled again. “Why else would you?”

“I’m just an ordinary bloke, Mrs. Faulkner,” he replied, with a small shrug. Then, deciding he might as well play along with her assumption, for both her sake and his own, he continued, “She is something special, mind, but I’m the fortunate one. Now, you were worried because you’ve been coughing up some small lumps?”

Mrs. Faulkner had thankfully been his last patient for the day and had left with nothing more than a small smile and a mock-demand to see a photo of his wife soon.

One evening, after a day that seemed never-ending, he stretched in his chair but regretted it almost immediately as his midsection collided gently with the desk. Now at 24 weeks, almost at the end of his second trimester, the curve of his belly was unmistakable, only the fact that he was male and therefore unable to get pregnant preventing any comments. That didn’t mean he didn’t get the obligatory jokes from his colleagues, of course, but that was only to be expected.

What wasn’t as expected was that the sudden magnetism he’d apparently developed extended to the other doctors and nurses. It was harder to shrug them off than the patients but he managed to decline each time, much to the amusement of Sarah who’d been watching quite a few of the incidents from the side lines.

“You would’ve been over the moon to get half of those when you first came here,” she said when he looked at her, his face a mask of resigned irritation.

“No, I wouldn’t.” She looked at him. “No! Alright, maybe one or two, but this isn’t over the top, it’s horrifying and it doesn’t make any sense. I haven’t done anything yet people are suddenly throwing themselves at me like I’m spewing pheromones?”

“Well, you are in a way,” she said, taking a sip of her coffee. “Don’t look at me like that, you are – or rather, you’re glowing. That special kind of glow that pregnant women get around the stage you’re at, only a lot more intense.” She paused, then smiled. “Oh, and there’s the allure of the already taken, of course. You’re practically radiating it, apart from the ring.”

She moved closer and, after a moment, bumped her shoulder gently into his. “I get it, John. I do. Even if I don’t know him or what happened, it’s obvious you love him. Keep loving him.”

He snorted.

“No, I mean it. I know he’s gone, that he won’t be coming back. but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t love him. You don’t talk about him, you don’t mention him at all. He’s the father of your child. Don’t shut him out of your life.”

“I’m not.”
It was her turn to snort. “Pull the other one.”

“I’m not, Sarah. It’s just…it’s nobody’s business but mine, alright? I get that you’re worried about me and I appreciate it. But I don’t need it, I’m fine.”

She paused. “Ah.”

He frowned. “What do mean, ‘ah’?”

“Never mind, John. Just…don’t close yourself off entirely, okay? I’m sure he wouldn’t want that.”

*To be honest, the jury was rather out on that one*, he thought.

She did have a point, of course, a very good one. But, much as he might want to, he just couldn’t muster the energy for such trivialities most of the time.

It didn’t matter. People didn’t matter.

It was all just grey.

_____________________________________

“Sorry I’m late.”

“Isn’t it the job of the police to arrive late to everything?”

“Very funny.” Lestrade sat down opposite John, pushing a pint of beer towards him before taking a sip of his own. “You’re not the one having to solve a triple murder in the chaos that is mid-December London. Shoppers aren’t the half of it.”

No, I’ve just got half the mothers in the nearby area convinced their little gem has come down with some new and horrible disease and they won’t accept the explanation that it’s just a normal cold.”

“Well, then.” The inspector reached down beside him. “Don’t know whether this’ll cheer you up but —”

He held up a paper bag that looked somehow second-hand.

Puzzled, John took it but didn’t open it. “I haven’t…” he began.

“Oh, it’s not a Christmas gift, mate, don’t worry. If it was, it’d be wrapped to within an inch of its life and the tape would still attempt to come loose. Just saw it, thought it might help a bit.”

Curious despite himself, John peered into the bag. In green paper lay nestled something small that he couldn’t quite see. He looked closer.

It was a small, wooden object. First, he couldn’t quite make out what it was but then he saw it had small holes in it.

“It’s an ocarina,” Lestrade explained. Then, when he saw the nonplussed look on the blond’s face, he went on, “I found it in a shop by accident. Knew as soon as I touched it.”

“Knew what?”

“Try and touch it. Go on.”
So, John did. His fingers had only just brushed it when he knew what the inspector meant.

“Don’t blow it before you get home.”

“It’s – “

“Yup. As I said, knew it the moment I touched it. They get something special about them, those sorts of woods and they all have their own signature. Don’t ask me how it ended up as a round flute in the middle of London, though.”

“I can’t take it.”

“What? Why?”

John shook his head. He couldn’t explain it but touching the wood felt as though he was coming home and being thrown out simultaneously. It hurt to touch. “I just can’t. It…”

Lestrade put a hand over his, his expression very worried. “Look, I know it’s not my place but you sounded like shit when you called. Now, seeing you, you look even worse than you sounded. I thought that getting you the… the tree would’ve helped but it obviously hasn’t, not enough. This came from your wood – “

“That’s the point!” John hissed, keeping his voice low so as not to alert anyone else in the pub. “Touching it is like dangling a bottle of whiskey in front of a newly sober alcoholic after offering him just the tiniest drop. I can’t do it. Not and be expected to just stay put here.” He paused, squeezing his eyes shut. “I don’t just miss it, I need it, but at the same time, without him there, going back would be…painful.”

“Not only that, though,” Lestrade pointed out, a pained expression on his face.

John only grimaced in turn at that.

He still couldn’t quite believe that something that had ties and connections in a as powerful as the netherworld would be incapable of going outside the boundaries of the forest. He was pretty sure Demelza had managed it and she was ‘only’ a dryad. A thing like the Hound or even a shapeshifter like the Bucca Dhu should surely have no trouble.

He should’ve been torn limb from limb already, when you thought about it. Seeing as it hadn’t stopped rattling around at least the very back of his brain since it had first entered, he’d thought about it a lot and so, now that he had someone to direct those thoughts to, he’d asked Lestrade when he’d called why he hadn’t been.

He’d been told that he hadn’t been because they couldn’t come to larger cities such as London and even if they could, they didn’t have any sufficient power there to do him harm. That was why it was important he stayed.

He’d expressed his frank disbelief at that, only to be informed that both the Bucca Dhu and the Hound was associated with the deeps, mines and wells and the netherworld itself. To function outside the realm of the forest they belonged to, even for a limited time, a folklore creature needed to latch onto some residual magic where they went. It had to be related to their function and their location in the wood, be they surface or underground dwellers.

After that, Lestrade had paused and then told John to meet him at this gastro pub this evening.

That’d explain Demelza, he supposed, and why it had taken another tree for him to ‘recharge’, stupid
as that sounded. But it still didn’t completely convince him. Not even mostly, if he was honest.

After all, he’d seen Sherlock go down under the force of the Wild Hunt. Someone as powerful as he had been no match, even though they’d come into his forest, his domain, where his power was at its greatest.

Even then, there’d been nothing he could do to stop them. What hope did that leave for John?

On the other hand, he had to admit he hadn’t seen neither sickly-looking lamplight eyes or glowing ones anywhere in the city since he’d arrived. He hadn’t even caught imaginary glimpses to unsettle him like he had with bright copper curls.

If they could come, why hadn’t they? They’d plenty of time and opportunity and it wasn’t like he’d done anything to disappear, start a completely new life rather than go right back to the one he’d left behind.

Granted, they didn’t know him beyond his first name and there was the ring and its qualities to consider as well, but he’d guess he left some other traces, if he was still becoming gradually more fay. He didn’t know for sure that still he was, away from the forest, as he hadn’t yet dared to take off the ring. But he’d had no real reason to doubt the information Sherlock had given him, mostly, so he believed that he still was.

Setting aside the pain of being reminded of what he’d lost, there was still a very real risk to going back to Cornwall; the possible inability of his hunters to get at him in London hardly extended to the forest.

“Wait until it’s born, at least,” Lestrade said after a while, a note of pleading in his voice.

“Yeah, yeah. I get it, I do, it’s just…I don’t know, really.” He sighed heavily, a lot of the weight he’d been firmly, deliberately ignoring for the past month settling down on his shoulders more and more as he spoke. “It should become easier, everyone tells me it’ll get easier with time but it doesn’t. It just…fester, eating away.”

The bag sat between them, looking innocent. John had the twin urges to push it away and never look at it again and grab it and never let it go.

“I hate to say this but —”

“You can tell that it does?” John finished for him. He snorted lightly, a mirthless smile on his face. “Funny, that. I’ve just been told earlier today that I look great, that I ruddy well glow, like I was something out of a pregnancy commercial. Then again, you’ve probably got a keener, better eye than eye of the people I work with, at least on this sort of thing.”

The inspector regarded him silently. Then he pushed the bag across the table and pushed again, more insistently, when the doctor tried to push it back.

“Take it, John. I get why you don’t want to. I do. But like it or not, it seems like you’re fading away, despite the tree. This…maybe it’ll have more of an effect. I don’t know, really, but…well, it’s worth a shot, innit? Just, keep it around in case, yeah?”

John still felt more of an inclination to chuck the thing for being a reminder but he left it sitting between them and when they parted, an hour later, he held the bag in his hand.

It did go into the back of a dressing drawer as soon as he got home, though. It was very likely that it’d be helpful, even if he didn’t quite believe the whole ‘fading’ drivel Lestrade was going on about.
That didn’t mean that he wanted it around him unless he absolutely had to.

He wouldn’t fade. He wasn’t some lovesick girl out of a story. Alright, so he might be grieving. Wasn’t that a normal response, given the circumstances? Wasn’t it also alright that he consequently didn’t feel quite up to par, as it were?

Fading away wasn’t in the cards. It just wasn’t. He had a child to take care of. He was far too strong and, frankly, bull-headed to fade.

The mug he’d been holding hit the floor with an odd little noise and since it hit it with the edge, it broke, spilling the tea that hadn’t already gone flying onto the floor.

The blond swore under his breath and bent to pick it up. One of the broken pieces cut his finger, deeper than it should.

“That’s it,” said a voice from the doorway. “You’re going home.”

“It’s only noon, Sarah. I’m fine. Just a little tired, didn’t sleep too well last night.”

In fact, he’d slept perfectly fine. That wasn’t what had been the problem but it was an easier explanation than the real one, which he couldn’t even properly explain.

“Then you must’ve slept poorly for days, because you’ve been progressively turning greyer since then and the last hour you’ve been swaying on your feet. Are you sure it’s not – “

“The baby’s fine, don’t worry about it.” He only realized the words were spoken very curtly when they’d already left his mouth.

She gave him a look.

“No. I’ll worry when I want to. You aren’t well and I won’t have you working here until you are. Go home.”

“Sarah – “

“Go. Home.”

She wouldn’t listen to him and so, eventually, he packed up and went home.

She watched him go, shaking her head. “God, I hope he finds someone else and soon. If those eyes go any deader, then…”

On the way, he thought he saw another flash of possible-Demelza but dismissed it like before. It wouldn’t be –

“John. John! John!”
He didn’t react, even when the calling didn’t stop. Consequently, he was unprepared for being grabbed by the arm, pulled along to a space between two buildings that wasn’t an alley and then turned around to face whoever had decided they wanted to talk to him. It happened rather quickly.

He opened his mouth to protest rather vehemently but the words died on his lips when he saw who it was.

It was Demelza. There was no mistaking her, even in the greyness of an overcast, raining December day in the middle of London, surrounded by a mass of people, many of whom were also of the ginger persuasion.

Apart from the signature wild curls, which burned as though the sun was still shining on it, the face and the curiously proportioned body matched and the skin had the same peculiar texture that it’d had in the forest. She looked like the dryad she was.

That made him frown for a moment, worried about the wisdom of that when she’d attract unwanted attention. That was only until he realized that the people around them didn’t see that. What they saw was a tall, thin young woman with a shock of hair and lively eyes. Dressed a little thinly for the season, perhaps, but other than that, just one in another million.

All of this flashed by in an instant in John’s mind, which was just as well; as soon as she got a good look at him, possibly enough to ascertain that it was really him, her face cracked into a huge grin and she lunged at him, hugging him tightly. Only the fact that he was a foot from a wall prevented him from toppling over from the force of it.

“John!” she cried as she did so. “John, I found you. I finally found you!”

“Ye-yeah, you did,” John said, thrown by the unexpected arrival. She shouldn’t be here, she didn’t belong here. It was dangerous for her, and harmful, too. “Why were you looking for me?”

She pulled back from where she’d been burying her face in his jacket and jumper, looking at him as though he’d asked what was so important about air.

“City life makes men stupid,” was all she eventually said. “Come on.”

“No.” She tugged at him. He didn’t move. “Demelza, much as I’m happy to see you and I am, I’m not going… anywhere until you explain why the bleeding blazes you’re here.”

“I’ve come to get you,” she said simply, as though that was all the explanation needed.

It wasn’t.

“Again, why? Why now?”

Her expression faltered for a moment. “Because we’re going home, John,” she said, her voice soft, imploring. “Together.”

“I can’t go home.” His home didn’t exist anymore and to have Demelza in front of him like this was truly rubbing salt in the wound.

“You can,” she insisted. ”It is safe now, the forest is safe.”

“The forest isn’t home without Sherlock and he’s dead!” he shouted, fed up. A few people stared but he didn’t care.
She frowned at the statement. “No, he isn’t.”

“What?”

“Sherlock is not dead.”

Chapter End Notes

Were you surprised? I was surprised.
Izzard quotes aside, I'm...a little uncertain on this last part, whether I've done it right. It isn't even angsting, it's just...I've never written something like this and might be botching it completely, one way or the other.
That said, I liked writing this, Lestrade and Mycroft's letter in particular - and the stupid research I put into Elfin Oak and Speaker's Corner.
Dealing with the unexpected

Chapter Summary

John is naturally rather disbelieving of what he's being told but Demelza is adamant.

Chapter Notes

<3 Thank you, everyone, your support is amazing and beyond appreciated.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John couldn’t help it; he stared at her.

It wasn’t the place to have this particular conversation. To be honest, it wasn’t the place to have this particular hallucination.

It was too much by half and he was more than willing to dismiss it as his brain malfunctioning after…after everything. It wouldn’t even be too surprising for it to do so, considering all the utter shite he’d been through.

He might’ve been able to cope with just the arrival of Demelza on her own, utterly unexpected and not entirely welcome as it was. She would go away again soon enough when he made her accept that he wouldn’t be returning, not without Sherlock. Then he could continue his humdrum existence in peace, getting to grips with his new reality without being reminded of the old.

Claiming that Sherlock was alive, though…that was just about a bridge too far.

His utter shock and disbelief at her statement transformed into intense anger rather quickly and he felt seriously tempted to harm her in some way. He refrained from doing it, partly because they were still out in public and he would be attacking her unprovoked, but mainly because she was his friend and it wouldn’t be right to harm her for that. It wouldn’t be right to harm her at all.

Nevertheless, his hand shook where he’d balled it into a fist at his side.

Ever the one to pick up on something being wrong rather fast, her eyes went big at his reaction.

“You…you did not know?” she asked quietly, almost inaudible over the general noise of life happening all around them.

He could only stare at her again. How could he have known? When would he have known? There wasn’t anything to know! No matter how powerful or magical, you didn’t get up and brush yourself down when you’d been torn apart by a horde of netherworld creatures. Sherlock was dead, end of story.

It might not be right to hit her but he could snarl at her and he did. He was then the one to drag her further in between the two buildings to get some semblance of privacy.
“Don’t you dare!” he growled once they stopped. His grip on her arm didn’t relent, however. “Don’t you dare come out of the blue and throw a lie like that in my face.”

“But it is not a lie, John,” she said, pleading in her voice.

“Oh, yes?” he asked with a slight smile and narrowed eyes. “And you expect me to believe you just like that? I haven’t seen you since…since before Halloween and suddenly, here you are, telling me everything’s ‘okay’? This isn’t some bloody fairy tale, things don’t right themselves just like that and people who’re dead don’t magically just come back to life!”

“John – “

“No! He’s dead. He is dead, end of. I saw him die with my own eyes. I saw him torn to bits by the Hunt…and it won’t…it won’t go away…” he trailed off and looked away, as he felt the tears threatening to spill.

She looked at him, a semblance of understanding seeming to bloom in her eyes, though he didn’t see it. “Oh. Oh, John.”

She went to hug him again, far more hesitantly this time, and he allowed it, his anger at her sudden appearance and frankly ludicrous claim not eradicating the fact that he really did like her and she’d been a great help in his time in the forest, for a multitude of reasons.

“He was severely hurt by the Hunt but he was not killed,” she said softly as she pulled back a little. “He is the son of gods, John. It would take more than that.” She tried to smile, though it was more of an uncertain wobble.

“He was mauled by a horde of monsters and other netherworld creatures!” John said, keeping his voice relatively low, despite the force in the words. “How much more do you bleeding well need?”

Despite his words, part of his mind couldn’t help pausing at the mention of Sherlock’s parents. It wasn’t so much the fact that they were gods, at least not on its own, as he’d suspected that might be the case, but that he got anything about Sherlock’s family out of them.

She didn’t answer, looking increasingly uncertain. He didn’t notice, however, as he ploughed on.

This really is a step too far, Demelza. I know you’re not human, I know you don’t understand things the same way we do but even you must realize this is beyond the pale.”

“But John…” She hesitated. “How can I convince you it is true?”

He looked at her, weariness settling into his expression.

“You can’t,” he said, simply.

Silence descended between them.

She looked so crestfallen that he relented after a while.

“Come on,” he said, turning to head back out into the street. “I’m not turning you out like that. I hope you don’t mind being inside buildings.”

He held out his hand without turning around, noting again the bark-like, yet soft quality of her skin as her hand slid into his, gripping tightly.
Arriving back in the flat was always a little strange but now, with Demelza tagging behind him, it was verging on bizarre, as his new existence clashed so violently with the blast from his past that was the girl.

It only got worse when she spotted the small version of the oak from the forest, almost as soon as he’d closed the door behind them. She let out one of the odd noises she’d used before, one which sounded as though it came straight from a tree, and walked very quickly over to it.

The tree, in turn, seemed to react to her presence, its leaves rustling and the soft thrum of magic it exuded intensifying a little. John might have taken a bit of umbrage with that, since he might not be fully fay but not that far off, either, surely, but then he remembered that she was a dryad. It’d make sense for it to react more strongly to a fay that had a connection to trees from birth.

“You have been back,” she said, looking up at him as he came over to her, her tone caught between excited and just the teeniest bit accusatory. She gently caressed the small trunk and the even tinier branches. “Why did you not say?”

“I haven’t,” he tried to explain. He nodded towards the plant. “That there was because a guy named Lestrade, who’s half changeling, got worried about the baby’s access to magic and got Mycroft to send it to me. It’s helped a lot.” Quite a lot more than he’d ever have anticipated, as a matter of fact.

He wasn’t prepared for the reaction the mention of Mycroft had in her; her eyes opened almost comically wide and she let out a seemingly strangled noise. What was unexpected was the look of surprised delight in her eyes, as though it was a piece of information that she hadn’t expected but was thrilled by it.

“You have got contact with Mycroft?” she exclaimed, the delight also showing in her voice.

He blinked, puzzled as to why she’d be so happy about that, of all things. Regardless of the estrangement between the two brothers that had been going on for ages, surely there had to be some form of communication between the two. Or at least the denizens of the separate forests would communicate, to pass on information that could be useful for either.

The point was that even with Sherlock dead, the fact that he had contact with, or was at least presumed to have, shouldn’t elicit that sort of reaction.

“No. Well, yes. Sort of. As I said, it’s actually this guy Lestrade who knows how to get hold of him. All I got from the guy himself was a letter – “

“But John, that is great!” she interrupted, standing up and grabbing his hands.

“What? Why?”

“Because if you have a way of contacting Mycroft, that means that he can tell you!”

“Tell me what?” John asked, only getting progressively more confused.

“That Sherlock is not dead.”

“Demelza – “ he began, a hint of warning in his voice. He’d heard enough of that bollocks from her
“John, you have got to know that it is true, and I do not know how else to convince you. Contact Mycroft and he will tell you.”

“No, I haven’t done so yet!” he asked, his voice rising in volume. “If he knows that his little brother isn’t dead after all, why hasn’t he let me know already? I am carrying his baby, he does matter to me. Or at least tell Lestrade and he as sure as hell doesn’t know.”

Granted, he didn’t know Lestrade well at all, if he had to be honest, but he in no way struck the doctor as the sort of person who’d withhold information like that. Not something as important as that.

“Because nobody has known!” she answered, her voice also rising, which was extremely unusual in and of itself. “Someone went to tell him the same time I went. We all only became aware of it the day before yesterday when his mother brought him back to us. She’s been nursing him ever since and has not let anyone see him or know.”

“No even his brother?” he asked.

The thought was heavily tinged with sadness. He didn’t know Mycroft, but though he sounded like a pompous arse, he also sounded like a brother who cared, in his own way. Hell, he and his sister were not on good terms at the best of times but if someone had kept from him that Harry had been hurt, severely enough to be believed dead, and that she’d somehow pulled through, he’d…to be honest, he didn’t know how he’d react, but it wouldn’t be pleasant.

She shook her head. “No. Mycroft has always been…but he…” She paused, seeming to search for the words. “You do know that Sherlock is unable to leave the forest? That his life is tied to that of the great oak?”

John nodded. “Yeah. Seemed a little fanciful but then so has everything else. Go on.”

“He is not the only one. Mycroft has to stay in the forest he has been chosen to take care of, as well.”

His brows knitted at that. “But…just because that applies to the sons, surely that doesn’t mean that also goes for their mother? Otherwise, she’d still be in the forest where she gave birth to Sherlock and if she was, couldn’t he then leave the care of the forest to her?”

“She can move as she pleases,” Demelza confirmed.

There was a timbre to her voice that suggested she was genuinely intimidated by her. Not that John could really blame her; given what little he knew of Sherlock’s powers, the leap to what kind of power his mother, a goddess, would wield was, quite frankly, frightening.

“But why couldn’t she then tell Mycroft?”

Demelza smiled again. This time, it was a smile that transformed her, even if only briefly, from the unsure, excitable girl she normally appeared as into a much more understanding and perceptive, almost maternal, version.

“Would you leave the side of someone who desperately needed care to survive and you were the only one who could provide that care?” she asked, gently.

John opened his mouth to argue then his brain caught up and he shut it again. He wouldn’t. Of course, he wouldn’t, not for anything.
So, instead he chose to say nothing. That seemed to be enough of an answer for her, though. Her smile broadened slightly, and she squeezed the hands she was still holding.

“I came as soon as I could, John,” she said, her words very whispery in their softness. “I promise. I wish I could say I brought a message, but he had not said anything or opened his eyes by the time I left.”

The thought of just how badly Sherlock must’ve been injured for it to take this long, for a goddess, to bring him back to even that point flitted across John’s mind at that. It in no way helped that the thought was accompanied by wonderfully detailed images of just what that process might’ve looked like that was conjured by his treacherous imagination.

No. Not that. The images of him dead on the ground were horrible enough, I do not want to imagine…oh, gods. No.

To try and push those thoughts as far away as he possibly could, he latched onto a minor question that hadn’t been answered. Anything to block out those images.

“You left to go find me? To tell me?” She nodded. “Alright. One thing, though – how the hell did you find me? This isn’t my old flat, I wasn’t coming from where I work and the street I meet you on isn’t one I regularly go down. You didn’t show any sign of recognizing Lestrade’s name, so it can’t have been him and if you were in contact with Mycroft now, outside the forest, again, you wouldn’t be excited about me having been in contact with him, you’d just contact him directly.”

He paused to take a breath but when he had, he didn’t continue speaking right away. Something felt off.

She was still holding his hands and perhaps it was the oddity of her skin texture or it might have been her own slice of innate magic that commanded his sense of touch. Whatever was the reason, the fact was that he hadn’t twigged holding his hands wasn’t all she was doing.

He looked down at their clasped hands.

She was using the tip of one finger to turn his ring around and around on his. It went around easily despite only being pushed by one digit, without showing any signs that it was about to fall off.

He looked up at her, a mix of dawning understanding and growing confusion in his eyes.

“It’s supposed to hide…” he began.

“It does. But it is meant for the eyes of regular humans. Oh, fay cannot see you either,” she hastened to add, her normal nervousness returning slightly, “but the power of the ring is quite significant. We can feel the magic in it, even if, to some, it is only somewhat. It is dwarf-made, after all.”

“But I’m not the only fay in the city. Surely someone else must have some magical item or there’s one in a museum.”

It can’t be the tree, either, since you were surprised to see that and you’re no good at pretending in such circumstances. I’ve seen you try.

“Baby,” was all she said, as though that explained everything.

It didn’t.

“So, is it the ring or is it the baby?”
“Both. The ring told me it was someone special with a connection to our woods, sent me in the right direction.” She paused to disengage one hand and place it, still somewhat hesitantly, on his by then rather prominent middle. “The baby told me it was you, John.”

It sounded like bullshit, the sort of thing that went with ‘your heart will lead the way’, ‘you know the right one instinctively’ and similar saccharine nonsense.

The thing was, however, that despite the corniness of it, he knew that for this group of people and these particular circumstances, it was true.

That wasn’t the reason he didn’t reply to her, however. That had more to do with her hand on his stomach.

Apart from Sarah’s occasional touches, which had been brief and smilingly awkward when they’d happened, likely mainly born out of a misunderstood consideration to him, the only one to touch his belly since…then, had been himself. It hadn’t been bad and as always, it had been a good way of calming down his little lodger.

What it hadn’t been was anything like what Sherlock touching it had been. Nor had the dry, warm hands of Sarah, not unpleasant though they’d been.

If he’d thought about it, he would’ve said that it had something to do with the numbing effects of the ring. Or, if he was feeling more romantic, that it was Sherlock touching it that had been the deciding factor.

With Demelza’s hand running slowly over it, however, caressing it carefully but without hesitation, there was the same feeling that the hands of the brunet had engendered. It was significantly less impactful than that and not all of it could be ascribed to the ring. Still, to have anything remotely like it was wonderful, quite frankly, and more needed than he’d realized.

It didn’t detract that the baby gave the same kind of kicks of delight that it’d given before, either.

He was so caught up in the soothing qualities of the touch that he didn’t immediately notice neither her other hand coming up nor that she was using them to do more than just caress.

When he did notice, his hands immediately came down to halt hers. She avoided them and continued to run her hands over the curve, occasionally depressing the still relatively soft shape.

“Mrs. Hudson has continued to teach me,” she said by way of explanation. “I am nowhere near as good as she is yet, of course, but it seems like – “

“Who’s pregnant?” John asked, for some reason more curious to know that than how his own baby was doing. He was a doctor and he had learned how to spot the signs in himself. It had been a big part of his persuasion of Sarah to let it go. I don’t remember hearing about anyone who was pregnant.”

“Skara, the troll girl from south of the valley. She only found out in late November, thought it was just a larger amount of gathered winter paunch than she normally got. Instead, she is expecting twins.”

John remembered her. To be honest, he was surprised she hadn’t had buns in the oven before now; with her looks and gentle demeanour, she’d had troll boys flocking around constantly, trying to impress her.

She hadn’t really seemed too interested in any of them but things can shift fast when you’re young,
after all, and she wouldn’t be the first woman to have become even more attractive when already taken.

“Well, then, good on her,” he said, meaning it wholeheartedly, and the smile he could feel slowly stretching out his lips felt genuine, warm and light in a way he couldn’t remember feeling for some time. “So, who’s the lucky lad? Not that burly one who can barely muster a grunt in reply?”

Even as he said it, part of him realized that the description applied to about half the teenage boys he’d known.

“Njal?” she replied. “No, not him. He frightens her a little, I think. She would not say at first but Mrs. Hudson found out. It is Holger.”

“Holger? Who – oh, him.” He had a vague mental image of a tall but muscular troll who loved collecting mushrooms and listening to people. “Yeah, seemed a nice enough bloke. How far along is she?”

It felt ridiculously nice to have something so banal to talk about. Not that he hadn’t had that with co-workers and such but it was still different. This he was invested in instead of merely going through the motions of interest.

“Three months. They danced at the harvest.”

“That long? She sure hasn’t looked it.”

“Hard to tell with trolls. Rock children, they fill out differently. The babies are definitely in there, though. I could feel them.”

“Alright.” He hesitated.

He wanted to ask her about more things but at the same time he wasn’t too sure. Not so much because she wouldn’t tell him, because he knew she would if asked. But it somehow felt wrong to stand there and talk about various things which comparatively insignificant to what they’d discussed before. Since it hadn’t yet been resolved, as he hadn’t said either or, it felt improper to, well, basically gossip.

On the other hand, it wouldn’t make a blind bit of difference to whatever he’d decide to do if he postponed it to have a bit of news from the place he’d missed but hadn’t realized just how much he’d missed.

“So…” he began again. “What else has been going on while I’ve been away?”

It had been early evening when he’d first bumped into Demelza. By the time she’d told him of what had been happening in the forest, it was getting beyond late. He wasn’t going to turn her out in the middle of the night but he hadn’t any idea how she’d take sleeping in such a confined, human place, either.

*Oh, gods,* he thought as he realized, *she must have been entirely dependent on the ruddy tree not to*
suffer from the lack of contact with, well, anything, the entire time she’s been here.

She didn’t seem to be suffering when he took a moment to look but then again, he might just not be able to tell. Though he’d definitely gotten better at reading and understanding the folklore creatures he’d met during his stay, it still wasn’t up to sussing out everything. Sherlock could but he couldn’t.

That brought his thoughts back towards what he’d been trying to push out of his mind.

Could he call Lestrade at this hour? Despite the surprisingly easy camaraderie between them, it’d still be pushing it if it wasn’t for an emergency and it’d be hard to say that this counted as an emergency, as such.

Holding up a finger to stall Demelza, who wasn’t saying anything at this point, anyway, he dug his phone from his pocket, unlocked it, found the number for the inspector and…paused. A thought had struck and it wasn’t an entirely pleasant one.

Once he gave himself time to think about it, he realized that calling Lestrade and getting him to contact Mycroft might not be the first order of the day, after all.

Even if the girl said that there was no danger, that it had all been sorted…even if it was true that Sherlock wasn’t dead, had been nurtured back to life by his mother, that still didn’t alter one fundamental fact.

The mark on his wrist hadn’t gone. The Bucca Dhu hadn’t been dealt with and so still had to be out there, much as he’d worried about before. Regardless of how safe he might be in the city, and he still wasn’t entirely sure about that, that protection sure as all hell didn’t extend to returning to the forest itself.

Frankly, that would be the equivalent of walking straight into a lion den slathered in meat.

So, even if did believe Demelza’s claim, which would remove the emotional pain of going back, there was no way he could return. It would be too dangerous, for both him and the baby.

He opened his mouth to say something to that effect when the phone in his hand started vibrating. Puzzled, even more so when he didn’t recognize the number, John nevertheless answered the call.

“Yes?” he said, keeping his tone curt. He wasn’t in the mood for some scam-call.

“Mr. Watson?” said an equally curt, though rather posher-sounding voice on the other end.

“Doctor Watson,” the doctor corrected. Something about the imperiousness of the voice was familiar yet grating. “Who is this?”

“Of course, Doctor. I’m Mycroft, Sherlock’s – “

“Brother, yes, I know,” John finished for him. “Why are you calling me? How are you calling me? I thought you people didn’t have phones.” Never mind Sherlock’s obvious familiarity with handling the blond’s phone.

