What the hell does it matter if my words upset him, when he's so obviously out of control?

"I think you know what this is. I think you know that you have an eating disorder. And I think you are scared."

Sherlock blinks at me, his throat still swallowing. He has a wild look in his eyes that I don't like, so I push back against my chair, stand up, and go towards him.
"For in every adult there dwells the child that was, and in every child there lies the adult that will be."
- John Conolly

The anger is making my hands tremble. I clench them to get the shaking to stop.

Sherlock seems unrepentant. Wholly disinterested in the subject at hand, and it's making my anger even worse.

Currently he's attacking the top of a new Horlicks container with the tine of a fork, messily trying to open up the container. His motions seem almost frantic even though his facial expression is one of forced calmness.

I've never seen him actually make himself a beverage before (aside from black coffee, Earl grey tea, or pouring himself the odd cup of water).

An old snippet of conversation flitters into my brain - random and off-putting, and in no way related to the issue at hand:

'Do you have a girlfriend? Someone who feeds you up?'
'Is that what girlfriends do? Feed you up?'

I turn off my mobile. Take in a bit of air.

Debate how to begin.

"You are off, Sherlock. You know that, don't you? Off this case. Lestrade is furious. You're lucky if decides that he wants to work with you ever-"

My voice quavers with emotion and I stop speaking. Sherlock's motions have come to a pause, as if he's actually listening to me somewhat, before he resumes his stabbing at the Horlicks container.

When he speaks, he gives no indication that he's heard anything I've had to say even though I distinctly saw his brief flash of anger at my earlier words.

So it's all an act. This calm disinterest. This deliberate avoidance of the subject at hand.

"Damn foil lids. Those idiots. Absolute cretins. They basically glue them to the-"

"Did you hear what I said? Do you understand the harm you may have caused to this case? Does any of this register?!"

My volume has increased over the last few seconds, and Sherlock closes his eyes briefly as if overwhelmed by the noise. I see him rub his hands back and forth together as if rubbing sticks together to start a camp fire. It's an odd motion - one I haven't seen him do before. But it's something.

It's a reaction.

"Sherlock!"

"I didn't do anything wrong," his voice is soft when he speaks again. Not quite a whisper, but soft.
Something about it seems almost dangerous.

"You didn't do anything wrong?" I repeat slowly, as if trying to ascertain that - yes, that's really what he's said. "You punched a man, Sherlock! A child's parent! For all intents and purposes - a victim in his own right. You broke his nose! There may be real consequences here! There may be charges - do you even understand that?"

Sherlock picks up the Horlicks jar, ignoring me and eyeing the directions.

"Can you just put down the damn drink mix for one bleeding second and deal with this like an adult?!"

My flat mate glares at me. His blue eyes seem fuller and paler in the weak light of the evening. The pupils have constricted and seem small.

He's off put.

"I haven't even had dinner yet, John!"

Some part of me is alarmed at how easily Sherlock thinks a drink of Horlicks constitutes as a possible 'dinner.'

"And that deviates from a normal evening, how?!"

"I haven't had dinner in days, and I deserve to be able to have some dinner! I'm hungry!"

Hungry.

Well, that's a first.

"Which you can have in all but five minutes, Sherlock. After we are done talking about this."

"Well maybe I'm done talking about this now!," he seethes; I reach out to grab his shoulder, to turn him around, to get him to face what he's done and...

His face contorts.

It goes from seemingly disinterested and unconcerned, if somewhat irritable - to a mask of gargoyle-like rage in a matter of seconds. Without meaning to, I suck in a breath. A moment later I am jumping back at the sound of breaking glass.

I look down dumbly and away from Sherlock's line of sight and see Horlicks powder - creamy and pale - coating the floor. Shards of glass, thick and typically unbreakable, lay near Sherlock's feet.

It's only then that I realize: the jar didn't just drop.

He threw it.

He broke the jar deliberately.

He smashed it.

My heart is fluttering in my chest. The look of rage I had seen a moment before in him is rapidly draining away.

I open my mouth to say something - I'm not sure what - when my shoes interact with the edge of a
glass splinter. It generates a scratchy sound against the tile.

"Did I - did I hurt you?," Sherlock clarifies, his eyes closed. Unwilling to look.

I stare down at my legs, and brush at my jeans.

"No, but-," my eyes catch sight of Sherlock's feet. One is turning purple. A curlicue ribbon of red is swirling away from his bare legs. It almost looks too pretty to be blood.

"Don't move, Sherlock."

He doesn't.

I grab the broom from the hall closet and return quickly. Sherlock seems fixed in his position. His arms are wrapped around his midsection.

"I need to clear a pathway first. I'm sorry. I don't want you stepping on any more glass."

It's obvious, and I know it's obvious, but I can't help the clarification.

When I've removed the majority of glass debris and deposits from the kitchen floor, I assess the damage to my friend's limb.

A small pool of blood is outlining Sherlock's feet. His legs have taken on a pale, unnatural chalk colour. A flap of skin hangs apart slightly from his right shin; this is the wound that is generating the majority of the bleeding.

"Can you walk?," I ask tentatively.

He gives me a look.

"I didn't break a bone, John! Of course I can walk," he hisses out at me, his face contorting in pain as he moves.

I usher him into the bathroom, and Sherlock deposits himself into a chair that's been placed under the medicine cabinet. It's wicker, and he's going to bleed on it, and it's unlikely that I'll be able to get all the blood out of it later.

But I could care less about that right now.

I move his dressing gown away, slightly. Gingerly, so as to not generate more pain. His black silk pant leg has been torn, and the skin peaks out in identification of the injury.

"These were my best pajamas," he says moodily. "What a shame."

I shoot him a look and then go to grab the hydrogen peroxide and a bag of cotton balls from under the sink. When I return to his side I begin by saturating one in the solution of antiseptic.

"I don't get it. I really don't get it. Your behaviour has been-," I speak in low tones, inspecting the skin, and getting a butterfly bandage ready for application. As gently as possibly, I press the cotton to the wound and Sherlock sucks in his breath quickly, as if shocked by the sting of the peroxide. "Too shallow for stitches, so no hospital," I mutter. "It should stop bleeding soon."

I keep my hand pressed against Sherlock's leg. It's bleeding quite a bit still so I remind myself that
glass wounds are like that. They are like head wounds: they bleed profusely.

Still, the tremulous movement of my friend in the chair has me concerned.

I place the bandage against his leg, then wrap with additional bleached-white gauze and secure everything down with hospital tape. When I look back up, Sherlock has closed his eyes and he's making panting noises as if he's nauseous.

"John!," the sudden insistence in his voice is unmistakable.

For one brief second, I think he's going to vomit.

"What's wrong? Sherlock? What's wrong?"

This - all of this - is not a response I would have expected for him. He's not phobic of blood, and he's endured far worse physical injuries in the past. And whatever has come over him has come quickly.

"I feel funny. I feel- John!," his voice contains a keening, needful sort of plea. But I have no idea what is going on.

And suddenly he's gasping for air, and the doctor in me is kicking into high gear because even if I don't understand the why's just yet - I know what is happening. As even though I haven't experienced it myself, I've seen it countless times.

He's having a panic attack.

"It's okay," I say with greater calm than I feel. Because it's not, and because his entire body is shaking like a leaf and because two bloody minutes ago - he seemed fine, "head down. Bring your head down. No - don't bring your legs up, you'll make it bleed again. No, just focus on my voice. Take in a shallow breath. Come on, Sherlock. Right, just like that. No - no, just hold it. Not too deep. You're breathing too fast, Sherlock."

He's breathing too rapidly. At this rate, he's going to start hyperventilating; it's then that I realize he's not simply woozy from shock of the injury or the blood loss as I had supposed in the past. He's been steadily becoming more and more anxious over the course of the evening and his deviation in routine was a giant, neon warning sign of this.

And I didn't even see this encroaching. That this attack is just the final culmination of what I didn't see.

Because suddenly: it's here.

"I can't - I can't breathe!"

"Yes, you can! You're having an anxiety attack. A panic attack. I know it feels awful, just awful - but you're going to be okay, Sherlock. I promise. You're not going crazy and you're not dying. Come on, just listen to my voice. It's going to go away soon, and you will feel much-"

Sherlock's head now shakes back and forth in rapid succession.

"No. Nooooo," he wheezes, "can't. breathe. John - help me! Call Mycro-"

His eyes are wide and owlish, and he suddenly looks profoundly younger.

Something twists in my guts when he grabs my hand. Because Sherlock Holmes never just grabs anyone's hand, and never in fear.
I cup my hands and bring them up near his face.

"Just breathe into my hands then, Sherlock. It'll help. It's all about regulating the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in your blood. That's what's worsening the panic and making you hyperventilate - it's just simple biochemistry. And we'll get everything fixed and then you can read up on it, huh? I'll even let you steal my laptop, eh? Come on. That's good - just keep breathing just like that."

I know I'm blathering on and on, but I keep the wording and the pacing even and regulated. I hope the very act of explaining why he's experiencing what he's experiencing will help him through this with minimal anxiety.

For some individuals, it wouldn't make a whit of difference. But Sherlock likes scientific explanations. It's how his mind works. He likes to know the in's and out's of things. And beyond all that - I'm just hoping I can distract him a bit.

Sherlock's hands have grasped onto my wrists now and I can't help but take in how cold and clammy they are.

Suddenly, I feel a surge of protectiveness and faint affection bloom in my core. I push it away and focus on his breathing, instead.

After a few minutes the shaking starts to reduce and his gasping gulps of air diminishes. I unfurl my hands and slowly scootch over to where he's sitting, lowering myself down on to my haunches so that I can look him in the eyes.

It's only then that I realize his eyes are full of tears.

My hand comes up carefully, and finally rests on the small of Sherlock's back. I move my palm in slight clockwise movements and see him brush at his eyes with the back of one curled fist. He starts to calm down a bit, although his face is now infused with pink.

He's...ashamed.

"You don't have to be embarrassed, Sherlock. Panic attacks are-"

Sherlock's entire jaw is clenched.

"That wasn't a panic attack," he says slowly. "Why would I have a panic attack?"

I squint, try to really take him in.

"Okay, well - from where I am standing it sure looked-"

"I've had panic attacks before! I know what they are. What they were, and they were always-"

His lean arms have come to twist around his waist and he brings his legs together until he's almost sitting cross legged in the chair.

"Alright, well - you used to have panic attacks. And I just so happen to think that you may have had another one again tonight. Did you used to have them often when you were younger?"

Sherlock nods. He looks tired as he bites at one thumb nail.

"I used to have really bad attacks when I was a little boy."

Something unfurls in my heart. Not only is the statement unexpected, and terribly honest - but...
"You did? I wouldn't have pegged you for being an anxious kid."

I give a hesitant smile, because the tension in the room right now is so thick it's almost unbearable.

"Why?"

I'm lost.

"Why what? I don't know what you mean."

Sherlock breathes out in a rush. I can hear something layered in the air.

"Why wouldn't you have?" Something that sounds almost like a cry, but spirited away under the typical Sherlock snort of irritation.

"Because you don't seem to get anxious too often. You do and say things that would cause almost anyone else anxiety, except you."

Sherlock looks troubled. Not amused.

"Maybe that's because I'm a sociopath," he says at last, not meeting my eyes.

He sounds different this time too, when he says the word. It doesn't come off as sounding arrogant, or like he's branding the term 'sociopath' about like some twistedly beloved title.

And then, like a thunder clap: I get it.

Damn it, Sherlock.

Why did you take on their labels?

Freak
Psychopath
Sociopath

When they weren't truthful?

"I don't think you are a sociopath. I've never thought that."

The suggestion seems to stymie him, and he's quiet for a moment.

"What do you think I was like when I was a child then? If someone asked you - what would you say?"

I frown at the question. Rub my hands on my thighs.

"I dunno. I'd probably guess that you were much like you are now, I guess. Smaller, of course. Probably just as much a smart alec, I bet."

Sherlock looks at his knees then, letting out a sigh. He doesn't look happy with the analysis even though I kept it brief on purpose.

"I wasn't a bad kid," he whispers a few moments later. "I know everyone thinks I must have always been like this, but I wasn't bad then."

My heart is pounding so strongly now in my chest and I can actually hear the blood swishing
through my skull. The pressure is enormous. It feels almost like the onset of a migraine.

"I never thought you were bad when you were a child, Sherlock," I say carefully. Feeling as if I am walking into emotional land-mine territory, and having no idea why. "Did someone say you were bad as a child?"

He shakes his head slowly, as if uncertain by the movement. But that's his only response.

"I don't think you are bad now, either. If that helps you in any sense."

God - what are you trying to tell me Sherlock?

What are you trying to get out?

"I wasn't bad when I was little, and Toby Thiesen wasn't bad either," he adds a minute later, as if I haven't spoken at all.

I take a few seconds to get my bearing, to actually GET that it's actually Sherlock whose speaking these words. Not one of the children from our recent case from hell. And these nonsensical words feel wrong. They don't fit the puzzle that is Sherlock.

They fit a different puzzle. One I don't want to call by name, for fear of making it true.

An image flashes into my mind...

a child on one of my earliest rotations. Long before the army.

Small little boy, baby face. 4 years old.

Light brown hair, almost red-brown.

Pale skin.

Hazel eyes.

Serious hazel eyes, like an adult's.

Skinny, like Sherlock must have been.

Burn marks between his thighs.

Made with an iron.

I stand up abruptly, feeling suddenly sick, and so I rub my hands through my hair.

My head and back feel sweaty, and Sherlock is looking away from me.

His teeth are gnashing away at his lower bottom lip.

"Sherlock," I whisper. "Do you need to tell me something?"

No sound, no air, no breath. A moment later, his mouth opens - but not for speech. His nose is congested from tears, I realize.

"No," he mutters. "I'm fine."

I grapple with what to say. With how to say 'no, you are not fine - you are assuredly not fine' -
without making him feel like he needs to go on the defensive. Most of all I don't want him to clam up on me. Not now. Not when something is so wrong that every cell in my body is screaming with the weight of it. The truth of it.

"You don't seem fine, Sherlock. You must realize, at some level, that how you're behaving right now is very disturbing. Would naturally be disturbing to me, as your friend."

His teeth have now cut into his bottom lip hard enough that I think he's going to draw blood soon.

"Why does it disturb you that I care about them? That I care about those kids?" his baritone voice is flat. Dead. "That I care about little boys who've been hurt like that? Why does it disturbs you that I can feel something for them? Do you just think I am beyond caring in general?"

A 4 year old with hazel eyes, skinny and sad.

"I know that you care about them. I know that you care about people a great deal more than you let on. I also know that you're aware that's not what I'm talking about right now. That there are other things about your behaviour that make me think that something else is going on."

Sherlock looks to his lap. I clear my throat. Decide to bite the bullet. Ask the hard questions, since no one else ever will.

"Is there a reason - beyond impulsivity - for why you hit Mr. Thiesen this afternoon?"

"What do you mean?" Sherlock asks mockingly. And I suddenly see his mockery for what it is. A veil. A defense against anyone coming too close or seeing too much. "There is a reason for why humans do everything they do, even if the reason is illogical. Even if the reason is simple base emotion, there is a reason."

Sherlock's body is rigid which only pronounces his angularity and thinness as he speaks now. He's also leaning away from me, seemingly subconsciously. His entire composition concerns me.

"But this case seems more personal to you than most. I guess what I am asking Sherlock is... do you understand what these kids went through?"

"What happened to them was awful, John," he hisses. "Isn't that enough?"

"I know that, Sherlock! But it doesn't explain, to me, why-"

"And you think, what? The fact that I am angry about what happened to them means something more? Something's wrong with me too? Because I'm Sherlock Holmes, and I'm not supposed to feel anything for anyone?"

"I don't think there is anything wrong with those children, Sherlock! I certainly don't think there is anything wrong with you for being upset about what happened to them; on the contrary! And if you are asking me if I think there is something wrong here, with this case, let me only say this once. That I certainly don't in hell believe that someone is somehow less of a person, less worthy or less able to receive love - if they've been hurt in that way. Only the abusers are wrong. Not their victims. Never their victims."

Sherlock's lips are now pulled tight like the strings on his Stradivarius.

I pick my next words carefully.

"You typically are able to better reign in your anger. Especially if it is likely to get you booted from a
case. But you didn't - or couldn't - on this case, and that leads me to think that there is something very specific about this case that is making it hard for you to emotionally deal with whatever you are dealing with right now."

Sherlock's face is tight. The muscles in his arms stand out like cords. Corded, twine musculature. No fat.

When he finally speaks he looks me straight in the eye. His eyes are cold and blank and hauntingly dissociative.

"You think someone raped me too. When I was a little boy. Just like Toby."

It's not a question but a statement.

I try to swallow down the ache in my throat at his pronouncement. At the rawness of the words. At the ugliness of the sheer possibility that something like that could have happened to him.

It's hard.

"I've considered that as a reason for your behaviour tonight, yes Sherlock."

Sherlock's eyes are glistening and his mouth is contorted into something barely holding back a scream. But he stays completely silent, his chest rising and falling as if even breathing requires considerable strength for him.

"I think it's a possibility that I didn't want to consider for this entire case, to be honest - but one that makes sense given your behaviour with the children, your anger with Toby's father, your panic tonight. And if it's true - and I want nothing more for me to be wrong here, please know that - but if it's true it explains a lot. About you. It makes sense. For why you've struggled with some of the things you've struggled with for so long. For why you push everyone away."

"'Sense'?," and his eyes are angry and hard, but when he speaks, it sounds like a sob, "How does it make sense? In your professional opinion, how would something like that explain me away? Go on! You tell me how something like that makes sense! How it could ever make sense, Doctor Watson!"

And it's then that I realize: I've not insulted him.

No.

The look in his eyes, the horror-

Oh god.

It's true.

You took a chance, John.

A chance.

A shot in the dark.

But you didn't miss, did you?

You got it in one.

I have never felt less pleased with myself for being right.
"So tell me! Go ahead. How does something like that define "someone like me"? How do you think I've struggled all these years?"

My throat is paper. It's dry and it's parched and I feel like my knees have turned to jelly.

"I never said that something like that defined you, Sherlock. Or could define you," I say slowly, knowing that any wrong word right now could set off a chain reaction of emotions that neither of us is prepared to face yet.

Stay calm, stay calm.

Don't let this get out of hand.

"You said it made sense!"

And - God - he looks like a wounded animal. He actually looks like I've betrayed him.

So risks be damned.

I just can't sit by and be quiet when he's so clearly hurting.

"Because it does! Because you don't take care of your physical body, Sherlock. You push anyone away who could possibly be interested in having a romantic relationship with you. Your eating is atrocious. It's like you try to keep yourself underweight, because I know you get hungry and I know you ignore that hunger! You ridicule others when they express an interest in anything sexual, as if the very idea is something beneath you. Need I continue?"

"I just can't get them out of my head, John. That's what I was going to tell you. That's all it is. But you don't believe that, do you? If I say that - if I tell you that's all it is - will you think I'm lying?"

And Sally Donovan calls him a psychopath...

God, what did even that label, that slur alone - do to him?

Sherlock's face is made of stone and I have no idea what to say any longer. The fact that he's looking at me with an almost desperate need for a response has me unnerved.

"Answer me! You brought this up! You had to know! So answer me! If I tell you that nothing happened to me - that I was never hurt like that - will you believe me? If I promise you that I'm speaking the truth?"

My throat is choked and I don't want to hurt him. He's the last person in the world I want to hurt.

Which is why I can't lie to him.

"No, Sherlock."

He suddenly looks so crestfallen, I think he's going to cry.

"I don't believe that 'nothing' happened at all. I think you very badly want to convince me of that, and you very badly want that to be the case, but I don't think that's the truth."

Sherlock suddenly looks furious with me, and a small part of me is almost fearful of his response. Especially considering I've said far more than I had ever intended tonight. More than I think he may be able to cope with, and so all I can do now is dumbly watch him as he closes his eyes, clutches his hands together.
After a moment, he tries to speak again. And I know right away what he's doing.

He's changing tactics.

And he's avoiding what he doesn't want to face.

"I want to go to bed, John."

I help him to his room.

He limps on his leg, and leans into my shoulder as I help him up the stairs.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------

My mind is a whirlwind of activity as I help Sherlock to his bed.

"There's likely to be some swelling around the site of the injury. But if it feels hot at any time-"

"You said that already," Sherlock says quietly.

"Because it's important. If you get an infection, in a deep glass wound - it could advance quickly. Yellowing is a bad sign too, so I'll apply some Polyspor in a few hours, okay?"

I get no verbal response. I don't even get a nod.

I bring over an extra duvet and put it around my flatmate. Once the main room light has been turned off, I can see the blackened smudging of exhaustion under Sherlock's eyes with greater pronouncement.

He really didn't get much sleep during this case. Almost no sleep. And no food.

"One last thing," - and I'm stalling, I know it. But he's hurting, and I know he's hurting. And I hate it.

"Do you think you might start listening to me now when I tell you that you need to get more sleep? This whole...incident...could have been avoided with rest. Minimized, most certainly. You must realize that."

Sherlock shakes his head, petulant to the bone.

"It couldn't have?," I clarify.

"I was too angry," he mumbles.

Which is really not that specific a response. No doubt he was furious at Kevin Thiesen.

Lestrade had to restrain him.

I've never seen Sherlock angrier.

"I get it. Loud and clear. You need to sleep now, and you don't want to talk. Certainly not to me," I say resolutely. "If, however, you decide that you want to explain yourself then I will listen. I will sit down and I will listen, and I will do my best to understand. But I'm not talking in circles around this issue, Sherlock. I'm not going to pretend something so serious never happened."

He makes no motion, no sound.

Sherlock has literally curled in upon himself.
"Sherlock - about earlier, I'm sorry if you thought -" 

He pulls the duvet up to his neck now. Creating a physical barrier.

"I'm sorry I got so angry. I'll wash the floor in the morning, John. I'll make sure I get all the glass."

And like that - just like that - I've been dismissed by Sherlock Holmes.

By promises of house work, no less.
At five in the morning I awake suddenly, my heart pulsing in my mouth. I sit up abruptly and realize my body feels damp.

Sweat.

And a lot of it. But I feel cold.

There are no accompanying memories of Afghanistan, however, and I scrunch up in the bed, clenching and unclenching my hands. Trying to force relaxation into my body. I almost laugh at the irony there: force, and relaxation.

Force can never generate a state of relaxation. It generates the opposite.


Sherlock is playing a piece I'm not familiar with, which doesn't surprise me given my relative lack of musical instruction and knowledge. But the music is ratcheting up my sense of unease, low in my gut. It sounds so mournful.

I slip from my covers and pad over to the hallway, stepping lightly down the staircase before I reach the bottom. I drop downwards and listen to the score, not wanting to interrupt his playing.

After a few minutes, my limbs feel heavy with dread and the music slows to a stop.

"You are not disrupting me," my friend says softly from around the corner. "You don't have to sit out in the hall."

I sigh and get to my feet, giving him an awkward smile as I enter the living room before depositing myself down into the loveseat and repositioning the Union Jack pillow. I try not to study him. Not overtly, at any rate. I focus my attention across to the battered wall. To the chrome yellow smiley face on the wall.

I try not to treat him differently from normal but the fact that I'm so concerned with giving him his space probably indicates that I am.

It's very hard to know what to do. Especially when I'm a lousy actor. My emotions play on my face easily. And anger is one of the heavier emotions I'm feeling tonight, but the anger could never be with him. Not on this issue. I feel sick inside.

"I didn't think I was playing very loudly. I apologize if I woke you up," Sherlock mentions again, his line of sight connecting with my face - trying to read me.

I shake my head.
"You didn't. Wake me up, I mean. I couldn't sleep, I guess. Neither could you from the look of things."

Sherlock doesn't respond. He merely turns slightly away from me, his shoulders drawn high. He's holding the Stradivarius in his hands very stiffly. Tracing the lines of the instrument softly, as if it were a pet. A living creature.

"Sherlock," I say uncomfortably, suddenly irritated by my discomfiture. I don't know what to do, I don't even know if he needs anything I can provide, but I don't want to pretend that everything is okay when we both know that's really not true.

"How should I-"

I stop. I really am bad at this.

Dealing with this.

I can calm a person whose been shot, sure. I can help set a bone, or get a soldier through the pain of re-popping in a dislocated shoulder. I can even deal with screaming and tears and excessive displays of pain when the pain is physical... But I'm not used to pain of this nature. And it is of a different nature. It seems less clinical, harder to name, harder to speak about. Harder to think about. It shouldn't be. The stigma of if partly lies in the fact that no one even wants to comprehend that such events occur.

I wonder if that's partly what makes it so much more a crime. The fact that the sickness it invokes - even in those not directly victimized - makes people want to deny, to forget, to run away from the very idea of the subject.

I glance down at my hands, feeling a fresh surge of shame at this idea and at my own response. Because if I feel like this, then how in the world is he-

"I don't like this," Sherlock breaths. His voice has taken on an edge of - something - some strange emotional quality I've never heard from him before. So rarely does he even become emotionally rattled, but now-

"Neither do I," I start, honestly. Honesty is never the wrong way to proceed. If I can't name something, can't grasp it, can't conceive of the ugliness of a situation, I can still be honest with him about who I am and not turn away. "What do you want me to do?"

Sherlock frowns, stares at the violin. He looks confused, as if I've spoken in a foreign language.

"You don't need to do anything, John."

"Sherlock," I whisper, "I can't just ignore-"

"Why not? I've known you for years without you knowing any of this, and I was just fine."

That bite. That acid. I heard it only marginally before but it is back in fine form now. Crisper than before. Of course, to be fair, he was previously panicking. Now the panic has abated and all we are left with is an overlay of shame that is so wrong coming from him, since he's the one hurting. That - and a newfound willingness to push me away. Not because it's me. I know that. I know it isn't because it's me; it's because the subject is this. This subject and these memories.

"Why couldn't you leave it alone?" he exhales at last.
"Because I am your friend, Sherlock."

The frown deepens. Sherlock seems to want to say something but stops himself before speaking aloud.

"What?," I test. I might not like the rawness of his tone, but I'll get further with him if he doesn't sensor himself right now.

"If you are my friend, then you'll put it out of your mind."

I take in a breath, hold it. My heart is pounding violently against my ribcage.

"How does that prove my friendship to you? Hmm? To ignore something like this?"

Sherlock sits down in the opposing chair.

"Because I requested you to put it aside. Because I didn't want you to know in the first place!"

"Why does my knowing upset you so much?"

Sherlock swallows, his adam's apple bulging, holding, before pressing back down amidst a sea of milky white flesh.

"John-"

I wait patiently for his response.

"I don't know," he breathes, suddenly seeming very tired. "It's not rational. I know that."

I can feel my eyebrows raise in surprise.

"I don't think that's entirely true," I try, carefully.

Sherlock places his bow on the side table.

He looks almost confused.

He is so used to looking at every occurrence in an emotionally removed way. He's so used to pretending that emotions don't hold sway over his own being, that I am starting to suspect he's not very good at understanding his own emotional states when they do grab hold of him.

"Maybe you feel ashamed? Not that you should, but-"

"Why should I be ashamed?," Sherlock hisses suddenly, eyes flashing darkly. His mouth is contorted as if I had called him an ugly name. As if I've hurt his feelings.

"You shouldn't. Not at all. But many people who have experienced," and I hesitate to name it, I hesitate to call it by its correct name - rape, childhood rape, "abuse, as you did, often feel some measure of shame."

Sherlock rubs the soles of his palms against his knees. I wonder if his palms are sweaty. He so rarely breaks a sweat in the most extreme of circumstances - even when life or limb is on the line.

He's also not meeting my eyes.

"Why shame?," he says quietly. "Why do they feel shame?"
The question is so maddeningly childlike that my breath catches in my throat. I force it out a moment later, thankful he's talking to me at all.

If anything, I expected him to run off. Or ignore me. Petulantly ignore me until the weeks passed and the tension became so severe that he'd force me into reticence. A small part of me worried that he'd actually leave Baker street. It was a fleeting thought, but it was there.

"The victims, you mean? Why should they feel shame?," I clarify.

Sherlock winces, but nods, and I mentally berate myself for using that word at all. Victim. Sherlock would certainly not want me to see him that way.

I consider how to proceed.

"You must have read up on the psychology of those who have been hurt that way," I begin cautiously, feeling as if any wrong word might set my temperamental flatmate off. "Especially in childhood. Those are such important years, emotionally more than anything else. You're still forming your judgements about morality then. About right and wrong, and it's easy to prey on a child. It's easier to make a child feel complicit in something that's wrong, but also easier to convince them that they've somehow contributed to the crime. That they've somehow earned it."

"Mmm," he agrees, "so you think I'd reason through this sort of crime like a child? I'm flattered, John, real-"

"No," I growl, my voice low and commanding him to listen. "You know that's not what I'm talking about at all. You know that's not what I mean."

"Perhaps it's because I'm poor with emotions in general. Evidence yes, I can sort out the linear steps of a murder. But I rely on evidence to indicate sentiment. Emotions confuse me," he states cleanly, because this is now familiar territory. His inability to 'get' emotions is nothing new. Or so says Sherlock. I have my own reservations about how little he truly 'gets.'

And what of sentiment?

I can't help but wonder if he's putting his own feelings into the 'sentiment' camp. It would be an easy way of claiming an inability to discuss the matter at hand. He can't discuss emotions if he doesn't have any.

"You might not always understand your emotions, Sherlock, but don't try to tell me you don't have any. Emotions are part of what make us human..."

His jaw clenches and I realize I may have inadvertently insulted him.

"It's not healthy to ignore them. To supress them. That's all I'm saying."

He sits up straighter in his chair, scowling at the floor.

"I haven't suppressed anything," he spits out.

I consider the minefield here. The bombs that lay in wait with that very pronouncement.

"Well, then I can't be the only person to know about this. Does Mycroft know? About this?"

Sherlock suddenly looks pained. His eyes shift swiftly to the left and harden.

"I take it that's a yes, then?"
My friends' teeth are gritted tightly together now.

"He knows," he admits at last.

"Oh," I respond lamely.

"He saw," Sherlock whispers a moment later. "I know he saw. I know he's aware."

I suddenly feel queasy. Something distant and alarming is clamouring up in my brain, trying to tell me something. A faint feeling of foreboding.

"How," I clear my throat, "how old were you?"

Sherlock looks away. Seems conflicted. I can almost see the gears turning.

"Sherlock. Please tell me. How old were you when it happened?"

His eyes are strange. Steel girders coming down behind those ice-blue eyes. Keeping something terrible out.

"I don't know how to answer that."

It has lingered with him for years. For his whole adult life, likely. His response to the attacks of the children on our most recent case suggest child abuse of his own experience, but it had still been merely a suspicion up until a few hours ago. Mycroft's past comments, however, have indicated a perpetual or long lasting state of celibacy, and for a long time. Something I've always found odd. Not so much for the celibacy, if you want to know the truth. Sherlock is different in so many ways, I could have accepted that in and of itself. What got to me more so was Mycroft's lilted, almost testing tone. His seeming challenge for Sherlock to say something. Anything. To call his bluff. To respond. That is what struck me as odd.

What's more is that even now, as an adult, his attitude towards romance and more strongly - towards sex - remains almost chokingly hostile.

I'm starting to realize that this is the likely reason why.

"Do you mean when it started?"

I wince, feeling horribly slow.

God.

This happened more than once.

"How long?" I ask weakly. Poisoned. "How long did this go on?"

Sherlock draws his legs up to his chest.

"Until public school. I stayed in a dormitory, so it stopped then. For the most part."

"'For the most part'? What does that mean?"

Sherlock's spine is completely rigid. His arms are kept stiffly to his sides, rim rod straight.

"It means I had to come home during summer break."
My whole mind is swirling in pain,
'It means I had to came home...'
Home...
I clear my throat.
"How old were you when you left? 11? 12?"
"9," his response is clipped. "I was accelerated a few years. I had incentive, you see."
His eyes are hostile and something breaks apart in my heart.
"When did it start, Sherlock?"
I've been reduced to speak in the barest of sentences. Although my anger is barely tethered to something I can control, so that is probably for the best.
"I don't know," Sherlock breathes, his voice hitching on the last word. "Not really."
I press my hands against my eyes to clear the congestion. The pressure.
"Do you have difficulty remembering? What is the earliest you can remember?"
He hesitates.
"I was little. Very little. And everything turned blue."
His hands tremble at his sides.
It's then that I realize he's still wearing his jacket.
My throat feels sore.
"What does that mean? That everything "turned blue"?"
Sherlock's lip pinches against his teeth.
"Can you promise? Not to get mad?" he asks, and I realize something is off. I'm reminded of the tone I heard in his voice the previous evening. "I don't want you to get mad."
His voice sounds strange. Oddly regulated. Paced almost robotically.
Definitely dissociative.
"I promise not to get mad at you, Sherlock," I say evenly, trying to keep my fear from showing. My own horror.
"I remember that my pajamas were wet," he says slowly. "There was a full moon, and I became a ghost. And it was blue."
What the hell is going on?
"Sherlock," stay strong. Just keep it together. "What does that mean?"
Sherlock rests his head against his knees in frustration.
"I mean, in my head - I became a ghost. I crawled up the side of the wall. And I looked down, and I could see I was crying. My body was shaking, and I was crying, and then I focused on the moon, and the blueness. The entire room was blue, John. My face, my hands, the dresser. My bear. And then I wasn't scared anymore because if I was a ghost, nothing could hurt me."

I close my eyes.

A bear? A stuffed bear?

Such sentiment.

He hadn't always been so distanced from human emotions, human connection. The need for comfort. He was forced to distance himself, to preserve his sanity.

"What you are describing sounds like classic depersonalization."

"I know. I experienced it a lot back then," he hesitates for a moment. "Sometimes, I still do." I have to strain to hear the admission.

"How old were you when that happened? When everything 'turned blue'?," I whisper. "How old, Sherlock?"

"I must have been about three. I couldn't have been much older."

I feel ill. Gut-sick.

Sherlock seems to be wary of something.

"Mycroft was still at home," he adds a moment later. "He left for school, abroad, shortly before he turned 11 and a half, so I couldn't have been much older than three when it began."

Mycroft?

My head is spinning.

"You said your pajamas were wet. Had you peed the bed?"

Sherlock hesitates.

"Sometimes I did. It made our mother mad. For years, I had to be punished for it. I just didn't learn."

I take his hand gently.

"What does that mean? What did 'punishment' mean?"

He lets out a pent up breath, but seems to be able to speak more freely a few seconds later.

"The hall closet had a lock, so it was ideal. Because mummy never hit. She did, however, think it was a dirty thing. And it was."

"What happened?"

"I would sit in the closet until I dried off. Sometimes for hours. I'd sit with the sheets and it would itch, and it would smell. I would know how dirty and disgusting I was. But it didn't stop it from happening."
Of course it didn't fucking stop it from happening...

Sherlock forces his eyes back to his violin.

"Even after I went away to school, it still happened. I couldn't stop it, as much as I tried. But I didn't share a room, thank God. So I was able to take care of it myself."

His cheeks are furiously pink. Bright, almost hot looking. As if he's been slapped.

I bolster my emotions, and try to offer my best friend some comfort.

"It's not unheard of in children, Sherlock. Sometimes the bladder doesn't-"

"No," he growls. "No. Mummy had me see doctors. Quite a few. Nothing was wrong with me. I was just obstinate."

"I don't think you were obstinate. I think you were frightened."

He seems to doubt my words.

"The doctors said nothing was wrong with me. They said it was something I should have been able to control. That I was just doing it to get attention."

Just because nothing was physically wrong with you doesn't mean everything was okay.

"It can also be triggered by emotional trauma, Sherlock," I say gingerly, a minute later. "It's fairly common in children who have been sexually assaulted. It's fairly well known, in fact."

Sherlock's cheeks are now bright red, his mouth firmly clenched together. He'd rather discuss bed wetting than this subject, apparently.

"It wasn't urine that night anyway."

His voice sounds constricted.

"What?"

"It was semen," he says stiffly, eyes averted to the floor.

I take a deep breath.

"You mean - when you were small? When you thought you were a ghost?"

When you were completely dissociative and thought yourself to be dead?

"Mmm. Yes. That night. I hadn't peed the bed. You asked."

I squeeze his hand so he'll continue.

"I thought he was bleeding. It was warm. Hot. And it was sticky, but my eyes were closed. I thought maybe it was blood, John. I didn't understand. I was scared, and I could taste blood in my mouth."

"You could taste blood in your mouth?," I reiterate dumbly, not knowing if physical abuse was an added dimension in Sherlock's already ugly childhood. Given what he's revealed in the last 24 hours, very little could surprise me at this point.

"I thought it was blood. Maybe it wasn't," he whispers. "I don't think it was."
I have the strongest desire to pull Sherlock close to me, and hug him.

Tell him that it's not always going to hurt this much.

Because I know it must. There's no way that this doesn't hurt.

"I think it was...you know," his voice warbles and I nod.

He doesn't want to name it.

Normally, he has no difficulty discussing sex in a clinical or removed sense.

But this isn't just sex.

This is something obscene.

Cruel.

And highly personal.

"I get it. Do you remember anything else?"

"I only remember bits and pieces. I don't remember actually, well - I don't remember anybody doing anything to me. I just remember mostly the after. The breathing. My crying. Pain. Not being real."

'Not being real.'

Oh, Sherlock.

"There were noises from him too, like crying. Not crying, of course. But I didn't know about sex then," he admits, as if this alone fills him with a sense of mortification. The redness now almost looks painted on his skin, as the rest of his face is white. Paler than usual.

"You were little more than a baby. Of course you didn't know about it."

He doesn't comment on that. Typically, he'd say something patronizing. How he - at three - was light years above the level of an infant.

Which is probably true, of course. But emotionally he was still just a very little child.