“Desperate times,” was all the explanation he got. “…Demelza is with you? No, don’t act surprised, it’s tedious. If you haven’t yet left for Cornwall, I strongly urge you to do so now.”

“What? Why?”

“Don’t be tedious, Doctor. You know perfectly well. Yes, Sherlock is alive but he’s still suffering.
Our mother can’t do anything more for him but he’s not…Part of him is missing and she believes that part is you.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve been writing this alongside a NaNoWriMo, so apologies if this has suffered as a result. I’ve tried my very best to get something decent done on schedule. Dunno whether I’ve succeeded or failed. I hope it's given you a few more answers, at least. :)
Wither then? I cannot say

Chapter Summary

Mycroft explains. John negotiates. An agreement is reached. Preparations are made. But what then? How do you react to the thought of returning to a place where you life got turned upside down?

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas! Well, almost...close enough.
Thank you, everyone, you are the best and sweetest! Your feedback really means the world.
Chapter title, btw, is the last line from The Old Walking Song :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That’s a…bit convenient, isn’t it?”

The words were out of John’s mouth before he could stop them. They were hardly fair and rather insensitive to boot.

The thing was, with all the things that had come his way in roughly the last month and a half, be they worries or just extra knowledge about the fay world that had been as draining as informative, he was a little overfilled; he couldn’t take in much more, regardless of how important those things were.

Unsurprisingly, there was a small, suppressed gasp from Demelza beside him at his comment. Ever so slightly annoying as they could be, he couldn’t really blame her for her reaction this time around.

Much more surprising was the reaction from Mycroft; of all things, the small noise coming from that end of the line was more of a snort, possibly of amusement, possibly not. It was very difficult to tell.

“Convenient or not,” the voice said, still oddly calm, “the fact remains that he has not made any progress in his recovery for the last fortnight according to Mom – our mother, and though he apparently has yet to wake up, he keeps muttering your name. She brought him back as much in the hope that whoever answered to the name of John would be there as anything else.”

Leaving Mycroft hanging for the moment, the doctor looked over at the girl sitting beside him, looking nervous and unsure. It was a dead giveaway that she’d been listening in. on the conversation; her hearing had always been remarkably good. His eyebrows rose.

“Why didn’t you tell me that?” he said in a low voice.

“I did not know!” she protested. “She did not tell us anything, except for Mrs. Hudson, and I left to get you almost immediately. I did not know any of this.”

A pointed clearing of throat could be heard through the phone speakers. John put the phone back up
“If you are *quite* finished,” Mycroft’s voice said, clipped and miffed. “I have other matters to attend.”

“And here I thought that you were concerned for your brother,” John replied, a sudden sharpness in his voice. He might not know the man or have any reason to judge him but he wasn’t going to allow that dismissive attitude from anyone towards Sherlock. Especially not his brother.

There was a momentary silence at the other end.

“That is precisely why I have other matters to attend, Doctor Watson,” Mycroft eventually said and there was something else in his voice apart from the imperiousness, something hard to define but felt.

*You bloody bastard. Why can’t you just come out and say that you’ve been just as affected by the whole thing? It’s not like I’m in a position to judge you or even see your reaction, is it?*

Despite that thought, it wasn’t too difficult to connect the image of a small, worried-looking Mycroft and the adult one he was talking to who seemed to worry in a much more repressed way.

“Right…okay,” he said, his voice gone softer and understanding. “That makes sense. Right. I’ll just go pack, then, shall I?”

“You are taking this all remarkably well, Doctor Watson, for a human.”

Sympathy or not, there were limits to what John was going to put up with.

“Yeah, well, you get knocked up by someone who doesn’t even give you his name or tell you that it’s possible for him to impregnate you because oh, hey, he’s an antlered myth come to life and after you come to terms with that, there’s a whole slew of new impossible things to deal with because that’s just how things go here and why you would need to acclimatize to stuff like that? Deal with all of that for a while, it tends to blunt your reactions to further bloody ’shenanigans’ like that.”

There was another pause.

“Indeed. Now – “

John wasn’t going to be put off. There was one thing he did need to know before he went *anywhere* and Mycroft was going to give him a clear answer whether he wanted to or not. He made ready to stick the verbal foot in the aural door.

“Hold on. Ain’t finished yet. As you so eloquently put it, I’m not fully fay. I’m more fay than human by this point, though, and apparently that’s alluring to some fay. Sherlock…tried to protect me and the baby from that but I haven’t been able to get rid of the mark the Bucca Dhu left on my wrist."

He paused briefly at the unexpected intake of breath at the other end, which he was likely only able to hear because it was so very quiet around him.

Ploughing on before Mycroft had a chance to take control of the conversation, the blond said, “I haven’t seen the thing since I’ve been in London. Your…Lestrade says that that’s because both the Bucca Dhu and the Hound has connections to mines and therefore can’t travel here, which, frankly, sounds convenient, too. Leaving that aside, I don’t think that protection applies if I go back to the place where they can get about freely.”

“I want to go, obviously,” he went on, making a quick decision on the spot and firmly ignoring the ensuing noise from Demelza, “but I have no intention of rushing to Cornwall without being sure that
my baby and I won’t be torn to shreds or on the way down there.”

He wasn’t going to budge on that.

So, you expect me to magic you up some form of protection?” Mycroft asked. His tone was probably intended to be scathing and condescending but it came out odd.

“You’re Sherlock’s brother,” John shot back, unperturbed. If he was going, it’d be fixed beforehand. “If you’re even half as clever as he was…is, then – “

“I am far cleverer than my brother,” the elder sibling downright snapped.

John smiled inwardly. *Gotcha.*

“Well, then, there shouldn’t be a problem,” he said, his voice kept carefully controlled. “You find me a way to get down there in one piece, otherwise I’m not going at all.”

“But, John,” came Demelza’s protesting voice, “if Sherlock needs you, then you shouldn’t – “

“I should rather risk not arriving at all because I’ve been attacked by creatures I have no realistic way of protecting myself or the baby against, should I?” John shot back sharply, directing the question as much towards Mycroft as Demelza. “Do you think that’s going to help him in any way? How is that in any way preferable to waiting another day or two for Mycroft to come up with a solution?”

The sharpness of his voice had now also gained something of a growl, too.

“Point taken,” Mycroft said, his voice odd. “Now, you really must excuse me. With all of this, I truly have matters to attend. Good evening to you, Doctor Watson. Do give my regards to the dryad.”

“Oi, hang on. When will I know that you’ve come up with something? How will I know?”

“Trust me, doctor. you’ll know. If you have things that need sorting, I do suggest you do it as soon as possible. Goodbye.” With that, the elder brother hung up.

John sat for a moment or two, taking in what had just happened. “Well, I supposed that’s sorted, then.”

Demelza gripped one of his hands, again. “Really, John? You’re going?” instead of her usual exuberance, there was quiet joy.

“Yeah,” he confirmed, sounding a little surprised himself. “Yeah, I guess I am. Still not sure I believe you all but even if you are lying, I can always come back here.”

“Do you want to?” she asked, her voice very quiet.

He didn’t answer. Instead, trying to divert her attention, he asked a question of his own. “So, you never did tell me – how did you get up here, anyway?”

They went to bed soon after, Demelza insisting on staying on the sofa. He’d argued, since he wasn’t going to hog the one bed when there was a woman who’d then have to settle for subpar sleeping arrangements. His pregnancy wasn’t going to change that, either.
Eventually, her argument that she’d be happier close to the tree, that it’d help her get to sleep, won through and she fell sleep with her fingers lightly touching the tiny trunk.

“John, for crying out loud – “

He interrupted, in a bid to explain himself. “Look, all I’m going to do is – “

“I know that!” Sarah said and she sounded beyond exasperated. “I’m saying, what are you still doing here?”

That was unexpected enough to stop whatever was about to spill out of his mouth. Instead, what came out was a nonplussed, “You what?”

“If he isn’t dead as you thought and he wants to see you – and you want to see him, of course – why are you still sitting here in my office?”

“Sarah, this isn’t a romantic comedy, I can’t just leave…”

She raised an eyebrow at that. “You managed rather well last time, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t – “

“I know. Pulling your leg.” She reached out to grip his shoulder. “Look, John, I was pissed last time, I won’t deny it. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to be an arse to you now. Just…keep me posted, alright? Especially when the baby’s arrived.”

“I’m only going down there to see whether he’s genuinely alive or not, Sarah. I’m coming back.”

“Uh-huh. Pull the other one. If I had someone who’d do that for me, I wouldn’t even think twice about leaving.”

“You would.”

“Hm. Okay, yeah, maybe twice. Point is, though, that you’ve been given a second chance with him, the guy you’ve been mourning and pining over him ever since you came back – don’t argue, you have – the father of your child. Don’t go wasting it by being pig-headed and obstinate.”

She gave a rueful smile. “Bad enough you’ve got one in the family who managed to muck something good up because of that.”

His gaze turned hard. “That was a low blow.”

She grimaced in response, in acknowledgement.

Time stretched out between them.

“Seriously, though?” he eventually asked, sounding more incredulous than anything. “Pining?”

She nodded, a smile slowly blooming on her face. “Most definitely.”

He groaned. Between Demelza who hadn’t shut up asking about stuff the entire time until he’d gone
In the end, they agreed that he’d keep her up to date on whatever happened, good or bad. They also agreed it was probably for the best that he called it a day at the surgery.

There was a very strong possibility that whatever the elder brother had worked out, it wouldn’t take long for it to turn up, mostly so that John could be brought back as quickly as possible. He’d better have as much in order as possible before that happened. It was unlikely that he’d have time to do it once they came.

Before he left the premises, Sarah had halted him and pressed a small package into his hands.

“I know Christmas isn’t for another week but since I won’t get to see you then, I thought,” she said, looking down and fidgeting slightly, “…well, anyway, it’s just a small thing.”

“Sarah, I…I can’t accept this. I haven’t got you one yet, for one thing.”

“Oh, give over. It’s for the baby as much as anything else.”

Looking up at him, she hesitated for a moment then enveloped him in her small arms as best she could. It was made more difficult by her having to come at him from an angle, given the considerable girth of his stomach.

A little surprised but touched by her continued support and warmth, he quickly returned the hug, even with hands full of Christmas gift and the belongings he’d had at the surgery.

“Merry Christmas, John,” she said, her voice muffled by the clothes covering his collar.

“Merry Christmas, Sarah,” he replied, his own voice soft. He then bent his head to kiss her gently on her hair.

He couldn’t help wondering why on earth they hadn’t worked out as a couple. Then he thought that sometimes, an ex-girlfriend turning into a phenomenal friend wasn’t the worst trade-off.

When she pulled back, there was a shininess to her eyes that hadn’t been there before.

“If you don’t send me at least one picture of this gorgeous bloke of yours, though, I’m – “

“I will, I promise.”

The promise also encompassed all the things she left unsaid between them, chief among them being ‘take care of yourself.’

He half-expected to come back to either a flat that was already occupied by who- or whatever was going to pick him, or them, he supposed, up or a completely empty one.
Instead, what he found was Demelza, a ball of energy contained in a relatively small area, with the mayhem that one would expect from such a combination.

“What the bloody – ?” he exclaimed at the sight. “What on earth have you been doing?”

“Exploring!”

“You couldn’t have done that without thrashing the entire flat?”

It is not thrashed. It is…a little messy.”

He opened his mouth to argue but closed it again. Truth be told, he was overreacting slightly; it was true that most of his clothes had apparently been strewn across the floor, what meagre food he’d had was out of the fridge and almost all books were out of the shelf but it wasn’t thrashed, as such. It was more…inquisitiveness that’d gone a bit overboard.

It’d be somewhat hypocritical to deny her a right to explore and learn about a reality alien to her, after everything, wouldn’t it?

“I was going to clean it up,” she said, sounding sincerely contrite. “I thought…you said you would be home later than this.”

Having put down what he’d carried, he settled down on what little space there was, in his own armchair and rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Yeah, Sarah basically told me to bugger off home and get ready for…whatever’s going to happen. You haven’t heard anything from the oh-so-superior brother yet, have you?”

She’d only just begun to shake her head when his phone vibrated in his pocket, signalling a text.

Be ready and packed by 10pm this evening. Lestrade will arrive then and escort the two of you to an area where you will meet the one who’ll escort you the rest of the way. I strongly advise you not to keep him waiting. – MH

John looked up from the phone to find Demelza watching him silently from the sofa, an enquiring expression on her face.

“Does the desire to surround themselves with pompous mystery run in the family or something?” he asked.

For a moment, she looked puzzled. Then it clicked. “I think it might,” she said with a small smile.

“Right. He says we’re supposed to be ready by 10pm when Lestrade will pick us up. That leaves us seven hours, which should be plenty of time for me to find what I’m going to need and for you to clean this mess here up.”

She nodded and got up. He followed.

As they moved around the flat, clearing things up, packing stuff for the trip, ordering dinner and so on, John realized he had an odd mixture of feelings bubbling up inside of him.

They were all related in some way to this whole business of going down to see Sherlock again. That perhaps shouldn’t surprise him, given that his thoughts had revolved around that for a day now. Even before then, a lot of his thoughts had dealt with the brunette, too, of course, but it had suddenly come to fill his mind now that the man might not be merely a memory any longer.
Along with those thoughts, though, came the emotions. They ranged from lingering doubt about his actual resurrection over growing anger at having mourned for nothing, and encompassing joy at his being alive to strong apprehension about seeing him.

The apprehension was possibly the most puzzling. He guessed that some of it was tied into uncertainty of what he’d be faced with. Though he’d been told that Sherlock had been nursed back to health by his mother, no one had told him what that entailed, precisely. He had been mauled by a horde, after all.

Not that his feelings would change if it turned out that there were some things that would look different or even everything. He liked to believe he wasn’t that shallow.

What was more worrying, though, wasn’t how it had affected Sherlock physically but mentally. It wouldn’t be a stretch to imagine that the incident had left some mental scars that couldn’t be easily healed. Sherlock might be mumbling his name, might need him in some capacity, but that didn’t mean he wanted to see John. He might resent him for what happened, seeing as it had been caused by John, however little he had intended for it to. He might reject him outright.

What would he do, then? Could he handle that rejection? Could he handle not being rejected? What would happen if he was welcomed with open arms? Sherlock wouldn’t be the only one marked by the experience, after all. Could John handle returning? It had been difficult enough when he’d had only the memories to wrestle with. How would he manage when they once again became a too-solid reality?

Arms wrapped themselves around him from behind, the feel of them familiar enough that he didn’t make any sudden movements in reaction to them. One hand came to rest on his growing middle while the other laced itself with his left.

Only then did he realize he was tensed up like a spring and was shaking slightly. His eyes burned and his jaw had clenched.

She didn’t say anything. Instead, she hummed and plastered her skinny body against his. He closed his eyes and let her presence soothe him as best it could. It wasn’t much at all but anything was a help.

John?” she asked after what seemed like ages.

“Hm?”

“Stand still, okay?”

He was about to say that he was standing still when he felt her fingers gently tug at the ring. Instinct was to wrench his hand free and prevent her from getting at it.

“No, please. Stand still. It is okay,” she said, her tone braver than she, judging from the nervous tremor in her body. “Trust me.”

With an effort, he did so. Once the ring slipped off, he had trouble suppressing the noise he made.

If he thought the magic flowing back when he’d been at the inn had been strong, he’d…well, he hadn’t been wrong. Regardless of whether or not it had been, it had felt strong then and it felt strong now.

The difference between then and now lay not so much in the strength as in the circumstances. Not only wasn’t it done in an attempt connect with something he’d just lost, a last indulgence, he wasn’t
on his own this time. It shouldn’t have made that much of a difference but it genuinely did.

The last time had felt more melancholic and wrenching even as it helped. This time it felt more cathartic than anything.

He released a breath he hadn’t been aware he’d been holding as he felt the magic flow back through him, giving him back his fay traits. Demelza’s presence at his back changed from a purely physical one to encompass a more clearly spiritual dimension as well.

She passed the ring for him to grasp then reached her hand up to touch one of his antlers. Her hand had to reach far further than he would’ve anticipated and when it made contact, there didn’t seem to be any give, even though there was still some sensitivity in them.

“I...I didn’t think they’d still be growing,” he said quietly, leaning into the contact of both her hands.

She didn’t say anything in response apart from a small hum.

The gentle pulse of his growing magic slowly synchronized with hers as they stood there, as he reconnected with everything that had been dulled and muted for so long.

I’m bloody glad I haven’t taken it off before this, he thought. I never would have put it back on.

He kept the ring off the rest of the time they spent getting ready for 10pm. Once the time drew near, though, he took it out of his pocket and, after looking at it for a moment, started to put it on.

A hand reached out to stop him before he’d even begun to slip it on.

“I can’t go out with bloody antlers and a tail!” he protested and tried to shake the hand off.

“Who will notice?” she asked in response. “It is late, there are many people and it is close to the Solstice. Strange things occur, even to humans. No one will look twice.”

He had to concede that she had a point. The ring was slipped into his trouser pocket.

“Right, then,” he said, taking a deep breath to try and push away the thoughts and worries that still thronged his mind. “Everything packed?”

She nodded. “Good. Now – ” He was interrupted by the doorbell ringing.

“You’re early,” John said to the inspector when he opened the door.

“Not by much and traffic’s not – wow, mate.” Brown eyes, which had widened in surprise, travelled upwards to take in the antlers. “Bloody hell.”

“What?” John asked. He tried not to sound defensive or self-conscious but this was the first time someone outside the forest had seen his antlers and he couldn’t quite manage to tamp down on the feeling.

“Nothing. It’s just...I didn’t expect them to be that big. When did you say they started growing?”

“I didn’t,” the blond said as he let the other into the flat. “But I guess at some point during August,
maybe a bit earlier. Why?”

Lestrade made that special kind of face that articulates ‘well, how about that?’.” “Impressive. But I guess if...well, anyway, it suits you.”

“Piss off. I look like the type of git who wants to one-up the cracker crown with those headbands with antlers on.” John had looked himself in the mirror earlier and perhaps it was just because everything was Christmas in the city but that had been his first thought.

The inspector paused then grinned and waved a hand. “Alright, maybe a bit. Not too much, though and – oh, hello.”

He’d spotted Demelza who, quite uncharacteristically, had hidden herself in the bedroom and had only just poked her head through the doorway.

“Oh, right. Demelza, it’s alright. He’s the guy who’s meant to pick us up. You don’t have to hide.”

She was never normally that shy about meeting people. Hell, even when he’d first met her, she’d had no qualms about grabbing his hand and dragging him into the clearing. Why was she suddenly so timid?

Lestrade didn’t seem annoyed by her behaviour; instead, he smiled disarmingly, his eyes soft as he waved a hello, standing still so as not to spook her further. “Hello, there, Demelza, was it? My name’s Greg, I’m a detective inspector.”

That fact didn’t seem to reassure her. She did take a few hesitant steps out into the kitchen diner. You are…fay?” she asked with a frown, as though she couldn’t quite believe what she said.

He nodded. “Yeah. Well, sort of. I’m a half-changeling on my mom’s side.”

There had been no embarrassment in the admission when he’d told John but now his grin was just a smidgeon self-conscious as well as charming.

The doctor’s eyes narrowed slightly as he watched them and he made a mental note.

“She went back to the forest?” Demelza asked, her curiosity and compassion winning out over the previous timidity as she stepped back into the room.

“Yeah…when I was sixteen. No word or anything, either, just did it. Apparently, she stayed a lot longer than most changelings ever do, but…” he trailed off, looking a bit awkward.

“That did not make it any easier,” she finished for him. Her hands reached out and grabbed one of his, squeezing it gently in understanding.

John cleared his throat after a few moments, making it as pointed as possible. “Everyone ready, then? I don’t want to rush anyone, of course, but it’s almost 10pm now.”

Lestrade blinked. “Oh. Yeah, of course.”

He freed his hand, possibly a little reluctantly, and bent to grab one of the bags John and Demelza had packed. “This all you’re taking?”

The words ‘that’s an awful little if you’re not coming back’ hung in the air between them, unsaid but felt.

The doctor felt a muscle twitch in his jaw. Yes, so he might be very keen to see Sherlock, however
apprehensive he also was, but that didn’t mean he liked the assumption from everyone that he’d just abandon everything that he had here for it. He was a man in his own right, independent of that lanky git.

His life didn’t revolve around Sherlock, not entirely, and he was going because he wanted to go, dammit, not because of anyone else. If he wanted to come back to London and the life he had here, he would. If not, then that was his decision, too.

“For the time being,” John said out loud in the end. He’d turned his back so he didn’t see what Lestrade’s reaction was nor did he really care.

He picked up the other large bag and the small one, too. Walking over to the front door, he paused. Then he took a deep breath, then another.

A hand gently touched his shoulder.

“It will be alright.” It was whispered into his ear.

“It’d better be,” he replied equally softly. “If it isn’t, I’m going to bloody well kill him myself.”

As the other two went out the door and down the stairs, John took a moment to look at the place he’d lived for the last month and a half, possibly for the last time. The place which he strongly suspected that he’d gotten through the intervention of Mycroft as much as anything else.

It should have inspired some sort of reaction in him but all he could muster was indifference. He’d existed there, not much else.

So, why exactly are you so torn about going back? that annoying voice in the back of his mind asked. Even if Sherlock isn’t alive, or he doesn’t want anything to do with you, the forest is still going to be there. It’s huge, so just set up your home somewhere he’d rarely visit.

Answering the voice was surprisingly easy, for once.

Because without Sherlock, the forest isn’t home, either.

The thought brought a sense of renewed confidence and determination.

He turned to go.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry! I know it must feel slow but it didn’t feel right for John not to take precautions and not to be worried/apprehensive (though I had thought I would've finished the story by now). We will get there soon, promise.

That said, this was a bit...cathartic, I suppose, to write. :)
The Way Home

Chapter Summary

John finally meets his 'transport' and gets something of a shock. He's in for more shocks along the way as they travel, and not all of them pleasant. How will he cope?

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year to everyone. :) We're not far from the end, now. Feels almost sad. ...and with this chapter, I pass 100k words on this, the first time I've ever done so on a fic. It's rather mindboggling. Thank you all for sticking with me! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Where exactly are we going?"

It wasn’t the most intelligent of questions and had an edge of childish asking in it but John felt justified enough in asking not to feel too embarrassed asking.

Over an hour had passed since they’d gotten into the car, but some of it had been spent navigating traffic as much as moving forward. They were sitting in a car that was rather…impractical for London traffic, at least in terms of its size, though it didn’t actually matter much, as it was late enough that there weren’t too many cars out, at least in comparison to the daytime chaos.

One nice thing about a relatively new and large car was that the ceiling height was greater. Though they weren’t anywhere near as large as they could apparently get, John appreciated there being room for his antlers immensely. He was still very unused to them being quite this large.

“Your’ll see,” Lestrade replied as he checked the satnav. John had tried to glean their destination from that but the display didn’t show the final destination, only the current road direction.

Looking out the window wasn’t much help, either. It was December, after all, late at night, and since they were now outside the areas that were lit up by more than street lamps and had a lot of identical looking semis, it was decidedly difficult to pinpoint their destination or even their route.

“Any particular reason you’re not going to say where we’re going?” John asked. “It’s hardly going to be an underground passage into Whitechapel, is it?”

“Near enough,” Lestrade said. To his credit, it didn’t seem as though he took any joy in being secretive. “To be honest, I’d rather it was government spooks that were helping out than this but, well…desperate times and all that.”

“That’s…not reassuring in the slightest.”

“Not at all, no, I know.”

“Any particular reason why you’re being so bloody cloak and dagger?” John asked. “And is that tied
to why we’re travelling out this far?”

“Trust me, I’m not being all cloak and dagger because I feel like it. It’s only because I haven’t been
told much more than you do. Just been told what to do and like a blooming lapdog, I jump to it.”

He sighed heavily and scrubbed a hand through his hair. “But yeah, it does have something to do
with why we’re travelling all this bloody way. The…the one who’s going to take you the rest of the
way can’t come into London, not even close. So, if you want to be completely sure that nobody can
get to you on the trip down, then this is how we’re going to have to do it.”

“Why can he or she not come into London?” Demelza asked from the backseat. “They are fay, yes?
I am fay, I could.”

The inspector looked at her in the rear-view mirror. “You’re not just fay, you’re a dryad,” he said
with a small smile. “There’s something residual for you to latch onto in the city, what with the trees
that’s been there for centuries and all.”

His smile broadened slightly. “You’re young, too, well, relatively, which means you don’t need as
much to latch onto, either. Despite that, sitting in here, you’re clutching that tree very tightly to you.
Not that I blame you, mind. But the one taking you the rest of the way…there’s not going to be
enough to sustain them in the city.”

“Makes sense, I suppose, especially for you lot.”

“You’re one of ‘our lot’, too, now, mate,” Lestrade pointed out. “And it’s you we’re doing all this
for.”

“No, it’s not. It’s got almost sod-all to do with me. It’s Sherlock you’re doing it for, both of you, all
of you, not me.”

“John…” Demelza started.

“No, it is. I’m not blaming you but if he didn’t need me to come all the way back to life, or at least, if
you didn’t believe that he did, you wouldn’t have helped me.”

“I helped you before and no, before you start, not because Mycroft told me to.” Lestrade paused only
because he needed to concentrate on where he should turn. “Like it or not, mate, you’re not alone in
this, however much you try to convince everyone and yourself that you are. I guess that’s easier than
letting people in, which is fair enough, I mean, after everything you went through, it’d be odd for
there not…anyway, the point is that people do care, like that Sarah you work with.”

He looked over at John as he turned the car, the normally soft, brown eyes sharp. “Just because
Sherlock’s a priority doesn’t mean you aren’t, too.”

John opened his mouth to argue then shut it again with a clacking of teeth. The man had, once he
thought about it, a point. A very good point, at that.

So, instead, to cover, he mumbled, “I half-expected you to say something like, ‘listen very carefully,
I shall say this only once’ at the end, there.”

The inspector snorted a small laugh, the tension broken. “Nah. Ain’t got the beret, mate.”
They eventually stopped at the side of what, in the darkness, was surmised to be a field somewhere on the outskirts of the outskirts of London.

“Dammit, we’re late,” Lestrade said as they pulled up. He’d said it at least five times for the last ten miles. “I knew that was the wrong turn. Bloody hell.”

“Does it really make that much difference? I mean, it’s only just gone past midnight by ten minutes. I didn’t think fay bothered that much about the clock.”

“They don’t,” the inspector said, curtly, running a hand through his hair again. “What they do care about is the changes, the edges. Midnight’s important because it marks the transition between today and tomorrow.”

“Ah. Another ‘magical’ time.”

That said, that half-explained why he’d tended to feel some extra strong kicks about that time. He’d put it down to the baby’s odd preference.

“Mock it all you like, there’s a reason it shows up so often in human folklore and literature. It – oh. No need to wait, it seems.”

Even as the words left the detective inspector’s mouth, it became apparent that he was very much right; something moved in the darkness and from the way it moved, it was abundantly clear that it wasn’t anything human or made by human hands.

For one thing, whatever it was, it was on a scale far larger than any normal human could ever be. At the same time, however, it didn’t move as any mechanical thing of equivalent size. In fact, it moved more like…

“Bloody hell, that’s not an Ent, is it?” John exclaimed, taking an involuntary step backwards as it came towards them. “Good god, it is, isn’t it?”

That’s all I ruddy well need, getting something Tolkien-related mixed in there, too. Well, more than rings and dwarves and all the rest already fits in.

“An Ent? I think not, little one,” a voice rumbled as it drew nearer, a voice so deep, rumbling and earthy it seemed to come from everywhere around them and inside of them. Yet, though it had similarities, it was nothing like the voice of the Cŵn Annwn. That had sounded like it came through the trees from the very depths of the netherworld whereas this voice, utterly idiotic as that may sound, seemed to come more from the depths of the trees themselves, as though they themselves were speaking.

All of which would fit brilliantly within the metier of an Ent.

When the what-ever-it-was came near enough to make out for the three human shapes on the ground, however, it only bore a resemblance to the tree-people in so much as they resembled imagery of the green man.

John had to admit, though, that the resemblance here was rather uncanny but then again, perhaps that wasn’t surprising when the depictions you could find of the green man were either rather generic or more symbolic than any real rendering of a face.

It of course didn’t help either that it was still the middle of the night and for all John’s time in the
forest, he hadn’t developed perfect nocturnal vision.

Despite that, he could see the general shape of the enormous figure as it stopped in front of them as well as the gigantic, dark beard that had all sorts of leaves tangled up in it, and possibly other things, and the massive set of antlers that dwarfed even Sherlock’s impressive set, when scale was taken into consideration.

It was more the implications of the voice and the thrum of the magic going utterly haywire inside of him rather than the appearance, what little he could see of it, that told John the creature in front of them was no ordinary, if rather oversized, fay. He thought he might even see something familiar in those features but convinced himself that he was just imagining things.

Demelza must’ve been able to see something else, something more than John could; she let out a strangled noise that was impossible to categorize definitively as either a positive or negative utterance. Then, of all things, she dropped to her knees and bowed her head.

John wondered whether he ought to do that as well and looked over at Lestrade for a clue as to what to do. Catching his eye, the inspector shrugged; he looked as uncertain as the doctor felt.

Before either of them could do anything, however, the matter was taken out of their hands by what was said next.

“No need for that, little one,” the voice said. It ought to have sounded soft, given the choice of words, but it didn’t. Nor did it sound harsh, irritated or even disinterested. It sounded like no inflection, no emotion at all and yet everything at once. “You show more than sufficient reverence as is.”

The enormous head then turned towards the two men and, though it should’ve been impossible to tell in the darkness, seemed to consider the two of them.

Under that unseen gaze, John got the distinct impression that he wasn’t only being scrutinized, much like he’d become used to from Sherlock, which strengthened the resemblance, but being measured and weighed as well. He wondered, with a slight sense of unease, whether he was found to be too heavy – or too light.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, a hand reached out towards them. John backed away in response but didn’t get more than a step or two before Lestrade grabbed his arm to stop him.

“Relax,” the inspector whispered, though the attempt to be soothing and reassuring was ruined somewhat by the slight tremor in the voice.

A finger, about half the length of John himself, made contact. He half-expected to be pushed down by the force of it but instead, it was extremely gentle as it touched the side of his face, travelled up to run over his antlers and then moved down to rest the pad of the finger against the significant curve of his stomach.

John let out a strangled yell at the touch. It sent shocks through him that made him convulse, only Lestrade’s ever harder grip on his arm keeping him moderately upright. But though they were overpowering in their strength and intensity, neither the shocks nor the touch itself were unpleasant. Quite the opposite.

In fact, it felt very much like what he’d experienced the first time Sherlock had touched his pregnant stomach those months previous, only intensified manifold.

Whatever it was, it left John shaking rather violently by the time the finger was removed from his
middle. It then tilted his head upwards with a careful push and he looked up into a shaped darkness that was, presumably, a face.

“Good choice,” the deep voice rumbled.

John had the urge to ask, ‘whose choice?’, if nothing else, then for clarification. He couldn’t get his mouth to work, however, which was probably just as well, given the nature of the other…he didn’t even know whether it was right to call it male. Asking an unwanted question to someone like that did not seem like a smart move.

The finger was removed from his chin but he didn’t get much of a chance to gather himself before he felt something touching the entirety of his back. It pushed at him gently until he lost his balance.