"The door opened, and the blue went away and the room turned orange, and I saw my brother's face. He had yellow pajamas on. Dinosaur pajamas. He was holding a glass of milk. He was asking for me. I remember hearing his voice and wanting him to come inside and pick me up and take me back to his room. I wanted the milk. My throat hurt and I wanted the milk. I wanted Mycroft to keep me safe."

Mycroft would have been about ten.

Not the adult I had been hoping for when Sherlock first started speaking.

Not if this was happening when Sherlock was little more than a toddler.

"Mycroft often came to bring me milk," Sherlock reiterates softly. "Sometimes he'd bring two glasses of milk. With Ovaltine. He'd put more in my glass, to make it stronger. I liked it that way. Sometimes he'd even sleep in my bed. After - after it happened. He'd rub my back if I couldn't stop crying."
My thoughts are swirling.

"When you were little, he'd sleep in your bed."

"Of course when I was little! Mycroft never-," and he suddenly looks furious.

I feel faint.

"What about your brother?"

"What about him?," the note of defensiveness hasn't departed.

"Did it happen to Mycroft, too? The abuse?"

Sherlock suddenly looks blank. Then wary. Then agitated.

"Of course not!"

He gets up and moves into the kitchen suddenly, obviously trying to end the conversation.

I follow behind by a few paces, giving him physical space.

"Sherlock, I want to help you. Help you both-"

"You don't need to help "us both"! Nothing would have happened to Mycroft!," Sherlock hisses. "Why would anyone have hurt Mycroft?"

Just like that, I feel sucker punched.

"I don't know! Why would anyone have hurt you?!"

He's moved from defensiveness to anger so suddenly.

Such terrible anger.

He's always seemed angry at Mycroft.

Is this why?

He finally sits down at the table looking spent. Drawn and thin. Hollowed out.

He's always looked thin, but now it seems to be an aching kind of thinness.

I take a seat across from him.

"Tell me. You've got to get it out, Sherlock."

Sherlock's whole body is the very picture of misery.

"He'd bring me milk. Tell me everything was going to be okay."

"But it wasn't. And part of you is still very angry with him. Even now. Is it because he was unable to stop it from happening?"

He seems thrown, lost. Unsure now of what he wants to say.

"He'd bring me milk and sometimes after everyone else had gone to bed, he'd come into my room."
He'd help me change into new clothes. He'd sleep with me," he suddenly flushes a deep red. "You know what I mean. Not in a bad way."

I nod in understanding.

"He'd stay with you, afterwards. Until you fell asleep."

"Yeah," and Sherlock's voice croaks. "Me by the wall, him to the open. To keep me safe. But it was too late. It was always too late."

My heart flutters sadly in my chest.

10 year old Mycroft was burdened with such responsibility, and such fear.

And who knows what the hell he lived through, himself.

"I'm sure he wanted to keep you safe, honey," and the endearment slips out too quickly, too easily, and it's because all of this bloody hurts to even hear about. I can't comprehend how he feels. And knowing that - I take a deep breath, and try to avoid calling attention to the slip. "I'm sure he really wanted to, Sherlock. Even to this day, he seems to be concerned with that very issue. Of keeping you safe."

Sherlock seems to be processing my words hesitantly. As if he is debating their truth.

"But he was only a child too," I add. "He was bigger than you, sure, but he was just a little boy himself."

"I know that! I know how old Mycroft must have been. I can do basic math!"

I give a hesitant nod, because the tension in the room right now is so thick it's almost unbearable.

"It's also unlikely that he wasn't hurt. You realize that, right? Typically, abuse of this sort isn't limited to-"

Sherlock lets out a strained laugh.

"No, no, no John. You've got it all wrong. Mycroft was loved. Adored. No one ever laid a finger on him."

"Sherlock, Mycroft was still - minimally - exposed to an emotionally sick and abusive-"

"He wouldn't have touched Mycroft!"

"Who wouldn't have?"

"Mycroft's father!"

I am confused.

Terribly confused.

"What?"

Sherlock takes a sip of water from his glass. His hands are shaking anew. His eyes fall away from mine.
"I was a bastard child."

"I don't understand. Your parents were married, were they not? And it hardly matters if they weren't, but-"

"No. No. I was a mistake, John! The worst mistake you can make. Our mother had an affair."

Something awful is crystallizing in my mind.

"So you are half brothers."

"Mmm," Sherlock agrees. "To Mycroft's displeasure. You'll never hear him refer to me as anything other than his little brother."

I disregard even telling Sherlock that this is actually a good sign. Showing a willingness to be close, rather than distant.

"So your mother was - what? Married to Mycroft's biological father? Obviously not to your biological father."

"Yes," he breathes harshly, as if the very air itself is heavy. "I never even knew my biological father. I don't even know how well our mother knew my biological father. I don't even know his name."

I don't comment on that.

"So Mycroft's father hurt you. But he didn't hurt Mycroft. Because Mycroft was - what? 'His son'? And he didn't see you the same way? Is that what you are trying to tell me?"

Not a question.

Because something vile is already forming in my mind.

Something that I know is correct as assuredly as I know my own name.

Sherlock's fingertips are white on the glass. He takes another sip of water.

Sometimes pedophiles redirect their perversion onto other children, sparring their own biological children.

"He loved Mycroft. He loved Mycroft properly. So did Mummy. Don't you see, John? Mycroft was planned, and he was proper. He was supposed to be here. They actually had to try for an entire year to have him! I was not supposed to be here. I never should have been here at all. I was the biggest mistake of our mother's life and the biggest shame of the entire Holmes' family."

"You were not a mistake," and my voice is suddenly harsh. Commanding. "You were an innocent little boy!"

"I wasn't innocent-"

"Sherlock!"

"I wasn't innocent!-," and he suddenly bangs his curled fist on the table, spilling the water. "Don't argue with me on that! Mycroft knew, and how our mother knew and no one stopped it because I was the mistake. And how could she protest, really? Say no to him? When she had hurt him so badly? How could she tell him what to do with the pathetic little add-on child that never should have been born in the first place?"
His voice is rising, and all I feel safe to do is stay quiet and let him vent.

"You wanted to hear, didn't you? What he said, when he did it? When he did all those disgusting things to me? When he made me do that with him? You wanted to know?"

I can taste bile.

"Sherlock. Please stop."

Sherlock lets out a garbled, horrible cry-laugh.

"You wanted to know! Last night and this morning! Think talking makes things all better don't you? But you really have no idea!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push you! I just didn't want you to feel-"

"What? Didn't want me to feel ashamed? What the fuck do you know about shame, Dr. Watson? What do you even know about any of it? Of not being deserving enough to cry, to say no, to ask for anything to stop? I was lucky enough that she hadn't gotten rid of me when she could. Everyone knew it. Mycroft knew it!"

I inhale rapidly.

"I don't know anything," I admit quickly, trying to calm him down. "I don't know anything about what it's like to be hurt that way, and to feel like how you must have felt. How you feel."

"Exactly! You just think it's cathartic! You think I need to talk about it?"

I grab his hands, stilling them.

I didn't want to hurt you.

I'm so sorry, Sherlock.

I just didn't want you to think that you had to hide this from me.

Hopefully my eyes say more than my voice ever can.
John is shocked to learn that the abuse that Sherlock experienced is more emotionally complicated than he had previously considered. Mycroft provides sufficient details to fill in the gaps, and a warning too: Sherlock is not ready for a relationship. Sexual or otherwise. John is overwhelmed by the suggestion that he cares for Sherlock romantically.

I emerge from the shower and dress quickly, quietly. The shower was warm, but my insides still feel cold. I actually feel worse than I did last night. Weaker, and so much more concerned.

When I return to the living room to locate my keys and wallet, I notice that Sherlock has fallen asleep on the couch. I pad as silently as I can to retrieve what I need. Gently, I move the Stradivarius off his lap, and pull the afghan throw over his body - grateful when he doesn't stir.

His under-eyes are marked by two half-moons of blue. Almost purple in intensity.

Sherlock looks wan. His face, additionally, looks thinned out more than it ever has before... The ridgeline of the bones of his face are even more prominent now, and the sunken look around his temples is alarming. Without thinking, truly without thinking, my fingertips connect with the bones and I tentatively feel the temple area of his skull, before lightly stroking down to his cheek, and rubbing the pad of my thumb over his face.

My god, Sherlock.

I am so sorry, love.

Quickly, almost as if stung by a wasp, I pull my hand back when my inner dialogue catches up with my physical actions.

What am I doing?!?

Sherlock's lips are dry. His skin is overtly warm. He's probably terribly dehydrated.

I sigh, and scrawl out a quick note for my friend - reminding him to drink at least two glasses of water when he rises - doctor's orders! - before laying it against the coffee table where he is likely to see it upon awakening.

The book store is moderately busy, and I say a silent prayer that I will not be accosted by a sales person as I wander the aisles.

Any other day? Sure.

Just not today.

My eyes scan the rows, based on subject matter.
Philosophy...Physics.

Psychology.

I stop and look at the word - almost as if I cannot grasp its meaning - before turning down the aisle and scanning the books for titles, for themes.

Eventually, I find what I am looking for and turn around, furtively watching others and trying to confirm that I am not, likewise, being watched.

No one around. Good.

The first book that I pick up reads: "Forbidden Relationships: Helping your Partner overcome Childhood Incest" and is a book about, apparently, the romantic issues that often present in a relationship with an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse.

I feel odd even holding it in my hands, because Sherlock and I don't have that kind of relationship and we never will. And yet the chapter headings and the information contained within is quite accurately describing a lot of what I am feeling, romance aside. Because, truthfully, I am feeling frustration. Helplessness. A wordless type of horror. Fear to further discuss the issue. Feel of alienating the sufferer.

Guilt.

Guilt.

I stare at the word, and feel my heart slam into my ribcage.

Sherlock needs help. He needs something more than what I can give him.

A professional, probably.

I put the book into my basket, before looking onwards for additional material. I find a few books on male rape and associated stigma, and decide that they could also be helpful.

When I get to the checkout station the sales girl gives me a warm smile.

"Have you found everything you were looking for today, sir?"

I nod slightly, my smile tight-lipped. Probably more awkward than it should be considering I am not doing anything wrong; I still hand over the materials with an alarming sense of reservation for a person not doing anything wrong.

That right there?

That's shame.

You don't want a perfect stranger to read the titles, to think of the subject...

Or possibly, you don't want her to think that you were the victim of sexual assault.

And if purchasing a few books is too much for you...

How the hell do you think Sherlock feels?
You are just buying books. Books.
You are not doing anything wrong.
So man up, Watson.

Surreptitiously, I watch the girl's smile falter slightly as she scans in the purchases. She has a warm, open face and cannot possibly be more than 19 years of age. Some part of her demeanor reminds me of a young Molly Hooper. Innocent, and very sweet. Eager to help.

I clear my throat, trying to dispel the tension.

"That will be on debit," I say cleanly, before she can pose the question.

The less talking, the better.

"Do you have a Bigley's Buyers Card, sir?"

I shake my head (I do, but it is somewhere in my wallet, and I just want to get out of here), and quickly insert my debit card into the chip machine. The transaction goes through rapidly, and I take the books (now enclosed in a paper bag) from the girl quietly.

"Have a great day, sir," she says almost tentatively, her eyes showing softness and empathy.

I mutter my thank you and return the sentiment, before I hightail it out of the shop. I walk two blocks before I come across a small café; the sign below the awning reads: "Authentic Italian Lattes-Cappuccinos-Espressos and more!" in curlicue script, and the interior of the building is low lit, almost closed off from the street and the hubbub of noise and activity. It seems soothing.

It seems like what I need to get my head in order.

I go inside and order a large mocha and a biscotti, and then sit down at a booth near the back of the establishment. When I have my beverage and treat, I pull the books out of the bag and begin to read.

Three mochas and two biscotti later, I am halfway through the first book - the one on working through romantic relationships with a previous victim of abuse - when my cell phone begins to chirp. I glance down quickly, surprised that Sherlock would be calling me at all. Honestly, I would have bet that he'd want to be left alone for a fair amount of time, just to calm down, and sort his thoughts. Like I seemingly need to do.

When I pull up my text messages a few moments later, however, I internally cringe.

We need to talk - MH

Damnit.

Damn it.

This is what Sherlock would precisely not want. He would not want this aspect of his life to be discussed. Especially not in his absence.

I feel torn on how to proceed.

A good part of me wants to talk to Mycroft. Desperately wants answers.
But another part of me feels extremely protective of Sherlock's emotions, and his right to privacy.

Finally, I text back:

That may not work for me tonight.

I have a pretty good suspicion as to what Mycroft wants to discuss, and I can't help but feel agitated just thinking about how quickly things have devolved in less than a day. Putting the books back into my bag (and wrapping up an extra chocolate biscotti for Sherlock in a separate bag), I nervously tap my fingers against the melamine counter and wait for a response.

Mycroft never drops any issue he feels is of seriousness, and nothing could be much more serious than what happened to Sherlock.

Twenty seconds later, my phone buzzes with a new message:

Please, John. Let me explain - MH

How did he figure it out?

Figure out that I knew? So quickly?

Sherlock and I have gone over the flat for signs of bugs or wires, or general surveillance. We do so rather routinely, and we haven't found anything in quite a long time.

And while CCTV surveillance would merely show that I had visited a bookshop, it wouldn't give any-

No.

Mycroft, you infuriating bastard.

My account! My bank account.

He must have been able to determine what I had purchased.

I charged the books to my debit account rather than paying in cash.

Checking the receipt, I feel an undeniable surge of anger. I can see that the book titles are somewhat modified, and shortened in length, but you can make out the last names of the authors and the basic titles of the purchases. It would be easy enough to search codes if someone were so inclined.

And obsessively observant.

Or obsessively nosy.

I need to get home. - JW

I swallow down the last bit of mocha, now cool, and leave the restaurant hurriedly - just as my phone buzzes again:

I will keep this short - MH

When I get outside, it is dusk, and the lights of the nearby store windows are illuminated in the blue-black of the cooling night. Across the street from the Italian café lies the dark automobile, shiny and awaiting my arrival like a sea serpent waiting for its prey.
I grit my teeth as I reach for the door handle.

There is no way Mycroft will leave me alone, otherwise...

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The driver does not take me to The Diogenes Club. Nor some industrialized building complex.

Instead, we drive up to a cobblestone pathway where manicured hedges dot the driveway. A wrought iron fence surrounds a fairly impressive patchwork of greenery and grass. In the near distance I can see a venetian red brick building, with ivy trellising the exterior.

We pull up to the entrance and as the vehicle stops I see the door open to reveal Mycroft's presence. He watches me carefully, his face looking rather inscrutable.

I pick up my belongings, and angrily follow him inside.

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"You can't just force someone's hand every time you feel like discussing something with them, Mycroft! That's not-"

"In good taste?," he murmurs, his eyes hawkish. Severe.

I let out a small expulsion of breath.

"I need to get home."

He nods, sagely. As if agreeing with my assessment.

"You absolutely need to, is that right?"

"Please don't be an ass!," I growl.

Mycroft's mouth purses into something distinctly off-put as he walks me through the entryway and into a separate room, separated from the hallway by a door that looks fashioned out of crystal. It is an art deco style. I can only guess at what it must have cost: undoubtedly, an exorbitant figure.

"They were the doors from our childhood nursery," he explains, calmly, his line of sight matching up with my own.

"What?," I ask stunned, only starting to realize with any certainty that this home must be, in fact, Mycroft's.

It has a different feel to it than Sherlock's space. It is impeccably tidy, and rather rich in colours and fabrics and materials. It screams wealth to Sherlock's hodgepodge of curios and preserved insect bodies, skulls and knives.

"Beautiful, aren't they?," and Mycroft nods his head towards the detailed art deco door, before opening it up to reveal an impressive study and library, "Sherlock always used to think so. As a child, he would sit with water colours and paint windows, doors, buildings. For a long time, I thought he was committed to becoming an architect. Or an artist."

I stare at the glass as I move inside, marvelling at the detailing.

"That is from your...nursery? Seems a bit-"
Over the top for a children's room.

Mycroft maneuvers into the room and points to a seat where I can sit.

"Mine and Sherlock's, both. We had the same nursery as infants," he laughs, but it sounds sour, and he takes an opposing chesterfield seat for himself, pulling forward a small cart before he settles in to the space. It is a bronze cart, topped with a set of brandy glasses and a decanter.

"Grand Marnier?," and he offers the decanter as a means of confirming my response.

"I've had over a liter of coffee beverages in the last two hours, Mycroft. I don't need any more fluids tonight. But - thank you. I appreciate the offer."

His smile is terse, tight, as he pours out several ounces for himself. When he doesn't speak for a few moments, I start to get antsy.

"Mycroft - please don't drag this out."

Mycroft's eyebrow quirks in question.

"'This'? Which this are you referring to John?"

I feel my hands curl into fists.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be. You know what I'm referring to!"

Mycroft's face studies my own; I feel like I'm being scanned by an x-ray machine.

"Ahh," he says lightly. "So you haven't progressed to having a romantic relationship with my brother yet. Good to know. It does - I admit - alleviate one of my primary anxieties regarding his emotional state."

I suddenly feel very, very dizzy.

"What?," I rasp.

"A romantic relationship," Mycroft repeats more firmly this time. "The start of something skirting a physical relationship. I thought that's what I would be dealing with, but I can see I have jumped the gun, slightly. Not to worry - I wasn't expecting anything excessively intense at this stage. Nothing too extreme, of course. But I was concerned all the same, because Sherlock is not ready for a sexual relationship. Even with you."

I feel my face colour and heat up, and my heart starts to pound wildly.

"Are you deranged?! I am not...having any such relationship with Sherlock!"

Mycroft frowns at his glass, swirling the brandy in a clock-wise direction.

"Are you interested in one?"

I back up in my seat, almost alarmed, and close my eyes. I then count to 10, backwards, before continuing on.

"You are insane," I get out - sounding more angry than anything else, even though I feel a keening need to cry.
"Is that so?," he asks almost placidly. "It is "insane" of me to consider the possibility that you care intensely about my brother? Have feelings for him?"

"Of course I care about him intensely! He's my best friend! But I don't want to have se-," I stop abruptly. "I'm not gay, Mycroft. I care about your brother, yes. But I will not be pushing him into a sexual relationship anytime soon."

Mycroft nods, then picks up a notepad from his paper.

"How was the book? By a Dr. Jeffery Issacs, was it? The one on assisting a romantic or significant other through," and he looks back to his pad, "the 'trauma of childhood incest and sexual abuse'? Interesting choice of reading material for a man not interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with Sherlock."

I close my eyes yet again; I don't even want to look at his face right now.

"You are not even denying what happened?," I gasp, feeling hollowed out. My eyes are stinging. "You are not even pretending that you don't know why I got those books?" My eyes reopen, but the scene before me is blurred by the tears that have flooded my sight.

"How can you be so calm about this?"

Mycroft takes an additional sip of alcohol.

"When does denying truths make a situation better for anyone?"

I stand up suddenly, furious.

"You cannot be serious! I had...no idea, Mycroft! No idea that he was in that much pain! We work on the most horrific cases, but you didn't even bother to give me a heads up. To let me know what might tip him over the edge!"

"And why should I have done so? Was it my duty to inform you of Sherlock's dirtiest and most closely held secrets? Was that my brotherly right? To go behind his back and talk to you about all the dark things of his past? Things, mind you, he always wanted to keep hidden from the world?"

I move quickly into his space, my chest squeezing horribly.

If he keeps this act up for much longer, I am going to have a heart attack.

As if stands, I feel as if I may faint any moment now.

"Dirty? That wasn't Sherlock's dirty secret! That was your father's sick perversion! And - damn you, Mycroft! - you just sit there as if this situation - my knowing this disgusting, horrific history! - is just some niggling annoyance in your day! As if your own brother - your own little brother - is somehow just mildly put out by this! As if it is a nothing thing - something that hasn't impacted his entire adult life!"

Mycroft puts down his drink.

"It hasn't impacted his entire life. Sherlock's performed admirably, given what he had to live through."

I feel like throwing something.

"Admirably? He pushes EVERYONE away! He insults people to ensure that no one gets too close.
He treats his physical body as if it is of absolutely no importance. Only his mind matters to him, and even that is something that he has honed into a machine so that he can delete any piece of information he doesn't want to remember. But the human mind doesn't work that way, Mycroft! You think it hasn't impacted his life? Who would he be today if he hadn't lived through what he had lived through?! He might have become a husband, or a father! Or maybe - he would have just been happy!"

"Do you think your 'what-if's' helps matters, John? To ask those sorts of questions? He coped as well as he could cope!"

I suddenly feel the heat and rage drain from my body, like water swirling down a drain. Mycroft's tone, his body language, his words - are all defensive.

He is defending Sherlock. He is defending Sherlock's at-times off-putting mannerisms. He is defending the very fact that my best friend is so caustically reactive, and secretive.

He is defending the wounded brother he could never save, and all at once I feel exhausted.

"I realize that. I do," and I pause for a moment, to get a bit of oxygen into my cells. "And - God - I am not criticizing Sherlock. I'm not. I just had no idea. I didn't even consider that he had been hurt like that."

Mycroft seems to study me for a moment, unsure of how to proceed.

"Did he ever get help?," I ask suddenly, needing to know. Needing to hear the answer.

"As soon as I had the means to remove him from that situation, I did so, John. When I came of age, I was able to access a certain amount of my trust fund, and I moved away from the family estate. 6 months later, I ensured that Sherlock was with me. So yes, he got help. I got him out of that home!"

The defensiveness has not abated. If anything, it has increased. I push my fingertips against my eyes, trying to relieve the pressure forming in my skull.

"No, no. I mean - did he ever see someone? As he got older? Did he ever talk about it properly with a doctor?"

Mycroft sighs. He suddenly looks about 10 years older.

"After Sherlock had been with me for a few years - after the dust had settled, so to speak - I tried to get him to discuss certain things. I certainly didn't want him to feel coerced into talking to me. He refused to talk to me all the same, no matter what tactic I attempted to get him to open up."

"And it is admirable that you reached out to him, Mycroft. I am not in any way asserting that you didn't help him as much as possible, but did he ever - you know - see a psychologist? A child therapist?"

Mycroft's eyes have taken on a faraway look, and he seems to hesitate for a moment before proceeding.

"If I tell you something - something very pivotal to explaining my concern for Sherlock - will you promise not to repeat a single word of it to my brother? He can never know that I've mentioned the subject. He would never forgive me if he knew that I was discussing certain...events...with you tonight."

I feel my mouth go dry.
"What can possibly be worse than what I've learned? What can possibly top that?," I question, my voice cracking.

"If one is hurt, but is strong in their own being, in their own heart - it is hard for others to see them as victims. But if they expose their heart as being damaged, or broken - it is much more frightening. And Sherlock would never want you to pity him, John - even though my biggest worry if that he is broken. And that he will never have the type of life he should have had the right to experience - namely because he is too scared to accept that he wants it. Or, more accurately - to accept that it is okay to want it. That there is nothing shameful in wanting a partner. Wanting what others want."

The words are cryptic, and I find myself getting painfully agitated.

"Sherlock isn't broken," I insist, firmly.

Mycroft looks down at his lap, refusing to meet my eyes.

"I knew it would be hard. To care for Sherlock after what he had lived through, but I couldn't see any alternative. He was adamant John - completely insistent - that we never breathe a word of what occurred to anyone. I actually scheduled an appointment for him to see a psychiatrist shortly after his 11th birthday - which was a few months after he had come to live with me. I was only 18 myself. In many ways, almost a child myself, you see."

He looks hesitant to continue, and I flash him a sad, small smile. 18 is terribly young, especially to be pushed into the sudden role of guardian to a younger, traumatized sibling.

"I recall the near-hysteria on the morning I told Sherlock that we would be taking a cab into the city to see a doctor. When I told him the nature of what he would be expected to talk about...he started to cry. And when I tried to calm him, he ran from the room, and out of the flat. I searched for two hours, and by necessity had to cancel the appointment."

Mycroft slowly gets up, and walks across the study to stand near the bay windows. The sun has now completely set, and the lamps lining the street outside have turned on to illuminate the roads.

"I let it go. What was the alternative? He was almost hysterical, John. And as the time passed, he became more intransient. More resistant to even allude to what had occurred, never mind discuss it properly. I let it go, thinking - perhaps mistakenly - that he would heal with time, and without any insistence on my part that he speak about the ordeal. I knew intellectually that is must have impacted his development, because even at 11, he was reluctant to even accept a hug. His body would clench, he would become immobile. Rigid. But I had no frame of reference for what would, or could, be normal for Sherlock. The abuse had started when he was so little, you see. It had gone on for so long, that I worry - even to this day - that his entire personality and temperament has been created out of necessity as a means to combat the constant threat he felt as a little boy. I don't know if he can change certain aspects of who he is, now."

My mind recalls Sherlock's words from the morning.

Speaking about being three years of age, and thinking himself dead.

Believing he had turned into a ghost.

Or maybe simply wishing he had.

"For about two years we soldiered on in a sort of silent pact. I would not press him on the subject, and he would continue to grow and learn and be himself, in safety - knowing, of course, that he could always confide in me if he felt the need to discuss what had happened. But growing up is hard,
John. It is hard for many children, and doubly so for those who are dealing with the repressed feelings that I knew he was dealing with. And so my little brother continued to grow, in every way you'd expect of a child his age."

Mycroft stops abruptly, and takes a deep breath.

I can sense that he is steeling himself up for what is to come next.

"Shortly after he turned 13, I realized he was starting to go through puberty, if he hadn't already started the process. I started giving him even more space. I did not discuss, in any way, what sort of changes he would experience because I knew he was already aware of what to expect."

There is a note of self-recrimination in Mycroft's tone.

"What happened?"

"Adolescence happened," Mycroft grits out. "I didn't even realize he was struggling so much until it was almost too late, John. Too late to save him."

I feel foggy and confused, and my expression must reflect this confusion.

"You see, it was when Sherlock was 13 that I realized that it was unlikely he would ever be able to have a normal - or shall I say adult - relationship with another person. Certainly not a sexual one."

My guts twist up into a knot, and I take in a breath of air. Bile is climbing up my throat.

"Why?," I gasp. "What happened when he was 13?"

"He was extremely depressed with developments that he could neither avoid nor slow. I have ascertained that it was likely due to the normal sexual changes he knew to expect. He was not coping well with even the prospect of their arrival, apparently."

Fear is trickling down my back in the form of cold sweat.

"I should have known something disturbing was coming, simply by the way he attempted to stultify each part of himself that experienced any sort of physical change. He had become almost mute during the period when his voice was changing its timber from that of a child to a young adult, for example. For months, he barely said a word. He would write his requests down on paper. Reports started to come home from the school, but getting him to see that...it could not continue as it had? No, he wouldn't accept that. He would patently ignore me. And after his voice had broken - well, then, it was almost worse. He seemed so ashamed of the fact that he sounded so different that I was actually at a loss as to how to soothe him. His own voice repulsed him, John, and his own physical growth scared him. He was growing rather quickly at that age, and so he started to eat less - markedly less - in an attempt to stop his development. It was frightening to see my brother - who had always been slender - start to look gaunt. Almost skeletal."

It's nothing new. His disinterest in eating.

"How bad did it get?," I ask quietly, dreading the answer.

"Bad enough that I was forced to get him help. Of course, I noticed that he started despising any general change marking his transition from child to adult, but there was nothing I could do to stave off the progression. Nothing anyone could do. Sherlock, however, believed that eating less would slow the process. I still recall one night when I expressed concern that his poor eating was possibly stunting his growth, and he actually smiled. He almost looked relieved. Soon after, I threatened to
have him assessed by the adolescent mental health division for anorexia nervosa. The threat alone seemed to be effective - as you can imagine. He started to eat a microscopically larger amount, and for a while - that is how the two of us operated. He would eat barely enough to keep a sparrow alive, but provided he kept his weight stable and did not continue to lose weight, I let the issue go."

"But he still doesn't eat properly."

Mycroft nods in my direction, accepting my words as truthful.

"His eating remained impoverished on the whole, but he kept to the deal I had proposed, and for several months subsisted largely off of protein shakes. He was growing in height, however, and since I was fairly certain that he wasn't engaging in any purging behaviours, I accepted the situation as acceptable. Certainly not ideal, but better than it had been before I had threatened to have him assessed. I guess, I assumed that after a few years he would grow more comfortable in his new body. That didn't happen."

Mycroft turns away from the window then, and runs a hand through his hair. He actually looks nervous when he continues.

"One morning, after coming home late from a business meeting, I found my brother in his room with the lights turned off. I knew something was wrong the moment I entered the flat. When I listened carefully I could hear that he was crying. And Sherlock never cried. Not even when he had been small and he was being abused."

"Is that when he had...hurt himself?," I get out my question in chunks of raw sound; Mycroft's gaze is pained when he meets my line of sight a moment later.

"John," and when he continues on, he looks torn, "What I am going to tell you - above all else - is information that I request you never repeat or discuss with my brother. You may want to. You may even think it is helpful if he talks about it. I assure you, what I need to tell you next will not be easy for me to get out. If Sherlock were to be made aware that you knew, he would be mortified. And extremely distressed."

Mycroft is now quiet, as if waiting for my assurance.

"I promise I will not mention what you are about to tell me with Sherlock. Not unless he brings it up, of course," I clarify slowly, my heart pounding far too loudly in my ears.

Mycroft gives a pained laugh.

"Oh, it is highly unlikely that will ever happen. Especially since it relates to an occurrence that my brother finds extremely shaming. I can only imagine how much more complicated his feelings regarding such an event have become in the years since it has passed."

"I will not bring it up, Mycroft," I reiterate, softly. "I promise you that."

The taller man sighs, brushing his hands over his suit jacket, but seemingly accepting my words.

"The event that triggered my brother most deeply was completely normal. To most others, it would seem to be almost innocuous, on the whole. It was the night my brother first experienced a nocturnal sexual response," Mycroft's voice is extremely soft. Barely above a whisper. "He did not deal well with the experience."

If someone wound rope across my chest and restricted my lungs from fully taking a breath, I could not feel more lightheaded.
Oh Sherlock...

"You explained it to him, though? That it was totally normal and healthy? Surely he understood that he couldn't have controlled it?,” I whisper.

"Of course I did," Mycroft replies tersely. "In as few words as possible actually, as the subject was highly distressing to him. Through his crying, I came to learn that he had suffered from a rather vicious nightmare before the event itself. He also did not learn of what had occurred until he had gotten up to use the washroom. That additional component only increased his shame, I believe. After a few short exchanges, all I could ascertain for certain was that he felt disgusting - which he told me in very caustic terms which I do not want to repeat out of privacy for my brother. He also explained in a rather disturbing moment of hysteria of how he might possibly damage his lower body - with a knife - to keep such an event from occurring in the future."

I suddenly feel sick, and stand abruptly. My face and chest feel prickly with heat.

"I need to- I need to get back home."

"John? You've grown pale. Please sit down."

"He's at home! And he's feeling all this shame, right now! Someone should be with him!"

I stagger across to the wall, and turn against it, breathing harshly.

The amount of self-hatred he must have felt. The amount of self-revulsion...

Do not cry.

Do not cry!

"I am almost done. Just a few more moments. But what I have to say next is perhaps more important than anything else. So please do not leave just yet."

"Please tell me...he didn't try to hurt himself that way," I get out, a few minutes later.

Mycroft hesitates.

"Mycroft! What happened? What did he do to himself?"

"We never spoke of it again - what he had told me, I mean. I chalked it up to his hysteria at the time. But I could clearly discern that even the mere prospect that the situation could repeat itself was extremely distressing to Sherlock. I did what I could to minimize his shame, of course, but I knew the likelihood was that it would continue to happen. Unfortunately enough for him."

Mycroft drinks the last of the brandy, his cheeks slightly pink.

"The next day, he was pale - anemic looking, almost. He wouldn't look me in the eye, and I could tell he had cried a fair deal since I had spoken to him, because his eyes were extremely swollen. I tried to make light of the situation by that point, and decided to keep him home from school. It didn't seem to help his mood, and he refused to eat his breakfast, and then later on, his lunch. When I came home for our evening meal, he was back in his room, sitting in his cabinet, like he used to do as a child. He refused to eat the food I brought up for him, although he did sip at water. The following morning, when he refused his meals again, I realized we had a bit of a problem on our hands."

I sit up in the loveseat, feeling an odd sense of foreboding.
"Four days later, I had had enough. Even in that short time, I could see that he was rigidly avoiding all forms of nutrition, and though four days without food is a far cry from starvation, I was concerned where his behaviour was leading. I knew he needed help, and so against his pleading, I took him to see the psychiatrist I had first contacted two years previously. I explained the basics of what had occurred to the doctor - and had stressed that he was finding it difficult to cope with the nature of the event and found it highly shameful. Still, I was encouraged to bring him in later that afternoon. Which I did. Surprisingly, since Sherlock refused to let me leave his sight, I had to sit through the entire session - which revolved around discussing the emotional and physical dynamics of adolescence. Or rather, it amounted to a lecture on male adolescent biology, since my brother refused to acknowledge any question that was posed to him."

"That must have been extremely awkward for a young boy," I mutter, feeling fresh concern blossom in my chest for my flatmate. "I can understand why he wouldn't have felt comfortable to discuss the subject. Especially not with his older brother in the room."

"No doubt it was. I found it awkward enough myself, and I was considerably older and able to deal with the subject emotionally. But Sherlock became, if anything, more uptight, more mortified as the session progressed. The more we told him that the event was not something he could control, and that it wasn't something unusual - the more upset he became. At one point, fearing I was making him more ashamed, I attempted to leave the room - but he grasped onto my arm and refused to let me leave. His fear had, evidently, eclipsed his shame. So I stayed."

"You are a good brother, Mycroft," I say quietly. Because it's true. And because he's likely never heard it before.

"Thank you, John," Mycroft says, looking away from me, and clearing his throat. "And it was a distressing session, made worse by the fact that the psychiatrist had an almost aggressive manner with Sherlock, and refused to back down on certain points. By the time the session had ended, he looked...dead inside. There was this horrible look of repulsion cast across his face. His mouth was twisted up and he was trembling. If anything - he seemed even worse than he had before he'd seen the doctor. I felt extremely guilty. I still do."

I swallow down a lump of sore regret, and suddenly feel an intense need to see my friend. To hold him.

I highly doubt that would go over well, of course.

"The next day his affect still seemed...off. In a way more staggeringly alarming than his chronic shame, his embarrassment. His sense of self-loathing was absent, but so was any other previously discernible expression. He acted almost like...a robot. What I found most alarming was that his speech seemed flat and almost schizoid in manner. In the back of my mind, I recall worrying he had had a psychotic break."

"Did you take him to the hospital?"

Mycroft suddenly looks guilty.

"I should have. In retrospect, it's clear that he should have been taken to the hospital, but I foolishly decided to keep him home for yet another day, despite the fact that I knew I could not stay with him. At the time, I thought it was a better alternative than forcing him to go to school when he was so obviously struggling to keep himself together emotionally."

"I can understand that reasoning. You were trying to give him his privacy."
"Privacy that he should not have been allowed. Not then. Not in the state that he was in. But I was inexperienced in recognizing Sherlock's danger periods back then, and so I left him alone for the duration of the day. When I arrived home later that evening, the door to Sherlock's room was closed. When I checked in on him, I could see that he was resting in his bed and thus I left him alone for a few hours more. When it surpassed 7 pm, I checked in on him once more and as I approached him - after turning on the light in his room - I noticed that there was blood all over his sheets and that blood was seeping through his duvet."

"Oh my god," I breathe out. I feel...sick. Nauseated.

"For a few terrifying seconds, I thought he was dead - until I realized he was breathing raggedly. I quickly tried to determine how he had been injured and sighted his medication containers by his hand. He was unresponsive, and I called the A&E immediately and explained that I thought my brother had attempted suicide."

We sit silently for a minute, two minutes. I wipe tears away from my face, and pull the bag of biscotti in towards my stomach. I really yearn to get home. To see him.

To hold him.

Which I can never do, of course.

But I want to do that.

To hold him, and take away some of his pain.

When Mycroft continues on, it is almost in a whisper: "The hospital later informed me that he had swallowed his two bottles of anti-anxiety medication. He had also cut his thighs and genitals with a parcel blade. Luckily, most of the wounds were superficial, but the attending doctor in the critical care unit realized that the form of mutilation Sherlock had inflicted upon himself was suggestive of sexual abuse because of both the location and the aggression of the cuts, and Sherlock was transferred to an adolescent psychiatric ward. I was, as you can imagine, accosted by social workers repeatedly and questioned about any potential incestuous on goings between myself and Sherlock."

"Jesus, Mycroft. I am so sorry."

"It was an extremely difficult time, yes. Made worse by the fact that I had not even pushed for punitive action against my own father, for what he had done to Sherlock. I had taken my brother away from the home where he had been hurt, yes - but neither of us had reported the years of abuse to the authorities. Sherlock forbade it when I tried to get him to even consider the possibility. Of course, being the logical perpetrator of such abuse in the eyes of the hospital staff, Sherlock finally broke his silence and decided to speak out. He was terrified, I am sure, and yet he did it to protect me."

Mycroft suddenly gets up, and grabs his coat from the hall closet - which he applies quickly, sans scarf or gloves.

I can tell he has decided that the conversation has come to its end, and is now unceremoniously escorting me back to the car. My head is swimming with unanswered questions, but I follow mutely - completely overwhelmed.

"I am sure that you've heard enough horrible things for tonight, John. And I won't discuss this with you again, because frankly - it is far too difficult for me to face, except in times of utter necessity. But I needed you to know the complexity of the situation. The reasons for my concerns regarding you
and Sherlock. Regarding any potential future developments. I need you to know that he may not be capable of returning anyone's affections, especially not sexually. In fact, if he feels conflicted about his relationship with you, it's possible that he may try to evict you from his life entirely. And I know that would probably bring ruin to him. You are - indeed - very good for him."

I flush anew, for reasons unknown.

I have never felt sexually attracted to Sherlock Holmes, and yet Mycroft's gaze is one of intense knowing. As if he's seeing something I cannot yet see.