As he landed, on what had to be some sort of skin, it dawned on him what that something was. Not that it was too hard to suss when what closed around him were clearly fingers.

“No, no, no,” he said, pushing hard at the fingers but to no avail. “Hold on. Nobody said anything about being carried in a ruddy gigantic hand all the way down to Cornwall. Put me down!”

The creature holding him, ever so carefully, didn’t listen.

“It was the only way Mycroft could think of that would get you there fast but completely safely!” Lestrade said, shouting slightly to be heard as John was lifted into the air. I didn’t know what that meant until now but it’s okay!”

“**It’s not** okay!” John shouted back, struggling in the still very gentle grasp. “I’m being hoisted up by an enormous creature that I can’t even see and I can’t get free and nobody’s told me anything – “

**“Quiet.”**

The word, spoken in a voice now so deep that it was felt more than heard, rang through the doctor’s entire body. His mouth clicked shut of its own accord and his body stopped struggling, too, despite his continued attempts.

“I will not hurt you,” the creature said, bringing the blonde up in front of its face. “You are one of mine, now. You carry my grandchild. A god protects his own. My wife tells me our son needs you urgently. You will not jeopardize my grandchild. I approve and thus, I will help you reach my son safely. Understood?”

John nodded mutely, the sheer amount of words filled with so much power enough to exhaust him. It dawned on him both why the other times the god had spoken had been so curt and why Sherlock had only bristled with that power when he’d been unable to keep himself emotionally under at least some control.

“Good,” the god said.

The hand that held John moved him so he was nestled in the crook of an elbow. It should’ve been a somewhat precarious place to be but somehow, despite his earlier panic and his rational mind, he didn’t at all feel in danger of falling or otherwise getting hurt.

“Sire, I’m sorry to bother you,” the detective inspector called, “but your son wanted some proof that – “

“Tell him I will see him later, changeling,” the enormous shape said. The hand reached out again. “Come, little one, I will carry you, too. The journey will be long. Haste is required.”
Demelza, her eyes as wide as saucers at the prospect, quickly did as she was bid. She didn’t need much in the way of help getting up, though; she climbed nimbly up the length of the arm, as though it had every possible handhold one could wish for. As if that wasn’t enough, John noticed, as she moved closer, she was also carrying the entirety of their bags, which was just as well, since he hadn’t had the presence of mind to remember them.

She settled on the shoulder of the arm John was nestled in the crook of. The giant figure didn’t seem to mind her position. It rose onto its feet, presumably, and, without so much as a parting gesture to the inspector, began to walk, away from the city and into the countryside.

“Take care, Greg!” John managed to shout at the top of his lungs as they were carried off, obviously very long legs covering the distance easily. He couldn’t see Lestrade but he hoped he’d be heard, nevertheless.

Wind rushed past him as they moved and prevented him from talking to Demelza – he still didn’t feel brave, or stupid, enough to attempt to chat with the god – but despite that, he didn’t feel it lashing his face or turning him to a metaphorical icicle. In fact, he felt oddly warm and protected in his little impromptu alcove. That also should’ve moved at least a little but it was steady as anything.

Sherlock’s voice sounded in his mind. *I have told you time and again that you shouldn’t apply human logic to anything fay-related. I would’ve thought you’d have learned by now.*

*Oh, shut up. I’m allowed not to immediately assume that it’s only fay-logic that applies. Right now, my puny little human mind is stuck on the fact that I’m de facto a hobbit being carried by an Ent.*

*I’ts not –*

*I know! And I’m arguing with myself in my head so if you don’t mind, shut up until you’re actually there in the flesh to do the arguing!*

He thought the baritone voice muttered something that sounded like ‘fine’ but that might just be proof that he was finally losing his marbles.

Come to think of it, though, and that was a slightly morbid thought, he had to admit, if he did lose his marbles, then he could stop worrying about all the things that stirred just below his conscious mind.

As they continued to move, however, through what ought to be quiet but lit country lanes and bucolic splendour that were strangely quiet and dark, he found that the gentle rocking motion of the steps slowly but steadily lulled him to sleep.

He was jolted awake what felt like a long time after but couldn’t have been more than half an hour, judging by the sky. It was only his military training that kept him relatively calm despite the suddenness, which was just as well; he was still very high up, after all.

The reason for his rather abrupt awakening wasn’t immediately apparent. Instead of vocalising the question of why they’d stopped, he looked up towards Demelza, hoping for something of an answer.

She pointed out in front of them once he managed to catch her eye, his eyebrows raised in question.

Turning his attention in the direction she pointed, he at first couldn’t discern anything at all. He could
smell that they were close to water, though, and after a few moments, he could also hear that the water was in some state of uproar.

The cause revealed itself soon after. Though John had, for the most part, reached a point where the oddity the fay world threw him didn’t floor him, he still wasn’t quite prepared for what rose out of the water, some way out.

It was a woman. At least, the general shape of it was recognizably female, even at a scale almost as huge as that of the god carrying them. Details were almost impossible to make out but even so, there were things in there that didn’t seem right, and it wasn’t merely the amount of seaweed and other river debris that could just about be seen to cling to the contours of the body.

“Who dares disturb me in my slumber?” came a voice out of the darkness, the harmonics of water as it travelled coalescing and forming into words. A small part of the doctor was pleased with himself that he no longer had trouble discerning the words in the natural noises that was so integral to the speech of many fay.

“One who seeks passage over your waters,” the god called back, seemingly not at all fazed by the apparent hostility from the other, who was more than likely another god, or in this case, goddess.

“You have your passage already,” the goddess said and there seemed to be a slight softening to be detected in her voice. “You’ve had your passage over all my waters for centuries. In that time, you’ve never asked for permission before. So, I ask you, why?”

“This time, I do not travel alone.”

Water surged and splashed as the shape evidently moved up to the bank where they stood. John once more found himself under intense scrutiny. As he stared back, he couldn’t help the question forming in his mind; why on earth did they need to ask for passage over a river? He was pretty sure he’d moved across at least one river in his train ride up to London and he had sure as hell moved across the Thames in the time he’d been back.

So, the question became, why was this time so markedly different?

The question was answered, at least after a fashion, relatively quickly.

“He cannot cross. Not with a mark like that.”

“Like what?” John asked before he could stop himself. “I’ve crossed the Thames before with this mark, nobody’s done a thing about it and nothing’s happened, so what’s the difference between then and now?”

The goddess took a while in answering, regarding him silently in the meantime.

“You ask good questions,” she said eventually, approval in her tone. “The difference lies in your… for lack of a better phrase, stage of transformation. You were not fully fay when the mark was made or even the last time you crossed this river. You are now, however, and as such, the problem is twofold. For one, all fay people are looked after by different deities and to cross their domains, you’ve got to be granted permission.”

She looked at him, expectantly, and he belatedly nodded to show he understood. Only then did she continue. “For another, once the transformation was complete, the contract of the mark was rendered null and void and, as such, it became poisonous to you.”

John felt a muscle work in his forehead. Right. Something else I wasn’t told about that’s only vitally
important to both me and the baby. Don’t know what I was expecting, really, given the track record of every ruddy fay I’ve ever encountered.

The goddess turned her gaze to the god. “I suppose that’s the real reason you’ve come here?” she asked and got a rumble in reply. She sighed heavily, the noise like the dull, deep sound made when a big rock hit a large body of water.

Then, without further preamble, she reached out and grabbed hold of John’s wrist. He opened his mouth in protest, thoroughly fed up with being manhandled by just about everyone at this point, but the utterly wet touch was so light he almost couldn’t feel it. What was more, it only touched the immediate area around the mark.

It felt good, soothing, and when his arm was lifted and the mark ever so gently kissed, by what had to be lips, a sensation that could only be described as the reverse of what he’d felt when he’d first put on the ring radiated from it.

When the touch withdrew, it left a cool, pleasant tingle through his body. He brought his hand up to his face but in the darkness, he couldn’t see whether the mark was gone or not. It felt like it but that wasn’t in any way definite.

“So…it’s gone now?” he asked after the goddess had pulled back further into the river.

It wasn’t exactly a nod he got in response but nevertheless, he felt as though he had been given a yes. That was about all he got, however, as the giant woman shape sank the rest of the way back into the river, leaving only ripples that surprisingly quickly were too weak to be detected.

Before they faded entirely, the voice spoke one final time. “You have your passage, all of you, forevermore.”

The words had only just faded when the god carrying John and Demelza began to wade into the water, his strides as confident and consistent as before, even if they weren’t quite as fast, given the currents and flow of the river.

“So that it, then?” John called up to Demelza, taking the opportunity to ask her while they were still moving relatively slowly. “That was all it took to get rid of the mark?”

She looked down at him, a myriad of emotions dancing in her lively face. “Belisama is a great goddess but I think she was only able to do it because you are now fully fay. I should have seen that you were, too, but…” she trailed off, sounding apologetic and slightly shamed.

“She’s a goddess, she ought to be able to spot things you can’t,” he argued back, as much to try and wipe away her anxiety about it as anything else. “Don’t worry about it.”

She nodded, though she was biting her lip. “Will you sleep now?” she asked after a moment.

He settled back more comfortably in his unusual hammock-like little space. “Yeah, I planned to. I can’t see anything, unlike the rest of you, so it’s not really that scenic a ride for me. Might as well get some sleep while I’m up here, safe and sound.” He paused then looked back up at her. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all. You need sleep for the baby – and you need to be rested for when we arrive back home.”

Home. Now there was a description he’d tried to avoid using and not only about his flat in London. Having it being used so openly about the forest brought with it a flood of emotion, about Sherlock in particular, which he wasn’t quite prepared to deal with yet. So, as he closed his eyes to hopefully fall
asleep soon, he tried to tamp down on them hard.

*On the other hand,* said the inner voice, *it might be a blessing in disguise, them flooding back. You’re going to have to deal with them sooner or later and probably sooner, seeing as you’re now actually going back to the forest. You’re going to be confronted with Sherlock, more than likely as soon as you’ve arrived.*

The tone changed and became slightly mocking. *Do you really want the first time you see him again to start with you punching him because anger, preferably coupled with violence, is the way you deal with emotions you’re not quite prepared to handle?*

He would deserve getting punched in those ridiculously prominent, yet attractive prominent cheekbones, John thought churlishly. It didn’t help his mood that he knew the thought was childish.

*Even so, it’s hardly going to endear you to him again, and you can’t exactly say he wouldn’t have reason to be less than enamoured with you now. Not after what he more than likely has had to go through in his recovery. It’s your choice, of course, I’m just saying…*

Wanting to go back to sleep very badly, John had, reluctantly, to concede that the best idea would more than likely be to at least try to work at some of the feelings he’d so resolutely stamped down on before they reached Cornwall.

Sherlock deserved that. No, wait, scratch that. *They* deserved that, all three of them.

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By the time they reached the edge of the forest, the first time they’d stopped since their meeting with the water goddess, it was starting to get light. If John had to be honest, he would’ve estimated that they’d be a lot longer in getting there than they’d been. However, he supposed it would only make sense that it wouldn’t take that long for a creature, a god, like that.

He’d gotten some sleep in the intervening hours. At least, he must’ve done, as at some point, he’d blinked and had to work against some proper sleep grit caking his eyes. Not that he remembered or could say that he felt the benefit.

The most he could say was that he had managed to contemplate at least some of his feelings.

John was in no doubt that it was indeed their forest they’d arrived at, though. For one thing, he could feel the threads of magic that were so familiar and thrummed in harmony with his own. For another, there was someone there to greet them.

It wasn’t Sherlock. It was far too tall, for a start, and what was more, it was female. Abundantly female, one could say, in fact, with nothing at all to conceal that fact. More than that, though, the face had some very familiar traits and those were crinkled in a small smile that was equally familiar, achingly so, and directed at him.

When she turned her attention back towards the god, though, the smile faded and the eyes narrowed. No words were spoken but John got the definite sense that she wasn’t pleased with the god, at all.

The doctor, having been put back down on the ground almost the moment they’d stopped, looked up to see whether he could discern the god’s expression but was sadly unsuccessful. Nor did it help to
silently ask Demelza; she looked a little overwhelmed by being in the presence of not one, but two actual gods. John couldn’t really fault her for that. To her, it must’ve been like meeting the queen and the pope at the same time. Or something like that, at least.

The two gods must have agreed on something, however, as the goddess turned her attention back to John after a few moments and her expression softened slightly again.

“You are John?” she asked. He nodded. “Good. He asks for you, even now. Come.”

With that, she turned and started to walk into the forest. John followed her after waving quickly to Demelza and nodding his thanks to the god, getting an odd sense of déjà vu as he did so. This time, he wasn’t in much danger of losing sight of his ‘guide’, though.

He hadn’t quite sorted out all the emotions and so he was still feeling apprehensive as they walked towards, presumably, the place where Sherlock had been placed. One feeling in particular steadily grew, however; immense joy. It didn’t take a genius to work out why.

As they walked, John struggled a little to keep up for a few reasons; not only did her much longer legs make her stride much longer than his, the forest floor didn’t yield as firm a footing as when he’d left.

On top of that, his stomach had not exactly gotten smaller in the intervening time and although he’d become relatively adept at navigating with his new girth, that skill didn’t seem to quite stretch to muddy, slippery, sometimes frozen, uneven ground. Consequently, he stumbled and staggered as much as he actually walked. The fact that she, probably unintentionally, cleared the way of any low hanging branches or similar that his antlers could get caught in was only a small comfort.

Whenever he was in danger of falling behind, however, the enormous figure in front slowed down until he’d almost caught up. Then it resumed its earlier pace, as though there had been no change. Not once did she as much as turn her head in his direction or otherwise acknowledge him.

A part of him felt angry at that; if he was that unimportant to her, why hadn’t she found some other way of curing Sherlock completely? At the same time, though, he had to admit that as Sherlock’s mother, the one who’d spent all this time nursing him back from whatever horrible state he’d been in, there wasn’t much reason for her to like him.

After all, he was to blame for this whole affair, wasn’t he? It was unintentional, completely, but that didn’t change the fact that the blame lay with him. How could she be blamed for not giving him a very warm reception, given that?

Luckily for John, whose distraction by his thoughts and ever-growing apprehension didn’t help him navigating the terrain, the trip wasn’t too long.

They didn’t stop, as he’d at least halfway expected, given everything, at the cave he’d shared with Sherlock or even anywhere close to it. Instead, though it did appear to be a cave they’d stopped at, it was nowhere he’d ever been before. That made him pause and he opened his mouth to ask about it.

Before a word passed his lips, however, he thought he heard a noise. A relatively very small noise from deep inside this new, unknown cave, which should’ve barely been audible, even in the quiet of the forest in early winter morning.

Yet for all the quietness of it, in John’s ears it sounded as loud as if it’d been spoken directly into his ear.

It was his name, spoken so very quietly by that very familiar voice.
“Sherlock?” he asked, his voice pitched equally quietly. He didn’t get an answer so he took a few steps into the gloom of the cave, trying to make out anything as he called again.

This time, there was an answering noise, as quiet as the first one had been. The doctor walked further into the darkness, carefully so as not to fall in the darkness, staring all the while in a determined effort to make out where exactly his…his what? Boyfriend? Lover? His…his Sherlock was.

Despite the apprehension, despite all his worries, now that he was so close, he found that he couldn’t wait to see the man, even if he’d end up paying for it, in whatever way.

It took several long moments but eventually, he managed to make out something. The longer he stayed in the gloom, the more he could see of the figure lying prostate. What he could make out, though, he in no way felt reassured about seeing.

“Sherlock?” he called again, hesitation and worry creeping into his voice.

“John.” This time, it was much clearer, though it was still very weak and quiet. There was a pause, then the voice came again, significantly clearer and more focused than before. “John?” In fact, it sounded like a genuine question rather than a mere chant of a name.

“Sherlock?” John had now reached the edge of whatever the figure was lying on. He thought he recognized it but he wasn’t entirely sure and he couldn’t, he wouldn’t let his mind conjure certainties from scraps of wishful thinking. “It is you, isn’t it? I swear, if this turns out to be some sort of joke, I’m going to strangle you myself.”

Another noise but this time, it was different. It was the tiniest of huffing laughs, which sounded odd and, sadly, a little broken.

“John.” It seemed to be the only word Sherlock could say, which the blond fervently hoped wasn’t true – the thought of that massive brain being robbed of verbal communication was deeply saddening.

His thoughts were distracted from that horrible prospect by a hand lifting up slowly, uncertainly, fingers twitching as though the figure was trying to grasp at something but couldn’t see it.

Not entirely sure it was the right thing to do, John reached out in turn to grasp the searching hand. As soon as they made contact, the hand grabbed on, the grip tight and unrelenting, as if it could prevent John from ever leaving that way.

“John!” the baritone said again, this time sounding choked with some emotion.

“I’m here, Sherlock, I’m here.” He moved closer then knelt at where he surmised the head to be. “Can you see me? I’m here.”

The other hand came up, trembling minutely, and, after searching briefly, found the side of John’s face. He pressed into the contact, both the physical and the magical.

“You bloody sod,” he said softly, lump in his throat. “How could you do this? Why did I let you?”

Long fingers caressed his cheeks, almost apologetically. He was shaking now, with repressed anger and grief and…other things.

“I never thought I’d see you…I thought you were dead!” he shouted, overcome. The dam broke.

Everything else he tried to say was drowned in the heaving sobs wrecking him.
We've gotten somewhere :D I did promise. Hopefully it's been worth the wait. :) 

Notes: I did an awful lot of research on river goddesses and I eventually settled on this being Belisama, mostly because she's the only one I can find who's not the goddess of a specific river. As for Sherlock's parents...I didn't name them here but I decided his father was Cernunnos and Modron/Matrona as his mother. I slipped in another little quote from a show at the start because that's how my brain works. :) Do tell me if you find it :)}
Healing and reconnecting

Chapter Summary

Reconciliation and reconnecting after a separation can be hard enough but when one of the parties is struggling to even communicate and needs healing of more than just the physical, it becomes much harder.

Chapter Notes

Wow! Guys, you are nothing short of amazing, all of you! Thank you for all the kind feedback! It really means the world. This is a week late in comparison to the normal schedule and apologies. Life has been...interesting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For how long they stayed like that, John had no idea. At some point, Sherlock must’ve moved himself or moved John since his arms had come to encircle the doctor’s shoulders and chest, gripping tightly as though that way, he could prevent John from ever leaving. Apart from intermittent whispers of John’s name, he said nothing.

Meanwhile, John himself was sobbing into the lightly furred chest, his own hands gripping and clawing as he shook and howled through the torrent. If he thought he’d confronted his emotions enough to deal with them beforehand, he was sorely mistaken.

The only positive that could be said about the whole thing was that he’d at least not punched Sherlock.

After what felt like an eternity, he’d run himself out. He’d run out of tears to shed much earlier but that fact hadn’t stopped him from crying. As he came down with a final few, hiccupping breaths, he finally lifted his head to try and look at the other. Not that he could see much, of course.

He could see the pale eyes, as they seemed to glint, even in the gloom.

A small, self-deprecating smile found its way onto his lips. “This is not how I imagined our reunion to be,” he said, his voice little more than a hoarse croak. “But I suppose it’s better than punching you in your ruddy, too-handsome face.”

Broad hands ran through his hair and over his antlers in a gesture that could only be called caring. “John.”

“That’s really all you can say, isn’t it?” the blond said, his voice gentle even as it still croaked and bore traces of his crying. Despite his words, his smile had turned genuine. “Why is that? God, you must be going absolutely barmy, being unable to say anything but a single word.”

He got a snort that was undeniably contemptuous in reply, likely to show that despite his suddenly
seriously shrunken vocabulary, he wasn’t entirely incapable of expressing what he wanted to get across.

“Alright, fair enough. Why, though? I mean, if your mother could…” he had to pause to swallow hard, “could do all of this, why can’t she give you your vocabulary back?”

“A physical mending is always much easier than a psychological one,” came a voice.

John turned his head, squinting against the light coming in through the mouth of the cave, and could just make out the shape of what was undoubtedly Sherlock’s mother, coming a little closer.

“I could indeed heal him. With all my knowledge, my powers and that of the great tree, I could, and did, heal him. Physically. Psychologically is another matter and as you know, my Sherlock lives mostly through his mind. He cannot be whole without it, but I cannot touch him there if he doesn’t want me to. So far, despite the tremendous damage his mind has surely suffered, he has point-blank refused any attempts to help him.”

“So…is that why he needs me? But that doesn’t – “

Make any sense, was what he was going to say. John didn’t have any influence on Sherlock’s mind. Alright, so there was no denying that they’d grown very close in the time they’d spent together, even if that was more on the doctor’s part.

That was an emotional closeness, however. How Sherlock felt and how he thought didn’t always overlap, he’d learned; even if John had influence over Sherlock’s emotions, as far as anyone could control anyone else in that way, at least, that didn’t extend to his mind. That had always been entirely Sherlock’s.

Then it clicked. At least, he thought it did.

“You…utter cock,” he whispered, vehement anger mixing with awed warmth. “You…you’ve actually gone and…why the hell couldn’t you just tell me that? There was no need to…your giant mind is your most treasured possession. Don’t go wasting it by letting your emotions control it.”

“John.”

“You told me to leave!” John argued back, accusatory as his voice choked back up. “You told me to run, did everything to make sure I’d run. Then you…the Hunt…and you were gone. How could I stay when they’d hurt my…our baby? It was the only thing that I’d have left of you. That wasn’t going to happen. I wanted to stay, you berk, I wanted to be here, with you, more than anything!”

His voice had risen considerably by the end of the last sentence. He stopped speaking.

The silence between them lasted for a very long time, or at least it seemed that way to John. He looked at what he could make out of the face in front of him, trying to gauge a reaction, without success.

“Say something, Sherlock…please, anything.”

Please, let me know you’re still in there, somewhere. Let me know you can be reached. You’re normally so ruddy eloquent I want to smack your posh face but right now I’d take your long, detailed explanations of things over just having my name being repeated back to me. I’d have that over nothing at all any day, any day at all. You could be mute if it meant that you were alive and here. But it isn’t fair on you.
“John…” A pause and then, “John…it…okay.”

“You…”


Pale eyes looked up over John’s head to where the doctor guessed the goddess was standing or sitting.

Some conversation seemed go on between them, unspoken in the way family has. Eventually, a decision must’ve been reached because Sherlock nodded his head. Then he turned his attention back to John.

“Time. Need,” he tried to explain, looking progressively more annoyed.

“You need time to get healed? Was that it? You just didn’t want her to until now?”

Sherlock snorted and shook his head. “Bond. Need. Explain. Later. I promise.” His frustration was evident from his expression, even in the low light.

A little hesitant without quite knowing why, John smiled and leaned forward to press a soft, quick kiss to cupid bow lips, where he nevertheless tried to get across something of the love and relief he felt. As he pulled back, though, the lips followed him. They pressed in for a decidedly longer kiss that, at least to the doctor, seemed to be a response of ‘me, too’.

John then started to rise. He figured that since Sherlock had now agreed to and was capable of being healed the rest of the way, his part of the immediate proceedings had concluded. Therefore, it was probably best for him to get out of the way, so that he didn’t interfere with anything crucial. Fully fay now or not, something that utterly magical, reaching bone level, as it were, would be likely that he’d end up messing up something just by staying.

So, he’d just sit himself down, possibly at the cave entrance, and wait for the goddess to work her magic, as it were. It might, of course, take quite a long time before that happened, given how long the first part of the healing process had taken.

He could hope that Demelza would know where they’d gone, though, and that she’d catch up relatively soon. She still had most of the bags, after all.

As soon as he started to get up, though, he was almost yanked back down by broad hands. An uncomprehending, irritated and slightly panicked look met his eyes.

“I wasn’t going anywhere. Well, I was, but only to the mouth of the cave.”

“Why?”

“Why? So that I wouldn’t be in the way, obviously. I mean, I’m not going to be much use in what – “

“You are,” Sherlock interrupted. “Wasn’t hyper…hyperbole when…said you…needed.”

“Oh, so you know about that, do you?” John muttered under his breath. “What can I do, though,
Sherlock? I’m no magical creature."

“You’re fay.”

“Yeah, okay, maybe,” John said, having to concede the point, “but I don’t have any skills in that area.”

“You do,” Sherlock insisted. He now had the cheek to look, of all things, a little smug and very proud at the same time. “Feel it right now. Felt it since the beginning.”

“Since the dance, you mean? God, feels like that was years ago. Wait, was that why you got interested in me in the first place?”

Sherlock shook his head but didn’t say anything. Not that he could be blamed for once, given the circumstances, but it was still frustrating not to get the verbal explanation of that. A minute part of John had kept wondering why, if he wasn’t the first human to tread the dance and keep up, which was highly unlikely that he was, Sherlock would have taken an interest in him, specifically?

The notion that there’d been others had been soundly squashed by the brunet’s behaviour between then and now. As for the rest, however stupid the thought was, he would simply have to wait and ask again later.

As the goddess came up close, revealing the actual size of the cave in the process, she started singing. It was so soft and quiet that she might have been singing all way up to them and John just hadn’t noticed before she was right behind them. Even when she was, though, it was difficult for him to make out words. It could’ve been pure vocalization, of course, but he thought he could hear a few recognisably Gaelic words in there somewhere.

Large hands, far softer than they had any right to be, encircled them both, touching them gently as the song slowly but steadily grew in volume. Or maybe it didn’t. To be honest, John couldn’t tell for sure since some seemed to come as much from inside of his head as outside. It was getting to be something of a signature for the more powerful folkloric creatures and frankly, it was also getting rather tiresome, mostly because of the way it filled his head to capacity.

The slight annoyance soon faded, however. As the song grew, or didn’t, something else started to grow in its place, filling not only his head but his entire body. By entire body, it wasn’t just his skin or even his nerves. It was from the very marrow of his bone through his flesh and organs to the outermost layer of skin, filling to capacity and beyond with…with something he couldn’t identify beyond its magical properties.

It wasn’t unpleasant as such, not in itself, but it became that by its sheer intensity and all-encompassing nature, pressing against every inside of him all at once.

He didn’t realize he’d started to shake until he registered that Sherlock was making soft hushing noises to him and rubbing what he could reach of the blond’s back.

“It’s alright, John. Pass soon, I promise.”

“That’s. Hardly the. Point. Is it?” John got out through his teeth, fighting the odd dual feeling of being about to explode and implode at the same time. “What is. It?”

He looked up into pale eyes, trying to get across that an answer of ‘magic’ wouldn’t be the best choice in the circumstances.

“Healing,” Sherlock said, which, quite frankly, wasn’t in any way better as an explanation.

Sherlock’s only answer was to make another hushing noise and pull him tighter against him while the large hands pressed against them more and more. John grit his teeth and tried to bear it as best he could. What else could he do, realistically?

It seemed to last for absolute ages. At some point, though, the horrible feeling faded and transformed into an even stranger sensation. One that was almost impossible to describe.

The best way he could explain it, or try to, would be by comparing it to the feeling of security and grounding you might feel when sitting down and hanging on after a severe dizzy spell. Only, the grounding wasn’t confined to the object you were clinging onto but the very ground itself, stretching down with metaphorical roots.

That wasn’t right, either, really, or if it was, it was only a very small part of it. it felt…felt…

He opened eyes he hadn’t realized he’d closed and turned them to Sherlock again, looking for some sort of answer. He gasped at what he saw, completely forgetting his question, then had to close and reopen his eyes to make sure he wasn’t merely imagining things.

It wasn’t as though he was suddenly sparkling light from the inside or something equally ludicrous. There was no inner core of the true magic showing, no light shining down from above. Nothing like that and yet…

Yet there was something different, something that verged on those things without ever quite being any of them. It was more…like seeing him in a new light, seeing all of him.

“What is it, John?” the baritone voice was so soft that it was almost inaudible. Or maybe it wasn’t, and John just had trouble handling the input from his body. It didn’t really matter.

“You…you’re...” There was no way he was going to say, ‘you’re glowing’. It would be the closest he could get to explaining it but that didn’t mean he had any intention of making himself look stupid by saying it.

Sherlock’s smile was as soft as his voice. His normally pale eyes had become the kaleidoscope they had been before but this time, they weren’t pale, frosted tones. They were a full of colour, the brightest nuance possible of the colours normally in there.

“Do you believe me now?” the brunet asked, his voice as quiet as before.

“Believe you?” John said, confused, his voice pitched equally low and quiet. “Believe you in terms of what, exactly?”

He didn’t pick up on how Sherlock seemed to have regained his ability to speak proper sentences, at least to some extent.

“Believe that I wasn’t being arbitrary in my choice.”

“Choice?”

“Of you.” Now there was a much more familiar tint of annoyance-with-stupidity to the still very soft voice. “What you see now is what I always saw a hint of in you. Saw a lot more, of course.” The tint changed to pride on the last sentence.
“How can you tell what I see? And hang on, you just said that your choice didn’t have anything to do with the magic. How the hell does that in any way tally?”

Sherlock’s face, if not his voice, conveyed the must-you-be-so-dim-and-obstinate expression well. “It fills you. Look.”

He held up John’s hand between them and the doctor had to stare at his own appendage. Whatever it was that seemed to have taken up residence inside the ruler was filling him up, too. More than that, it seemed to gently pulse and did so in time with the same pulse from Sherlock.

“As for your question…it’s not the magic. It’s something much more fundamental than that and impossible to explain.”

“Convenient.”

“It’s what the magic binds itself to. It’s…” he trailed off, seemingly uncertain of how to phrase it, if he even could.

The large hands, having until then hovered more than touched, pressed down on them. Not hard, not forceful. Just…a gentle but unrelenting push down.

John started to press back until he realized that it wasn’t his body that was being pressed down as much as it was his self, daft as that still sounded.

As he sank down, the feeling of being grounded spread and connected to…to…to everything. To the giant oak tree, to the creatures all around them in the forest, whether they were fay or not, to the goddess behind him, to the very earth itself.

To Sherlock.

The matching pulse slowly grew and intensified until it felt as though their hearts were one, beating slowly but surely. To John, it felt as though as long as one beat, so would the other. Forever and ever.

The thought, which ought to have been horrifying, brought with it only an immense sense of relief and security. Nothing would tear them apart ever again, not for long.

For a while, John just sat there, trying to get to grips with what was happening, at least to the small degree he could reasonably manage. So engrossed was he, he didn’t even notice that not only had the pressure stopped, the goddess had moved away from them entirely, without so much as a goodbye.

Sherlock leant forward to press their foreheads together, a smile slowly taking over his entire face in the way John loved so much but had so rarely gotten to see. He returned it.

“My missing part,” Sherlock said, a distinct fondness in his voice that might more correctly be termed adoration. “My John.”

“That’s a bit saccharine for you, isn’t it?” Despite the words, John couldn’t help the way his heart swelled at both the words and the tone.

“It’s not saccharine if it’s true,” Sherlock sniffed.

“Sentimental, then.”
“I’m allowed to be sentimental when I get my family back.”

“Not to mention your speech and everything else, of course.”

The brunet wrinkled his nose and waved his free hand in a dismissive gesture. “Minor details.”

“Minor – Sherlock, I was told you were practically catatonic! That’s not a bloody minor detail!”

The thought that he might’ve regarded that as unimportant, might have chosen to stay that way if John hadn’t come back as quickly as he was made aware of the problem…the thought made his throat constrict and an unpleasant knot form in his stomach.