Part of me suddenly feels very, very uneasy.

"I don't have any...romantic feelings for your brother, Mycroft. Please believe me."

"Feelings are complicated creatures. Sometimes, those that are afflicted are the last to know..."

"Mycroft - I am not gay! I am not attracted to Sherlock in that way. And even if my feelings changed - and they won't, I assure you - but even if they did, I would not proceed in any way that could scare him!"

Mycroft bites his lip lightly, sighing.

"It would take very little to scare him, John. Very little indeed. You must realize that."

"I would never be so brazen about any area that I know causes Sherlock that much pain! I care about him a lot, Mycroft. Your brother is my best friend."

Mycroft is quiet for a few moments, mulling something over in his mind.

"And yet you purchased books on how to advance a romantic relationship with an incest survivor," he says softly, his tone brooking no argument.

I cringe, feeling suddenly exposed, for reasons unknown.

Why won't he let this go?

"It was a comprehensive book," and now I am feeling keyed up, "That is all. I thought-" and what were you thinking, Watson?, "that if a book designed to help soothe an abuse survivor through a sexual relationship was so positively received by the psychiatric community - that the advice within could be adapted to a platonic relationship. And that it must cover a far wider reach of topics than a book devoted to platonic relationships. I wanted to be informed. I want to help him. That's the end of it!"

Mycroft is looking at me almost sadly now.

"John..."

Oh for heaven's sake. I don't believe this!

I get into the automobile quickly, refusing to debate this issue with him any longer; I hear a slight sigh from the exterior of the car, and a few moments later I hear Mycroft mutter directions softly to the driver.

Before the vehicle pulls away from the curb, Mycroft saunters to the rear view window.

"He is lucky to have you for a friend, John. I hope you can help him more than I ever could."
The smile he gives me is a pained attempt at gratitude for the visit, and I suddenly feel a pang of grief for him. For his disconnection from Sherlock. For his sense of ownership in the crimes perpetrated against his brother. For the confusion he likely feels, but has also likely never expressed - about why he was treated so distinctly to his younger brother. Why he escaped the same fate, even though emotionally - I know he likely feels almost as conflicted.

Certainly knowing that fact alone could make anyone feel complicit. And from what he's told me tonight, I now can comprehend why he's always seems so abnormally concerned about Sherlock.

As the car pulls away from the house Mycroft slowly shrinks into the evening blackness until he becomes nothing more than a two dimensional speck against the brick and ivy.

For a brief, flashing moment he seems like nothing more than a paper cut out doll, walking around a surreal English garden.

I wonder if that's what derealisation feels like. Except, without end. A sense of deep, profound disconnection from human love and connection. Surrounded in only blackness, and night. The endless state of being alone with your fears, your shames. No warmth, no connection to offer any hope. Nor make the burden lighter to carry.
This chapter will be in Sherlock's POV once more.

My throat is dry, and sore, and I wake up to the sense of constrictive pressure against my arms. A jostling, rushing presence.

The flat comes into my perception with a muted sort of darkness and I cough several time - my lungs feeling rough and heavy.

Almost as if I am coming down with pneumonia. Or something equally irksome.

"What is it?," I ask gruffly, feeling somewhat unnerved by the intensity of John's expression. He quickly releases both of my arms and I pull them up to my chest, unnerved by the pressure around my wrists. He was almost grasping my flesh hard enough to induce bruising.

He obviously felt an urgent need to wake me.

Why?

I study him briefly and note that he looks spooked, but is calming down in rapid progressions as I sit upright.

I focus my attention on discerning and evaluating his behaviour. Something is off.

Something has happened.

I could understand the pinched look of sickness on his face last night, and this morning, of course. But the flash of fear I am seeing now has not been caused by my previous words. It's a different form of nervousness. More intense, if anything.

And it seems to have been caused by the fact that I was sleeping.

Apparently quite soundly.

I stare at my wrist watch, determining the time, before stretching out my back and arms - leaning away from the chesterfield. Cricking my neck, I hear it pop. I must have fallen asleep in an awkward position; my neck feels stiff.

"Was there a fire?," I ask calmly, after a few moments of deciding how to proceed with John. "You look...unnerved."

Certainly I am not going to have another panic attack. Hopefully never again (I've never been more mortified in front of John since I've known him), but certainly not now. Honestly, the additional rest seems to have reoriented me. Grounded me. I don't feel so lost in who I am and what I need. I know what I need. I need to push all this emotional refuse from my past away. Anytime I dwell on the memories for even a few moments, I start to feel weak and...pained. It's nonsensical, but that's how it is.
And I am not "working through" (Mycroft's words, not mine) emotions like that if they take me so off-course.

In fact, as it stands I am now mentally re-bolstering my mind palace, and keeping certain emotions contained within in a lock-down mode. Because I have been lax. Terribly sloppy.

This body is mine, and as such - so are the accompanying emotions. They are generated by the body at some level; they do not exist independently of the brain and its chemicals - and so they are something I should be able to control. There is simply no need for weepiness, for such a maudlin display of vulnerability.

My breathing, my tears, my words...are all under my determination.

Or they should have been, and would have been, if I had been more soundly rested. On that point, John is correct.

When he still hasn't responded, I feel a slight irritation bloom in my solar plexus. Because I will not operate around him if he is determined to treat me as if I am made of spun glass. I am not breakable, I am not weak, and I am not a child in need of molly coddling. I will leave the flat for extended periods of time and go for walks if that's what is needed to bypass this awkwardness.

I cannot stand to see that look in his eyes: as if I am some pathetic, mewling kitten who has been beaten and left bleeding on the side of the street. An animal that needs to be coaxed back to safety, and spoken to with gentle words and gentle touches for fear that it may bite or claw or otherwise attack anyone who comes near.

"Perhaps there was a viral epidemic whereby people were bleeding from their eyes? And you were trying to determine if I had succumbed to the big, black sleep? Is that it?," I try again, crossing my arms over my chest. I know I look petulant. I can't help it. The move is almost instinctive, and as loathsome as it is for me to admit it - strangely comforting. I can feel the physical dimensions of my chest, my arms, the top of my torso - and I can sense that I am disconnected and therefore separate from everything else in existence. While that very thought sometimes brought me great anxiety in childhood, now - in adulthood - it gives me a strange measure of peace.

John, strangely enough, winces. And in the back of my mind, I feel a disorienting, sickening 'no.' No, he wouldn't have told him. No, he wouldn't have done that to me.

But John is as readable as a primary school book.

"Why did you feel the need to wake me up with such insistence?," I finally manage to get out. I don't want to look at him right now. A good portion of me doesn't want to see. I just want him to give me some pat, overprotective response - and be done with it.

"Sherlock," he whispers - and I know he means to say more, and merely doesn't know how to proceed. Or rather, he doesn't know how to proceed in such a way as to not give information away. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the more alarming issue. That fact that he feels he needs to hide the reason for his concern.

Because he's not doing it to protect my so-called emotional sensitivities. He and I both know that I do not have anything close to emotional sensitivities.

No.

He's doing it to protect someone. And given the truly limited number of people who know about my past history, diminished further by the fact that John wouldn't willingly go to any of them and discuss
matters on his own...

I can only conclude...

Damn you, Mycroft.

I will kill you, you poncy, infuriating blowhard.

"Do you have something you need to tell me?," I ask suddenly, my voice taking on a syrupy tone. The mockery loud and clear.

And that's when I realize that I am truly angry.

A part of me almost feels an emotion close to hurt. Something like a feeling of breathlessness and betrayal and anger and shame, all swirled together to make one detrimental emotional state of potential instability if I don't pull myself together right now.

Keep it together, Holmes.

Haven't you exposed your underbelly enough in the last few days?

I can feel a formidable heat bite at my eyes, making them start to water, so I do the best to hold onto my anger. Finally, the sense that I need to cry abates. Anger, I know, always allows me to preserve some measure of cutting formidability.

Pain always destroys me.

"Let it go," I finally get out, looking at my lap. "Whatever he has told you. I don't need to know. He is stubborn beyond all measure, and I don't want to hear his exaggerations about how I was never able to cope, how damaged I was - how worried he is about me."

When I finally gather the strength to look at my flatmate, I realize he looks bizarrely thrown by my admission. Almost frightened. He's shifting about on the balls of his feet as if he's ready to run.

"I'm not angry with you, John. God knows how meddlesome Mycroft can be. And he should have predicted that I would have discovered his activities in a heartbeat. Your face gives everything away."

I suddenly feeling dismal and tired. "We don't have to speak about it, okay?"

It's the only out I'm going to give anyone tonight, and if he doesn't take it - if all of this becomes a horribly big deal - I'm going to lash into Mycroft with such animosity that he'll think twice about encroaching into my territory again.

John seems to be hesitating with something, and his face shows the tug-of-war that is the state of his mind.

"No Ebola outbreak, Sherlock, sorry to say. I'd know you'd probably find that pretty exciting," he says uneasily, his eyes still owlish and somewhat guilt-ridden.

What's more - I can hear the tone. The false levity. I try to ascertain whether or not I could have said or done anything in my sleep to have disturbed him, and I pull my sash more tightly across my body.

I don't believe I have a recent history of sleep talking. At least, I haven't spoken in my sleep for almost 15 years now.
(One of the benefits of an indulgent cocaine habit was a blissed out ability to fall asleep anywhere and at any time, and not have fear lurking about in my brain making me react like a scared child all night.)

Almost on impulse, I find myself tugging at my shirt cuffs - trying to lower them over my forearms. It's an old response - one I still haven't managed to wean myself out of, and borne of the necessity to hide track marks. Even though I no longer engage with the needle, I still find that the mannerism occasionally shows up when I'm feeling overwhelmed. Some sort of bizarre tic holdover from my early 20's, but if I am lucky - John won't understand its meaning.

Although John is watching you, genius.

And even if he doesn't understand what it means...

He knows it showcases anxiety.

I force myself to halt the motion, the itch in my arms increasing. Anxiety makes the itch stronger, even all these years later.

"You okay?," he asks softly. And it's something that I've come to realize is just so naturally John Watson. His softness, his sensitivity. As a counter measure to my brashness and at times unknowing emotional insensitivity.

I'd admit to occasionally having difficulty imagining him in the military. I can see the impact of his time in service in his hair cut, and how he walks, and holds himself, and even how he parses his sentences. But he doesn't seem like he would have been a natural fit for the army. He has too much natural empathy. Too much irrepressible softness.

It's hard to imagine him being in any position whereby he'd be expected to shoot - and kill - some random stranger on any given day.

Which probably explains why he flitted on over to the medical corps as soon as he was able. And also why he suffered with PTSD symptoms for the better part of a year. Because it is not in his nature to cause or indulge violence. He's a good marksman, yes - but that trait is more about technical precision. It is not a trait necessarily twined to a need to hurt or destroy or cause pain.

But he could hurt you. Couldn't he?

If he wanted to?

He's strong.

And quiet.

Suddenly, I feel some niggling and incredibly new fear that there is, perhaps deep down, a dark and violent side to my best friend. One that even I haven't discovered. One that I have never seen.

I can't indulge in the thoughts with him in my presence, however. And John, unfortunately, is still studying me. I feel a little dreadful considering the prospect that maybe this is just how things are going to be between us now. I have a hard enough time being seen in physical pain or weakness. Even emotions relating to pleasure, or joy, make me feel strange. Uneasy. As if my enjoyment of anything sensorial - be it eating a meal, or smelling a scent, or delighting in the feel of new soft clothing against my skin - is skirting a reality tinged with something perverse. As if it is wrong to feel good emotionally, and certainly physically.
And I know that doesn't make a lot of sense, but it's how I feel.

Intellectually, I know it makes it hard for others to live with me. Even more so - to relate to me. I know that truth, in a clinical and removed way.

But the admittance that I don't want others to see my fear, or pleasure, or almost any emotional state? It makes me wish on many occasions that I were a robot. That I didn't have to feel. That I didn't have to realize what existed all around me. What delighted others, but which causes my insides to coil up in a teeming need to get away.

And from what? I don't even know. If pressed, I wouldn't be able to explain the fear, the revulsion. Not for everyone else, but for myself. For the expectations that I should be partaking in things, in events, in ways of being - with others - that I have no interest in.

It is so much easier for me to piss off and aggravate others. Force their hand, and make them hate me. Make them stay away. And usually it works, too - the John Watson's and Molly Hooper's of the world aside.

So maybe it is the fact that I am still woozy, still drowsy - that I blurt out:

"I don't like people looking at me, John."

John's frown lines deepen. Because it's a half truth, at best.

Certainly he knows that, too. Anytime I've said something that's wowed him - I don't think I minded the admiration.

But there are glances and looks of incredulity when I make a mental leap, and then there is analysis, with a half formed frown. As if there is something rotten about me.

And it's those looks I detest. The kind that remind me of the past that lurks just out of range of everyday memory.

The kind that make me feel studied, watched. Like a disordered individual.

"What? What are you talking about?," John finally gets out.

I sit up, push back against the surface of the chesterfield. Attempt to get another half foot of physical distance between the two of us before I continue on.

"I cannot stop my idiot brother from discussing matters with you if he is so inclined, but is it too much for me to request that you do not look at me as you are currently doing?"

John backs up on his own now. An essential six or seven more inches in an opposing direction. I let out a pent up breath.

"I wasn't aware that I was looking at you in a bad way, Sherlock."

I bristle. Even John can't be that stupid.

He must know what I mean.

"You are studying me. And it's not in your nature to study people. Therefore, I don't like it. I don't like what it means."

Johns frown deepens.
Not the result I had wanted.

"I...apologize. Lord knows I don't want to make this harder for you. I'm just concerned."

Another word I hate.

Maybe more than all the others combined.

'Concerned.'

Awful word, that.

Makes me cringe every time I hear it.

"And what will it take for you to no longer be concerned?," and my voice is like grit. Sandy.

John actually sighs. I hear his sigh, and I see him lower himself down to his haunches. Probably so he can meet me eye to eye. A display of camaraderie, perhaps?

"I am your friend, Sherlock. So I'm going to be honest with you, yeah?"

I don't say anything, don't even move - but he gets the message. Proceed.

"It might take me awhile before I no longer am concerned about you. There's also a chance that I might always be concerned about you. It's how I operate when I care about someone. I don't want them to be in pain, if it can be helped. And I don't think ignoring all this stuff is going to make it hurt any less."

I suddenly feel infused with heat, and realize I feel dirty from my lounging around on the couch all day, getting sweaty from the sheets. My hair is probably stringy with sweat. I must have sweat all over my clothes, too, because my hair about my chin and temples seems to be somewhat weighed down against my skull.

"I don't like that response," I say finally. Not knowing what else to say, and not caring if I sound like a 5 year old. I've been accused of being profoundly childish in the past, so I hardly care if I sound juvenile now. Especially if that is the prevailing consensus of my behaviour when I am normal. When I am fine.

John's brows draw together.

"But it's the truth, Sherlock. And I thought you'd prefer the truth more than anything else right now."

Truth?

That infuriating Mycroft. What the hell has he told you?

"Then while we are on the subject of truth, John - what did my brother tell you tonight?"

John suddenly stands up. He looks tense.

"Oh relax! I know you didn't go to him of your own impetus looking for answers. I've already told you - I'm not angry with *you*." He seems to be debating with an issue. I can see the tension play out over his facial features.

"You shouldn't be angry with Mycroft, either, Sherlock. He was just trying to help."
"Trying to help," I scoff. "He's just trying to appease his own guilty conscience. If he spoke to you - believe me - it was more for his benefit, not mine."

"Look, Sherlock. He didn't even want you to know that he had spoken with me! He expressed - very strongly - his recommendation that I never even bring it up. He merely wanted to clarify a few issues. And he didn't really tell me much more about what occurred than you did."

But I can see his tell. I know his tell. He's rubbing his right ear lobe with his hand.

Liar.

"Why are you lying to me?," I hiss, "You told me you were going to be honest! But you're lying. I can read the falsity all over your face! What did he tell you?!"

"Sherlock! The two of you have me between a rock and a hard place! Mycroft insisted in speaking with me. You know what he's like! You know how persistent he is!"

"Oh, I am so sorry you are in such a difficult position. However shall you cope?"

A flash of hurt plays across his features.

"You git! Don't take your anger out on me! I was trying to help you last night, and I was trying to help you this morning. Don't you see, Sherlock? You can barely contain it right now! You never lose it on cases. But you did on this one! And if you can do it once, you can do it again! It means there are very real-"

I get up, try to move past him. I don't need to hear this.

"No! Listen to me! The reason Mycroft knew of my concerns was because I was trying to help you."

Fresh understanding now, and an elevated heart race.

"What did you do?"

Of course! How would Mycroft learn of it? That John knew in the first place? Unless John was taking matters into his own hand, perhaps?

Has he contacted someone on my behalf?

It'd be just like him to try to get me to talk to someone. Even though he hated going to a therapist, himself.

John rolls his eyes as he comments, "You make it sound like I betrayed your confidence. All I did was go to get some books. To learn more about what you are going through. To help you with sorting this all out."

Books.

To read more about it.

To know more about what would have happened in my disgusting past.

To hear professionals write about it.

"I don't need any help, John! Not from you! Not from some bloody so-called professional! Nothing is the matter with me!," and the snarl comes out all on its own.
"Nothing is the matter, hey?" and John's voice - his timber and volume - has returned to being so rational, so aggravatingly calm - that I want to scream. "So you didn't describe what sounds like trauma induced dissociation to me this morning, did you? I must have imagined that part. I must have been confused, because it sounded to me like you were describing a very traumatic early childhood. An inability to stay with reality, because the reality presented to you was so horrific!"

I stand up suddenly, my fingers curling into fists under my dressing robe.

"I can't believe you are using that against me! That was a lifetime ago! And I told you that in confidence! Not so you could hold that information over my head like this is some sort of twisted poker game. And now you and Mycroft-"

"It was a confidence I kept! I didn't tell Mycroft any of it! Nothing of what you said, and nothing of what occurred, or my responses!"

I look down at my hands when I feel something warm and wet pearl up against my palms. I've cut my skin. Accidentally, of course. But it's cut all the same. Half moon bleeding in a vibrant rose are starting to crest along the center of my hands.

"Damnit, Sherlock!," John breaths, suddenly sounding old and heart broken, "This is what I am talking about! Either you deliberately hurt yourself, or you didn't feel the pain associated with hurting yourself, and that is scar-," and his voice drops off.

My hands are still shaking as John departs to the bathroom, only to pad back a few seconds later with a damp wash cloth.

"Is that what Mycroft said?," I ask at last. Even though I dread the response. "That I'll hurt myself? That I have?"

I don't say the thunderously loud question that's storming in my brain: that I want to. That part of me actually wants to. Because the distraction is so effective. Because it blots out everything worse. Because it is effective. And infinitely safer than cocaine.

John closes his eyes.