Pulling back a little, Sherlock regarded him with a completely calm, utterly serious face. “It is when – “

“No. Stop right there. I’m glad you’re happy to have us back but that doesn’t mean it’s okay to disregard your own mental state. You’re needed here, you – “

“Didn’t care. I was the one who refused to be helped. Quite vehemently so.”

John was, quite frankly, aghast at what he was hearing. His eyes were wide in disbelief as he stared at the other. “Why? What possible reason could you have for doing something so utterly…utterly imbecilic and selfish?!?”

Despite maintaining the calm outer appearance, a small flicker of uncertainty and maybe even embarrassment could be detected in the brunet’s eyes at that.

His gaze flickered away while he mumbled something.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“Because I wanted you to come back to me,” Sherlock finally said, looking back at the other, almost defiantly.

John had to blink, not quite believing what he was hearing.

It couldn’t be. After all they’d been through, together and apart, Sherlock was still worried that John wouldn’t have come back on his own? That was just absurd. He’d told the lanky git several times that he’d had no intention of leaving anymore. They’d had a bloody row about just that when they’d had the Hunt about to catch up with them, with all that entailed, and even then, John had only run because he had to.

Given all of that, why in the name of all seven hells would Sherlock think that John wouldn’t want to come back of his own free will? That he had to be, basically, emotionally blackmailed in order to return? How the blazes could he be that ruddy stupid?

He was just about to open his mouth to voice all of that when he saw the minute trembling in the long, pale body. More than that, he felt that tremble inside of him, too.

Oh. Oh.

“Sherlock?” he said instead, pitching his voice low and soft. With how he felt, it was with something of an effort. It helped to know just what he needed to say. “Sherlock, listen to me, okay?”

The pale eyes, which hadn’t seemed to really see him, focused again on him. There was a barely perceptible nod.
“I don’t want to leave. Then or now. I came back not because I was told to but because you were alive. Something I had real trouble believing at first. Because I could come back, come home, without there being any more risk to the baby, to any of us.”

He laid a hand gently on the brunet’s cheek, smoothing his thumb over the prominent cheekbone. “If you don’t want me to leave…” There was a small but audible hitch at that. “Alright, I’ll take that as a no, then. I want to be nowhere else but here, with you and the family we create. You know why?”

Sherlock didn’t shake his head but instead just looked at John, his pupils widened.

John smiled, a small smile that was nevertheless packed with emotion.

“Because I love you.”

The words passed his lips far more easily than he would’ve ever imagined but then again, he’d been thinking it for long enough, even before Halloween, and often enough that it felt like the most natural and right thing. To go that one step further and say it out loud wasn’t that big a concession, seen in that light.

He supposed that it might be a strong word to use after they’d only known each other for a relatively short amount of time. It hadn’t felt like a short period, however, not in that regard, and well…the fact of the matter was that he did love the man, how ridiculous it might sound.

What he got in response wasn’t quite what he might have hoped for, however. Not that he would have expected tears or a heartfelt declaration back. This was still Sherlock, after all.

He wouldn’t have counted on getting such a look of utter puzzlement, however. It was as though what he was saying just somehow didn’t at all tally with the brunet’s comprehension of the world.

That knowledge didn’t make him angry as much as it made him incredibly sad. Even more so when he mentally joined the dots and understood far better some of the reactions and behaviours Sherlock had exhibited in their time together that had so confused him at the time.

“Is it that hard to believe?” he asked just as softly as before, his smile now laced with sadness.

“Not that you can love, no,” the brunet said, shaking his head. He wasn’t quite looking John in the eye anymore.

“But that you can be someone who is loved is?”

There was no answer.

“Oh, Sherlock, you bloody idiot. Of course, you are loved. You’re loved by more people than you know.”

“Tolerated or even respected is a far cry from being loved, John.”

“Mrs. Hudson loves you. You can see in her eyes. I can’t say whether your parents do because I have a hard enough time reading you and you’re not fully a god. But I’m sure they do, in their own weird way – and I know your brother loves you. No, shut up, he does. Did you know he was the one to call me and say just how much you needed me here? His voice trembled when he said it, too.”

He paused to take a breath. “All he really needed to do was confirm you were alive but that’s neither here nor there. He got your father, I assume, to get us, to make sure we were safe. Hell, he was the one to get Lestrade to watch over me and find me a small version of the big oak so I had a source of
magic close by. If that isn’t proof that he loves you, I don’t know what is. He sure as hell didn’t do all of that for my sake.”

Sherlock looked about ready to protest so John bent forward and kissed him gently, pouring as much feeling as he could into it. The ruler responded, though rather hesitantly, as though he was uncertain.

When the doctor pulled away, his smile had gone. “I don’t know how else to convince you but it’s true. I do love you and I wish I’d said it before…well, before. That’s been one of my biggest regrets, in all this time.”

Sherlock still didn’t look convinced. John sighed then remembered something.

“You asked earlier whether I believe I wasn’t an arbitrary choice? I do. Know this, though – you weren’t an arbitrary choice, either. Alright, so my heart was a little slower on the uptake than yours but that’s because I’m an idiot human.”

A minute smile appeared and a hand came up to rub at the base of John’s antlers. “Not human anymore.”

“But still an idiot? Well, ta so much.” Nevertheless, he pressed into the touch. “If you don’t believe I love you, can you believe me on that, at least?”

He got a nod in return, one he was immensely glad to see came without any hesitation.

“Right, okay. Good. That’s something, at least.”

His concession was born mostly out of the fact that he knew the lanky git loved him, too, very deeply, even if he didn’t say it with words. No one pulled the stunts he had for someone they didn’t love, after all, and there was no way he’d believe it was all for selfish reasons, either, if Sherlock should ever attempt to pull that one.

I’ll get you to believe me in time, don’t worry. No matter what it takes, I’m going to make you see just how loved you are by the people who matter most to you.

He kept that to himself, though. It would be for the best if he could make Sherlock come to that conclusion on his own, with only a little help and prod.

“So…are you healed now?” was what he asked out loud instead. It was probably a stupid question to ask but he needed to know. “I mean, you’ve obviously got your voice back and you seem yourself but that’s hardly any proper indicator of anything but…”

Sherlock snorted but he also gave a small smile. “Almost. There are some things that are still healing and some things may take a while longer to get fully mended. But I’m alright on the whole, as you’d put it.”

“Oi. The fact that you’ve got speech back doesn’t mean I’m willing to get pummelled with more or less subtle insults.”

His complaints fell on stony ears. That was hardly a new thing, though this time it wasn’t just because he was being rude. Instead, his eyes had fallen on the very prominent bump that had become John’s stomach.

Not that that was surprising. To be honest, it was almost more surprising that it had taken him this long to turn his focus in that direction.
Bony hands came up to hesitantly, almost fearfully touch the covered expanse. John wasn’t having any of that hesitation and pushed his stomach into the hands more fully.

“If you’re going to touch, then touch.”

“It’s…growing, then?” There was that odd note of hesitation again.

“No, I just gorged myself on Christmas biscuits and puddings.”

John realized that the time might not be right for such a quip the moment after the words had left his mouth. It was odd, though – surely Sherlock could feel that the baby was alive and well within him? Hell, he’d always been the one more in tune with what had happened inside John’s…womb.

*Perhaps that’s one of the things that are still healing, then?* the doctor wondered. *Either that or he’s just nervous about it all, which…I suppose isn’t too strange, either, all things considered.*

“It’s doing just fine, love,” he said in reassurance. “Growing as it should, getting a little heftier to carry. Seems to be hitting the milestones rather well, too. I haven’t had anyone prod and poke it, if that’s what you’re worried about, though. Well, Sarah has but she doesn’t really count on that score.”

Sherlock looked up, his eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth but John got there before him.

“She’s not going to rat on us. No, really, she isn’t. Shut up. I’m not listening to any argument on that front. That’s just something you’re going to have to trust me on, alright?”

The ruler still looked ready to argue so John gave him a short kiss.

“You’re not getting out of telling me exactly how you survived in the first place, you know,” he said when he pulled back. “I want to know now.”

He tried to make it sound light and inconsequential but couldn’t quite prevent the small lump of his throat becoming audible. The image of those curls and antlers disappearing under the mass of ghostly, horrifying bodies not to reappear had been a regular guest in his nightmares, often mixing with the other horrors haunting his dreams in very horrible images and scenarios.

Sherlock didn’t immediately answer, which was worrying. Nor did he look like he were ever likely to answer, which was even more so.

“Sherlock…”

“Later, John,” the brunet said insistently. When the doctor opened his mouth to argue, a finger was placed on his lips.

“I will, I promise you.” John still didn’t look the least convinced. Given Sherlock’s track record, it wasn’t really that surprising. “Truly. I’ll tell you anything and everything you want to know about this. But now isn’t the time.”

“That’s ruddy convenient.”

“Yes, it is,” Sherlock conceded. “But not for me. For you.”

John frowned in his what-bullshit-are-you-pulling-now way. “For me? Why?”

Because telling you will take a long time and right now, there are other things you have to do first.”

“Other things? What do you mean, ‘other things’?” the blond burst out. “We’ve just been through…I
don’t know what, quite frankly, but it was confusing, overwhelming and draining. What other things could there possibly be?”

Sherlock smiled softly. “You weren’t only bonded to me. You were connected to the ground itself and the oak, tied to their life force. You are, like me, part of the forest now.”

Chapter End Notes

For once, not a cliffhanger, eh? What is the world coming to?
This felt good to write, for both of them, for what I’ve put them through in this story (even if this also hurt a bit to write). I hope it also felt right reading, all things considered.
We aren’t far from the end, now...that feels rather weird after writing this for so long. :)
A warm welcome!

Chapter Summary

It isn't only each other they need to get reacquainted with; there's a forest full of denizens eager to reunite and there's still a few things to sort out. Sherlock still has a surprise or two for John but he isn't the only one.

Chapter Notes

This has really been almost a month in the making, hasn't it? Sincere apologies. Life is slowly bettering and I've been able to write again. THANK YOU to everyone who's been patiently waiting and to the ones who have been kind enough to leave feedback, especially comments. They've been invaluable to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John looked at him as he processed the information. It made sense, all things considered. At least, it made what had just happened a little more…comprehensible, for lack of a better word. He could feel the connection to Sherlock in a way that was much deeper and somewhat different than what he’d felt before, more akin to the tree when he’d touched those months ago.

The difference between then and now lay in that that had come from an outside source and gone in to touch and connect with what it could find inside of him while this came wholly from the inside.

“That’s…that’s the bond, is it?” he asked.

“No, not the bond. Well, it is a bond but not the one I mentioned. This binds your life to the magic, to the life force.”

John put two and two together quite quickly. “But it’s not the bond that you made between us – and don’t think I’m letting you off not informing me that you did that, by the way. But those two bonds, they’ve got to be similar, don’t they? It feels similar.”

Sherlock made a face. “The answer to that is somewhere between yes and no. It’s a bit complicated.”

John levelled him with a look. “Funny how every single thing you don’t seem too keen on talking about is ‘complicated’.” He sighed. “Alright, I get it. Later it is. But it’s going to be later and not never.”

He pressed another kiss to cupid bow lips. “Thank you, though,” he said quietly when he pulled back. “For…everything, really.”

That was all he managed to say, though he wanted to say more. Sherlock followed him and gave him another, more insistent kiss. Then another.
“Oi, I thought you said we had other things to do,” John said between kisses. He wasn’t doing much to stop it, though. “Even if you’re not going to tell me what those things are.”

“How about I show you instead, then?” Sherlock said.

With that, he started to get up from where they’ve sat, pulling John up with him. He grabbed hold of the doctor’s hand and began to walk towards the entrance, the hand in his held very tightly.

John noticed as they walked that though the other could walk and do so relatively well, he wasn’t quite as sure and fast in his gait as he normally was. Not that he was limping or anything like that. It was just...something that tipped him off the man wasn’t quite as healed physically as he would like the blond to believe.

He also got the sensation that they walked for a lot longer on the way out than he had on the way in. Then again, he hadn’t really been in a good state of mind to notice that sort of thing when he’d entered so that might explain it. He certainly preferred that to the other option of the cave not being quite located in what he’d still call the real world and therefore not bound by the laws of physics. That thought still messed with his mind.

As they walked, he took the opportunity to ask a question that had just formulated clearly in his mind but had been an undefined soup of suspicion for some time before that. He wanted an answer and could do without one at the same time.

“Did you...when you were...were attacked. When the Wild Hunt attacked you, did you have any idea you were going to survive?”

Sherlock turned his head to look at him while still walking. “No,” he said, his voice as definite as it was curt. A muscle twitched in his cheek.

“Really?” John wasn’t going to let this one go, even for an explanation later. Sherlock could give him this one now. It felt very important to know.

“Yes, really. What, you think I wouldn’t have told you if I knew I was going to survive that?”

Put that like that, it did sound a somewhat silly question. On the other hand, though, there were also legitimate reasons to think that he wouldn’t.

“You didn’t tell me anything about the Hunt, really,” John said in his defence, “not much useful, anyway, and you’ve told me very little of how this world, you in particular, works. Yeah, you’ve told me some, but I always feel like I’m being dragged along in the dark, metaphorically speaking.”

The answer didn’t come for quite a few moments. Very long moments. Then, very quietly even in the dark emptiness they seemed to be walking in, “I would’ve shielded you from them if I’d known. I only made you run because I thought they’d rip you apart as well as me. I don’t know everything either, John, even about myself.”

Another few long moments followed that statement. Then, equally quietly, John replied, “I’m sorry, love. I should’ve realized – “

“No, you shouldn’t,” the brunet interrupted, his voice suddenly sharp. He didn’t elaborate further on what he meant by that, though, but John didn’t get a chance to push it.

“I only found out afterwards that being tied to the forest doesn’t only apply when you’re fully alive. I thought I was dead even if they didn’t bother taking me with them down to Annwn. When my...my mother found me afterwards, there was so very little left of me, physically and spiritually, for lack of
a better word. But…” he trailed off.

“As long as the tree is alive and well, then you can be healed?” John finished for him.

Sherlock nodded. He squeezed the hand in his very tightly and had his own hand squeezed in turn.

They finally reached the mouth of the cave and John had to blink and shield his eyes in the sudden light.

“Didn’t know it was that quick – it’s still morning.”

“The sun has set and risen again more than once since you entered.”

John looked at him, raising his eyebrows. Then he sighed and shook his head. “I don’t even want to argue with you or ask how you know.”

As his eyes got used to the natural light – whatever light had allowed him to see to some extent inside was anything but natural and therefore likely not to have shown the true story – John could more and more easily make out just what a state Sherlock was in.

He didn’t look good. At all. Well, he was still more or less himself, it wasn’t as though things had been rearranged or anything. Instead it…well, to say that he looked like he’d been in the wars was putting it very mildly.

What threw him just as much was the expression in that battered but still handsome face. It wasn’t odd, per se, but it certainly wasn’t what he expected.

“What?” he asked, trying not to sound defensive.

He didn’t get an answer. At least, he didn’t get a verbal one. Instead, the hand that wasn’t holding his reached out to touch not his face or even his stomach but his antlers. The touch was slow and soft, rubbing over the protuberances that had turned from soft cartilage fully into solid bone in the intervening time.

“What is it? Is it that they’ve grown? That’s only natural, isn’t it?”

“No, not that, though they have blossomed quite nicely. No, take a look.”

“I can’t, you plonker. They’re attached to my head. What is it?”

By way of answering, Sherlock made a plucking motion. He then moved his hand down to show what he’d plucked, and John had to blink in astonishment.

It was a willow catkin. Very tiny but unmistakable in its soft, downy whiteness.

“But that doesn’t make any – they’re not branches. Not wood ones, anyway, and even if they were, this is December. They’re not supposed to grow on actual trees until very early spring. Yours certainly haven’t had anything growing on them in all the time I’ve known you.”

He looked up at the other to ask for an explanation. He didn’t get one apart from another smile, which was nice but ultimately rather useless in the context.

His hand was tugged insistently, and he decided to let the matter drop for the moment.

As they stared to walk again, John noticed that between his entering and leaving the cave, there’d been a rather significant snowfall. Snow covered the ground and the vegetation like a thick, cold
duvet and made everything feel muted. It lent a touch of quiet magic to the entire forest that no amount of genuine magic ever had in quite the same way.

Something else was different, though. John could feel it, that connection that only grew minutely stronger with every step he took, anchoring him further to the forest around and beneath him. His ears twitched at new sounds he had never previously noticed.

They didn’t get much chance to appreciate it, though, or just enjoy the walk being back together. After only a very short time, someone could be seen approaching. Several someones, in fact, and many of them quite familiar.

“Did you plan this?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “Quite apart from my obvious social butterfly status, when would I have had the opportunity to call anyone?”

“I don’t know, you might have pulled a princess move or something.”

For that, he got a look of equal parts incredulity and exasperation from his partner. He supposed it was rather a silly notion but given everything, he was at the point where he wouldn’t put anything past any of them.

“Are we not allowed to come out to greet them when both our rulers return to us?” a voice rumbled from behind them. It came from a huge, hulking figure that John had never seen before. Its shape and slow movements gave it away as a troll. It smiled, the light coming off the white snow reflecting off the teeth.

There was a murmur of agreement which came from all around them, most of the voices coming from people that couldn’t be seen.

Sherlock didn’t answer but with their hands still tightly entwined, John could feel the lanky body stiffen. He felt his heart tighten in turn, as much from the joy of his partner discovering just what his subjects thought of him as from the sadness that he had trouble believing it, even in the face of the evidence.

He completely failed to register the phrasing of ‘both our rulers’.

“Are we not allowed to celebrate that fact along with the evidence that they’re both seemingly unharmed?” another voice asked.

This one came from further away and it was familiar. Very familiar indeed and equally as welcome.

Mrs. Hudson emerged from between the slowly gathering ring of people. She walked a little more slowly than John remembered and was smoking merrily on her pipe as she walked.

What stole his attention, though, was the fact that this time, her image didn’t wobble back and forth between the more ‘normal’-looking visage and the Aunt Sally one. It stayed firmly on the ‘normal’-looking visage. He frowned slightly, trying to work out why.

“What is it, dear?” she asked as she neared.

“The…you…” he said, waving a hand to try and encompass the entirety of her small form, as though that would get his meaning across.

“I need some way of scaring off people that can’t tell unripe nuts from ripe, you know,” she said,
guessing correctly at what he meant. “I’m not really scary on my own, I’m afraid.”

“I disagree,” said Sherlock beside John.

“Of course, you do. You’re not above getting dragged over my knee yet, Sherlock,” she said under her breath, smiling sweetly so no one would suspect anything.

“You can’t do that. I’m still healing.” There was a bit of whine to the baritone voice.

“One bruise more or less won’t make a difference, now will it?” With that, she turned her attention back to John. She grabbed his free hand, holding it between both of hers. “Thank you, John.”

“Whatever for?” he asked, frowning.

Her eyes flickered towards the taller person beside them and her lips quirked. “For a lot of things, which we’ll have a good talk about later when we’re not surrounded, but mainly for coming back to all of us. Both of you.”

Sherlock snorted.

“I wasn’t talking about you, Sherlock, so would you very kindly keep your opinions to yourself?”

Despite her words, her eyes sparkled in that warm, loving way that John had seen so many times before in her when she looked at Sherlock. A way that, now he came to think of it, he had not seen a single time from the brunet’s real mother.

Granted, no parent would go to that kind of length she had for a child that was not loved, regardless of the duties that child had to take care of. At least, he hoped not. But there was a difference, a vast, hugely important difference, between loving your child, to whatever degree that was, and showing that child how loved it was.

John felt his heart give a little lurch and a clench at the same time.

*I won’t let that happen to our child,* he thought vehemently. *It is going to see that its parents love it deeply and be in no doubt of just how much they do. It deserves that and so much more and so does Sherlock.*

He saved the thought for a later date.

In his brief mental absence, the ring of people surrounding them had begun to move closer, a cheering and chanting coming from them all, echoing between the trees. It was a wonder that they’d never been caught by any outsider, with the loud ruckus they so often made.

Someone came up, slapping John heartily on the back, though not Sherlock. It was only the fact that their hands were joined, with the strength and grounding that brought with it, that prevented the blond from stumbling forward into the small woman in front of him.

“Now that we have you both back, it’s time to celebrate!” a booming voice shouted from behind.

“Sometimes, I can’t help but wonder whether you do anything but celebrate,” John mumbled under his breath.

Sherlock must have heard, though; he gave a small snort of amusement. “We did miss the last two celebrations, John,” he pointed out in that annoyingly reasonable tone. “You can hardly blame them for taking the opportunity.”
“No, but – wait, two? What two did we miss?”

“Apart from Kalan Gwav, Montol Eve was two days ago, the same day you came back. If one was given to superstitions, one might call that a sign.”

“Montol Eve?” John asked, sounding slightly defeated.

He really wished that he didn’t so often sound as though he was ignorant – and that the fact that the cave really did have only a remote connection with the forest didn’t unsettle him slightly. He’d long ago given up thinking anything connected to the ‘real world’.

“Winter Solstice, if you prefer the more general term.”

“Winter Solstice was two days ago? But that makes this – “

“December 23rd, yes. What of it?”

John glared slightly. “That means it’s Christmas in two days, you berk.”

“So? We do not celebrate Christian holy days. As you might have noticed, we tend more towards what might be called pagan leanings.”

There was only a brief pause. “Well, that’s just tough,” John said with mock-cheerfulness. “You know why? Because if I’m going to stay in this forest we’re going to celebrate Christmas and Easter and every bloody birthday of importance.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows drew together in annoyance and his mouth opened in retaliation but before he could say anything, he was flicked on the nose by something.

That something turned out to be a well-aimed hazelnut thrown by Mrs. Hudson who merely raised her eyebrows at the look of indignation and hurt she got from the brunet as he rubbed his nose.

Probably as the only one of the three, John noticed that whereas before everyone in the forest had treated Sherlock with caution or, at best, respect, or so the brunet clearly believed, there was now a scattering of warm-hearted chuckles and a few whooping cheers from their audience.

They had more than missed their ruler and now they were extremely happy to have him back. Moreover, when shown that he was a person, small though this bickering and showing of emotion was, they reacted positively, appreciatively.

He heard Mrs. Hudson say, “It’s not like you didn’t deserve it. Now you listen to John.”

Pale eyes turned to him. “Relationships are about compromise, idiot. I’m perfectly fine with celebrating all your traditions but on the condition that you also celebrate the ones that are important to me, alright?”

Sherlock paused then, seemingly reluctantly, nodded. “Alright, fine.”

Well, that’s one victory at least, John couldn’t help thinking. He neither ignored what I said or sulked about it. Now just to make sure he’ll follow through. One step at a time.

“More celebration is always welcome!” the booming voice said with obvious glee in it. The crowd around them cheered.

Sherlock clapped his hands once and everything fell silent around them.
“I thank you all for coming out to greet me and my spouse like this,” he said, and his voice boomed around the immediate area in a way the blond hadn’t heard before. It wasn’t unpleasant, quite the opposite, it was merely unexpected. Only his subconscious caught the phrasing.

“I have always known this forest holds the absolute best fay population in all of the British Isles and you have proved that tenfold,” Sherlock continued. He paused, his calm demeanour seeming to falter. “I’m thankful to be…back again and gratified that you would want me back.”

If he expected to have a smart-aleck or derisive reply thrown his way, it wasn’t to be. Instead, he merely got another heartfelt cheer.

John thought there might be a little colour in those cheeks.

Point proven and score one to Watson, I think.

“If you will, however, go on ahead and start the celebrations,” Sherlock continued. There was a round of disapproving noises and he had to raise his voice to be heard. “John and I will join you a little later. I promise. We still have a few things to sort out first. Private things.”

That seemed to meet with more general approval. No one quite had the nerve to cat call or similar, though, which was probably for the best. Recovering or not, it wasn’t wise to incur the ruler’s ire, even if he didn’t use any magic. That tongue powered by that mind was quite weapon enough, really.

As the gathering of folklore creatures heeded their ruler’s suggestion, a lot of them went past the two antlered men and the small woman beside them. None of them touched Sherlock but John got several pats, shakes and slaps as they went by. He even got a few kisses as well, from men and women alike, though none were brave, or stupid, enough to try kissing him on the mouth.

If they had, he wasn’t all too certain how they’d fare afterwards, judging by the gradual stiffening of the lithe body beside him as they all walked by.

John felt a little happy at that. Any kind of jealousy ought to have made him worry instead but to be honest, he was more focused on the fact that it might be another proof of his partner opening up.

Finally, they seemed to have all gone, leaving only Sherlock and John behind. The doctor blinked. Mrs. Hudson didn’t move fast on a good day but nevertheless, as he looked around, he couldn’t find any trace of her.

“She got someone to carry her,” Sherlock said before John could open his mouth to ask the question. “She likely wants to preserve her energy for the festivities.”

“You know, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to you doing that.”

The brunet only smirked at that. He then bent down to get a proper kiss, which the blond was more than happy to provide.

“Only I get to do that,” Sherlock said as he pulled back, looking decidedly pleased with himself. “Or touch you. Or have you touch.”

“That’s going to be rather difficult when I examine patients,” John pointed out, calmly.

He wasn’t going to get angry about it. It was hardly worth it, seeing as he fully planned on ignoring the veiled command. He might be Sherlock’s, fair enough, but he was still an autonomous being that could do whatever he wanted – at least, until the child was born, of course.
He continued, “I’m perfectly fine with being your part—“

A memory flashed through his mind at that thought, something he’d only subconsciously been aware of when he’d heard it a little while earlier.

“Hang on just a minute. You didn’t say ‘partner’ earlier. You said something else entirely.”

Sherlock tried to feign ignorance, but John wasn’t having it. He took a step closer so that he was right up close to the other, looking up at him. “You said ‘spouse’.”

“Did I?” the brunet asked, again trying to sound innocent.

John narrowed his eyes in a way that clearly said I-know-you’re-messing-with-me-and-I-am-not-in-the-mood. Sherlock held his gaze for a few moments, face completely blank.

Then he slowly began to smile, a smile that was equal parts infectious joy and smirk. “I did say we were bonded now.”

“You didn’t say that it was the equivalent of bloody well getting married!” John growled.

“What else did you think it meant?”

That…was actually a point and John admitted as much, at which the smile only grew. “You might have told me that beforehand, though.”

At that, the smile faltered and with it, John’s heart clenched.

Oh, you stupid sod, you didn’t have to do it like this. I thought you knew by now. You could’ve just asked.

Saying that out loud might risk Sherlock bridling purely as a defence mechanism. He was already retreating into himself a little, the blond could tell.

What to do instead, though?

Inspiration struck.

It might be considered a little over the top but at the same time, it fitted rather well with what had come before. More importantly, it felt as though it was the only right thing to do at this point in time, for him and for them.

Digging in his jacket pocket, he ignored the look from the other. It took a moment to find it, during which he had a sudden jolt of fear as he rummaged. When he did though, he closed his eyes briefly as he breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, with a hand still holding onto the hand of the brunet for stability, he slowly lowered himself down onto one knee, very mindful of his frontal burden as he did so.

Sherlock didn’t stop him doing so. Neither did he say anything, which was somewhat more worrying. He merely watched but John took comfort in the fact that he seemed immobile more due to unwillingness to believe what he was seeing; the pale eyes kept flickering back and forth, looking for clues. Looking for answers.

“I…I know this isn’t really the time or the place,” John began, willing his voice not to betray the sudden bout of nerves. “And to you it probably doesn’t count because it’s only a silly human custom that’s inferior.”
“John…” the baritone voice said, sounding hesitantly hopeful yet wavering with uncertainty.

“Shush. Let me finish. It’s important that I finish.” He paused to take another breath to steel himself. “What seems like ages ago, I had a thought of the two of us standing at the altar, me bulging in a very unfetching manner in formal wear, while you looked gorgeous. Everyone was attending and…”

Feeling silly, he paused then cleared his throat. “Anyway, what I’m trying to say is I liked that thought. I like it even more now. So, even if we are already bonded…”

He drew the hand out of his pocket and, clutching it tightly so that it wouldn’t drop, changed his grip on the hand he was holding. Once it was turned so the palm faced upwards, he gently placed the ring in the middle of it. Then he equally gently closed the fingers back over it, holding them closed with his own hand.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to put it on your finger, given everything, but…Sherlock, will you marry me?”

If John had been asked, he would, after having had to stop and think for a moment, have had to admit he wasn’t quite sure what kind of answer he’d have expected from the other. Perhaps a slightly derisive but mainly amused, dry answer? Maybe silence followed by a quick, emphatic nod? That was, of course, if he got any response at all.

None of them had been the one he ended up getting; another hand grabbed hold of him and dragged him up to a standing position so that he could have his wits snogged out of him.

When they eventually parted, John was slightly dizzy but also grinning.

“I take it…that that’s a yes, then?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

The expression on the brunet’s face was complicated, which made sense given everything, but what seemed to be winning out was one made up of joy, contentment and love.

“Oh, I think so,” Sherlock rumbled in reply a little later, his eyes sparkling. “John, you idiotic, unpredictable, wonderful man.” With that, he kissed him again.

*I’ll get you to say the words someday, Sherlock, mark my words.*

“Sherlock,” John said between one kiss and another several kisses later, “much as I enjoy this, and I really do, don’t get me wrong, I think we ought to stop now.”

Sherlock made a noise of dissent and tried to go for another kiss, but John pulled his head backwards. This earned him a noise of distinct disapproval.

“I’m serious, love. Even if you don’t care about getting to the celebration – don’t think that you’re going to wiggle out of it, mind – I’m getting rather cold standing out here in the snow.”

“It’s not that cold.”

“Says you. You don’t count in that regard, with the fur and everything.”

“You’ve got more on than I do, if we’re being pedantic.” He gave a contemplative look. “Besides, I don’t believe for one minute that you are actually that cold.”

“Why not?”

Instead of answering verbally, Sherlock reached out with the hand not holding the ring. He flicked
open two buttons on the blond’s shirt rather deftly then ran a finger pointedly through the fuzzy texture he found there.

John looked down then back up. “That’s just regular old chest hair, that doesn’t count.”

He merely got a raised eyebrow.

"It doesn’t and even if it did, that doesn’t equal my not being cold.”

“Well, then, we’d best get you somewhere with meat and drink and dancing.” The sudden change in attitude ought to be jarring but given who he was dealing with, it was pretty much run of the mill behaviour.

With that, he grabbed hold of the doctor’s hand and began to drag him in the direction that the others had gone.

“Oi, one condition before we go,” John said, though he followed along.

Wherever Sherlock lead, John would follow. He’d complain and reason if the man was being impossible and unreasonable, of course, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t follow in the first place. His place was beside his…his husband.

Sherlock didn’t stop but merely slowed down and looked over his shoulder, eyebrows raised.

“You’re going to be part of it. That means no sulking in a corner and no disappearing into the shadows. I mean it.”

“And what do I get out of it if I comply with your demands?”

*Oh, two people can play that game, my friend. “Well, that depends on you and your behaviour, so I guess you’ll just have to wait and see…dear spouse of mine.”*

He had to admit that he was pleased with the expression that last addition to his sentence caused; slightly stunned and extremely delighted.