"I don't need Mycroft to tell me that you have a history-"


"Self-harm, Sherlock. If only related to your drug use, for starters. Using hard drugs? You knew exactly where that could lead, but you took part in it anyway. Not only that - but the misappropriation of substances in general, even legal substances, to modify your bodily limitations. You don't have allergies, but I've seen the pseudoephedrine purchases in the medicine cabinet. I've seen the dimenhydrinate you take so you can get to sleep most nights. I know the chemical cocktails you make for yourself when you are having an 'off' day. Your tendency to ignore physical signs representative of hunger, fatigue, cold, pain. Problems we've discussed before! Long before I even
knew about this...issue. In short - you completely ignore what your body needs. And that's just your body. You are so much more than a body, Sherlock! And you are certainly not a machine, even though I know you wish it were that simple! So tell me - is that not reason enough to be concerned?"

I can feel the adrenaline coursing through my body. And I want to say something to John, something to get him to see - but I can no idea what to say. I have no idea if I even think he's right, or wrong. I just feel off-kilter.

Focus. Focus.

You've already had a panic attack in front of John Watson.

Army doctor John Watson, who probably saw his own friends bleed out in the field.

And here you are, acting like a pathetic, disgusting-

I swallow down my shame, and try to get my words to come out with a stability I don't know I can pull off right now.

"But what else? He told you something. Because you looked scared when I didn't wake up right away."

John licks his lips.

"Is there something Mycroft could have told me, about you not waking easily - that would cause me to be concerned?"

I suddenly feel furious.

At Mycroft.

At John.

At every living being who doesn't feel like this.

Doesn't feel this tangle of black and red and everything pulsing and hurting. And rage.

"Stop playing games with me! This isn't funny!"

John's eyes suddenly harden and deepen.

"The last thing in the world I think about child abuse, Sherlock, is that it is funny."

He probably finds it heartbreaking.

Cue the violins.

I try not to snort. I try to hold on to my irritation towards Mycroft.

"Don't give me the run around! Admit it! You just think I'm weak and damaged! In need of being watched 24-7 lest I try to cut my body open again with an exacto blade! Or did Mycroft not get that far in his disclosure?"

My torso and arms are suddenly trembling.

I didn't know anger could make me feel this way.
That furor alone could make me feel so upset.

Or if I am even upset.

Or if I am sad.

I don't know. I don't know anything.

"Jesus Christ," and John's voice comes out in such a way that I doubt he meant to speak at all. In fact, if pallor was determined by octaves, by notes - he would be several notes paler right now. "Can I please sit down?," he questions, but it's obviously rhetorical because he's already moving to sit down besides me.

I pull back and try to get my heart to stop thundering away in my chest.

When he opens his eyes again, I can see that they are full of tears.

Oddly enough, that makes my resolve harden more so. It makes the sad feeling in my gut lessen. It makes it easier to feel anger and not pain. Because if he is in pain-

Then maybe he deserves it. After speaking to Mycroft.

Knowing how that would upset me.

He could have walked away.

He certainly didn't put up much of a fight now - did he?

"Why did you do that? Hurt yourself like that?," and he speaks so softly that I can barely hear him. "What in the world would have possessed you to do that, Sherlock?"

I pull my hands to my lap, and study the crusting blood. Focus on it. Focus on the geometry of it. If I could straighten out the lines, and intersect another few lines of red, I would have an equilateral triangle.

"Sherlock?"

And suddenly one of my hands is in one of his, and my throat feels tighter, even though I didn't think it could feel anymore constricted.

I pull my arm back quickly, shift away from him in my seat.

"I'm sorry. I should have asked first before I did that," he mutters.

"Doesn't matter," I get out.

Whose lying, now?

"Why did you tell me that, Sherlock?," and the look in his eyes highlights just how much he wants to understand. But doesn't.

That he's not just saying what he's saying to be polite. He really wants to know.

Except he really doesn't. He thinks he does. But now one would want to 'get it.'

To get it - would mean he'd have to understand everything at a level far beyond the superficial.
He'd have to have lived through it himself. So words are useless, anyway.

Because he'll never understand.

"I told you because I was angry," I bite out. "And because I know Mycroft likely already told you. And because I wanted to shock you. Make you stop talking about everything. I can see now that my attempt has failed."

John nods to himself, evidently seeing or appreciating a certain emotional logic in my words that I cannot discern myself.

"Can you tell me why you did it then? What was going through your head to make you think-," and he evidently cannot keep speaking.

"It was 23 years ago, John! I don't know what I was thinking when I did it! I guess I was upset," I huff.

His eyes are scanning my own. Moving back and forth rapidly.

"You 'guess you were upset'?,, and his voice is parsed slowly, as if he can't fathom what I've just said. "You were upset? So you took a knife and cut your legs and-"

"Yes," my tone is brisk. "Yes, to whatever Mycroft said - yes. I don't see why it is important now. I didn't do any lasting harm to myself, according to the doctors. Not that it would change my life at present one way or the other if I had. And we both know I don't have time for carnal pursuits, even if I had the interest. Which I don't. Little Sherlock's were never on my to-do list anyway, so there is no loss there." I pat his shoulder in mock sympathy, a heady anger making me want to hurt him. John and his lovers. John and his normality. Obviously not understanding a whit of it. But trying to act like he understands.

When his very lifestyle screams to me that he doesn't. That he can't.

"Sherlock," John gets out in a tense voice. "This - this isn't something to joke about."

"The fact that I was a reactive idiot of a child? That sounds like a hilarious joke to me, John. How someone apparently so smart could do something so dumb? And then to be caught, to be bandaged up, to be kept in 72 hour hold? I think that's freaking hysterical."

"That's not what I was implying, and you know that's not what I was implying" he responds calmly, preternaturally patient. "It just shocked me, is all. And despite what Mycroft said, I didn't know if you needed to talk about it. Something tells me you never really have."

My heart starts to slow. In a strange way, I don't even feel ashamed of what I've just admitted. Possibly because John doesn't seem ashamed for me. He just seems resignedly sad. And while that shouldn't make me feel better, it doesn't make me feel quite so exposed.

"I had to know if he told you, so I had to get your reaction. I thought you'd think I was a freak, if you knew," and when I speak, my voice comes out in staggered breaths. Monotone voice. Controlled. "Because it is a freakish thing to do."

John's index finger flitters over to my left hand. I feel a slight wispy touch - back and forth; a physical attempt at assurance. It makes my stomach tighten. On one level, I like it. I think. Deep down, I think I love that he cares. On another level, I hate it. The touch, and maybe even the caring. The concern. It's not even sexual touch, and it still makes me feel funny. Still makes me feel wrong. And the fact that it still makes me feel like that - makes me feel like crying. At least it makes part of
me feel like crying. And I hate that too - the splintering of emotions.

Because damn it, this is confusing. Nothing feels right. Cruelty feels wrong, of course. But kindness directed towards me - softness, gentleness, excessive thoughtfulness - those ways of being make me feel even sadder. Not hurt, certainly not betrayed. But red-hot ready to cry.

I have no idea why, except maybe it's because I can. Maybe it's because I know that I'm free to, and he'd never respond badly if I were to do so, or to talk, or to rage. Or anything related to venting. That he'd still be there for me.

I pull my hand away, and the soft motions of John's hand against my own immediately stops. He doesn't resist me, and he doesn't attempt the motion again.

"I've never thought you were a freak, Sherlock. And I never will, alright?"

And just like that, I start to wonder if the motion was more instinctive, and not really thought out at all.

"What now?," I question, trying to hold in the shuddery need for fresh air. I can calm down in my own room, in the bathroom. I can get it together in privacy.

John rights himself, then offers me a hand and brings me to my feet.

"Perhaps the best thing is to just proceed...as normally as possible? And, since you are obviously exhausted - an early bed? No 3 am violin sessions, perhaps?"

"Early bed?," I scoff. "It's after 8 pm and I've slept the entire day."

"You did," John says slowly. "So you can see my concern."

"No doubt exacerbated by Mycroft's exaggerations," I mutter.

"Sherlock," the tone is brisk this time. Brooking no argument. The firmness makes me feel better. "It doesn't sound like Mycroft exaggerated anything, does it?"

I expel my breath and turn away, wanting the conversation to end now and as we walk to the kitchen, John suddenly turns to me. Studious and intent. More so than our previous interaction.

"Did you take something?," he parses his words carefully as he opens a cabinet - evidentially looking for something for tea, not meeting my eyes now. "Some sort of medication, perhaps?"

"And just when we agreed to try to get things back to normal, too-"

"Sherlock - you slept for a very long time. Had you taken a drug of some sort? Are you taking anything to, you know, help you with your sleep? Beyond the dimenhydrinate?"

John's lips suddenly look pinched.

"You're actually - what? - scared?," I muse.

He doesn't respond.

"What is it?," I repeat, more caustically than before.

Mortifying, really.
"Scared because I was sleeping? No - that's not it. You are scared precisely because you are worried that I had taken - what? Taken a sleeping medication?"

He flinches at that.

"No. This is Mycroft's doing. Oh, I see it now. He told you...he told you I had been suicidal. I didn't just hurt myself - I tried to kill myself. Is that it? Melodramatic donkey's ass!"

"Sherlock!"

"No. Alright? I am not taking sleeping pills. I give you my word."

He looks away to the fridge, biting his tongue when he sees a plastic Ziploc bag with cut brain segments of a goat.

"That's it. I am getting you a bar fridge. You can keep body parts in there."

I settle down on a stool, and watch him as he bustles about. I still am upset with Mycroft. But John isn't treating me like a basket case, so the anger I had felt earlier is diminishing.

"I'm going to make us some tortellini," my flat mate finally states, sighing. "You like tortellini, don't you? You told me to order it once. At Angelo's."

I slam the cabinet shut just as he attempts to open it.

"What?," he asks petulantly. "Sherlock - I'm trying to make us dinner here. If you don't want to talk about anything else, then I'm not going to force you. But you need to eat. You have lost weight on the Thiesen case, and you can't afford to do that."

"What's this, then?," and I indicate to his clothes, lightly touching the sleeve of his arm. "You have changed your jumper."

"Hmm?," he asks absently, once more looking for the box of dried green and orange tortellini from the Italian market. "Do you like pesto sauce?"

John was wearing an oatmeal jumper earlier. My favourite jumper. With blue jeans.

Before he left the house.

Now he is wearing a cranberry red jumper, with brown cords.

It is not a hot day...so it is unlikely he would have sweated in his clothing. Certainly not to a degree whereby he felt he had to change.

He did not work today.

I also know he had a large bowl of steel cut oats around brunch, shortly before he left the flat.

So he probably did not drop food on his garments.

But he may have spilled a beverage on his clothing.

"Did you spill something on your clothes?"

John's brows crease, and he seems to be internally debating something.
"I spilt coffee on them, yes."

"Pants, too," I muse. "Did someone bump into you? You're not usually that careless."

John rolls his eyes.

"Yes, Mr. Observant. I was at a café this afternoon. A man spilled his beverage on me as he was leaving."

I grumble under my breath. That jumper really is my favourite.

"I brought you back a biscotti as well," John continues. "You're welcome, by the way."

I hop up from my chair, and root around in the cupboard, looking for the treat.

"It's for after dinner, Sherlock," John says calmly, with the edge of something stern. Almost as if he is my fa-

Almost as if he is my superior.

"I actually like biscotti," I admit, taking a bite. "Never big on tortellini."

"You chose the tortellini, Sherlock! You actually put four of these bags of gourmet tortellini into our cart. Therefore, if you don't like tortellini - tough. We are using this food up."

I smile into the air, finding John's tone amusing, then pull my feet up and under my body. Sitting cross legged, I watch him as he prepares the meal.

The fact that he is pretending to be irritated with me (when I know he really isn't) is enough to calm me down and make everything feel more or less normal again. And resolved. I suddenly feel much better.

"Can you clean a space on the table, please?," John asks quickly, pulling me from my musings.

I nod and go to find the necessary supplies after depositing my experiments in new regions around the kitchen. I then take a bottle of eco-cleanser that John must have purchased from under the sink and spray the table top with a light mist, wiping everything down with a tea towel.

"Not what that's used for," John says under his breath, and then, more loudly: "thank you, Sherlock. That's great."

I smirk anew, pleased that he's bypassed the chastising stage entirely.

"What sauce would you like?," he asks easily. "A marinara? Or a crème sauce?"

"We have sauce?," I question. Because - I highly doubt that we do. In fact, I am almost certain that we don't.

"Well, we have all the ingredients to make a sauce. We have tomatoes, peppers, onions, butter, cheese... the appropriate herbs."

"That sounds excessively time consuming for a sauce. Can't we just grate cheese over everything and be done with it?," I say easily, biting once more into the chocolate biscotti with relish.

John watches my actions and sighs.
"I told you. That was for after," he reiterates, while I smile at him with closed-mouth appreciation. "Well, at least you are eating."

I stop mid-chew, and put the bag down on the table. I don't like the insinuation.

"I'm not on a case. So the rules don't apply. I don't have some sort of problem with eating, despite whatever lies Mycroft may have tried to tell you."

John looks stunned for a second, before replying: "Sherlock, I didn't-"

"Getting a shower," I mutter, departing the room as hurriedly as possible.

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I take the stairs two at a time until I get to my bedroom and then quickly locate clean clothes. I decide upon black jeans and a Kelly green button down shirt before I make my way to the bathroom.

The light flickers on until the room is encapsulated in a golden glow. I lock the door - checking twice - before pulling off my sleeping garments and tossing them into a pile by the hamper.

I then grab a new blue Gillette razor from under the sink, along with my shaving foam, toothbrush and paste, and a 2-in-1 bottle of shampoo that smells decidedly like candied pears. I take the assortment of items over to the tub basin, before throwing back the curtain and fiddling with the taps.

From the inside of the space the rest of the bathroom looks green, and eerie, and I quickly seek out hot water before pulling the tap upwards to flood the shower interior with water.

I work quickly, starting with my teeth because I have only slept through the entire god damn day and they feel grimy and disgusting. I get a good lather of licorice foam going before I spit everything down the drain. I then re-brush my teeth until the interior of my mouth feels suitably clean.

Next I squirt out a quid-sized worth of orange scented body cleanser and rub it over my frame, in sections. When a section is completely scrubbed and cleansed, I rinse off the residue and mentally delete that part of my anatomy from my body's daily to-clean list. Clean areas are in green, dirty areas in red. At least in my mind. A sort of easy to understand Go and Stop system.

I let my fingers cascade over my chest and along my torso as I rub at the flesh with the cloth. Eventually the skin changes colour from pale white to reddish, and that change, ironically enough, indicates that the area is sufficiently cleansed.

I do my arms next, and then my face. Finally I grab the bottle once more to get slightly more gel, and apply the cleanser to my thighs, and between my legs - looking at the shower curtain as I do so. I feel around until my fingertips connect with the slightly raised ridge of keloid scars and then I move lower to complete the routine on my calves and feet.

My hair is always last, because it is the least problematic area and takes the least amount of time to complete.

I turn off the shower for a few moments, shivering in the relative coolness of the space, then cup my hands to receive a fair bit of Barbasol foam. Most men do this chore in front of the sink, so that they can see the outline of their face and avoid nicking themselves. Luckily, my proprioceptive abilities are highly attuned, so I rarely cut myself. The shower also adds an added bonus: the ability to completely rinse off and wash away all foam and residue.

I apply a thin layer of shaving foam to my neck and jawline, then deftly feel about with my fingertips...
once more before swiping the razor blade over my facial skin until the slight gritty edge of new hair growth is cut away and the skin feels hairless once more. As luck would have it, my body hair is relatively sparse and fine and doesn't seem to grow in very quickly at all. In fact, I could probably get away without a daily shave and have no one be the wiser. The bigger issue, for me, is one of tactile defensiveness. I dislike the sandpapery quality of my skin when the hair grows in. It distracts me to such a degree that I am typically highly attentive to my personal hygiene.

I shave twice tonight to ensure that I have gotten all slight protrusions - before restarting the shower jet and rinsing the shampoo and shaving foam off and away from my body.

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My hair is air drying and already starting to curl when I return to the kitchen; John is serving the tortellini into two chartreuse bowls.

"Feeling better?," he asks pleasantly, with only a hint of sadness from the earlier evening still splayed across his face, and I nod curtly.

I always feel better after a shower.

It's just the way I am.
Chapter Summary

John makes Sherlock Ovaltine. Ovaltine makes Sherlock sick. In addition, Sherlock explains more about his past in the clinic, his difficulty with eating, and summons the courage to visit Toby in the hospital. He devises a way to get the child to explain more - without talking. Donovan considers that she may be wrong about her take on Sherlock.

This chapter is in Sherlock's POV.

After dinner, John whipped out the Cluedo board, then put on the kettle and returned with two mugs of Ovaltine. I know it was his attempt at being soothing. But it made my heart skitter in my chest like a scared, wild animal.

The knowledge that he thinks he has to comfort me is almost worse than the knowledge that I know that he *knows.* About almost everything, really.

And just like that - the feelings have come back. That weird heart clenching upset of not wanting people to look, and see. Not wanting people to analyze and pity me. Because that's what they'll do. There is no question about it.

And now that I can see that all too soft look of gentleness in John's eyes, it upsets me. It's almost a Pavlovian response at this point. Even though I know John is - by his very nature - kind and gentle whenever he can afford to be.

Truthfully, I don't know why I feel so frenzied with everything.

I cannot begin to address why I don't want him knowing.

John, it seems, wants to talk.

At least one of us knows what we want.

"You look pretty weighed down there. Care to share what's going through your mind?" he asks with a feigned casualness, taking a sip of his beverage.

His voice is softer than normal, and I hate that, too.

I stare at my mug of rapidly cooling Ovaltine.

There is a lump in my throat that won't go away.

"Why did you make me this?"

'This' comes out as almost shrill in tone, and I hate that too.

"You don't like Ovaltine?"

John's eyes are studying me. He knows what I am asking, and he knows I am aware of his motivations for the beverage. What this drink means to me.
It was the beverage Mycroft sometimes brought me. After my so-called father was... done with me.

Back then, it meant that my older brother had come to push out all the bad of the evening, and keep me company until daybreak so that I could rest. Rest knowing that, at least for a little while, I was safe again. I'd hold onto Mycroft as if he was a big, breathing doll. I thought he would protect me, but he never could, and part of me understands that, too. Part of me always did understand that it wasn't Mycroft's fault. Never his fault. Even so, Mycroft never had to go through it. Never had it happen to him directly. He witnessed, he observed, but he didn't endure it - and as unfair as it may be - part of me has always hated him for his retained innocence. For getting to grow up and not know the awful feelings that came with it all.


I hear my flat mate swallow then - he's close to me physically - and the swallow sounds incredibly loud in the quiet of the flat.

"I thought Ovaltine meant comfort. I just...I don't want you to-"

He breaks off speaking.

"What?," I rasp.

John is shaking his head.

"I don't know, Sherlock. You say you don't know what you're feeling? Well, I don't know what I am feeling either. It's all a mess."

I snort at that, and he looks affronted.

"I'll apologize if that's not the answer you want," he adds a moment later, his frown deepening.

I take a sip of the drink, then put the cup down quickly. The scent is making me nauseated.

The taste is making me want to scream.