Feeling happy in a way that he had problems recalling feeling for a very long time, John smiled and managed to not only draw level with the other but actually get slightly ahead of him. He then began to tug at the hand in his.

In response, Sherlock’s own smile turned into a grin. He upped his pace to be in front and when John did the same, he started lightly running.

Eventually they were bowling through the forest towards the celebration, running and dodging between the trees as they laughed.

When they eventually reached the gathering, it turned out that it wasn’t far from where they’d first met all those months ago. There was even a bonfire, though it wasn’t quite the size of the old one. That said, in the harsher winter light, which reflected off the coating of snow, it looked every bit as spectacular as the previous one.

John stood looking at it when they came to a stop. Then he turned his head towards the other.

*Did you know about this?”* he asked and got a tired, are-you-seriously-asking-me-that reaction in return. Alright, fair enough. It’s just…a little uncanny, I suppose. That they chose a bonfire again as a celebration, given last time…unless, of course, that’s always how it’s done?”
“Not really, no. Bonfires are normally reserved for the solstices, but I think, since they did just celebrate Montol Eve, that they found it appropriate to light another one.”

*And it has nothing to do with you returning to them?* John wondered, smiling as he looked at his partner.

It didn’t matter much, though. What mattered was that they were here, they were well, they were welcome, and they’d make their little world work, together, all three of them.

He had finally found where he belonged.

Chapter End Notes

I could end it here. It'd seem finished like this, wouldn't it? All nicely wrapped up and resolved.
I'm not going to, however. I spent a lot of time contemplating doing it, admittedly, but the baby hasn't arrived yet and there's a few other things I want to sort out and cement, so that it is properly finished.
Will you bear with me until then?
Issues still to solve

Chapter Summary

Just because they’ve reconnected doesn’t quite mean that there are no issues left between the two, and that’s without adding the magic that still needs to stabilise. But that doesn’t mean they’re going to leave it at that, either.

Chapter Notes

I…made you all wait again, and after you were all so kind and understanding - thank you all so very, very much for that! I hope you know how much that meant to me! Genuinely sorry for another delay, but perhaps the fact that it’s a little over twice the normal length helps. But then, you’ve been wonderful so far. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This time, John declined being in the circle of dancers, citing tiredness – and pointedly ignoring that he’d just been running through the trees – and the changes in his body. The only problem with that was that nobody seemed inclined to listen to him, no matter how much he protested, and he was consequently dragged out to e part of the gathered ring of people.

The only two positives about it was that for one, the tempo wasn’t as fast as the last time, making it more feasible for him to keep up, at least for a while. The other positive was that Sherlock was dragged along, too.

“I do not join the dance,” he protested, trying to sound as regal and commanding as possible. It didn’t help.

“When they do the celebration solely in honour of you, guess what? You do.”

“Wrong.”

“Of course. What am I wrong about this time?”

“They don’t do it solely in honour of me.”

John was about to ask the question, ‘Then who?’, but the words died in his throat when he caught the must-you-be-so-dense expression on his partner’s face.

Oh. Oh.

He was going to ask further but was distracted from it when the dragging lead them into the already made circle of people, an obvious space made for them. For them both.

Hands gripped their free ones, and the circle started to move. John looked to Sherlock, who smiled with his eyes and squeezed the hand in his. Then he changed the grip to a more secure one and gripped hard.
It wasn’t hard to understand the unspoken message; ‘Don’t worry, I’ve got you. You’re safe’.

The dance began.

It was different this time. That, perhaps, was an obvious statement, as so much had changed in the intervening time between the summer solstice and now, and not just in the purely physical sense for John. It was a definite factor, that was for certain; dancing with a group of other people when your mass had increased drastically, and your centre of gravity had shifted was anything but easy.

Apart from that, though, there was other, more subtly changes that were no less significant.

The greatest change of all was the magic. He could sense it now, not as an intrusion or a force trying to overwhelm him but as a part of him and everything around him, as natural and inevitable as the breath he drew.

He could see the people dancing in the circle with them, and they were people, for all their mythological ancestry and appearance. Good and bad, quirky and straightforward, interesting and boring, they were all there, all part of the forest, of their forest.

The forest that was now his responsibility as well as Sherlock’s, he realized with an odd mixture of pride and dread. These were not just Sherlock’s people to look after and care for, they were his on equal terms. As the partner of the ruler of the forest, it ought to be a given, really, and there was no question now that he was Sherlock’s partner.

Well, of course you are, idiot. That’s generally the meaning that ‘husband’ encompasses, among other things.

That was true, but he mustn’t quite have contextualized all that it entailed for him.

The weight of the realization, of both of them, made him lose his footing momentarily, and he was saved from falling flat on his arse by the hands gripping his.

Sherlock looked at him oddly as he regained his balance, his face made even harder to read by the combined light from the reflecting snow and the bonfire flames playing across the features. He didn’t say anything, however, and John didn’t feel up to trying to explain when he was plenty occupied by just keeping up.

It was late by the time they made it back to the cave they’d previously shared. John had managed to pull out of the dance relatively quickly – and everyone in the circle had actually halted to allow him to do so, too, though they hadn’t allowed Sherlock the same curtesy – but that didn’t mean he was allowed to retire from the celebration altogether.

He was instead shifted onto a makeshift seat by the others who hadn’t joined in the dance for various reasons. It had obviously been prepared just for him to sit on, with its support and softness, alleviating some of the strain he’d put himself under during not only the dance but the run through the forest beforehand.

Why had he done both of those? It was mad, putting a body in his condition through something like that, willingly.
Like you haven’t done so before.

Not when he’d been this pregnant, though, and it hadn’t been merely for the hell of it, either. That rather made a difference, he’d say.

Perhaps it was the quiet after the very long storm, maybe it was exhaustion, either physical, mental, emotional, or all three. Perhaps it was a horrible mix of everything, he had no idea, but whatever the case, he felt panic slowly rise inside of him, along with a horrible sense of dread.

Gods, what if he’d done something to the foetus, something irreparable and debilitating? Why hadn’t he thought about that before? Had his thoughtlessness caused other problems earlier that he’d just been blind to or had chosen to ignore? What if the fact that he hadn’t let anyone check up on it properly had, had –

A hand landed on shoulder. It wasn’t a big hand, so it shouldn’t have been able to make that big an impact. Nevertheless, it did, somehow.

More importantly, though, it also shifted his attention away from what was going on inside his mind.

Looking up, he saw Mrs. Hudson’s face, peering at him with a mixture of fond exasperation and long-suffering understanding.

“Panic attacks could do more to harm the baby right now than a bit of running around, dear,” she said, reading the situation with a skill he wouldn’t have attributed to her. Then again, that was probably very unfair on her.

He gave a small smile, mostly in an honest effort to deflect. “Just a little more winded than I thought, that’s all. Nothing to worry about, really.”

She snorted at him. “I’m old, dear, not daft, and you’re too tired to hide.”

Then her hand slid to press against the prominent curve of his stomach and she got a hard kick for her troubles. John winced, and she smiled.

Her other hand came up to join the first. He was about to protest, that this really wasn’t the place for an examination such as that, but then he remembered just what she was. She could check just about everything with a few careful passes of her hands, with perhaps the occasional press inwards.

The expression in her eyes was difficult to read, though, bent over as she was. She was seeing something that he wasn’t, that was obvious, but whatever it was, she didn’t seem inclined to share. Trying to push her would hardly be beneficial, let alone wise.

Finally, she seemed to be done. She looked up.

“Don’t worry, dear. Right as rain, the – right as rain. Can’t rightly see how it wouldn’t be, given how well you’ve looked after it.”

“Thank you,” he said, relief over something he hadn’t known he’d been tense about before washing over him. He paused, an old thought striking him again. “Ehm, Mrs. Hudson?”

“Yes, luv?”

“Will it…is it…how will it look when it’s…it’s born?” he asked, cursing himself for the hesitation. “Will it look like a human or – “
“I think you’d feel something more than a push and a kick if it had antlers, John dear.” She paused briefly, and John again had the feeling she was withholding information. “Apart from that, though… I can’t say. It might have fur, it might have just the bushy little tail. It might look just like an ordinary human.”

“Perish the thought,” a familiar voice said.

The doctor turned his head to see his mate come up to them, panting slightly as he did so. He must have been drawing on resources he didn’t have, it occurred to the blond, given how he’d just been through an experience that defied understanding, let alone speech. Something far more, far worse than what John ever had experienced, he reckoned. And yet… yet he’d not only danced, he’d run, too, and had to deal with all the people who’d wanted to chat to him. Surely, he must be more than just winded?

Even so, there seemed to be no evidence of it. Not that it would be obvious, of course, but John still thought he’d gotten somewhat good at reading the man. Apparently not, it seemed.

But what could they do? The obligations didn’t go away and the people around them had been without their ruler for far too long as it was. No wonder they wanted to get close and have him join them.

So, whatever might potentially still trouble his partner, John would have to settle for doing a thorough examination when they got back home and were on their own.

If he was being honest, though, John had to admit that, regardless of his worries, the way the light sheen of sweat glistened in the firelight was quite… pleasing, as was the way the bare chest moved. He was suddenly grateful for the mass that was perched in his lap, which was proving very effective in obscuring things he didn’t want to show. At least, not in front of Mrs. Hudson and the rest of them.

Speaking of Mrs. Hudson, she and Sherlock shared another one of their meaningful looks that they didn’t bother explaining to John. What else was new?

What he also saw was the crowd of people behind them, hesitant but hopeful. Sherlock was still wanted for public relations, then.

“You’ve got groupies for autographs,” he said. When the pale eyes shifted to him and Sherlock frowned in apparent incomprehension, John nodded towards the gathered people. “Behind you, there.”

The brunet turned his head just enough to see then turned back. “They can wait,” he said, dismissive.

“Sherlock, you’re their ruler. They’ve missed you. You have a duty to them. That means you can’t just ignore them because you don’t feel like dealing with them right now.”

Normally, John would have expected Sherlock to sniff disdainfully or not even bothering to comment. What he got instead was a sweep of those eyes and another meaningful exchange between him and Mrs. Hudson.

John crossed his arms in annoyance. Then a thought struck him. Perhaps he’d do, in a pinch, at least for some of them? He’d gotten more than a few glances since they’d arrived, and several among the gathered people eyed him with interest and hope.

He started to get up, only slightly hampered by his girth and exhaustion. Before he could get more than halfway upright, however, he was stopped and pushed back down.
“What are you doing?”

“Trying to get up, what does it look like?”

“Why?”

John blinked. Was he seriously asking that?

“Because you shouldn’t keep them waiting,” he said as he attempted to get back up. “I know I’m not you but seeing as you’re too big an arse to do it, then…”

“No,” Sherlock interrupted, voice sharp. At John’s reaction of narrowed eyes and pinched mouth, he repeated it. “No. You shouldn’t exhaust yourself like that.”

“That’s rich, coming from you. I’m fine.”

“You’re not, and you’re not meeting them. They don’t want to talk to you, or me. They just want to look at you.”

“Look at me? Why?” That made no sense.

Sherlock fixed him with a must-you-really-be-this-dense-look that John somehow managed to decipher in the fading light and harsher shadows. Other than that, though, he didn’t deign to answer.

“Sherlock…”

“We’re going home,” the ruler suddenly said. He grabbed hold of John’s arm and dragged him upright, despite John’s attempts to stay put. “Goodnight, Mrs. Hudson, and thank you.”

“Night, boys,” she called after them as Sherlock dragged John by the same arm past the people who’d gathered to see him, despite the blond’s best efforts to dig his heels in, and further, past every single person there for the somewhat impromptu celebration.

“Sherlock, would you please…we’ve talked about this – dammit, would you stop!”

To his credit, Sherlock did, though only when they were a bit of distance away. He didn’t look at the shorter man, either, even as he let go of his arm.

“What the hell are you playing at all of a sudden?”

“You’re tired. I’m merely looking after you.”

You can do that without dragging me around! John didn’t say this out loud, though. They’d been here before, and what Sherlock voiced as his problem, when he even bothered to voice it, was usually either not the problem at all or was purely the tip of the proverbial iceberg. John would be helping nobody by getting angry and shouting.

Instead, what he voiced was spoken very softly as he stepped up close. “I know you are. But next time, maybe just ask me, yeah?” He touched a bare shoulder, relieved that it didn’t move away from him. “I appreciate you…doing this. Worrying, taking care of me. It goes two ways, though, and…it involves talking, too.”

“I know,” Sherlock whispered. He didn’t say anything else.

The silence stretched.
John would have wrapped his arms around the other, if his stomach would have allowed him to reach. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Sherlock. Really. Hey, look at me?”

Sherlock did, over his shoulder. It was surprisingly clear he felt he’d buggered things up for himself, again.

“I love you,” John said, voice soft but insistent. “You didn’t do anything irreparable. I want to work at this relationship, together, with you. If we screw up, we work at it. Like we always have, yeah?”

Sherlock nodded. His eyes flickered, though, and didn’t meet John’s as he did so.

John thought he might know the cause of that, the underlying reason for Sherlock being uncertain and somewhat…possessive, for lack of a better word. Even if it wasn’t, it didn’t hurt to get “I’m not going anywhere. I chose to be here, with you.”

It was true; even though he’d been more or less tossed around like a rag doll by so many fay people in the time since Midsummer, especially in the whole scenario since he’d learned that Sherlock was alive, he had made the choice. In fact, he’d made it long before he’d known about his partner still being alive, he realized, or perhaps remembered. He hadn’t wanted anything to do with the forest because Sherlock wasn’t there.

He’d even told Sherlock so earlier, though perhaps it was a bit too much to expect him to remember everything, at least so soon after having come all the way back to life. Either that or it was an issue that had roots much deeper than he had first anticipated. Depressing though that was, it was probably the latter possibility that was the more likely one, and John’s heart did another involuntary clench.

There was another pause, a long, telling one.

“Do you believe me?” John asked, his voice more imploring than he’d intended.

“Yes,” the brunet said quietly after yet another pause. It sounded much more convincing, though. The blond’s lip quirked.

“Now, take me home. I need some alone-time with my fiancé.”

A slow, slightly uncertain but hopeful smile was his answer.

If John had been expecting to just have a good, long chat with perhaps a good amount of cuddling before falling asleep when they got back, he was sorely mistaken.

They’d barely made it into the cave, which didn’t smell as musty and unused as he’d have thought, given the amount of time they had both been away, when he was pulled up against a strong, warm chest while one arm slid around his middle. Soft lips descended onto his neck.

“What happened to ‘taking care of you because you’re tired?’ John asked. He wasn’t doing anything to halt the caresses, though.

“I am taking care of you,” came the answer. The free hand stroked downwards.

John caught it before it reached its target, twining their fingers together. “That wasn’t what I meant, you plonker, and you know it. We’re both exhausted, we ought to sleep.”

“Can’t. Not when you don’t smell like you should anymore.” To underline his point, Sherlock began
to trace his nose and tongue slowly up his neck towards his ear.

“Just because I smell like aftershave rather than moss, wood and you doesn’t mean I smell wrong.”

“To me, you do.” The words were spoken lowly, straight into the blond’s ear, sending shivers down his spine. “I need to fix it. Please let me.” The teeth nipped at the ear.

John groaned at that.

“Was that a yes?” The teeth nipped again and again, interspersed with soft kitten licks across the shell.

“Oh, gods, yes.”

He’d barely finished speaking when he was turned around and kissed, hard. Broad hands found their way underneath his layers of vest, shirt, jumper, and jacket, caressing the warm, soft skin underneath. At the same time, though, he also tried to push all garments up an off at the same time, which was, of course, quite impossible. That didn’t stop him from trying, though…and trying.

John pulled back. “Alright, stop. I’ll do it myself.” Sherlock pouted and tried to get close again but was stopped. “You can’t just keep pushing and expect four items of clothes to slide off just like that.”

“They slid over the stomach easily,” the brunet pointed out.

“That’s because they’re stretched around it, idiot.” John replied as he unbuttoned the jacket, “because I’m bloody well bloated with your offspring, and in any case, the armpits would always be in the way. Just give me a moment.” The jacket hit the cave floor.

Of course, Sherlock didn’t. Though he let John handle the layers on his upper body, his hands found their way to a belt buckle, which was quickly undone. The button and zipper came next, opened just as quickly, and by the time John had started on unbuttoning his shirt, his jeans hit the floor as well, the rustle of the fabric and the clink of the belt audible in the otherwise quiet room.

John somewhat regretted that he’d agreed to getting this undressed while he was unbuttoning. Yes, he’d been warm and cozy last time but even in the southwestern England, there was a marked difference between the nip of autumn and the bite of winter, especially in a cave that hadn’t been inhabited in the intervening months.

As soon as the shirt came off too, however, he was pulled against a decidedly warm body, which made up for it, at least to a degree. The bulge that was his stomach was still between them, though. Sherlock solved that by shifting them so that he was pressed up against John’s side, his interest becoming increasingly evident as his hands once again found the stretched expanse that wasn’t covered in white cotton.

“For the record, you’re not,” the brunet said in a low voice.

“Not what?” John asked, a little confused. He pushed into the touch, his nerve endings more sensitive than he remembered, or perhaps it was because it was Sherlock doing the touching.

“Not bloated. You look…just like you should.” There was the definite feeling that he’d initially meant to say something else.

“Yeah…bloated. That’s another thing – do your children grow more than regular humans? I checked, when…and I’m bigger than I should be at this stage of the pregnancy.”
Sherlock was nosing at his throat now, licking at it. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen Mummy pregnant. Perhaps your body just behaves a bit differently.”

John was about to argue that Mrs. Hudson must know, and she’d probably pass it on. His words became a strangled noise when, without any preamble, he was suddenly hoisted up into the air, one arm going under his knees while the other supported his back.

“Sherlock!”

“Am I not supposed to carry my bride into the home?” the brunet asked innocently, though there was a minute quirking of lips and a glimmer in the depth of pale eyes.

“Not like this, you bloody well aren’t,” John growled back, though he didn’t do anything as stupid as attempting to get down. With his luck, and his gained weight, he’d risk injuring himself. “It’s supposed to be over the threshold, for one thing, apart from it being outdated – and I am not a bride!”

“Interesting how that wasn’t your first objection.”

John growled again and pushed at the chest, to no avail. How the hell do you even know that, much less care?”

“We’re separate, John, not isolated. I get bored. You know this.”

“So, you study up on wedding rituals? Just for something to do?”

Sherlock’s eyes shifted sideways at that, and John had his answer. He thought he might even know where the information had come from, or rather, who.

He smiled.

“Still not a bride, though. I’m either already your husband or I’m your fiancé, neither of which entails that you to lug me around like this. So, please, put me down.”

He soon came to regret his choice of words, however, as Sherlock walked the few, though admittedly long, steps over to what had served as their bed – which, quite oddly, seemed to not only be as suspiciously fresh as the rest of the cave but had had things added to it as well – and proceeded to dump John onto them.

“Oi! Watch it!” John shouted. He couldn’t rightly say he’d been hurt anywhere, even though his antlers smarted a bit from the impact, but his hands instinctively moved to protect his stomach, regardless. His little passenger gave an enthusiastic kick, though, which assuaged his fears somewhat.

“Oh, I intend to,” Sherlock practically purred as he lowered himself onto his knees between the blond’s legs. Once there, he grabbed the waistband of John’s pants and quite resolutely pulled them down and all the way off. He threw them behind them, then slid his hands resolutely under the vest.

John batted his hands away and dragged the garment off himself. The broad hands followed his movement, sliding up his chest at the same pace, then down again across his stomach, which quivered under the touch.

“So big,” Sherlock said softly as he caressed and mapped the curve of the belly, almost reverentially. “So healthy and strong. So perfect.”

“Sherlock…” John whispered. He thought it was the baby that was meant but then he caught his
partner’s eye and had to swallow. *Oh.*

“I can’t make up for the time we’ve…lost,” Sherlock continued, pressing closer. “But – ”

“If you’re feeling guilty about all of this,” John interrupted, “please do me a favour and shove it. You didn’t do anything wrong. Doesn’t mean you’re not a complete wanker but that’s beside the point.”

He wrapped a leg around a hip as best he could. “Now come up here and give me a kiss.”

With a small smirk, Sherlock complied. Or rather, he tried to but then shifted himself to lie beside his partner instead. John didn’t complain, though, partly because it was done in consideration of his stomach but mainly because he still had the living daylights snogged out of him.

Sherlock seemed much more…not aggressive, not as such, but certainly much more dominant than he’d been the last few times they’d made love. One might even say possessive; he nipped, bit, and sucked, pushed his way firmly into John’s mouth and continued to take control of the kiss, despite the doctor’s best efforts to pay him in kind.

The result was a John who was panting when they parted, his lower lip starting to swell as he stared at Sherlock, a question in his eyes.

“Please, John. Let me,” Sherlock said, replying to the unspoken question. “I need to.” The pupils in the pale eyes had expanded considerably but more than that, there was something in the depth of them.

John nodded at that. If he was honest with himself, he could admit that Sherlock wasn’t the only one who felt that way; that need, not merely for sexual gratification but for a rekindling. A chance to reconnect properly and reaffirm their relationship in a way that added the physical plane to the psychological and emotional one already established.

As soon as he nodded, he was practically enveloped by limbs; one leg slid between the doctor’s and the other hooked over his hip, effectively pinning him in place, and while one hand spread across the expanse of his belly as best it could, its arm under his body, the other slid up his side slowly. The rest of the body pressed into the whole of his back, the length of a cock shifting itself neatly in between his cheeks.

All those points of contact sent an amount of sensation through John that he wasn’t expecting. A small part of him wondered just why that was, whether it had to do with finally being touched like that after so long, something about him having become fully fay or just because it was Sherlock. The majority of his brain didn’t care, though, and just revelled in every sensation that came his way.

He pressed into the contact. Or rather, he tried to, as he couldn’t press into every point of contact, and so he was forced to pick one.

Not that it mattered because Sherlock seemed determined to make up for it, pressing everything he had into use as he explored and refamiliarized himself with John’s body.

His tongue in particular traced intricate patterns over every part of skin he could reach while his teeth nipped and bit.

In between, he kept mumbling John’s name, with a reverence and love that almost floored the doctor.

“John, you have no idea how much I want you,” he said into John’s throat, after what felt like hours of tactile exploration.
“Think I...I might have a...ah!...fair idea,” John replied pressing back into the hard length that was rubbing against him ever so enticingly, yet wasn’t near where he needed it most, no matter how much he bucked or shifted. “Fuck, Sherlock, more. I need more.”

He tried to turn around but was prevented from doing so by the limbs that still held more strength than John would credit for their wiriness.

“Not yet...still need to mark you.”

“You’ve mapped by whole bloody body by this point, get on with it,” John growled, frustrated and aching by that point. “I need you!”

“Patience, my John.”

“That’s rich coming from – ah!”

Sherlock’s smile could be felt pressed against John’s skin as he pressed even closer. “You were saying?” he asked, his smirk evident in his voice.

“That’s – ah, fuck – that’s cheating, you bastard.”

“You’re given what you wanted and yet you’re still complaining.”

“I’m...nnh, only complaining because you...oh, ah...are a fucking, bloody...ah...tease!” The last word came out as more of a shout as John’s back arched strongly.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Sherlock said as he added another finger, beginning a scissoring, twisting motion that earned him another string of curses, some of them rather inventive.

“So tight, yet so soft,” he practically crooned. “So very wet for me. Have you been feeling neglected, John?”

“You fucking bastard, that’s not...that’s...nnh!...oh, gods, yes, right there. That’s hardly relevant to anything, is it?”

He turned his head to try and fix the other with a glare, but it hardly got started before it disappeared again, replaced by a look of surprise and alarm. He had not expected to encounter such a look, not only of lust, which was at least expected, but also possessiveness and a simmering fire that he hadn’t quite seen before. It sparkled in a way that gave it away as magical, and John suspected that there was something residual from when he’d been healed that was flaring up inside of him because of the given circumstances. That didn’t mean it didn’t send a shard of ice all the way down the doctor’s spine, especially when he recognized the way the eyes went steadily paler while the face twisted into a very unpleasant mask.

“Oh, I think it is very relevant, especially if it means you’ve tried to alleviate that neglect somewhere else.”

The voice had suddenly dropped an octave, becoming darker and rather dangerous. The grip the free hand had on John’s hip suddenly tightened to a point where the nails were leaving sharp indents in the flesh beneath them. The fingers still buried inside of him weren’t quite as harsh, but they pressed harder and much more forcefully inside, turning pleasure into distinct pain.

Taking all of that into account, John reacted relatively mildly, ignoring the fear he felt at the expression; he reached down to grab the wrist of the hand opening him, managing, despite the awkward angle, to make it stop, slightly crushing it in the process. At the same time, he turned his
upper body around to face his partner as best he could, given his burden.

“I do hope that wasn’t an attempt to insinuate that I’ve been, oh, I don’t know, unfaithful or the like,” he said, his voice overly sweet while his eyes flashed, meeting the sheets of eyes with molten steel, unwavering in the face of the magic that seemed to have taken over Sherlock. “Because I really wouldn’t recommend doing that. One, you don’t get to dictate what I do just because it ruffles your feathers, whether they’re magical or not. Two, you were dead, that alters the matter completely and renders any fucking jealousy so ridiculous it isn’t even funny.”

He took a breath, the glint in his eyes keeping the brunet’s mouth shut and, more importantly the fire flickered. “Three, I was still bloody well grieving over your death while burdened with this thing,” he indicated his belly, “do you really think that would be the time where I’d think ‘hey-ho, feel like going on the pull tonight’? That getting laid was my bloody main priority over everything else?”

Sherlock’s face had gone gradually paler as John had been speaking. He opened his mouth, but all that came out was a small, strangled noise. The fire, the magic evident in his eyes had almost died completely.

“You may be clever, Sherlock, and you may be able to deduce a whole lot of things but if you really think about me, then I don’t think you know me at all.”

“John…” The voice cracked, and the throat worked. It seemed imperative for him to get out what he wanted to say, though.

“John,” he tried again, “I’m sorry. I…suddenly, I couldn’t control…I didn’t mean…I’m sorry.” The last words were spoken with some urgency and insistence, as though that way, he could impress how much he meant them. “I’m so very sorry.”

It was a strange word to spill from Sherlock, John thought, quite apart from the number of times it came, and then he realized why; he couldn’t remember when he’d last heard the man utter the word. If he ever had in John’s presence. The sentiment, possibly, but never the word outright.

Now, though…now it kept coming. Something else was wrong; otherwise, it didn’t make any sense for this to solely be the reason for the outburst.

*Especially not when you consider that he had very few qualms about things your first time, John’s mind piped up to say. Of course, different time, he didn’t know you, and you can’t remember too much of it, anyway. But there’s no doubt they rather manhandled your body, all of them, him in particular, even if you did like it and did consent.*

But perhaps that was just it. There was no doubt that between then and now, it wasn’t just John’s body that had changed. So had he, and so had Sherlock. They had changed and grown, together. It had hardly been easy, but it had been more than worthwhile, for both.

Being apart, though, under the circumstances that they had, was bound to have tapped into whatever insecurities and worries that they hadn’t yet been able to talk about and work on, at least sufficiently, and had let them grow and fester.

This was probably even more so for Sherlock, seeing as John ‘merely’ had to deal with what his dead partner had done, whereas the brunet had to, imprisoned in his body while he was healing, had to struggle with what John could do as well, combined with the insecurities and misgivings about the doctor’s actual desire to stay.

Given all of that, it perhaps shouldn’t be too surprising that, when combined with what might’ve
been a surge of magic inside of him, that he’d reacted. It was maybe more surprising that it hadn’t been a stronger reaction than it had.

*In fact,* he thought, *that might be another huge clue on its own.*

That still left the question as how to proceed. He wasn’t going to say that it was all alright and just brush it off, because that sort of behaviour wasn’t alright, and Sherlock needed to know that. On the other hand, he couldn’t be entirely blamed either and to do so could have him reacting unfavourably.

Unaware of having closed them, he opened his eyes and tried to smile, with his eyes if not his lips. “It was the magic?” he asked, pitching his voice low.

Sherlock nodded. “I have never…never experienced it like…I won’t do it again.”

There was no snark, no defences, no downright denial. It must have done a number on him, the magic, and sure enough, there was still the smallest pinprick to be seen in the depths of the pupils.

“I know,” John said. He sighed then leaned forward to gently kiss his partner. “Let’s get some sleep, yeah? You still need more rest, it seems.”

“I’ll control it. It won’t happen again.”

“You can’t control your nature, not completely. Not after something like this, at least.”

“I can if it means protecting you.” There was a vehemence in the baritone voice.

Again, John noted. That seemed to be recurring, along with the protective streak holding out against the other…things, born of magic, evidently pulsing inside Sherlock at any given point. Sometimes, like now, it was quite obviously raging instead, and yet…

This was one of the few instances where he’d come close to overstepping and doing something possibly irreparable and even so, it had taken a relatively short amount of time for him to rein himself back in. All of that for..

*Are you really that dense, John?*

He pulled Sherlock as close he could, running his hands up and down the body and then wrapped his limbs around the lanky body. The brunet let himself be manhandled.

“John, you don’t have to – “

He was cut off, silenced by a kiss that John tried to pour as much of the love and trust he felt for his into it, hoping that it would get across.

“I know I don’t, you idiot,” he said, smiling when he pulled back. “I want to. No matter your faults or mine. And you know what?”

Sherlock still looked guarded and suspicious. “What?”

“I can’t wait to see you in a suit on our wedding day. Now, you can join me or not, the choice is yours, but I am going to get some sleep.”

---

John did sleep during that night, and slept quite well, after everything. However, he also spent quite some time thinking, staring into the darkness of the cave that was no longer really that dark, despite the hour.
To be honest, a lot of thoughts were gathering for their turn at consideration as he lay there, wrapped in long limbs and soft flesh, careful not to move in a way that’d give away he was awake. After all, it hadn’t exactly been a day without incident or things that needed more contemplation.

The most important thing, though, and certainly the most immediately pressing, was what had happened between them before sleep. Yes, they’d managed to sort it, at least relatively so. That wasn’t what he was worried about, not really.

What had him more worried was how Sherlock would react afterwards; how he would internalize this experience, because he undoubtedly would. If he thought that he couldn’t be trusted to control himself, either body or mind, when they were intimate, then there was a real, genuine risk that he’d put some distance between them.

Oh, he was close now, at this moment, but this was still right after impact, as it were. There was still time for it to settle down and take root and once that happened, he’d have the devil’s own job of dislodging that notion.

He knew Sherlock would be able to control himself without having to withdraw entirely. There was no need for him to take such drastic measures, or even measures at all. They could still be intimate.

Not that it, of course, had to be all about sex. Far from it. John enjoyed far more about their relationship than merely the physical aspect, however good it’d turned out Sherlock was in the sack. He enjoyed the talks, the humour, the silences, Sherlock’s laughter and soft smiles, just…being around him, really, whatever that entailed. Well, mostly.

The point was, though sex wasn’t all there was to their relationship, it was definitely an important component that John would be willing to forgo or compromise on, but not because of a single occurrence from a rather unique situation that he’d been able to pull himself out of.

What to do, then?

A possible way of persuasion slowly emerged, and he smiled. That would work.

There was a muffled noise from behind and the arms around him shifted and tightened for a moment. Until then, he hadn’t realized he’d shifted away from the embrace and snuggled back, ready to sleep.

“Mmh,” the baritone voice rumbled as Sherlock rose from a sleeper that had evidently been much deeper than normal. “Oh…” He arched into the soft warmth he could feel,” yes…”

Then his brain seemed to catch up with him and do so fast. “J-john, what are you…?”

John didn’t answer, at least not verbally. He merely continued to pepper the tip of the erection in front of him with kisses and kitten licks, while his encircled fingers moved smoothly but relatively lightly over the base. It was rather bleeding obvious, wasn’t it?

“John, stop.”

“Not enjoying it?” he asked innocently, looking up at his partner through his lashes. He kept his fingers moving.

“That’s not…oh…not the point.”
“That wasn’t a ‘no’, so…” He looked down and continued his ministrations, slowly applying more pressure, though never outside the realm of teasing.

Hands came up, one to tangle in his hair while the other found one of the longer tines on his antlers, which still had catkins on them. For a moment, he thought it might be to pull him closer but instead, they tried to push him away.

He looked up again as he halted what he’d been doing, waiting for an explanation.

“John, I know what you’re doing.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes. You don’t have to prove anything. I won’t – “

“You will,” the blond interrupted. “I know you will, given half a chance, try and withdraw from me, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not doing this out of a sense of obligation or whatever else you might be thinking in that too big brain of yours. I’m doing this, now, first because…well, I want to, and secondly, because yes, I am determined to prove something. I’m going to prove that you aren’t going to hurt me.”

He started moving his hand again, firmer than before and in longer strokes. He kept eye contact, challenge in his eyes.

“That and this are two entirely different things that cannot be compared with enough relatable parameters for – !” His voice became a choked noise at that as John’s finger pressed against a particularly sensitive spot. In the circumstances, it should be applauded that he got that far in the sentence.

He glared. To the doctor’s relief, there was no crackle of magic in the pale eyes this time. “Don’t try to distract me from…from the point I’m trying…trying to make.” Despite the words, and the fact that John had indeed stopped moving his fingers, he had some trouble breathing and the hips made small, aborted movements.

“If it’s the point I think you’re trying to make, I don’t much fancy hearing it, ‘cause it’s complete and utter bullshit. So much so that I’m going to prove to you just how much arse-blabbering it is.”

He straightened up in one move, dislodging the hands on him, determination in his eyes. More than that, there was both challenge and warning in there, too. On his knees, thighs straight, he moved forward, keeping eye contact, until he was right above his partner, bracketing long legs with his own.

Broad, bony hands came up to his hips as started to slowly lower himself, but he slapped them away before they got anywhere near. “No, you don’t, unless it’s to anchor yourself or similar. This is gonna happen.”

“What, over my protestations?” The tone was only halfway teasing.

“Turnabout would be fair play, wouldn’t it?”

He got a pained expression for his troubles.

You were the one who brought it up in the first place, you arse.

He stilled. “Do you genuinely want me to stop?” he asked, his voice quiet. “Honest answer, and not because you think you’re protecting me or keeping yourself under control or whatever.
“John…”

“I said, honest answer. Do you want me to stop?”

“No.” Sherlock shook his head. “No. But I…I don’t think that –”

“Well, then, that’s sorted,” John interrupted, his smile more chipper and confident than he felt. To be honest, what he mainly felt was relief.

He reached behind himself and down, finding the erection and working it until it stood hard and proud again. Then he angled it while he also began to lower himself, carefully guiding it towards his entrance. He’d taken care to make sure he was soft and open enough for this before he started mouthing at his partner’s morning wood.

“John…” Sherlock whispered, the name sounding almost reverent on those plush lips as pale eyes stared at the expanse of stomach blocking his view. The feel his cock sinking down at a steady, though unhurried pace into the warmth and soft tightness of the blond’s passage made the pupils dilate further and further.

John didn’t stop for a moment as he sank down, the movement slow but sure. He’d halfway expected it to be difficult, with the girth of his belly and the subsequent weight he now carried, not to mention all the space the baby was taking up inside of him. More than halfway, really.

But there was nothing. Nothing except the right sort of fullness as his buttocks became flush with the brunet’s pelvis. If he’d doubted whether it was the right thing to do, the notion fled at that moment.

“Gods, yes…!” he moaned. He opened eyes he hadn’t realized he’d closed and looked at his partner. Then he smiled.

“John…”

“Still think it’s a bad idea?” the blond asked. “Because I fail to see the argument.”

“You never even heard the argument.”

“No, because there is no argument. But okay, let’s get this out before we start, then.” The corner of his lip twitched. “This position isn’t arbitrary. I’m the one in charge, I can control the pace and can easily stop if I need to. More importantly, though, I can see you and your eyes.”

He waited a moment, then cocked his head slightly and raised an eyebrow, hoping that what he wasn’t saying would also get across. Where I can make sure you won’t lose yourself, just as you are, too.

Sherlock’s eyes went icy for the briefest of moments before the colour bloomed back, even warmer than before.

“I’m safe like this, Sherlock,” John said softly, placing a hand gently against a cheek. “Do you hear me? I am safe. I’m safe regardless, because you won’t hurt either of us, but this way, you can see it, too. There won’t be any risk of you going too far.”

He leant forward to peck the cupid bow lips. “I trust you and I love you. I want this – “ he shifted and squeezed at that, which caused a hitched breath and an aborted thrust - “to be part of us, our relationship, too. Do you understand me?”

Sherlock hesitated for a moment but when he nodded, it was emphatic.
John leaned back somewhat to get a better position for the bouncing he planned to do. That had the effect of sliding the length inside of him a little bit further in and to the side, where it pressed up against something... oh, gods.

*How did I just manage to have a fucking coherent conversation, let alone make an argument, with that thing throbbing inside? God, that feels bloody... oh, fuck yes!*

He lifted himself equally slowly, both to enjoy the sensation and the look on Sherlock’s face as he did so, but also to make sure that it was indeed a position that he could keep moving in. Regardless of what he’d said, he wasn’t about to stop, come hell or high water. Well, almost.

When he was sure he had a good angle for his legs, and his stomach as well, he sank back down at a significantly faster pace, breathing out heavily as he moved. Once full again, he let out a loud groan of satisfaction.

Getting a rhythm going proved to be a bit more difficult, however. Sinking down was not too hard to do at a good, steady pace. Rising back up again, however, that was quite another matter. Not that it was a complete failure, far from it, but it didn’t provide him with the... bounce, for lack of a better word, that he wanted from this. He wanted that cock to slam up inside of him with every downward push, pressing against his insides, which was nowhere near happening.

He tried moving faster but that only resulted in it almost slipping out of him.

Hands came up again but this time, it wasn’t to grab hold of his hips but rather his own hands, and then only to bring them up and settle them on top of broad shoulders. He gripped on gratefully. The hands then settled on his hips. John was about to protest but it died on his lips when he saw the expression on Sherlock’s face.

“Let me help,” the brunet said, voice soft but insistent. “Please, John, let me.”

John smiled and, instead of answering, started to lift himself up, bracing himself on the shoulders. The hands on his hips also helped him as he did so.

However, as he rose to the point that only the head was left inside of him, he felt the long fingers shift for a better grip. As soon as they had one, they exerted force to push the blond back down, his hips thrusting upwards at the same time. The result was that he slid back up into that warm, tight passage quickly and effortlessly. He groaned throatily as he bottomed out, John’s buttocks flush with his pelvis and the underside of his bulging stomach brushing up against the flat one of Sherlock’s.

An answering groan came from John as he tilted his head back for a moment. He then tilted his head forward again, touching their foreheads lightly together as he looked into his partner’s eyes.

“Sherlock?” he asked.

“Yes?”

John raised his eyebrows, the ghost of a cheeky smile playing on his lips. “Would you please fuck me already?”

He got a toothy grin in reply, one that lit up that infuriatingly handsome face and made John’s heart do a somersault in his chest. “As you wish.”

With that, he started up a rhythm that wasn’t exactly fast but was steady and made up for it with sheer power.
Not that John minded, in any case; with the angle he was at, it hit far deeper than normal, or so it seemed, at least, and the pace was just right to make him feel each exquisite slide in until it could go no further, pressing against every nerve ending he felt he had. Then the withdrawal that left him feeling achingly empty and craving to be filled again.

The pace slowly but unfalteringly increased until he was practically bouncing on the cock sliding into him, his hands on bony shoulders helping to keep him grounded as he slowly lost himself to the sensations coursing through him from almost every point of his body. His thighs trembled, and his stomach quivered as he rose and fell, his fingers digging deeper and deeper into the shoulders. Sweat made his skin glow and trickled onto the lashes of his closed eyes, and all he could smell was their combined musk and sweat as he panted.

In the back of his mind, he wondered at how magnified everything felt. Each sensation seemed much more intense than anything he’d experienced before, including in bed. Perhaps there was something more to being tied to the tree and the forest than he’d realized? If there was, it would be something to consider at another time.

Part of him could hear himself groaning and speaking broken sentences.

“Oh, gods, right…there…fuck yes, Sherlock, please, deeper…want to feel…feel you filling me…filling me completely…want to be bursting with it…with seed, with child…anything that…fuuuck!”

Realizing just how much he was babbling, he leaned forward as best he could with his stomach, eyes still closed, to seek out cupid bow lips. They thankfully met him halfway, saving him from clashing into them or toppling over, though it was a little precarious with his cargo between them. Their lips touched briefly before Sherlock parted his and licked at the doctor’s, seeking an entrance that John was happy to give.

He wasn’t willing to just passively let his mouth be plundered, however. He battled with the other tongue then nipped at it. This only resulted in Sherlock moaning throatily and dig his nails into the hips he had hold of, steadying the blond as he thrust and withdrew.

The pace increased even further, to a point that, to be honest, sent a flicker of worry through the doctor, even in his state. Breaking the kiss, his eyes flickered upwards.

There was only the tiniest of indications that any magic was crackling in the middle of those lovely eyes, even though the pupils were blown wide enough to almost eclipse the iris completely.

He had been right. They were safe to connect in this way.

Which was just as well because he wasn’t at all sure he could stop at this point.

Like this, his very convex stomach pressed constantly against the concave of Sherlock’s, curled around the protuberance as they moved. Overly sensitive as it was, the pleasure signals the nerves there sent to his brain were almost as strong as the ones coming from his passage, creating a sort of circuit that sparked and flared inside of him.

It was far too much. It wasn’t nearly enough.

“Sherlock…” John breathed against soft lips when they parted after another long snog. “Sherlock, please!” His tone was quite desperate as was the look in his eyes as he gazed into an equally overwhelmed face.

Sherlock responded with a ‘yes’ that seemed hissed but at the same time rumbled through his body and into John’s. He thrust up hard one more time, pressing the blond’s body down at the same time.
As he climaxed, he buried his face in the nearest piece of flesh, muffling the noise he made as much as possible.

John let out some sort of non-identifiable noise as he felt the seed shoot inside and the air around him crackle with energy and…other things, tugging at things deep inside of him. It was good, oh so fucking unbelievably good, but it wasn’t enough for him. He needed something more, just a little bit more, just…

He reached down, trying to somehow get at his own straining cock, trapped as it was between not just their bodies but underneath the mass and weight of his stomach, as well. It was not exactly an easy enterprise. He tried again.

The large, bony hand that let go of his hip pushed his hand away, surprisingly gently, especially given that the brunet was still ejaculating. Then wrapped around his shaft, firmly. Just right, just the way –

A few tugs were all it took for him to shudder in orgasm, a noise somewhere between a groan and choked keen ripping from his throat. Underneath him, Sherlock bucked as his clenching passage milked his cock further. His hand around John’s erection didn’t clench or the like, however.

The crackle around them intensified as he felt the magic flow through him more and more openly. They had connected, in more ways than one, it seemed.

They stayed like that, panting but still, for some time afterwards. Slowly they came back to themselves as the air calmed.

John let out a small huff of a laugh. That bloomed into a chuckle and then a full-blown laugh. At first, Sherlock merely looked at him, puzzled. Then he started chuckling too, though the nonplussed look remained.

“Well, it’s about right, innit?” John laughed. “That this would be how our reunion would go, considering how we started. Including the buggering.”

That cleared the puzzled expression into one of understanding and, thankfully, John couldn’t see anything else. Well, anything but laughter and love.

“Start as you mean to go on, isn’t it?” he said.

John leaned down for another kiss. “I believe it is.”

They were quiet for some moments after that. John then started to get up but was prevented as much by his trembling legs as the hand still on his hip.

“Sherlock, we can’t stay here all morning.”

The other hand slowly traced up his stomach. “Why not?”

“Sherlock…”

“Why not?”

“Because you have duties to attend. So have I.” Possibly more than just the ones that came with being the doctor of the forest, now, considering everything.

“They can wait.”
“Love…” Why exactly he was arguing the point, he wasn’t sure.

“No, they can wait. For once in my life, they can take second priority. Right now, I want to have the two of you alone, to myself.”

“Not sure I could go another round, after that.” To be honest though, Sherlock was the one that looked worn out.

“I didn’t mean sex. Just…” Pale eyes shifted down as the voice faltered.


The doctor kissed him again. “I think we can manage that,” he whispered.

In fact, they spent the rest of the day inside the cave, mostly on Sherlock’s insistence. He seemed keen, somewhat unexpectedly so, to know what had happened to John in the time…the time he had been in London.

At first, John wasn’t overly enthusiastic about it. He even tried to get out of telling Sherlock anything about it, mostly because he didn’t think there was anything interesting to tell. A part of him wasn’t exactly keen on reliving the dreary period, either, though, if he was honest.

Sherlock was persistent, however, and so, curled up together, John told him about Sarah, getting a new flat and managing the baby. He told of Gregory who’d shown up to help – though Sherlock snorted and proclaimed him to be nothing more than a way for Mycroft to poke his nose in in other areas that he couldn’t himself go, which John didn’t believe for a moment.

Alright, so clearly there was a link between the two but Lestrade had other duties beside that, ones that evidently had priority, and John never got the sense that he was a lackey. Well, not any more than any other officer of the law, at least. He got the distinct sense it had more to do with Sherlock being a contrary little brother than anything else.

Whatever the case, though, as he talked, and Sherlock asked questions, tension he hadn’t realized he’d accumulated began to slowly seep from his muscles. It felt right to talk about both the large worries and the more pleasant minutia of everyday life, even if he was somewhat disbelieving that Sherlock genuinely had much interest. Perhaps it was just for his benefit, which…would actually very sweet, in itself.

Once he got to the return journey and the meeting with the ruler’s godly parentage, however, Sherlock stopped him, placing a finger on his lips.

“Enough now. I have no wish to hear about them,” he said, firmly, which only deepened the doctor’s already furrowed brow.

Come to think of it, his mother had disappeared from the…cave right after whatever-it’d--been, without any word or gesture, towards John or Sherlock. She’d been nowhere to be found outside, either, and nobody had spoken of her. Nor of his father, neither.

He’d gathered already that they didn’t exactly have the most cordial of relationships, which he could relate to. Still, she was his mother – and she’d obviously cared enough about her son to help him, nurse him.
“Why are you so against your parents?”

The brunet looked sideways, then towards the ceiling.

“Sherlock…”

“Hm?” John level a *look* at him. “I’m not. Really. I’m neither for nor against them. They’re the reason I’m in this world.”

“And…?” the blond prompted. Surely, that wasn’t all there was to it?

“And nothing. They’re gods, John, they have very little concern with mundanities.”

That wasn’t quite the impression John had gotten but he didn’t press it. “By extension, you’re a god, too, though, logically,” he pointed out instead. “Yet, you don’t behave like they do.”

Sherlock snorted. “Of course not,” he said as he tried his best to look haughtily dignified. He wasn’t quite able to hide the fact that colour was creeping into his cheeks, however.

John wanted to kiss that colour but before he could, Sherlock beat him to it, kissing him on the lips.

When he drew back, his gaze was a good deal more intense. “I will never not be there for our child. *Never.* I promise.” The voice was vehement.

John’s heart clenched as it went out to his partner. He managed to smile lovingly, though, and pressed into the body around him. “I know, love. I know.”

Sherlock would be a good father, no, he’d be a great one. John knew that without a shadow of doubt, and he knew that their little family could weather anything, together.

He was sure of it.

January passed relatively quietly for them both, as they got reacquainted with the forest and its inhabitants but more importantly also with each other.

Despite what had happened that morning, Sherlock tried to put some distance between them at first, both physically and emotionally. It happened within only a few days, days that he’d been forced to spend on the move around the entirety of the forest, to reaffirm connections with everyone after his return. John hadn’t been able to go with him, as it included areas that weren’t easily accessible, especially not with his little passenger hampering movements.

Time on his own wasn’t necessarily a good thing, John had thought, as it could easily mean time to overthink what had happened, twist it somehow in light of his insecurities. He’d been proven right when Sherlock returned, and he kept a good two or three feet distance between them, at no point going closer than a foot.

He had likely done it for ‘John’s own benefit’, or some such rot, though he did have the grace to at least be aware that he was doing it, with the way his eyes shifted, and his throat bobbed whenever he noticed the distance had been reduced stepped away.

Not that it mattered much, because John wasn’t having any of it. Most of his time in the forest had been spent having to roll with the punches of whatever Sherlock did, no matter how he’d fought, and he’d grown more than fed up with it, especially he thought they’d sorted it out. Now that he was
back, and after what they’d talked about, he swore to himself that he’d change it and do so once and for all. So, he’d put up with no more such bullshit and he meant to tell Sherlock and let him know just how hurtful it was and how damaging it could prove.

He was tempted to do it in public, just to cement it and make it harder for the brunet to renege on what he said but really, it wasn’t a discussion that should be aired like that.

“I don’t know what’s going on in that brain of yours,” he’d said when he’d seen Sherlock starting to withdraw again a few mornings later, his tone deceptively calm, “and I won’t begin to tell you how you ought to feel, but if you try to pull away on me one more time, don’t think I’ll hesitate to retaliate.”

“How?” It was clear that Sherlock had spoken despite himself, a sliver of worried panic just about detectable in his voice.

It might seem petty or cruel but that was somehow reassuring. That meant that he was doing it out of some odd sense of protection rather than a loss of interest, or it at least pointed it strongly in that direction.

John didn’t look at his partner, who was behind him, as he replied. “Oh, I thought Demelza might like a little help with her work and a bit of company in her home,” he said, his tone deliberately light. “You know, just until the cold months are over.”

The implications of that, and possibly also what was implied, sank in rather quickly, it seemed.

“You wouldn’t!” Again, the words seemed have been pulled out before there’d been time to think, which was impressive for Sherlock.

John turned to look over his shoulder, his eyes narrowed while a small, tight smile played on his lips. “Try me.” His voice crackled with the same energy that was in Sherlock’s at times, though not quite as strong.

The brunet spotted that, as well, and paled even further.

“I need help and support as I grow, especially since you seem to have been kind enough to fill me with a monster, and if you’re determined not to be there, I might as well go somewhere that I’m wanted.”

Was it underhanded, playing on the taller man’s fears like that? Possibly, but on the other hand, it was those fears that had been the cause of this in the first place, so perhaps it was just as well.

Sherlock looked as though he’d been punched in the gut. “But John…I can’t…I couldn’t…what if I –”

“You aren’t going to hurt me, or the baby, ever. You’ve proven that, so many times over. How many more times do you need to believe it?” There was no answer. “Christ, how you can be so clever and yet so utterly imbecilic at the same time, I have absolutely no idea.”

“You can’t know that I won’t!” Sherlock snapped.

“No, I can’t,” John conceded after a moment, feeling more than hearing the small intake of breath. “I can’t know anything, not in this forest. But I can know that I trust you. Every part and aspect of you. Always.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “I wouldn’t have come back if I didn’t trust you. You’d know that
if you pulled your head out of your arse.”

Opening his eyes again, he searched the pale ones. “You can’t have love, proper love, if you don’t have trust. Will you believe me? Will you trust me?” He put everything into those words.

It took a while but eventually he got an answer.

“I’ve always trusted you.” The words were reassuring and a great relief but just as important to the doctor was the fact that Sherlock, completely on his own, moved close enough to wrap himself back around John, arms encircling the greatly chin coming to rest on the blond’s collarbone. He was shaking. “And I’ll do everything to make sure that I’m worthy of your trust.”

On one hand, it felt like they’d been down this road before but on the other, it felt like progress had still been achieved. Maybe it was different because he’d clarified just what the outcome would be. Maybe the magic inside, once lust wasn’t clouding his mind, helped him determine. Or, perhaps, it was…

“Thank you,” John said as he, meaningfully, pressed himself as close as possible to the body behind. He’d finally registered what wasn’t being said out loud, too, and that was probably what clinched it. “Likewise, love.”

Chapter End Notes

I rewrote parts of this quite a few times and I apologise if there's something left that's not up to snuff, as it were. It also got rather away from me, as I meant to have gotten to the birth and the baby, truly! But this took a lot longer to get sorted than planned, as the insecurities played out, although hopefully this ties a few more ends, at least. If it didn't live up to expectations, then I apologise and hope to rectify it in the next (and likely last) chapter. :) I have some of the next chapter done already and that is the birth. Speaking of - I haven’t named the baby yet. If you have any suggestions for names, I'm open to hearing them. :) One of each, perhaps? Feedback is as always greatly treasured.
All good things...

Chapter Summary

John has a bit more adjusting to being pregnant to do, but this time, Sherlock's there to help.
Then...it's finally time.

Chapter Notes

Back to a more timely release, at least for this one.
Thank you to everyone who gave feedback on the last chapter and for the lovely baby names suggestions.
WARNING/HEAD'S UP - somewhat 'graphic' depictions of birth in this chapter (and a bit of mention of lactation). If this is not your cup of tea, that's fine, just skip the latter half of the chapter. To be honest, I don't think it's all that graphic...or at least, if you can stomach an episode of Call the Midwife, then you should be alright. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One advantage of knowing exactly when a baby was conceived was that the math of its due date was rather simple; just add forty weeks to Midsummer Eve and bob’s your uncle, at least if forest god offspring had the same…incubation time, as it were, as normal human beings. He’d tried to question Mrs. Hudson about it but like with everything else to do with his pregnancy after he’d come back, she had been rather…evasive on the subject, only giving him a frustratingly enigmatic smile.

That put the expected delivery to the end of March, the 25th if the forty weeks held true to a tee. That was highly unlikely but even if he was off, he would still be into spring before it arrived, which would be a rather good time to have a little one’s first month, at least in the forest. Food would be easier to get to, for both John and the baby.

That was another thing that still more than baffled him; the way his nipples had started aching in a very particular way. There had been nothing even remotely resembling that while he’d been in London, which was probably just as well, all things considered. But as he’d reacquainted himself with the forest again, he’d become aware of how sensitive and achy they were, not to mention the very slight swelling of the breast tissue.

It didn’t take a doctor, much less a genius, to work out what was happening to him.

Perhaps it was because he was fully fay now? Or maybe his altered body also thought he should have something with which to nourish his newly born? Did fay even nurse?

When he asked Mrs. Hudson, as Sherlock, surprisingly supportive and mindful though he otherwise was, wasn’t giving him anything useful, she clucked at him. “Of course, we do, John. Don’t be silly – and don’t worry, you won’t grow breasts.”

“It’d figure that I would, though, given everything else. As if I didn’t look bizarre enough as it is.”
She whacked him lightly over the head for that remark. Despite that, it rather hurt, though it likely didn’t help that his antlers, and consequently his scalp, were aching already.

As he looked at her with a pained frown, she tutted. “Honestly, you’d think that as a doctor, you’d be more sensible about things like that. You’ve got life growing inside of you, John, you’ve got to feed it somehow. How did you think it would work?”

He opened his mouth, ready to argue. Then he blinked and paused. How had he expected it to work? That it would just go straight to eating grass as soon as it was born? Magic aside, both he and Sherlock were human in bodies and as such, it should work as any other mammal, complete with mammary glands.

As the understanding dawned, he snorted. “Don’t suppose there’s a fay Tesco’s selling formula, is there?” he asked, with a half-smile pulling at his lips.

He got a full smile in return. “Not even a Co-op Food. Can you imagine the pixies having that easy access to food?”

“Oh, gods no.” He paused. “But I’m going to…well, lactate?” He had stopped wondering whether she’d know such things. She always did, with unerring reliability. Whether she felt inclined to share that knowledge was another thing altogether.

“Only as long as it needs it.”

He sighed and stretched, the quite substantial weight of his belly fighting against it. “Well, that’s something, at least. Though to be honest, I probably should be thankful I’m not developing three new sets of nipples or something.”

“You’ll be fine, John. Don’t worry.”

Somehow, that wasn’t necessarily very reassuring. Then again, what was he expecting by now?

He got a similar reaction from Sherlock when he voiced the issue. There was a more distinct note of interest in it, however, to the point where John had to tell him, very firmly, that there would be no experimenting on his nipples or otherwise. The brunet had reluctantly conceded.

Afterwards, he did seem to spend quite some time caressing said nipples whenever they were close, which were, surprisingly, more and more often as time went on.

Oh, Sherlock still performed the duties expected of him, though the doctor more or less forced him to cut it back as much as possible for the sake of his health, at least until he was significantly better. As much as possible turned out not to be that much, after all, however; there were several things that had been forced to wait while Sherlock was being healed by his mother and could apparently wait no longer, and of course, Sherlock himself being a headstrong, obstinate bugger wasn’t helping, either.

He did tell John he had a duty to fulfil, and when the blond tried to argue with that, he pointed out that fulfilling that duty was part of his healing process, too. It was something about everything being tied together and feeding on each other, which, though grudgingly, John had to concede made sense in context. His argument was further diminished when he could see that it did indeed help.

But as John grew heavier and things started to become more difficult for him to manage in the context of living in the forest, even as he still stubbornly did them, it had to be said that the ruler of
the forest seemed to realize that taking care of his mate was a duty that had to take priority.

John tried to tell him he was fine, bugger off and get on with it. When he almost fell and broke something because he was being stubborn and wanted to get up on his own, however, Sherlock, face white as he’d stared from the other side of the small clearing they’d been in, had only barely refrained from shouting his partner down for being reckless with their baby. The pale eyes managed to convey his feelings just fine, though.

John hadn’t had much of an argument to that.

Afterwards, Sherlock had taken great care to be there whenever John was to go anywhere, supporting him and providing him with every little thing. It would’ve been infuriating if it wasn’t both so sweet and so heart breaking, especially when the panic showed in the fine features, and so John let him, using the opportunity to talk and discuss anything and everything they felt like.

It was quite the marked difference from when the brunet had gone off on his own for longer periods without any sort of explanation, and John was grateful for it.

Demelza and Mrs. Hudson still came to check the progress, make sure he and the baby were healthy, and so on, but they were only allowed to help John when Sherlock could neither postpone his duties nor take John with him.

To be honest, though, John wasn’t too annoyed about being left behind or rather, he soon stopped being so. That was mainly because he was rather tired, the baby taking up far more energy than he would’ve ever predicted. Then again, it perhaps wasn’t too surprising, given how determined it had seemed to make up for time lost while in London.

He was assured that nothing was wrong, the life signs were sure and just what they needed to be. Even so, his increasing dependency didn’t sit well with him at all.

“You might as well get used to it,” Sherlock commented one evening as they sat together in their home, just enjoying a rare, quiet moment together. His legs were spayed wide to accommodate John sat between them, leaning up against the cave wall. John’s head rested, mindful of his antlers, on Sherlock’s shoulder, his eyes closed, and body relaxed in the arms of his mate.

“That isn’t the same thing at all, Sherlock, and besides, I don’t want to be dependent on anyone for anything more than I absolutely have to. Gods, keep doing that. My back’s been killing me all day.”

He leant into the contact of the one broad hand massaging the overtaxed muscles in the small of his back.

“Mmh.” Sherlock merely hummed and nuzzled the doctor’s cheek.

“Did you have to give me a monster baby on the first go?” John groaned.

“What, are you already longing for the next one?”

“It took John only a moment to work out that he was being teased. “I’d like to see you having to take care of a toddler while I am in the throes of labour.”

The brunet’s answer, soft and quiet, rather surprised him when it came. “I wouldn’t mind trying.”

John opened his eyes, brow slightly knitted as he stared at the other. “Sherlock, no. Not yet. I want to spend some time just the three of us, without having a bun in the oven. Having a baby to look after is going to be enough on its own without going through pregnancy at the same time.”
“Don’t you want our child to have siblings?”

“That’s not what I’m saying, you berk. Of course, I do. I’m saying it can wait a year or so, at the very least. We’ll have enough to deal with as it is.”

Like getting married, for one. They’d settled on waiting for that until the baby was born and John would actually fit into a suit again.

“We’ve managed.”

“I’m not going there. Now, shut up and put those hands to some use.” A pause. “Oi, not like that. I’m far too sore for that.” He batted away the stray hand.

That was another interesting side effect; Sherlock wasn’t only getting more territorial and protective of John the bigger he grew as his due date neared. With that had come an increased interest in the doctor’s body.

That didn’t necessarily mean sex, as he seemed just as content map out and caress every part he could get his hands on, over and over again. It was far from a rare occurrence that it turned to sex, however, as both their libidos had also increased. Sometimes, John worried a bit about that.

Sherlock was unperturbed by the mild rejection and continued to massage his pregnant mate. The quiet contentment radiated from them both.

Of course, it didn’t go as planned. Afterwards, John thought he should have realized it wouldn’t, but then again, hindsight was always 20/20, wasn’t it?

It was only crawling towards the end of February, a month before his due date, when he one day woke up alone, his stomach cramping in a way he hadn’t experienced before. Gasping, he surfaced fully from sleep and looked around.

Sherlock wasn’t there. Where was he?

Oh, of course. He’d left the previous evening, as had to go be the arbiter in a dispute between a group of pixies and a flock of fairies that both claimed that the other group had defiled their sacred place, which naturally was the same sacred place. It had gotten to the point where they were threatening to make life hell for the neighbouring fay, and so Sherlock had been called to help.

He’d been extremely reluctant to go but John had kissed him and told him to mind his duties. Everything would be fine.

Now he wished he’d swallowed his tongue instead, because it would just figure that somehow in all this magic-laden world, it’d be possible for such words to trigger something, if nothing else then out of pure spite.

This wasn’t good, though. Being born a month early was never an exactly good idea, and he didn’t want to consider how bad an idea it was for it to happen here, regardless of the inherent magic.

Alright, calm down. One cramp didn’t equal that he was about go to into labour, did it? It could be his little passenger just lying on somewhere it shouldn’t, or he’d twisted a muscle or –

Another cramp gripped him, radiating throbs out from his abdomen and weirdly, making his antlers
throb, too. It felt like his whole pelvic area had a bet on to see just how tight it could curl itself up and was determined to win that bet.

Scrabbling for purchase, he somehow managed to get himself from a position lying on his side into an upright one, which only served to drag at his heavy belly that looked overstuffed as it was. It had been hard to believe that he was only in his eighth month when gazing at the fullness of his stomach. The change in position did feel good, though, and gave some other areas a bit of needed relief. At least, that was until another cramp gripped him and as he rode through it, he became aware that his thighs were rather wet. It wasn’t just the occasional amount of, well, slick, for lack of a better word, that now happened whenever he was aroused, either.

In fact, once he thought about it, it wasn’t hard to suss out what exactly was going on.