"I can't drink this. I'm sorry," I bite out, rising quickly, and making my way to the kitchen. I dump the contents into the sink and watch the gritty remains of the sugar-barley blend coat the drain. I then open the pantry door and root around until I locate gunpowder green tea.

It has a unique bite and an aroma I associate with my adulthood. It's completely safe.

When I return to the living room a few minutes later, John's own drink has been hurriedly finished off, and the letter tiles for Banagrams have been tossed out on the floor.

I sit cross legged on the carpeting, and pull 21 pieces towards my body.

I will play games with him if it puts his mind at ease, but I am not talking to him about this in any depth. He has Mycroft to ring up for answers about my mental health, should it come to that.

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It is 4:33 AM when I consider a sleepless night a foregone conclusion. I grab my violin, bow and slippers, and pad down the hallway, locking the main door as I do so and stepping out onto the
pavement.

The air at this time in the morning is almost assaulting in its briskness.

I walk eight streets north and then proceed four blocks to my right, wandering over to a small park. At this hour no one is around, and the street lamps shine eerily down onto the cobblestone that winds throughout the area. I walk over to a park bench and sit down, adjusting the violin, and getting comfortable before beginning to play. I choose a piece by Sarasate, and let my body play the music with almost manic rapidity. I put all my anger and rage into my playing, and the music suffers for it, I am sure; by the end of the 9 minutes, however, I am actually feeling emotionally lanced. Almost as if someone took a scalpel and opened a putrescent wound. Lighter, inside, maybe. Less constricted in my throat and chest and lungs. My chest feels open again, and I pull the violin closer to my cheek, closing my eyes and letting my hands proceed to work out basic scales. It's a meditative pattern, and I am soothed by the rhythmic motion.

I continue on until I can feel the tension drain from my body, and when I open my eyes again - it is early dawn, and I can see a few people milling about in the distance - including a young female runner of about 22 or 23 years of age stretching by the gate entry. She looks up at me, gives me a welcoming little wave to be polite, then resumes her stretching.

I get up from the bench and tie my scarf more securely around my neck before I pad back to Baker street.

When I get to the door, I stare at the metal numbers with a type of dread - wondering if the flat will still smell faintly of honey and barley and cocoa, or if the scent of old memories and old pain has begun to dissipate with the day.

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John is waiting for me. Sitting on the bottom stairs, by the entry way.

I still my motions as I make my way inside, and hold my violin tighter across my chest in a type of weird, protective impulse.

"Where have you been?," John starts, his voice falsely calm. It's a put upon calm - a unique breed of patient and assuring that he's recently tapped into these last few days. It's not authentic, as such, but it's not rooted in falsity for falsities sake. He simply doesn't want me to tune him out.

I wonder if he's used that tone with his exceptionally anxious patients. With kids.

I don't doubt it.

I can tell based on the tension in his hands, his neck and his face - that he's actually been worried about me.

I hold up the violin by way of explanation.

"I was at the park. I didn't want to wake you up with the noise."

John closes his eyes for a moment.

"Did you get any sleep at all?"
I hesitate, consider lying, then opt for truth.

"I couldn't sleep. Too keyed up."

For a moment, I consider reassuring my flatmate that I probably didn't need to sleep. I had slept the previous day. I am definitely not sleep deprived at present moment.

It should count for something, right?

"Do you feel better?" he asks a few moments later.

The question throws me. I hang up my jacket, affix the blue scarf to the peg by the coat rack.

"Sherlock?"

"I don't know," I frown at the wall, still turned away from him.

"You don't know?" John repeats dumbly.

"I told you I didn't want you to know. I told you that I don't know what I am feeling," I admit at last.

"Everything feels-

My voice warbles off and I move past John on the stairs. He moves out of the way easily, and seems to shift gears.

"Try to get some shut eye for a few hours. You'll want to be well rested today."

I turn around abruptly at that, knowing something has occurred with that simple proclamation.

John sighs, rubs his hand through his hair.

"Lestrade called. Woke me up, actually. It seems that Toby has regained consciousness."

"What?"

"He opened his eyes this morning. About 3 am. His mother called Lestrade a couple hours later. She wants to talk to you. I think she wants you to talk to her son too, actually."

That is an interesting development, considering I punched her husband without an obvious (at least in her mind) explanation.

John watches me carefully.

"She doesn't seem angry Sherlock. Not at all. She's just extremely concerned about her son."

My mouth feels gummy. Sticky. I need to brush my teeth.

"And she wants me to talk to Toby," I repeat, slowly.

John wavers a bit.

"She wants to see if you can get him to talk. He hasn't said a word since he's awoken."

I glance at my watch.

"It's only been...what? Four or five hours?"
John nods.

"Even so, he won't make a sound. It's too premature to actually diagnosis him with anything, but the doctors think it's a result of shock. They are hoping they can get him to speak even a few words. To break through the silence."

"He was violently assaulted. Are they sure it's not something...neurological?," I test.

John shakes his head. "He was crying out in his sleep last night. Several hours before he awoke. There is no problem with him making actual sounds."

I put my violin on the side table, suddenly feeling bone-weary exhausted.

"I'm not a child psychologist, John. I can see patterns, connections, and it is obvious why this boy is engaging in selective mutism, even if - at present - it's too early to diagnosis anything. He's terrified. He's likely been threatened. Or perhaps he was hurt so violently because he tried to talk. At any rate, there is an entire staff of trained clinicians to deal with traumatized children at Evelina. They do good work."

John's eyes squint microscopically, taking me in.

Oh.
Oh, I see.

"No. I didn't go there. No."

He looks to his hands awkwardly.

"I didn't say anything, Sherlock."

"Evelina disbanded in 1976, and wasn't reopened until 2004. I was in clinic in 1989. The Priory," and the words rush from my mouth of their own power. Their own free will.

I don't know why I am telling him any of this.

John takes in a strangled breath at the admission. Holds it. He's internally debating something, and I wish he'd hurry up and ask what it is he wants to know before this feeling of numbness departs. Before I can no longer allude to it, never mind be actually honest with him.

"Why?," he asks at last.

My hands curl around the bow, and I feel the horse hairs line up against my palm.

"I wouldn't eat," I admit, my voice sounding hollow and odd to my own ears. Almost as if another person is talking through me. Not me, not Sherlock. Normally, I'd be snarling at him for having the gall to even ask. Right now, however, I feel tired of denying, of running.

I feel tired of doing it alone.

John steps towards me on the soft padding of the main landing.

"How long did that last?," he asks gently. "You not eating?"

My mouth feels dry, and I'm sure if I took my pulse, it would be shaky. It would be fast and light and weak and sketchy.
Because I do feel fear. And I have no idea why.

It's just John.

Just John.

My friend.

He's not going to judge me.

"Until they threatened to intubate me," I swallow, my chest feeling heavier than it did yesterday. Heavier than it did even the day before. The air in my lungs feels hot, and tumultuous. Like a summer thunderstorm, about to break open - but it's internal, it's bodily. It's inside, and that makes it even worse. "I tried," I get out at last, not knowing what I'm even saying anymore. Not knowing where the words are even coming from. Where they've been hiding all this time.

"I know you did."

I look down at the rug, at my shoes. At the black scuff mark on the side of the wall that Mrs. Hudson has missed.

"I was so scared."

"I know," my friend concedes.

But he doesn't know.

Of course he doesn't know.

"I couldn't stop what I was doing. I couldn't put it in my mouth. Any of it."

John's hand connects with mine. Cups mine. I feel his other hand at my lower back. Light pressure. Circular.

I close my eyes, let it wash over me. Get it over with. Let the thunderstorm break.

"Why couldn't you stop?," he asks gingerly, and his breath is warm and close to my cheek. Close to my mouth. It smells sweetly like mint toothpaste. I feel dizzy and overwhelmed - and God what is wrong with me? Why is it all coming back?

For one crazy, bizarre, lightheaded second I have a weird impulse to push my lips against his mouth. I blink rapidly against the image, feeling my heart begin to speed up. I force my body away from his, even a few precious inches.

What is wrong with me?

"I don't know. I can't talk about this!"

"Why couldn't you stop, Sherlock? Tell me," and he wants to know, and he wants me to trust him, and I don't know what will make it go away.

"I didn't want it in my body!," I exclaim, anger and fear now coming to the surface, the image of John in my mind, my lips against his, and it's not real, none of it is real, and I don't think of him like that, and I could never-

"I never wanted it in my body," I breathe out again, forcing myself to calm down. Forcing the images out. Not wanting to mix John up with these feelings. These feelings of it all being wrong. All
of it being so wrong.

"Food?" he clarifies.

My hands grip the lapels of his coat. His black coat with a swatch of leather.

"Him."

I hear John swallow again, his hand slowing its motion on my back as my words register.

"I know, Sherlock," he gets out about 10 seconds later. His voice sounds sore.

I'm shaking my head back and forth. Because he doesn't. He doesn't know.

John's hands are curling up into fists. He's angry.

I'm just not sure if he's angry with me.

Because we don't talk for awhile. He departs upstairs, shaves, changes clothes, and I flitter about the flat in a state of agitation.

"You have to call Lestrade."

"He was furious with me, John. You said so. I'm not going near him for awhile."

John comes closer, his eyes projecting Ultimate Seriousness. The "We are Brooking No Arguments Today, Sherlock" eyes.

I realize I can smell aftershave. It has a woodsy scent.

I suddenly feel dizzy again, and back away from him.

"No one - no one, Sherlock, aside from you - even suspects this is about molestation. The boy is not going to reveal that information on his own! You need to talk to Lestrade, and you need to speak to his mother. The sooner the better. For Toby's sake."

I rub a hand through my hair again.

"I need a shower. And I will need to stop by Tesco's first."

John nods, but his eyes scour my frame. Probably trying to ascertain why I need a shower again after getting one so late last night.

"I'll make us something to eat," he states at last.

His voice holds no brook of refusal.

I hold the bag of supplies - a box of 64 count crayons, sharpeners, markers, blank paper, lined paper, colouring books - in my hands.

We do not talk as the taxi navigates the labyrinthine corridors. I do not tell the cabbie the best way to avoid congestion near the Jubilee line, or that construction is occurring near Westminster Bridge Rd.
I'm relieved, of course, that Toby is recovering. Certainly far better and quicker than anyone had predicted. How could that not be the best sort of news?

But all the same - I am not looking forward to this visit. I don't want to look into those terribly young eyes and try to convince this child to talk. He obviously doesn't want to do so. I wish I could indulge him this one thing. I know what it is like to want - no, need - just one small aspect of control. To not want someone to take everything away.

When we arrive at the segment of the hospital known as "the beach" (each area is decked out to resemble a terrain for various animals), John gives Lestrade a slight wave. Donovan assesses me coolly - probably still put out that I've been requested to talk to the boy when I violated basic rules of conduct so abominably.

We step into a conference room. It's merely the four of us, which surprises me.

"Where's Mrs. Thiesen?," I question.

"She's with her son. Reading to him," Lestrade responds, his eyes glancing at Donovan.

"Does he know that someone is coming to talk to him?," John queries.

Lestrade sighs, his voice heavy. "I don't know. But aside from that, there are a few things we have to quickly discuss with you, Sherlock. Certain rules you will follow, if you want any further involvement with this case."

I resist the impulse to tap on the table.

"Yes," I drawl. "Proceed."

"Firstly - and I want to get this out of the way now: John has gone to bat for you. That's why you are sitting here at all, and not on my scrapped list."

I look away from John, feeling my face heat up. It's an out-of-place reaction.

"He mentioned you think that Toby was sexually assaulted," and it's Donovan's voice now. I turn to address her, and her eyes bore holes into me with their intensity. Her gaze holds an expression of something that is not irritation, not anger - but is rather a type of resigned acceptance. Of her continued partnership, so to speak, with me - or the seriousness of the upcoming discussion, I am not sure. But no...that's not it. There is something else...

She's wondering why I lost my temper over this child.

She still thinks I'm heartless enough not to care enough about such a subject.

And now she's wondering what my angle is...

"Mr. Thiesen is involved some how. I know it. I feel it."

Lestrade nods, shares a look with John.

For a second, anxiety blooms in my bowels. For a second - I wonder if John has mentioned something more to Lestrade. Something more about me.

"That's the thing, though, Sherlock. You don't work off feelings. Certainly not exclusively. This case
has been about leaps and jumps and intuition - and for you, that's strange. And you found this boy, and you found him when it counted, and we got to him in time, yes - but what do you have to support your suppositions?" Lestrade tries again, his eyes scanning my face - back and forth, back and forth.

I clear my throat.

"Nothing conclusive," I admit. "Nothing that you'd find worthy of explanation."

"How about we be the judge of that for ourselves?" - Sally, this time.

I press my palms against the table, releasing the tension.

"When we were looking for Toby - when we thought this was an abduction case, possible ransom case - and we spoke to his teacher at the day school - she said some things to me that made me suspicious about Toby's home life."

"What things?," Donovan asks crisply. Lestrade has taken a backseat in questioning now, it seems.

"She told me that she had been concerned for Toby for awhile. That he had said and done things that she found inappropriate. Sexually inappropriate."

Donovan bristles at that.

"He's 9 years old. They start basic sex ed at his age. It's not unusual for boys to show a fascination in the subject. It's brand new to them."

I look to John. His eyes look wide and grounding.

"It wasn't brand new to Toby, that's the thing. His teacher is about to have a baby. Apparently Toby asked her some rather - intrusive questions."

Donovan shakes her head, as if not wanting my hunches to be anything more. I can't say I blame her.

"Again - he's curious. It's normal. Especially at that age."

"He asked her if she cried when the baby was being made."

Donovan's mouth screws up.

"He doesn't understand, Sherlock. End of story. He might have seen something on the telly. Something that scared him, and so he thinks sex equals pain."

I still my movements. Drop my hands by my side.

"His teacher told me that he asked her... if she screamed."

Lestrade's face immediately shifts. Takes on a sour look.

"What did she tell him?," John asks.

I exhale.

"She told me that she said that "making a baby" doesn't hurt. That it's only something adults do when they want to have a child, and that there is nothing bad about it."
When I look up again, Donovan looks vaguely distressed.

"Anything else?," she asks, her voice fainter than before.

"The Thiesen's are wealthy. They have a personal housecleaner. Yet Toby has been hiding his own undergarments in his duffel bags, washing everything separately. It would be highly unlikely that he'd be going through puberty at his age, so modesty doesn't really cover it. His mother told me he's very private, but I can sense she's had her own niggling little doubts about his behaviours for awhile now. He's taken to creating forts in his closet - again, a relatively normal activity for his age - except that he spends the majority of his time at home inside those constructions. He has no friends. His eating is scanty. He doesn't sleep well. His energy levels vacillate between excessive, almost manic, and sluggish. The photos I have seen of him do not show an ease or warmth. He holds himself apart from others. He appears emotionally stunted. He isn't physically demonstrative. When he is upset, apparently he reverts to acting like a much younger child."

Lestrade nods, taking in the information. Seeing the picture as something that could allude to a darker history.

"Well," he pauses, "You'll be the perfect person for him to speak to then, I guess."

His answering grin starts to falter when I don't respond. In fact, I quickly look to John.

He's shaking his head lightly, looking visibly stressed.

No.

No. 'I didn't say anything.'

No.

"Is that supposed to be some sort of joke?," I hiss a moment later, turning back to Lestrade.

Lestrade glances at Donovan. Suddenly looks peevish.

"I'm sorry. That wasn't appropriate. Just trying to-"

"You can't lighten the mood, Detective Inspector. This child has been attacked. In all likelihood, raped."

Lestrade closes his eyes. Glances at his subordinate.

"Okay. I just meant - you'll get him. Be able to relate to him, perhaps. That's all."

I can feel my mouth turning into a sneer.

"I'll "get him"? Pray tell - what does that mean?"

"Damnit Sherlock. You know what I mean!"

When I look over to John once more, I can see his head is still moving. Oh so slightly.

He's telling me to lay off.

He's telling me to 'Let It Go.'

"Am I doing this alone?," I ask at last, biting my tongue and letting the previous matter rest. "Talking
to him, I mean?"

Lestrade moves forward in his chair a bit.

"No. No, you'll conduct the interview with Donovan."

"And his mother?"

Lestrade sighs.

"It's unlikely that Toby will talk - or write, as it may be - about much if his mother is present. You'll have to use to a video recorder to ensure anything recorded can be substantiated in a way that would be defensible in court. It's standard procedure when talking to children without a parent."

I rise from the table.

"Let's get on with it, then."

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"I understand, Mrs. Thiesen, but we want to make this easier for your son."

Donovan is trying to soothe the worked up woman.

"He's barely regained consciousness! And now you want to talk to him, without someone he knows even being present? What makes you think he's going to talk to you at all? He's not even talking to me!"

"Mrs. Thiesen," I state, as calmly as possible. "Your son will not talk, we realize this. But he is using other mediums to communicate, correct? What is the likelihood he will draw or write anything that will allow us to help - given what we've told you of our suspicions - if you are present?"

The woman suddenly pales.

"Are you stating that I'm involved?"

I look to Sally, hoping she can better express our position.

"No. Not all all. But we want Toby to talk to us. He's the only one who really knows what happened, and he's not talking for a reason. Yes, he's likely very scared - that is true. But some of this could also be shame. It is also unlikely - if my colleague's concerns are correct - that Toby will mention anything in your presence," Donovan says, in one of her victim-soothing voices.

'Colleague...'

The last time she used that word in relation to me, it was in mockery.

"But I'm his mother," Mrs. Thiesen suddenly rasps, as if this fact has gone unnoticed by all us.

"All the more reason it would be hard for him to talk with you there," I state evenly. "He cares about your opinion of him. He will not willingly allude or communicate anything we need to discuss with you in the room."

Mrs. Thiesen wipes at her eyes.

"If he gets upset, I want you to stop," she warbles. "He has gone through enough."
I meet her eyes.

"He likely will not be open to communicating with us, but we will not push him. I promise you that."

Donovan opens the door to the room, and softly makes her way inside, looking at me as if unsure how to proceed. She's been glancing at me far more than would be typical. Staring, studying. It's a little unnerving.

"You'd be best to do the introductions," I whisper, clearing my throat. "He'll likely be less stressed by the presence of a strong female than by any male, no matter how gently I talk to him."

She seems to accept this as acceptable, and moves closer to the bed.

Toby is resting under what looks to be three or four blankets. His hair has been washed since the last time I saw him, and the swelling has gone down from his eyes. Only one eye is open - the other is still swollen shut. The opened eye is red rimmed and looks unnaturally large. Hyphema. Stitching at the corner informs me that it has probably been cut open with a scalpel in the last day or so to release blood; a necessity in periods where blood accumulates and potentially distorts vision due to clotting. Most often cause: head trauma, especially decompression injuries.

The boy watches us carefully as we approach, his back leaning into the bedframe as if to pull away. It's obvious he's not happy about the prospect of having visitors right now.

"It's okay, Toby. My name is Sally and this is-," and Donovan studies me for a moment, probably trying to ascertain how to word our relationship using a term other than freak, "my colleague. His name is Sherlock. We are detectives."

It's probably the most generous description that I'm likely to ever get from Sally Donovan.