His water had broken; he was decidedly in labour. Yet, there was not much he could do right now except wait. Getting himself into a seated position hadn’t been easy and he doubted he could comfortably manage to get himself upright and all the way over to Demelza’s lodgings, never mind the probable inadvisability of travelling that distance in his state. In fact, in his new position he could feel that the baby seemed to have drop, giving another indisputable clue that it was now and going gallivanting would be a stupid idea.

Besides, she and Mrs. Hudson would be along for their now daily visit in not too long, plenty of time before it was time.

In the meantime, he dug out his phone from its place among the rest of his possessions, carefully wrapped in several softer items of clothing to protect it as best possible. With some very discreet help from the landlord couple, Brenda and Iain, he’d gotten hold of a small power generator that was solar and a few other paraphernalia to set up some electricity access for himself and the creature comforts he wasn’t going to abandon, such as some light at night, an electric shaver and a charged phone. For one thing, Sarah’s threat of what she’d do if he didn’t keep in contact hadn’t been completely idle, he knew, which was also why he was digging it out now to send her a text to let her know. It also alleviated a bit of the pain of not being able to tell Sherlock.

*Think it’s time now,* he typed, wondering whether he should wait until it was all done. But she’d wanted to know, and he could perhaps ask her for some help.

The reply came surprisingly quickly, given that it was still very early in the morning.

* - Oh, John, that’s early. Are you sure it’s not just stomach cramps?

  - Pretty damn sure, yeah. Far too regular, it’s not Braxton Hicks cramps. My water’s broken, too, which is weird, even for all of this, but it kind of removes any sense of doubt. Everything else I’ve researched on it points to this, too, so…

  - Do you want me to come down there?

He smiled. She really was a godsend in her own way, always caring yet practical.

  - Not sure you’d be able to get down here in time, in any case, and you’re needed where you are. I’ve got the most experienced midwife in the entire forest to help me, when she gets here.

  - Given what you told me of Sherlock’s birth, that’s not really reassuring.

He had to concede the point.
- True. Crap, I don’t want to think about that, or the fact that it’s far too early and we don’t have the proper tools for it, or how I’m ever going to push the baby out.

He sent it, then swallowed and sent another one. *Sherlock’s not here, either.*

It shouldn’t have mattered, as he was the one who’d have to push out the baby, not Sherlock, and counting on the man for emotional support in a time like this was perhaps putting too much faith in him, at least when it would likely be overwhelming. But he still wanted him there, desperately.

- *John. Breathe. Just concentrate on what you can do, not what you can’t, okay?*

He drew a deep breath, texted her back, then tried to make himself as ready as possible. A frisson of anticipation and exhilaration swept through him as he did so.

Early or not, it was time, finally. The baby was ready, and they were about to become parents, at last.

“I am going to fucking kill him!”

“Try to be calm, John,” Demelza said from somewhere to his right. “You have got to relax when they – “

“I know that!” John snapped. How it didn’t become an outright snarl, he didn’t know. Then again, how he hadn’t socked someone right across the jaw yet, he had no idea, either.

“Oh, fuck!” he cried as another contraction gripped him, sending pain throughout his entire body.

They were becoming progressively longer and stronger and happening with ever-decreasing intervals. The urge to push was immense but even through the haze of pain and anger, he was still aware just how bad an idea that was. It wasn’t time yet.

In a more rational world, this should’ve completely baffled him. He wasn’t a woman, there was nothing down there that should be able to contract like that, not enough to push a baby out.

Then again, one shouldn’t have been able to grow in the first place, and so there was very little point in trying to look for a ‘rational world’ in this forest.

Still, the worry about just how it was going to get out of him, out of the passageway that was in no way designed for anything with bones in it, no matter how soft, to pass through was real. Even the fact that his waters had broken several hours previously hadn’t been enough to assuage him, at least not for long.

As if all of that wasn’t enough, he was alone in this. Well, that wasn’t quite true, as both Mrs. Hudson and Demelza were there, soothing him and getting everything ready as best they could for when the baby arrived. But that was it. Sherlock was still nowhere to be found.

Someone had been sent to get him, once the two women had arrived to find John on his own, but even with the capabilities the fay possessed, it was far from an instantaneous thing.

He panted and groaned, some of the groans quite pained, his way through the contraction, trying to gauge how long it lasted but failed, the pain occupying his attention. All he could reliably say was that they were indeed getting progressively stronger and longer, hopefully signalling a good progression.
“Is there…there any dilation yet?” he asked. If this was a normal labour, he’d probably now be in the 
active phase, judging by both the pain in his abdomen and his urge to push. The reality, though, 
probably was that he had only just entered that phase, despite how much the contractions hurt. 

He thought he could feel the baby sinking lower, but he wasn’t at all sure. 

Mrs. Hudson checked, or rather, she had Demelza check for her, citing her problems with her hip. 
Not that John cared right now. 

“Some,” the girl said after doing a thorough check. “Not a lot, though. I don’t think it wise for you to 
push yet.” She looked at the older fay for confirmation. 

Mrs. Hudson nodded. “Best to treat this as much as a normal birth as possible, I think. You’re 
certainly progressing as one would expect.” She gave him a small smile that was probably meant to 
be reassuring. 

“Would…nnh…would that be normal for humans or…haaah…normal for fay?” 

She didn’t seem fazed in the least. “Both. We are not monsters, John. We do not spring fully formed 
from rocks or are shaped out of water. The basic mechanics are the same.” 

Oh, yes, completely the same, because it’s quite biologically normal for a grown man to grow a tail 
and antlers a deer would be jealous of, never mind having his innards changed and added to, just so 
a baby could grow in there. Quite the mundane, humdrum thing, I can see that. 

He didn’t voice that out loud, though that was mainly because his lungs were fully occupied just 
providing enough air for him to breathe through the pain of the contractions. 

The contractions which were coming rather fast, now, or so it seemed. It could just be that he wasn’t 
done feeling the pain of one before the next one started up, which was no real indicator of anything. 

Another contraction hit him and hit him hard. The next after that hit even harder. He reached out for 
something to grab onto, preferably hurt, as he let out another string of curses, quite a few of them 
directed at Sherlock. As his hands found nothing to clutch, he clenched them in pain and frustration, 
tipping his head back as he closed his eyes. 

Therefore, he missed the look exchanged between the two women, which had a distinct tint of worry 
to it. 

“John, I think we ought to have you change position.” 

“Why?” The word came out through clenched teeth. He could barely move, so the idea of changing 
position seemed quite ludicrous. 

“Because…” Demelza paused, hesitating. 

“Because you’re dilating rather fast,” Mrs. Hudson finished for her. 

“I thought that…that was the whole point.” 

“Not this fast. Normal dilation should take a few hours.” 

“It’s been a few hours.” Actually, it had been quite a lot more than that, when you also counted his 
sleep and the time until the two women had arrived. 

The elderly woman harrumphed, the annoyance trying to mask genuine concern. “You’ve dilated
half an inch in the last ten minutes. That is very fast for a ‘normal’ pregnancy, even more so taking
that it’s your first into account.”

John, who wasn’t exactly glowing by this point anyway, paled further as the words sank in. He
searched her eyes.

She smiled, just a tiny bit tightly. “It doesn’t necessarily mean something is wrong. It just means that
we need to be vigilant so that if something does happen, then – “

“Nothing is going to happen,” a voice interrupted, the tone flat in its unwavering certainty. It came
from the entrance of the cave and there was no mistaking it.

John was about to say something when another contraction hit him, and he was forced to concentrate
on just getting through it.

“You took your bleeding time,” was what he ended up saying once it had passed.

He then noted that Sherlock hadn’t moved from where he’d stopped at the entrance and couldn’t
quite help wondering why. Was he merely assessing the situation? Was he unsure of whether he
would be welcome? Was he having second thoughts about the whole thing?

Not really the time to be speculating on that!

Sherlock did come into the cave properly then, moving slowly, though, to be fair, it didn’t seem as
though it was due to reluctance. He didn’t say anything as he moved but when he reached them, he
dropped to his knees. Then, almost fearfully, he reached out a minutely trembling hand, not for the
stomach, as the doctor would’ve honestly expected, but John’s face.

Pale eyes, uncertain and awed and more than a little bit scared, searched blue. “You didn’t tell me,”
Sherlock said but the voice didn’t sound in any way accusatory, as one might expect.

“No, I didn’t,” John said, just a tiny bit archly, because his…everything was hurting. He was, in the
circumstances, allowed to. “That was because I didn’t know when you left last night. Kind of hard to
inform of something that takes you by surprise.”

“But you should’ve had some inkling. The body normally tells you – “

“Don’t claim to be a bloody expert on this now, Sherlock. I – “John broke off to fight his way
through another contraction, whole body trembling.

Sherlock turned his head to look at Demelza, who stared back, trying to appear brave, then at Mrs.
Hudson, who was frowning as she smoked her pipe.

“We can’t know, Sherlock,” she said, reading his face, his unspoken worries, correctly. “It might be
that you’re right and nothing is going to happen. Could be just dilating that quickly because the body
knows there are antlers that are coming first and therefore a slower dilation will leave the baby in a
position that might hurt the inner walls. Or it could be that his human biology is rejecting the
impossible and trying to get rid of a foreign body. It’s impossible to say at this point.”

“But he’s been doing so well,” Sherlock said, insistently, almost pleadingly. “There haven’t been any
complications throughout the…the pregnancy, not even when he was fully human. Why should it
happen now? He’s fully fay now. It doesn’t make any sense.” The last the sentence was nearing
accusatory in its tone.

Welcome to my world, a small part of John commented inside his head. The major part of him,
however, at least what wasn’t focused on the pain that seemed to penetrate everywhere, was occupied with trying to make sense of the conversation without, well, quite frankly, panicking at least somewhat.

He ought to be calm, ought to trust in Sherlock and Mrs. Hudson. And he did, he truly did. But knowing that, feeling that, that didn’t stop the unease from slowly creeping back up his spine.

His voice, when it came out after another contraction passed, was relatively calm, however. “The baby will still be born, won’t it?” he asked, fixing his gaze on the elder woman smoking her pipe. “No matter what happens, the baby will still be born?”

“John – “

“No, shut up, Sherlock. I need to know this. Will it?”

“Yes,” she answered, immediate but still somehow sounding hesitant.

“That’s something, at least,” he said through gritted teeth and another contraction.

“John, nothing is going to happen.”
The doctor smiled, thinly but warmly and loving for all of that. “You can’t know that.”

“I can.”
The sudden crackle in the voice alerted John. He looked at his mate and saw the tell-tale icing of already pale eyes.

“Sherlock, no. No!”
The brunet turned to him. “Yes,” he said, his voice thick with the magic that he wasn’t keeping such a tight leash on any longer. “I am not losing you ever again. You will not leave me.”

In response, John felt, of all things, his own magic rising. Until that point, he had only been sporadically aware of it stirring inside of him, never in any discernible pattern or at a particular time or occasion. Most of the time, when he had noticed it, he had attributed it to having the grandchild of gods growing inside of him and nothing else.

Now, though…now, as it rose within him, he couldn’t attribute it to anything but himself. The baby and its energy, its magic, was concentrating in his pelvic area, which added a severely odd layer to the labour. Meanwhile, what he felt rising now was from his chest, born out of fear, anger and love for his baby.

What was more, he could feel it pushing against something, which was probably Sherlock’s own, innate magic, refusing to be steamrollered.

“I was a soldier, Sherlock,” he said, the tiniest of crackles in his own voice belying the magic. “I am a doctor. That has not changed. My duty was to help others survive, regardless of personal risk.”

“No! I will not lose you.” The power in that voice was unmistakable.

“I lost you,” John shot back, meeting power with sheer stubborn tenacity. “I refuse to lose my child.”
The air around them was slowly filling to capacity with that same crackle of magic. Not even another contraction could distract John, though, mostly because he was not going to back down on this point, no matter what Sherlock said or did.
If it came down to him or the baby, the choice was easy. There was no choice.

“Enough!”

The single word, ringing out sharply in the entirety of the cave, did not come from either John or Sherlock.

Their gazes shifted from each other to stare at Mrs. Hudson, who glared at them in turn.

“Are you quite finished?” she snapped. There was no answer. “Good!”

She took a pull on her pipe. “Good grief, one would think we already sat here with a baby being strangled with its umbilical cord.” Two faces paled slightly at that. “We aren’t, and I will not have you two jeopardize anything with your blithering stubbornness. If, *if*, things should complicate, we will deal with that when and as it comes. As it is, you’re dilating faster than normal and while that is cause for concern it’s not at a rate that truly alarms me.”

She turned her attention back to Demelza, purposefully ignoring the two men. “Could you be a dear and check where exactly the baby is and whether it’s turned or not?”

“Hold on, if I haven’t dilated fully, you shouldn’t – “John started but was shut up by the look he was given by the elderly woman. He suddenly understood far better why she was considered the best midwife in the forest and why nobody outside of Sherlock tended to contradict here.

Demelza nodded to Mrs. Hudson and moved closer to John. One hand pressed over his loosening entrance while the other ran over the expanse of his stomach. She did...something, and he shuddered.

“The position is right,” she announced after a few moments. “It is moving slowly downwards. Dilation is around three inches.”

“Right. At this rate, the last inch won’t take long and then I will need you to get ready to push but not until I say so, is that understood?”

John nodded, his face serious. She knew how to phrase instructions in a way that was helpful, not stressful.

She secreted the pipe, rolled up her sleeves and stood up. “Sherlock, would you make yourself useful for a change and help your mate up onto his knees?”

Even the brunet wasn’t stupid enough to argue at this point. He complied, lifting John’s heavy body with annoying ease, the arms sliding under the armpits. The blond would glare at him but the change in position commanded his attention; the baby could now suddenly be felt pushing on his pelvis in a way that he hadn’t experienced before and, quite frankly, could have done just fine without it.

Of course, his body also seemed to think that was about the perfect moment to have another contraction grip it and do a proper job of it while it was at it.

“Bloody, fucking hell!” he shouted, his hands shooting out to lock onto Sherlock’s forearms, which were resting against the quivering mass that was his stomach. His fingers dug hard into the soft flesh it found there, his nails perilously close to piercing said flesh and drawing blood.

Despite that, Sherlock didn’t flinch or otherwise acknowledge that it hurt, which it undoubtedly must have. Instead, he merely shifted so more of John’s weight rested on him, and for once, the doctor wasn’t going to argue.
They spent a moment or two getting John as comfortable as possible, given the circumstances. Then Demelza, showing an astonishing amount of flexibility, moved to check on the progression of dilation.

It ought to have felt odd but on the other hand, so ought almost everything else about this entire enterprise. To be honest, that had stopped at some point, possibly when Sherlock had finally decided to show up, and that was just fine.

She didn’t say anything as she straightened back up. Instead, she looked at Mrs. Hudson, who nodded, and then she turned back to the two men and smiled.

John didn’t need to be told what that meant. He swallowed, the reality, the responsibility and the risk settling onto him properly. Nevertheless, he didn’t feel intimidated or panicked as he might have or might be expected to.

He could do this. Early or not, magic or not, right anatomy or not, their baby was ready to be born and he’d make damn sure that however it looked, whatever it was, it would make it into the world safely, to be looked after and loved by both its parents.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you,” Sherlock said, voice soft but earnest in a strangely intense way, as though he was attempting to put as much reassurance and support as possible into it.

“You haven’t.” John was smiling, despite the pain. Despite everything. “But I appreciate the effort, nevertheless.”

The next contraction hit and this time, he did push. He pushed, and he yelled as he did so. If there were words in there, he wasn’t aware of them.

Demelza moved slightly to one side while Mrs. Hudson settled on the other, so that between them and Sherlock, he was surrounded. No, he was cocooned, protected and cared for as best they could while he bore down and did his best to deliver their child.

Chapter End Notes

I...really should stop saying that I think I'm done because I always turn out to be wrong. Sorry :)
I was halfway tempted to end it on "there was no choice" but then I realized that it'd be a bit harsh of a cliffhanger, even for me - and we were a bit under on the wordcount, too.
I've not yet been pregnant myself, so I gleaned everything I could from various sites around the web. That said, if I have got anything wrong, apologies and do tell me, nicely, what it is. :) Should I be worried I enjoyed writing this?
Their little baby makes it into the world and both John and Sherlock are as completely smitten as only parents can be. John manages to connect, in all senses of the word, not only with his child, but with the rest of the forest.
They then come full circle :)

Chapter Notes

Four weeks but twice the normal length. That's not bad for a finale, is it? Well, it's what I wrote, so...enjoy, I did writing it, and thank you to all who left lovely feedback <3
Also, still heads up for the rest of the labour, just to let you know. :) Oh, and for breastfeeding, nothing graphic, but, again. :)
calmly, her skill and subsequent confidence having grown continuously ever since John had met her, at least when it came to midwifery. The rest of the time, she was still unsure of herself, but it gave the doctor a bit of hope for her future. If she could grow confident in her abilities, she could extend that to herself in general.

Sherlock shifted his body again, so as to try to give John the best support while also giving more room to deliver.

In hindsight, it might’ve been rather a redundant move; as the shoulders moved out, relatively unproblematically after the difficulty and agony of the head that had likely left something of a looseness, the pressure eased. He still had to push, obviously, but comparatively, it was a significantly easier and less painful than it had been so far.

Inside, beneath every other half-formed thought thronging his mind, the abject fear of what had nearly happened to Sherlock at his birth was churning and storming around like a train going pell-mell. Even the obvious, the *indisputable* fact that everything was progressing well, one might even say exceedingly so, wasn’t enough to disperse it.

Things could change in a moment. He knew that better than most.

Perhaps the fear would only abate when he held his little passenger in his arms and it was breathing properly and regularly.

Perhaps it never would, ever.

Once the shoulders passed fully through, it wasn’t just the feeling of pressure that eased. The rest of the delivery seemed to pass in a blur. Maybe that was merely because the first part had taken so very long, or maybe he had just lost all sense of time.

Whatever the case, it seemed to take mere moments before he felt the rest of the body leave him. There was no wail, scream or any noise to indicate the baby was drawing breath, however, and his heart and mind froze.

Sherlock was peppering his cheek with kisses, whispering in between them. Only then did John realize that he was hyperventilating and making the oddest of keening noises while his mate tried to soothe him. He felt another contracting pain but he barely paid attention to it, even as something soft slid out of his entrance, so focused was he on the baby that wasn’t drawing breath.

“Shush, John, it’s alright, it’s alright. Shush now.” he kept whispering.


He was stopped by the sight of Demelza rising onto her feet from her seated position between his legs, her head turned downwards as she moved ever so carefully. What her mood was, he couldn’t see, however, as the mass of copper curls that was her hair hid her face quite effectively.

He watched, his breath frozen along with his infant, as she lifted her head. She was smiling ever so softly yet warmly.

She held out the tiny bundle in her arms and John took it without thinking, automatically adjusting his arms to hold it as securely as possible.

The little creature, its face not nearly as scrunched up as he would have expected it to be. It sneezed once, twice.
It then opened its mouth, drew a breath and let out…a noise. That was about the only way he could describe it. It wasn’t a wail, it wasn’t a scream. It wasn’t even a hiccup. It was…not dissimilar to the kind of noise the forest residents used that was as much felt as it was heard.

“There’s your ‘scream’,” Sherlock said from behind.

“You mean it – he waited all that time to breathe? How can he do that – and I swear, if you just say ‘magic’, I’m going to punch your lights out, do you read me?”

“Not every baby cries at birth, John. I thought you were a doctor.”

“Every baby needs to breathe, idiot, and he wasn’t breathing.”

“Just waited a bit to be reunited, that’s all.”

John wanted to argue further, because that was absolute horse crap if ever he heard it, but at that moment, their little one opened his eyes and looked at them. Speech was, for the moment, a forgotten memory as he took in the wonder of those pale eyes.

If he thought he’d loved his child before, it paled in comparison with the utter besotted adoration and love he felt for it as he held it as gently as possible.

“He’s got your eyes,” Sherlock murmured, his chin resting on John’s shoulder as he, too, looked down at their child, who stared back at them with that unwavering stare that only babies could produce.

“He’s got yours, you mean. Look at how pale they are.”

“They’re blue, though, so they’re yours.”

“Alright, fine. The ears are indisputably yours, though.”

“Mmh. Compliments the snub nose, your snub nose rather well, I think.”

“Hey!”

“Calm down, John, I like your snub nose, it’s rather endearing, especially when wobbles just slightly when you’re excited.”

“It does not!” John protested. He wasn’t upset, though, and turned his attention back to the baby in his arms. “He’s a lot more human-looking than I expected…I think, at least. Now that I think about it, I’m not really sure what I was picturing, to be honest.”

Sherlock merely hummed in reply and snuggled even closer.

There was another small noise from the baby, who looked more nonplussed than anything else as it looked back at its parents. The small hands opened and closed, as though seeking something.

“Hello, there, little one,” John said softly, vaguely noticing both women moving away to give them a bit of time on their own, “welcome to the world. You caused a few worries on your way, didn’t you?”

He was smiling as he spoke and held a finger out. It was almost immediately grabbed by the tiny fingers in a grip that was far more sure and stronger than he would’ve expected, even for Sherlock’s child. However you sliced it, and however unexpectedly unproblematic the labour itself had gone, the fact still remained that their little one had decided to arrive a month early. He wasn’t small for
being born that month, admittedly, but comparatively, he would still be smaller and weaker than he ‘ought’ to be.

“He was worth it in the end, though,” Sherlock said quietly, “wasn’t he?”

He sounded as though he wanted, no, needed reassurance on that score. Given how the child had been conceived, that could hardly be considered an unreasonable need.

“He was,” John said, turning his head so he could plant an awkwardly-angled kiss on a sharp cheekbone. “More than worth it. Don’t even mind what else came with it, either. Too much, anyway.”

The ghost of a smile played across cupid bow lips as Sherlock leaned into the kiss. “We never got around to discussing a name.”

“We did. You just turned every single suggestion I’ve come up with. Quite emphatically. Rather rudely, in fact, as I recall.”

“Seems rather pointless to discuss before we knew the gender, in any case.”

“You were the one who brought it up in the first…” He trailed off.

Sherlock looked at him, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Even at the awkward angle, John could see the disbelief. “Just…aching nipples.”

Instead of saying anything, Sherlock managed somehow to push at the doctor’s arms, guiding their son closer to John’s upper body. As soon as it was close enough, instinct guided it and it latched on to one puckered nipple.

John started slightly at that. Not because he was disgusted, though the whole idea of a male breastfeeding still seemed somewhat absurd, but because the actual experience of having someone suckle at his nipple was…nothing like he’d have imagined. Truth to tell, he wouldn’t be able to say what he had imagined, only that this wasn’t it.

Some part of it felt distinctly good, though, even with the decidedly odd sensation of liquid flowing from his chest, and as he gazed at the look of contentment on the baby’s face as it nursed, he couldn’t find it in him to complain.

The nursing went on for some time, both parents content to just watch their new-born. When he detached, he looked at them and gave what might have been a smile but was more likely merely a grimace. Then he yawned and closed his eyes.

They stayed like that for what seemed like a very long time, basking in the quiet and the shared joy and love. John cooed at him while he gently rocked him, and Sherlock watched and ran bony fingers reverentially across every inch of the small body that he could find, including the small but undeniable set of antlers sprouting from the soft skull.

They were all three of them. Safe and sound and whole.

A family at last.

Eventually, though, Sherlock stirred. “We need to get up and go outside.”

“What? Why?”
“Because they need to see him.”

John opened his mouth, though whether to voice disbelief, disagreement or both, he didn’t know.

Sherlock pressed another kiss to his face. “It’s part of the magic. They need to see him to connect with him, and he needs to be connected to them.”

“They’ve all had plenty of time to do that while I was carrying him.”

If he sounded grumpy and defensive about it, what of it? He’d just been through a severely tiring ordeal, to put it extremely mildly, and all he wanted right now was to spend some time with his soon-to-be-husband and his son, before he would likely collapse into sleep for a few hours. Was that too much to ask?

Sherlock paused, once upright. “I can take him on my own,” he offered.

“Like bugger you can.” It was with some considerable difficulty that he did it, but the blond managed to somehow get to his feet on his own, without jostling the bundle in his arms to any great degree. “If he’s going before the whole congregation, then we’re both going to show him off. Together.” He put emphasis on the last word.

He glared at Sherlock when he tried to step forward to help him. Then, realizing, he grimaced then gave the best apologetic smile that he could. It seemed to be understood, another testament to how far they’d come.

Once upright, too, he nodded towards the heap of his clothes. “You could perhaps find something to wrap around my shoulders. It’s going to be rather nippy out there, and that’s putting it mildly.”

“Oh, please. You haven’t been bothered by the temperature for over a month, at least.”

“I’m bothered by it now, and…oh, just at least give me a blanket for him.”

“He doesn’t need it.” Despite those words, Sherlock moved. Not towards the pile of clothes but towards the furs that comprised their bed. There he picked up one of the small, well-worn skins and walked back with it.

John frowned at him.

“Smells of both of us,” Sherlock offered by way of explanation as he wrapped it around the baby, John loosening his hold enough to make it possible.

“Don’t tell me he can’t smell us as it is. God knows I stink after all this.”

“Think of it as his baby blanket, then. Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“I suppose not.” He took a moment to look down at himself. “Bloody hell, I look like crap.”

“You don’t.”

“Cheers, that’s ever so reassuring. Could you at least clean me up a bit before we face the masses?”

“They won’t care.”

“Not the point, you arse. I care.”
John took a breath. He stood…not quite at the lip of the cave, because he would be visible to the outside world there, and he wasn’t quite ready for it.

Would he ever be?

That was the question, wasn’t it? Because it most definitely didn’t feel as though it was merely showing their new-born to the denizens of the forest. It felt as if he was to go out there, on the balcony, to wave and smile at his husband’s subjects, to be accepted by them.

Well, you are royal now, for all intents and purposes. You’ve not quite got the style of old Lizzie, but then again, you haven’t got the look, either, thankfully. And before you start with all this self-doubt and other bull, it’s a bit late to be worrying about whether you’re ready to assume that title and consequent role, mate. You signed onto that a long time ago.

But he’d been thrown into that, that was hardly the same –

Oh, get a grip. You were thrown into a war zone, that didn’t bother you. Are you really going to tell me Captain John H. Watson is brave enough to face battle but not one measly group of people who all want the best for you?

“Piss off,” he muttered.

Sherlock, standing beside him, looked at him oddly but didn’t comment.

“Ready?” was what he asked instead, eyes warm.

John smiled a half-smile. “You tell me. You always seem to know better than I do.” He took another deep breath. “Yeah, okay. I’m ready.”

He was about to step out there when the baritone voice stopped him.

“John?”

He looked up. “Yeah?”

“I love you.”

The doctor stood there for a moment, just assessing the situation and the words. “You know, I think that’s the very first time you actually said it out loud,” he commented, quite calmly.

Sherlock gave him a look that was equal parts hopeful, loving, and fearful. He didn’t say anything, though.

John grinned. “Give over, idiot. I’ve known you do for months now. I might not be the king of deductions like you are, but I’m not that thick, either. I can get the hint without being told, you know. That said, thank you for voicing it.” He paused, reaching out with his free hand to grab hold of a bony hand to squeeze. “Love you, too.”

He took a deep breath. “Right. Shall we get to it, then?”

“John, they’re not going to hurt you. If anything, they’re far keener on you than they’ve – “

“If you finish that sentence, I’ll have confirmation all your intelligence is just for show. You are adored by all of them. Yeah, so they fear you a bit, too, that’s normal. Bloody hell, if it comes to that,
the queen used to scare me as a kid.”

“I don’t believe that.”

John just smiled and winked at that. He gave the hand another loving squeeze. “Okay, I’m ready. Let’s do it.”

Once they did step outside, still hand in hand, he was quite unprepared for just how many people had not only been informed he’d given birth but had decided they wanted to come and see the child for themselves. They’d also managed to arrive in quite a short amount of time, too, but that he could probably brush off as another quirk of folklore creatures.

As he, quite frankly, stared at the gathered…well, multitude, really, he was reminded of the royal family gong onto the balcony, but it was mixed in with vague memories of having watched Bambi at some point as a child.

Well, that’s not all that far off, is it? Just be grateful there’s no annoying owl or rabbit sitting somewhere.

For some reason, however, when he stood there, they didn’t seem frightening. Not as individuals and not as a group, either, even though there were so very many of them. That puzzled him momentarily.

Then realization dawned; he knew them all. Some more closely than others, obviously, but in the months that he’d spent in the forest, both before and after, he’d become acquainted to some extent with most of the denizens of the forest when he’d served as their doctor.

The move to become part of their ruler’s family, in a more solid and official way than he had before didn’t seem too much of a stretch, or at least not a stretch that was insurmountable.

In a strange way, it’d probably be harder to go and face Harry.

Oh, gods…he’d have to, wouldn’t he? It was probably the thing he least wanted to do but he owed her, in a way. If not for the way she had treated Clara – the thought of her alone sent a sliver of ice down his spine – he wouldn’t have been down in Cornwall on Midsummer Eve in the first place. Not that that in any way excused what she had done, and neither was he ready to forgive her. To be honest, he was dead certain that he’d never be.

But she was all the family he had left.

He was nudged in the side, gently but pointedly. “Hm?” he said, trying to mask that he’d been spacing out, thinking about his sister.

“I think they’d rather like to…actually see him,” Sherlock said lowly without looking at him, just loud enough for only John to hear him. “Right now, all they can see is the top of his antlers, you’ve got him wrapped up so well.”

Indeed, people did seem to be craning and stretching in persistent efforts get a better look. Nobody was yet saying anything, but it was quite evident that they were slightly

“What, lift him up in the air like some sort of lion cub, you mean?”

Sherlock looked at him, nonplussed. “What?”
“Never mind.” He shook his hand to shift his bundle, gently rocking it until his little boy stopped the tiny, unhappy noises he was making. “I’m not sure he’ll have too much energy, at least not before he goes cranky, so perhaps you should do some sort of introduction or whatever else is required or expected in these events.”

“It’s not as much for their benefit as it is for his.”

“Still.” He got no argument against it, which was a bit surprising.

While Sherlock did just that, John took a moment to look at his little boy as he rocked him, the eyes unusually open and alert, studying him in a way that was eerily reminiscent of his father, even if it didn’t have the same sharp edge, instead being merely curious. He shouldn’t be quite this alert, though, John felt sure.

Was that due to the magic, too? After all, there’d been no question that the magic had been a factor when he’d been in the womb. That was what the miniature version of the tree had been there for, so it wasn’t that big a leap.

A small hand grasped at air slowly but determinedly and he reached a finger down that was immediately grasped.

It was still frankly mindboggling to think that the tiny creature in his arms, antlers, too-bright eyes, soft ears and all, was his. That he had come from inside John’s stomach, had grown there and was now in his arms, a living, breathing, perfect impossibility.

_I love you. I’ve just met you and I love you so very much already. More than you will ever know. More than I think my heart can bear. But by god, I wouldn’t be without you for the world._

Right now, all he wanted was to be with his little boy, if he was being honest. Just have some time, on his own, getting to know him a bit better without anyone else there, and that didn’t just include the multitude in front of him.

There were still so many questions that he had yet to get any real answer to and even more that he just wanted to check up for himself. Chief among them were the ones pertaining to their little son. Mrs. Hudson had been most unhelpful in that regard, and Sherlock hadn’t been much better.

He got another nudge.

“Are you ready, love?” he whispered and got a glare for his trouble. Then again, what else had he expected?

Sherlock, acting quickly, got the makeshift blanket out of the way so John could turn the baby while still managing somehow to keep the best possible grip on him. Then, after checking that he was alright so far, he held him up, carefully.

There wasn’t a cheer when he did so. Nevertheless, something akin to a whoosh swept through the gathered people. Every eye seemed trained on what had to be a little, pinkish blob with some branches attached to his head, who looked back at them unfazed, but it seemed to be in interest rather than suspicion.

The silence was still somewhat disconcerting, however, but Sherlock wasn’t saying anything to explain or rectify it, so John resolved to stand his ground and see what’d happen.

An answer to that came relatively quickly; the whoosh that he’d heard go through the crowd came again. This time, though, it wasn’t heard as it evidently went through them and towards him. It
couldn’t even really be said to be felt, at least not physically. It was more accurate to say that it was felt inside, in the parts of him tied to the magic.

In fact, it swept through him, touching on all those areas inside, so hard that it would’ve bowled him over if it hadn’t at the same time grounded him as solidly as if he’d sprouted roots himself right then and there.

The baby boy stretched out all its little limbs at once. Then he let out a noise not dissimilar to the first one he’d ever used and yet…it felt as though that had been a trickle of water to create a stream, whereas this was a flood to conjure a tidal wave.

To John, it was overwhelming, disconcerting, breath-taking, and all-encompassing all at once.

And the gathered throng responded to it as one, not through words or action, but simply through themselves, somehow, impossible to explain sufficiently.

Quite frankly, how he didn’t drop to his knees or keel over, he had no idea.

An arm slid around his still bloated waistline, squeezing reassuringly as it steadied him, for which he was very grateful.

John glanced upwards. He thought he’d heard another ‘voice’ join the rest and, once he’d looked up, he got confirmation that Sherlock had indeed opened his mouth to join in, adding his harmony to that of all the others.

A part of the doctor felt somewhat isolated by not knowing how to join in, too, or even if he could; the knowledge that for all his interactions and growing closer, in this, something so unequivocally important in his little boy’s life and for that of everyone else, he was still a stranger hurt more than he wanted to admit.

Another part was simply awed by the experience, by the fact that this was possible, first of all, and secondly, that he was allowed to witness it. It felt more special, and much more intimate, than even the solstice dances.

Eventually, the ‘sound’ faded to a residual non-auditory hum. It sang in his bones like the merest echo of what he’d felt the times he’d gone to visit the oak tree.

The little boy twitched then let out a proper, regular sort of noise. It was a sneezing hiccup and John brought him back down to nestle, protected, in his arms. The pale blue eyes looked back at him, content and sleepy. He yawned as his eyes began to droop.

Sherlock pulled him in closer, even though their sides were already practically flush. He dropped a kiss unto the top of the blond’s head and it occurred to John that he’d struggle to recall Sherlock being quite this openly affectionate when they were out in public.

The crowd had fallen silent again, all looking at them. This time, though, they weren’t looking at the bundle in his arms. Rather, they were looking, somehow expectantly, at him.

He glanced up at Sherlock again for answers, daft though that sounded.

However, the brunet did deign to explain himself this time. Somewhat, at least.

“They know you can’t be part of what has just happened, not properly,” he offered by way of explanation. “But they want you to be part, regardless.”
“But how?” He didn’t know.

Annoyingly, though not entirely unexpectedly, Sherlock didn’t provide any sort of answer.

*Right, pull yourself together, Watson. It’s not the first time you’ve been in front of a lot of people, expected to speak, and this time, there ain’t any risk of you accidentally cutting off anything that should stay on.*

He unconsciously squared his shoulders and straightened his spine. Parade rest was only avoided by virtue of his arms being full.

He smiled. “Thank you,” he started, raising his voice to be more certain of being heard. Not that audibility was too difficult in the almost complete quietness around them. Then he paused.

“I don’t really know what to say here, or what to do, which is hardly new or surprising, really, but I want to say thank you to you all, at least. For coming and for helping my, no, *our* little son through this part as well, helping to give him the best possible start in life.”

He paused again, to gather his thoughts and be sure of what he wanted to say. “You’ve all been brilliant while I’ve been here, actually, both before and after, so absolutely brilliant to me. I am very grateful for being welcomed, for feeling welcome through it all.”

“You’re stuck with us now, Watson!” someone shouted, the person hidden in the middle of the crowd. The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn’t place it, at least not enough to be confidently shout a name back.

As if I’m not perfectly aware!” he shouted back. “Wouldn’t have it any other way, though!”

He stole a glance up at Sherlock at that and was surprised to see him looking straight back. He felt his heart skip a beat at the expression he saw there.

The gathered throng seemed to expect something else from him, something more. He had no idea what that was, however. Or perhaps…

Closing his eyes, he tried to turn his attention inwards, to the magic that seemed to simmer below, ebbing and flowing but always just out of reach for him to touch himself, despite the many times he’d attempted to in the months he’d been back, been connected to the tree.

This time, though, maybe he could. Even if it was merely a tendril. Just something that might be enough to communicate with, enough to convey –

There!

He could feel it, tenuous as a gossamer thread but tangible enough to grasp with his mind, somehow. As he did, he tried to sling it out, completely unaware of how he did it.

It didn’t feel strong at all and it would likely have failed…if not for the fact that it was grabbed by not only Sherlock, standing so close beside him, but the entirety of the gathered folklore people, throwing their own threads out anchor his.

They were connecting with him, just like they had with Sherlock and their son earlier. Well, maybe not just like but something connected, still. He let it wash over him and become part of him.

Afterwards, they all went quiet. There was still a faint hum in his bones, though, which didn’t seem to fade away. That only contrasted the silence more starkly.
At the back of his mind, he half-expected a cricket to chirp.

Someone, at the back of the crowd, started to clap. Someone else joined in almost immediately, though, and then another and another. Soon, the entire assembly was clapping, loudly and enthusiastically, people smiling and grinning.

John and Sherlock smiled back.

“Why did they wait so long for that?” John asked, the cacophony enough to ensure that only Sherlock heard him.

“For what?”

“Clapping.”

“Waiting to see what else you might do? I don’t know and frankly, right now, I don’t care much.”

“Sherlock – “

The arm around him tightened momentarily. “You’re about to collapse, John, whether you want to admit it or not. Now that things have been…sorted, for lack of a better word, you need to get some rest.”

“I’m fine, really.”

“Of course. That’s why you’ve locked your knees to keep upright.”

“That’s just soldier’s stance.”

“Right.” A momentary pause. “Who exactly do you think you’re fooling here, John?” The tone of voice was hard to identify but that was perhaps merely due to the noise level.

John sighed. Like it or not, Sherlock had a point, and he was refuting it merely for the sake of being obstinate. He’d been in labour, had delivered his very first baby, had then had to present himself, not just to some well-wishing relatives but an entire community. On top of that, he’d managed to control, however briefly and however much he’d been helped, some of the magic interlacing his very core. To be honest, he should probably have collapsed long before this point.

“Myself, mainly – and even then, I’m doing a frankly pitiful job of it.”

He got another slight squeeze for that. Affection or acknowledgement? Both? Did it matter, really?

“What do I do, then?” he said, almost under his breath, as the applause was dying down. “I don’t imagine I can just turn around and go back inside, can I? Do I wave? Bow? Curtsy?” If the last suggestion was slightly snippy, then what of it?

“Given the state of your legs, never mind you holding our son, I hardly think the last two options wise.”

That was…somewhat more civil an answer than John would’ve expected. Was Sherlock worried?

“A wave will do,” he continued. “For anything else, I will explain to them.”

Once back inside the quiet, the mental safety of their cave, he could admit to himself that Sherlock was right and probably righter than he thought.

He managed to get himself over to their normal sleep space before he sank down, grateful that he’d had the presence of mind to get himself away somewhat from there at some point while in labour. What might have gotten on there anyway had been cleared away by the two women.

His baby boy let out an unhappy sound and John peered down to see what the problem might be.

A few moments later, he had tiny lips locked around his nipple, suckling hungrily yet at the same time, drowsily. The eyes looked alert still, but that, he suspected, was more out of obstinance than anything.

Oh, good lord. If he’s inherited just half Sherlock’s stubbornness, we’re in for a hard time.

He conveniently forgot to lump his own stubbornness, arguably worse than his partner’s, in there.

“A bit overwhelming, wasn’t it?” he said softly, doing his best to focus on the warmth the knowledge that he was able to provide for his child rather than the utter peculiarity of…not so much someone suckling on his nipple as the feeling of liquid coming out of it. “Yeah, I know. It was for me, too. But you seemed to be a hit out there, at any rate.”

The baby didn’t seem to give a damn, which was fair enough, really, considering.

When he eventually pulled off, he didn’t burp. Instead he let out what might be described as the squeak a kitten makes in lieu of a meow. Satisfied and tired, the eyes finally started to slip shut.

John was, quite frankly, a little thrown by the sound. “Wonder if you’ll ever give me a human noise,” he mused.

He felt his own eyes start to slide but fought it. He couldn’t fall asleep. Not yet. He had a responsibility now, one which he could only relinquish once Sherlock was there to take over and even then…

No, there’s no ‘even then’. He’s proven his dedication, and you’re nothing but a nagging berk of an utter arse-wipe if you continue to disbelieve him.

That was true. But that still meant he needed to wait, to…

When Sherlock walked back in, a good while later – he had to go through quite a lot of well-wishing – it was to find his blond doctor leaning against the wall of the cave, legs akimbo and head lolling to the side as he snored. Despite the otherwise completely relaxed posture, the grip he had on their sleeping child was firm and secure.

Sherlock stopped, whatever rant he’d had on his lips withering to specks of ash on them at the sight of his little family, sleeping soundly, trustingly, in his cave.

Careful not to make a noise, lest he wake them, he came the rest of the way into the cave and sat
himself down, so he could look without disturbing them. He sat with his hands steepled under his chins, his elbows resting on the knees of his crossed legs, content to stay there and watch.

A sense of serenity descended upon the mostly enclosed space.

When their little one began to make noise around two hours later, he got up as quietly as possible and managed to lift him out of John’s secure grip. The blond wasn’t keen on letting go, though, not even in sleep.

“Shush, John, it’s alright. I’ve got him. It’s okay.”

Once he got him safely in his own arms, he paused, taken by the vividness of the blue eyes. The boy wasn’t done being unhappy, though, and, after checking that he wasn’t hungry, Sherlock rocked him as he moved away to a little side-passage in the cave, so that his partner wouldn’t be disturbed in his well-earned sleep.

It might also, just a tiny bit, have something to do with wanting a bit of alone time with his son, as well.

Surprisingly, it didn’t take too long for him to calm the child down, and soon they were just looking at each other, one with a look of sleepy curiosity, as though attempting to suss the mass above him, the other with one of unadulterated, besotted love.

Sherlock bent down to plant the softest, most loving, lingering kiss on the soft forehead. “Thank you,” he whispered, his voice earnest. “I don’t think your…your dad would have ever come back to me if not for you, and even then…just the thought of not having you, either of you here…” The thought alone made his throat constrict tightly, his heart stutter.

Not that he meant he purely loved his child because it had given him John or vice versa. Such a notion was nothing short of ludicrous, whatever it seemed John had believed once. It was merely an added layer; the knowledge that this impossibility, this absolutely wondrous thing that hadn’t happened in living memory in this forest, which was saying quite a lot, all things considered, had indeed occurred and to him filled him with a sense of astonishment and gratefulness as well as love.

He had what he’d never thought he’d want, and he would struggle to remember feeling as…fulfilled as of this moment.

“Sherlock?” John’s voice sounded insistent, as though he’d called more than once, and slightly worried. Had quite a lot of time passed? Possibly.

“Hm?” He didn’t lift his gaze.

“You’re dripping on him, love,” the blond said, laying a hand on the crook of his partner’s arm.

“It’s not exactly the heat of summer.”

“That’s…not really what I meant.” The hand moved to run a finger over a cheek then held it right in front of pale eyes.

It was more than a little wet.

An arm slid around the slim waist of the taller man, pulling him close, carefully. John then rested his chin on a shoulder, with his cheek pressing lightly against the long neck. Sherlock hummed and

“Why do you insist on doing this?”
“Doing what?”

“Trying to manage your emotions on your own.”

“I don’t.”

“You do more times than you need to.” He got no argument this time and fell quiet for a moment.

“That said, I’m glad you got a bit of time with him, on your own.”

“I’ll get plenty of time for later, too.” The implications were hardly subtle.

“Very true,” John agreed, a contented smile spreading over his face.

Another pause. “You know, we do need to agree on a name for him.”

“He won’t care for at least some time yet.”

“Not the point, you twit. I’m not going to call him ‘baby’, ‘son’ or ‘child’ for half a year or whatever time period you think it won’t matter.”

“Naming ceremonies – “

“Hold significance, yeah, I kinda figured that, ta. Everything has meaning to you lot.”

“You are part of ‘my lot’ now, too,” Sherlock pointed out, turning his head.

“Didn’t grow up here, though. I didn’t say anything about a naming ceremony, which is probably something permanent and meaningful. That reminds me, I looked your name up when browsing through names…fair haired? Of all things?”

Sherlock made a face at that. “Yes, well…I wasn’t quite this dark-haired when I was small.”

“Oh? Blond, were you?”

The answer took just a fraction too long to arrive. “Well…strawberry.”

“You mean…oh, dear lord, you were ginger, weren’t you? Proper ginger and all.” John couldn’t help it, even though he knew he ought to be quiet; he started laughing, his mental image of Sherlock as a child suddenly getting even cuter.

“That’s not funny!”

“It is!” He sobered a bit at his mate’s expression. “Sorry, Sherlock, but it is. More importantly, it’s adorable. How did it get brown, then?”

Sherlock shrugged. “I grew up.”

John didn’t believe that for a second, and not just because Sherlock was entirely too nonchalant about it for it to be remotely plausible. Why would he try and dismiss it like that, though? Probably to underplay or dismiss the underlying, real reason. But there would be really no reason to do either of those, surely? Unless…

His sudden grin seemed to nonplus the taller man, and possibly alarm him, just the tiniest bit. “What?”

“You had it changed! On purpose, you used something to change it permanently.”
“I didn’t!”

“You did!” John was giggling lightly now. “You did it – because Mycroft’s ginger, too!”

He wasn’t quite prepared for the slightly crumbled look in the pale eyes behind the calm, unaffected façade, however.

*Oh. It was because of Mycroft but not because…oh…*

*Gods, I’m such an enormous wanker sometimes!*

He swallowed, then leaned up to plant a kiss on Sherlock’s cheek. “I’m so sorry, love, I didn’t realise. I should have, I know, but – “

“Why should you?” Sherlock asked, interrupting.

“Because I know your brother is about the only one you’ve had a directly harsh word for on a consistent basis. Oh, you’ve called plenty of people idiots, but none are you that dismissive or brutal in your comments towards. Why would that be? Unless you’ve got some particular reason to –

“I have reason to because he’s a world class berk.”

“Who left you when you weren’t ready for him to,” John countered as he held the gaze.

He got no answer to that, which somewhat confirmed his suspicion. How much older were Mycroft?” he asked, voice gentle.

“Time works different for – “

“How much older?”

“A lot. He was grown by the time I was…and Mummy wanted him to…”


Sherlock wouldn’t appreciate being ‘analysed’ like that, and especially not by John, who couldn’t claim to have much knowledge of psychology, at least not academically, outside of what had featured in his studies. What he knew, really knew, he’d picked up along the way through real life. It wasn’t enough to categorically say one thing or another, it was probably fare more complicated and tangled than that, most family business was, and in any case, it wasn’t for him to say.

So, instead he just smiled, hoping his expression would convey things better than his words could.

It seemed to do the trick. Sherlock smiled back, a little quirk of the lips more than anything but definitely there.

“He’ll want to see him,” he said.

“Probably, yes.” In fact, hadn’t Mycroft written exactly that to John in the letter he’d sent along with the tree? Something to that effect, certainly. “That’s not really the issue, though. The question is whether or not you want your brother to see him.”

“You don’t want your sister to.”

John did his best not to bridle at that unexpected comment. It was rather a fair question, after all, all
things considered, and though unexpected, it really oughtn’t have been, given that they’d been discussing Sherlock’s sibling.

“No…I don’t,” he admitted after pausing for possibly a little too long. “Those are hardly the same things. Your brother may be a pompous arse who likes to nose in on everything that isn’t any of his business, I’ll grant you that willingly. However, what he is not is an alcoholic wife-beater who’s been given far too many chances by just everyone they’ve ever known.”

He felt the bile and anger rise inside of him as he uttered the last sentence. Harry had burned so many bridges all around her, again and again. In a way, she was a sorry figure, more to be pitied than hated, with what she had brought her life to. But the thing was, it wasn’t just her own life she’d made such an effort to drag everybody down with her as she tumbled down into her very own hell.

“John…”

The anger grew even stronger. She had attempted to ruin so much of his life already, why should she be allowed anywhere near his new family? She wouldn’t understand but she would take another opportunity to belittle and demean him, and seeing him with a man on his arm, never mind the antlers, that would just about put the tin lid on the –

“John!”

“What?” he said, a snap in his voice. No, more than a snap, he realized.

Sherlock looked at him, meaningfully. More specifically, he looked into his eyes.

“She can’t hurt you now.”

“I know that!” Again, his voice was a snap, but this time, there was no mistaking the crackle. “Oh, bugger. Sorry. Sorry.”

Sherlock managed to get a hand free to cup the side of John’s neck. “Don’t ever apologize for what your sister did. Not to me. You are not to blame. Do you understand?”

John chuckled, not much humour in it. “That’s a bit rich, all things considered, don’t you think?”

”Doesn’t make it less true.”

The doctor had to concede the point. “We’re a right pair, aren’t we?”

A smile ghosted across cupid bow lips. “We are but we’re hardly foolish.”

“I don’t know about that – and don’t say anything along the lines of ‘at least I’m not’ or something similar, you hear?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Sherlock paused as he handed over their little son to his mate. “Rowan.”

“You what? What has a tree got to do with anything all of a sudden?”

“His name. You wanted a name for him. Rowan. Perfectly regular name, but also a symbol of balance, power and healing. Perfect, really, wouldn’t you say?” He had the cheek to look slightly smug.

“Why not some of the other Celtic symbolism trees, then? Going by date of birth, he ought to be named Ash. Rowan was only until the seventh.”
The brunet blinked. “You’ve studied it.”

“Yeah, of course I have. You’re not the only one who likes knowing things, you know. So, why not Ash? That’s associated with healing, too, and thought to be the guardian of children, among other things – and it’s a normal boy’s name, too. Seems just as perfect as Rowan, at any rate.”

“I don’t like the name,” Sherlock said simply, dismissively, as if there was nothing more that needed to be said about it. That wasn’t going to fly, which was plainly evident on the doctor’s unamused face. “It…it’s associated with the connection between the earth and the sky.”

“So? That’s a good thing, I would think.”

Sherlock levelled a must-you-be-this-stupid look at him. “The earth does not purely encompass what’s on its surface, John, keep up.”

It took only a moment for it to click. “Oh…oh, right, I see.”

He had to close his eyes against the images that conjured up, though he managed to banish them again. “No, okay, that…no. Definitely not Ash, then. What about any of the other names we discussed? Or rather, the ones I suggested, and you turned down. You can’t just pick a name out of the blue and make it sound like it’s already been decided. Which, I’ll tell you right now, it’s not.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with Rowan.”

“I don’t see what’s wrong with any of the other names that you refused point blank, either.”

I just explained why.”

John snorted. “No, you didn’t. You gave me a bunch of things associated with the name, that’s not the same thing.”

“It…isn’t far off. I told you, names have meaning, and they go beyond just the one that has carried over for humans. Tree names in particular, as you know, has significance to us.”

Then why didn’t you suggest it earlier? We’ve argued about it often enough, and none of the names I recall you picking was remotely topiary.”

“I only just thought of it.”

“Why do I not even remotely believe that?”

“You have a suspicious mind, John. How you ever worked as a doctor is beyond me.”

“Oi, ta for that. I’m a good doctor and you’ve had use of my skills plenty of times.”

He took a moment to concentrate on rocking a mewling baby back to slumber. “Rowan? Really?” A nod. “Hm. Could be worse, I suppose. I seem to recall ‘Finian’ and ‘Kavon’ among your suggestions. What’s the meaning that’s carried over to regular humans?”

He didn’t even want to bother with the argument. They were regular humans to him as well, now, really.

“Little red one.”

“Makes sense, given the berry and all…oh. You think he’s going to turn out ginger, too?”
Sherlock didn’t answer that. Then again, did he have to?

The thought of that, an antlered toddler with a shock of hair even redder than Demelza’s, sent a pang of something through the blond and he began to smile, quite involuntarily.


“There are always the options of using either the Gaelic version, Caorann, or the old Celtic one, Kair, if you prefer.”

“Caorann…” John said, considering it. “Fits in better with your name, at any rate.”

A sudden spark twinkled in his blue eyes. “Alright. We can call him Rowan or Caorann or whatever. On one condition.”

“Condition?” Sherlock echoed, unconsciously drawing himself up a bit. One would’ve thought he’d gotten used to being challenged a bit. “And what condition would that be, exactly?”

“That he gets a second name. It’s not like he’s getting a surname or anything, so it won’t matter much. I’m thinking Shaun sounds good, how about you?”

“But…Shaun is just another variant of John.”

“I know it is.”

The taller man looked at him as though he’d just declared something incomprehensible. “You’re not that self-centred.”

“No, I’m not. What, are you saying you can’t work it out?”

It was possibly a bit low, goading like that. But it was mainly just a harmless bit of payback and when it seemed to work, he wasn’t about to complain.

“I don’t know the meaning of every name in the world, John.”

“You knew that Shaun was a variant and what, you don’t know the meaning of my name?” He waited a moment, a slightly cheeky smile on his face. “Fine. I’ll tell you. It’s ‘god has been gracious’. Seems fitting, considering who and what you are. What your parents are.” A pause, for emphasis on the last part, the most important part. “What he will be.”

The implications sank in, blooming slowly like a drop of milk unfurling in a cup of black tea.

“John.” That single word, his name, conveying so very much.

The smile changed from cheeky to loving. “It’s true, though, innit?” he asked, though it wasn’t really a question. He got an answering smile.

How about you join Ro and me for some cuddling under the blankets? You can bring the violin, if you like.”

Before he could move away, though, John felt a hand grab his elbow. He turned back and waited for Sherlock to explain.

It took a few moments before he said anything. “No regrets?” was what he finally asked, his voice ever so quiet.
“None,” John answered, with feeling. “Ever.”

He grabbed the hand at his elbow. “There’s nowhere else I would rather be than with my family. The family I chose and the one I love.”

Sherlock followed willingly when John tugged at his hand. He also managed to grab the violin on the way and settled it under his chin, ready for play, as the doctor settled with their boy.

He really needed to insist that someone went and got some proper baby supplies. Like a cot instead of the nest of who-only-knew-what that’d been gathered. Nappies was another one. Lots of things, really, that still needed sorting.

For now, though, things were just perfect, and he was going to enjoy the moment. He closed his eyes.

“Next time, I hope we have a girl. Or two, maybe.”

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**Epilogue**

They made a chair for John. Traditionally, it was made for use only at the major celebrations, but an exception was made, agreed upon by everyone without anyone consulting John, which he couldn’t even claim surprise at, in hindsight.

It arrived not long after John had felt…not so much strong enough to venture out as not too busy to do so, what with looking after a baby who was quite determined to spend as little time as possible sleeping.

Sherlock helped, of course, quite a bit, but for the first few weeks, the blond didn’t see much of the outside world, apart from who and what decided to ‘pop in’ to see him. He now had a much better understanding of why his mother had always looked so tired at that expression.

One day, though, just after he’d managed to get little Ro to sleep after two hours of trying, there was a shout, unintelligible, outside the cave.

Annoyed at whoever had the nerve to make unnecessary noise when he had finally gotten his boy to kip, John had made his way to the entrance.

As he got there, he unconsciously crossed his arms over his chest, placing them so that he didn’t touch his sore nipples. “What’s the big…idea…”

He trailed off as he took in what was in front of him.

“Like the look of it, do you?” said a familiar voice. Out from behind the chair stepped an equally familiar person.

“I thought you people only worked in metal.”

Sindre grinned. “Only what we’re most famous for. Not the same thing. Besides, you never heard of Snow White?”

“I thought I wasn’t to give any credence to such fairy tales,” John shot back, raising an eyebrow,
“though I can’t really say I remember the part of the story where they carve her a chair.”

“Not a chair, a bed. But we all agreed that this was better, in the circumstances.”

“That’s…is that an Eisteddfod chair?” John asked. He could vaguely recall Sherlock sitting in a high-backed chair at the summer solstice and he thought he’d mentally classified it as such.

This looked very much like it, and yet…

The chair was made of what looked like oak, its feet resembling the base of trees, roots and all. Its back was unusually high but broad enough to support the blond’s back and more, topped with the crown of a tree and knobs that resembled acorns, while the armrests curled with the foliage that covered them.

Though that wasn’t the end of the carvings, it was where the tree motifs stopped. It wasn’t overly embroidered as some tourist bric-a-brac from the Black Forest, however, thankfully. Instead it was confined to the back where a stag’s face, complete with antlers, with a single flower and catkin on them, stared back at him, the strands of its throat fur transitioning into a gun and what looked like an asklepian.

There were bare areas left under and around these things. They left the impression that they were not bare by accident but had been deliberately left so to fill in at a later time.

John was only aware that he had moved right up to it when he registered the smooth ridges of the carved wood sliding under his fingers. The wood thrummed in response to his touch.

“You like it, then?”

“I…yes. I do. Very much. It’s quite…” He trailed off as his fingers trailed over the carved asklepian.

“Personal? Oh, yes. That’s the idea, really. Each is made to the specific person that gets it.”

“I haven’t exactly won any poetry competition, though.”

“No, and this isn’t Ireland.”

“But it is the king sitting under oak leaves. Well, sort of.”

“Queen, anyway,” Sindre agreed, which made John do a bit of a doubletake. “What? You’re married, even if you’re still holding out on a proper ceremony. You can hardly be the prince, as that’s the boy sleeping in there, and you cannot have two kings ruling together.”

“Why not?”

“A point.”

There was a pause. Then the blond sighed, heavily. “You’re all referring to me as ‘queen’ already, aren’t you?”

“Most of the time, yes.” The dwarf had the decency to be upfront and honest about it. “If it’s any consolation, it comes with a few privileges and is meant as a badge of honour.”

“It’s not, really, but thank you.” Another pause. “Why bring this chair now, though? We’re past spring equinox, so I can’t see the rush for you to present it to me now rather than at the next celebration.”
The beard parted to indicate Sindre was grinning. “A privilege.”

“You mean – I get to use it whenever I feel like it?” God, that would do wonders for his back.

“Custom and tradition would say you have to be visible, but yes.”

John was about to complain but then he took time to think. So, instead he smiled, a spark lighting in his eyes. “If I’m indeed ‘queen’, then I have the right to alter customs, don’t I?”

He got an answering twinkle from the dwarf. “Oh, aye, lad. Among other things.”

The following Midsummer Eve found the denizens of the forest once again dancing around the most enormous bonfire, though this time, without any human participants.

Neither of their rulers were taking part, either. Sherlock hadn’t deigned to give an explanation and John felt he could justly be excused from participating.

Not that little Ro probably couldn’t have been looked after by someone, possibly Mrs. Hudson. The notion that he could sleep that long was ludicrous.

But John wanted to be there himself, and more importantly, he wanted his son to be there. This solstice in particular was special, to him at least, for several reasons, and so he had brought him, settling them both into his Eisteddfod chair that had swiftly become his favourite piece of furniture, apart from the carved cot another dwarf had brought the same day.

From his cocoon nestled in the doctor’s arms, the blue eyes were watching the proceedings with rapt attention that ought to be a little disconcerting in such a young child, but which John had come to terms with as just being his little boy very quickly.

Sherlock leaned over from where he was more or less sprawled across his own chair. “I can take him for a bit, if you want to join them,” he said with a nod towards the dancers.

“Hm? Oh. No, that’s alright.” He realized what he’d said and felt like kicking himself. “You’re always free to take him, Sherlock, you know, regardless of…I don’t hold exclusive rights on him.”

“No, if he’s comfortable – “

John grumbled and, deftly, rose halfway up to carefully slide the baby boy over in long arms, which cradled the child instinctively.

“There,” he said, sitting back. “Have some quality time with your son. Take advantage of the time he’s the only you’re going to have to worry about.”

As he settled back, his hand found his abdomen, rubbing absently. “I can’t believe you…I said we had to wait.”

“How was I to know?” Sherlock said, his head bent as he played with their son, who made pleased little mews in reply. That shielded his expression from John, but he sounded far too innocent to be believed.

“Oh, piss off. You knew perfectly well, you twat. I’ve half a mind to keep you away from me afterwards, just to get a bit of rest.”
Sherlock’s head snapped up sharply at that and though he tried to hide his expression, John could discern it perfectly well, even in the shadows.

“I was kidding, Sherlock. I wouldn’t. You know that. It’s just…managing one’s going to be tricky enough as it is.”

“We’ve done well so far, though, haven’t we?”

“That we have, love.”

The brunet shifted to have an arm free. He then reached for John’s by this point proud set of antlers, where a few blossoms had sprouted. He plucked one and then brought it down for the blond to see.


“Surge of magic, indication of the bloom of life.”

“Why wasn’t I flowering all throughout my pregnancy, then?”

“Particularly strong surge of magic, John. What time of year is it?”

“Alright, fair point.” The magic really was overwhelming tonight. No wonder that he’d been bowled over the last time. Both metaphorically and somewhat more literally.

Oh. Right.

John grabbed the hand holding the flower and interlaced their fingers. He smiled at the puzzled reaction he got. Rather than say anything straight away, he stretched and captured the cupid bow lips in a soft, loving kiss.

Once they parted, he looked at his partner, eyes shining, with love and sudden moisture.

“Happy anniversary, Sherlock.”

There was no hesitation whatsoever. “Happy anniversary, John.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

And...it's finished. I almost can't believe it. This started out as an experiment, over a year ago, and turned into such a journey for me, and not just because of its length (I considered posting the epilogue separately but decided against it). Thank you to everyone who's taken that journey with me. I hope you've enjoyed yourself, that it's been worth it and that this end here has been at least mostly satisfactory, too. Didn't tie up everything but hopefully enough. :) Thank you again!

One last, final comment on a chapter - my source for Sherlock's info on Rowan trees
Apologies if someone feels cheated their name suggestion didn't get picked. Possible future children, maybe. :)

End Notes

I know next to nothing of Cornwall but I do know there's a genuine celebration of Midsummer called Golowan and there's a lot of mysticism and the like associated with the county. If I've messed up on anything, do let me know.

Feedback is loved and treasured but I'd love you to be civil in any critique :) 

Oh, and the most amazing thing happened; I got fanart for this story. The absolutely wonderful lunasharp drew this for me: https://bill-and-till.tumblr.com/post/173799984010/finally-finished-this-piece-based-on-elphenfan-s (I hope it shows up, I'm not the best at working such things). Isn't it lovely and awesome? :D I'm so happy for it. THANK YOU, luna! :D

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