Toby looks back down to his lap. He has been reading, apparently, and now goes back to looking at the pages. His free arm flips a page, while his casted arm comes up closer across his chest. It's a defensive position. From the distance, I can see scribbles from where, undoubtedly, nursing staff has signed him well wishes. Very likely, all acquired in the last few hours.

No wonder he's overwhelmed.

"Can we sit down, Toby?," Donovan tries again. "Would that be okay with you?"

The boy looks back up slightly, not meeting our faces. Finally he nods.

"Thank you," Donovan says warmly, taking a nearby chair and pushing one closer to me.

She deftly takes the recording equipment and turns it on, laying it down gently on the side table. Toby watches the proceedings soundlessly, and goes back to reading his novel.

When the camera begins to blink in red tandem with the other medical equipment, Donovan turns to me, her mouth pursed.

Showtime.

"You are probably wondering why we are here," Donovan begins softly, her voice lilting into a question.

The boy shrugs, his fingertips ghosting over a page of Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban.
"Well, we were involved in helping to find you. When you were missing," she continues on, the boy's shoulders hunching up. His small eye is scanning the page far too quickly to be reading.

I lean forward slightly.

"I've never read any of these Harry Potter books. Should I give them a shot?," and I point to the novel.

I have no intention of reading them, of course, but I'm hoping the question will help break the ice.

Toby looks up, studies me as best as he can. Part of me wonders if he remembers anything about that night. About how I picked him up, his eyes spasming in his small skull as if he were having a seizure. The animal-like scream in his throat as he pushed at me. John's shouting in the background for an ambulance. For the "goddamn paramedics!"

He had been somewhat lucid - but only for a few moments - and then he had passed out, prompting me to cradle his head with my hand and hold his body into my coat, trying to keep his temperature up. He had been so cold. And covered in blood.

I swallow down a butterfly of nerves now, wondering how much he recalls.

"Do you remember me, Toby?"

His good eye drops down to his lap. He seems hesitant to either nod or shake his head in the negative.

"That was a scary night, wasn't it?," I whisper.

I see his small throat swallow reflexively, his hands - one in a sling - tense and release in fear.

"We don't have to talk about that night, if you don't want to," I say evenly, hopefully my tone reassuring enough that he doesn't shut down on us entirely.

After a few seconds, he shakes his head.

I give him a terse smile.

"That's alright. I got you some things to colour with, and some notepads and markers so you can write if you'd like."

I put a bag of art supplies near his bed, and he looks at the bag sceptically - as if it's a big, growling dog, and not simple brown paper. As if the items could bite him, or actually do him harm.

"Do you want to see what else I brought for you?"

His little shoulders bunch up, but his body seems less stressed as he leans forward to see. I take the motion to mean 'ok.'

Donovan watches the entire transaction intensely, doing a better job at recording my movements than the actual camera.

When the puzzle books and majority of the markers and colouring sheets have been removed from the bag, I bunch everything together and put it near his side table, so he'll have easy access after we've left.

"Maybe we can use the crayons now?," I try. "On this paper, here?"
I won't push him, no. But he's so shut down that he'll likely need someone to help him along right now.

Toby looks at the box of Crayola crayons and touches it with his good hand, softly.

I open the yellow box, and hold it out to him.

"Why don't you take your favourite colour and I'll take my favourite colour, and we can write to one another?"

He's not stupid. He understands why we are here - Donovan and myself - but he's doing resoundingly well all the same.

I give him a slight smile in what will be taken as - I hope - further encouragement.

He holds a chartreuse crayon in his hand.

"Green is a great colour. And that one is just like fresh grass, isn't it?"

Toby nods, then opens his mouth as if to speak. I do not look at him, in case it is an actual attempt to say something. Any perceived pressure is likely to shut him down in a hurry. Eventually his mouth moves into an O shape, and then closes upon itself, his baby teeth cutting into his lip.

"This is my favourite colour," I say a moment later, to break the silence. I hold up an aubergine coloured crayon and scribble on the pad of paper.

He watches me with a hawk's vision.

"How about we try writing our names?"

I scribble down SHERLOCK in capital letters, and then return the pad of paper to the child.

He takes a few seconds longer cleanly writing out Toby. He writes it as "toby." All lowercase. The text is abnormally small and the writing is heavy, with the lines almost tearing at the page. I try not to frown at the reveal.

"How about I try writing you a question? And you can try writing back to me?"

Toby tenses but doesn't look away.

I think for a few brief seconds, then scrawl down "what is your favourite food?"

Toby reads the message and seems to relax, somewhat.

He's written 'chips and gravy.'

I smile, thinking. I need an in. A way to get this little boy to open up, without scaring him off right away; I scan the room, then hurriedly write back 'Digestive biscuits.'

It's a lie, of course. My favourite food never has been and never will be digestives, but I can see a small sealed packet on his breakfast tray. Untouched. Not even opened. In fact, none of his food looks touched - something that Donovan herself noticed almost immediately after sitting down.

Not that Toby is, by his natural build, excessively lean. There is nothing to indicate he under-eats habitually. In no way does he physically resemble myself as a child - which is probably for the best. Now, as I study him, and try to imagine his face without the bruising and the bandages, I realize that
if he resembles anyone at all, anyone that I know - it would be John. John must have looked similar to Toby as a child.

I quickly, inconspicuously, try to take in his demeanor and his form. His frame is solid, but he's lost weight recently. It shows in his face. His body doesn't naturally edge towards being lanky or gangly, I can tell, so the weight loss doesn't accent natural thinness. It just makes him look sickly. He has well defined muscles, but also carries no excess weight. A standard, but usually physically healthy mesomorph. He's shorter than I would have been at 9 years of age - and I could tell this quickly just from the night when I had picked him up. He's likely not even in the 4 foot range yet. His face is round and full, but not chubby. His eyes are dark blue, normally, but are now marred by intracranial bleeding, and the sclera is now a disturbing rosy pink. He's a towhead, but his hair is starting to darken into something sandy.

When I look back down at the boy, pulled by the flurry of movement, he's holding the packet of unopened digestives in his hand. He's holding them out for me.

I look at Donovan briefly, and her eyes are downcast.

"You want me to have these?," I test, while Toby scrawls down 'yes' in green crayon.

"Thank you," I mutter, trying to push a sudden wave of sadness away.

He even acts like John.

"Would you like a biscuit, Sally?"

Donovan, for her part, looks totally thrown off course, and I smile slightly as I chomp down on the snack. I really didn't plan to share with her, anyway.

"It doesn't look like you've eaten much of your breakfast," I say a moment later, mouth still slightly full with biscuit. "It must be hard to eat with the cast."

Toby shrugs, then goes back to staring at his book. He abruptly closes it, his eyes flashing up to mine suddenly.

Suddenly, there is a look I distantly recognize.

And suddenly I have an awful sense of what is going on, and again - it is more than a feeling, but it is not really based on anything physically demonstrative. All the same, I can't just ignore it. I look back at his tray.

He's consumed his orange juice.

He's pecked at the oatmeal.

He hasn't touched the fruit, or the biscuits.

He'll consume liquids, but he's hesitant to eat solid food. And his throat was not injured. He should be able to swallow normally.

I finish the first biscuit, and then tuck the remaining package into my coat pocket - aiming for relative nonchalance when I speak next.

"Does it hurt if you eat?"

Toby holds the green crayon with a tighter grasp now.
'yes', he writes. The letters are firm, rigid. Even more so than his previous writing. Something about admitting that is upsetting to him. Stressful to him.

"Does it hurt your throat when you eat, or does it hurt you somewhere else?"

He stares at me intensely, his small hand dropping down by his side.

After a few seconds, I ask, "Can you write down on the paper where you hurt?"

Toby looks back up at me faster now, his teeth making deeper indentations into his bottom lip. His face is scrunched up by the request.

"Do you want me to maybe guess? And you can write yes or no?"

He looks away from me miserably, his eyes rapidly filling with tears.

I close my own eyes, not knowing what to say. With an adult, with an adult whose not been hurt - it's so easy. It hardly matters what you say, then, provided you get to the truth.

I finally secure the brown paper bag, and look through some of the sheets I printed out from the internet this morning. When I find what I need, I pull them out and show them to Donovan. She looks over to the boy, then back to me. "Okay," she says softly.

I put the new papers down on Toby's lap, and his eye moves over the sheets.

They look like colouring sheets, but they are sketchings of a boy. Four pages of fairly detailed reproductions of a child's form. There is a front view, right and left side views, and a view of the backside. The cartoon is, of course, lacking clothes, and is anatomically precise.

"Can you maybe colour on here, Toby? Colour the parts of you that hurt right now?"

The little boy takes one of the sheets and pulls it close, staring at it. He suddenly reaches for the box of crayons and pulls out a crimson stick, putting the green crayon back in the box. The fact that he has switched to a red crayon is not lost on me. Toby then quickly colours in the left side of the head, pushing heavily onto the paper. He finally scratches out the eyes of the boy, pressing holes completely through the paper with the force of his strokes.

Then he shows me his handiwork. I instantly recognize the anger and the horror behind his colouring job. The head of the boy has almost been torn away from the rest of the paper.

"Your head and eyes hurt," I reiterate, noticing that his breathing seems to be increasing.

I hold the sheet stationary for him, so it doesn't shake. His body is, in fact, trembling.

"Yes, someone hurt your head and your eyes very badly, didn't they? And the doctors are going to help you heal. Soon, your head and eyes won't hurt anymore."

I let my own line of sight fall back to the paper.

"Does anywhere else hurt?"

Toby grabs the paper back and places it against the novel. After a few seconds he starts scrawling deep red strokes throughout the abdomen region on the cartoon boy.

When the frantic motions stop, I study the paper once more.
"Your stomach hurts?"

He nods sharply, his hands grasping onto the paper and pulling it back. He's obviously not finished just yet.

"What else?," I prompt. "What else hurts?"

The child looks up at me abruptly, his open eye widening in fear.

"It's okay. I promise you, no one is going to get mad at you. We want to help get rid of any pains in your body. We need to know where there is pain. And once you tell us, you won't have to tell us about the pain again. Those questions will be done."

He looks back down at the sheet of paper, over to Donovan, then back over to me.

Someone has threatened him. I know it.

I know it in my gut.

Donovan leans forward slightly.

"Do you think you can be brave, Toby? Like Harry? Just like that?," she asks him slowly.

Toby takes the paper back in a flourish. His hand is shaking profusely now.

He curls the paper up again so we cannot see his movements, and begins to colour once more. After a few seconds he stops, and looks at me. Looks at an additional sheet laying on the bed.

"This one, too?," I ask hoarsely.

He just stares. Finally, he nods. It is a bare fraction of a nod, but I catch it.

"Okay," I say, and lean over to hand him the other page.

He takes it slowly, then likewise curls up the edges and colours at an angle that doesn't reveal much of what he's doing, or where he's colouring.

After a few seconds he pauses. Puts down the crayon.

"All done?," I ask with forced calmness. I feel anything but calm.

Is this how John feels when he talks to me lately?

Toby nods and hands me the pages, both turned over to the white unprinted sides.

I walk a few paces back to my seat, and when I am sufficiently away from his line of sight, I slowly turn the sheets over.

Toby's marked the bottom half of both pages from the hip region to the mid thighs in coarse, cutting lines of red. I exhale slowly, trying not to let the air rattle out as I do.

I turn and look at Donovan, and show her the pages. Within seconds, her head is shaking in an almost unconscious protest to what she is seeing. She finally folds the pages up, and tucks them into her coat.

"It hurts between your legs," I state after I've composed myself well enough to speak without Toby
hearing my anger. "And it hurts, inside. Front and back."

The words are less than precise. But I can't do clinical right now. I can't call it by name. Not with that wandering, blood red eye of the child flittering up over a sea of white blankets, not even wanting to look at the paper, look at the crayons. Certainly not wanting to look at me.

Toby turns away from us slightly, and lets out a barking cough, congested with tears. He knows what he's just revealed, and the force and impact of what he's just admitted to is probably starting to hit him now. Sally moves closer and crouches down by his bed.

"Toby? Can you look at me?"

The boy shakes his head. 'No.'

"You did really well, honey. That's it for now, alright? No more questions today. We're done for now."

Toby brings his casted arm up over his face and turns into his pillow, as if to block us from his sight.

Before I leave his room, I bend down and pick up a snowy owl stuffed animal that has fallen onto the floor. It's grimy and obviously well loved - a security item that he has probably had since his infancy. I lay it gently on the bed, not wanting to touch him directly. A moment later, the boy's arm blindly reaches out for the doll and pulls it away from me, holding it close to his mouth.

Donovan turns off the video recorder, and we leave without saying anything else.
A soft tap at the door causes Lestrade's head to swish up in an arc.

"Come in, guys," he says resignedly.

"It's just me," Donovan starts, looking apprehensive and subdued. "Sherlock...left in a hurry."

"Left?," I question dully, feeling vaguely apprehensive.

Donovan lets out a strained exhalation, and pulls out two crumpled sheets of paper from her inner jacket pocket. She lays them on the table, and Lestrade reaches for them - turning them over in a flourish. I swallow down a lump at the cartoon child covered in lashes of red.

"What's this?," he asks dully, turning to look at me. I know then that he already knows what Donovan is going to say. But he's a father, a father of three - and his youngest is only a year younger than Toby. And he wants to delay the inevitable truth that is about to be revealed.

"Sherlock couldn't get the boy to speak - but he could get him to write down words with a crayon, and also - to do that." And she points to the sheets of paper as if they are venomous. "It was pretty obvious the little kid wasn't going to tell us on his own, and-"

"So this is where he was hurt?," I ask carefully. I can't see any other thing that this could really mean, unfortunately.

Donovan nods, and indicates to the second page of scrawling.

"He's going to need an internal exam - and we are going to have to inform the mother as soon as possible."

Lestrade sits down, pushing the drawings off to one side as if to get them out of his sight.

"Christ almighty - this little boy was raped. Sherlock knew it from the start."

Donovan's mouth is puckered as if she's tasted something sour.

"It couldn't be anything too recent. He was looked over briefly for signs of assault when they admitted him. Mind you it was cursory - not internal ."

"Or it could mean that he's just not bleeding any longer or bleeding enough to have raised the suspicions of the attending physician," I get out, my throat and chest abnormally tight. "And a child that's been abused for a long time would very likely not fight back if sexual abuse was commonplace, so there wouldn't necessarily been any bruising on the thighs or rest of the body if the
abuse was routine."

"Sherlock said he'd need an internal, and he had that look in his eyes - you know the one - like he's seeing something that no one else can see?," Donovan tries again, her breath coming out in a rattle. "And for once in his life he seemed to care about someone else too, so-"

"Oh come off it Sally!," I hiss, suddenly feeling angry and sad and miserable. But mostly sad. "Let it rest, alright? Sherlock's not the demon you think he is. He's not a psychopath, or a sociopath or whatever incorrect label he's tacked onto himself. He's just a person who finds it hard to relate to others. But can we lay off the Sherlock-bashing for one case, please?"

The woman before me opens her mouth, then closes it abruptly. Her cheeks are flushed. I either look really, really mad - or she realizes she's been really, really wrong.

"I know that, John, okay? I mean before today, I didn't really understand it. I hadn't seen that side to him yet - and that's probably my fault, too. But he was remarkably careful with that little boy. It was like a different person in there and-"

I cut her off, knowing I shouldn't. Knowing such an outburst is akin to shining a spot light onto Sherlock, and some small dark figure in the back of my mind is begging me to STOP. Telling me that these are detectives too. And yet a 'look deeper' sign has been tacked to his chest since the beginning. I felt it on day one. I heard it early on - when he questioned 'why?' all the time. Why do people do that? and Why do people think like this, John? Why, why, why. WHY? For all his brilliance, he also has a resounding vulnerability at times. It's not the typical innocent that marks someone as being gullible. But it has a childish edge at times. As if basic emotional reasons - beyond the salacious crime stories he's read, or the information obtained on cases dealing with murder, money laundering, burglary, or other criminal events - is somehow missing from his own emotional repertoire.

As if he were half man, half child. As if he could simultaneously see more deeply than anyone I had ever known, but couldn't appreciate the human motivations behind the actions. He could piece the puzzle together, but when he stepped back to look at the finished product - his take on the art was always with the words of someone young, someone vulnerable.

Brilliant, but vulnerable.

'This is my...friend. John Watson.'

And they never bothered to ever bloody look. Not really. So I can't help it. I can't stop the words from bubbling out of my throat.

"Did you ever consider it's just an act? One big act to keep people away? To keep people from looking too deeply?"

My throat feels bruised, and I suddenly realize I've said too much. And yet, at the same time - I've hardly said anything. I've hardly done anything to address the years of taunting, of name calling.

Lestrade frowns at the drawings, then at the desk - quickly meeting Sally's eyes.

"Look - I'm admitting it, John. I saw a different side to him today, and I know it doesn't change the past - but I honestly think he can help this kid. We keep him on."

Lestrade nods.

"I agree. You were saying he was adamant about an exam? Christ - he'd not press for it unless he
thought it vital, either."

Donovan lets out a pent up breath at that.

"He's been washed, his wounds tended to - there is a good possibility that we won't find DNA anyway."

Lestrade continues to nod at the table, while I take a seat - my heart pounding violently. Angry that they'd overlook the moral obviousness of the situation - that DNA matters far, far less than addressing a little child's pain.

"How did he seem when he left?," I ask suddenly.

"Sherlock, or the boy?," Donovan clarifies. It's a reasonable question, I guess.

"Sherlock, Sally."

"He was quiet. He looked off. Strange. Paler than normal, and we all know that he's about pale as a ghost normally. I thought it best to leave him alone."

I get up abruptly.

"John, I am su-

I wave away her comments - her certitude - with my hand.

"I am going to go look for him. I'd advise you inform Mrs. Thiesen that her little boy is going to require another exam as soon as possible. If Sherlock insisted on it, then it's not just to cover all bases as a technicality point. It's because this kid is wounded. And badly enough to warrant being seen by a doctor again."

Suddenly I am out of the room, out into the hall with the buzzing and beeping and creaking and the noise of intercoms and elevators and frayed, fried halogens crackling before me.

I take a deep breath and make my way quickly back to the direction of Toby's room, stopping at the closest nurse's station.

A brown haired nurse in her late 40's is filling out a form, and eyes me approaching the desk.

"John Watson. I'm consulting with the Yard about one of the children who was admitted yesterday, and I'm looking for a detective," I say easily. "He would have left the room a few moments ago? A little over 6 ft, dark curly hair - quite thin?" I use my hand as an approximate gauge to indicate Sherlock's height.

The woman stops, thinks for a second. Purses her lips.

"I think he went past the vending machines about 10 minutes back? Something like that - wearing a blue coat?," she says gruffly, already consumed with her task and returning to her work.

That's him.

"Ta," I say softly, padding off in the general direction she indicated.

I look around the vending machines, check the family room and TV lounge. Take a peak in a small café on the floor that is serving tea, coffee and a soup of the day ("Garden Vegetable Medley"), apparently - continue on down the hall until I see a large blue and white sign for the restrooms. Rap
against the door gently with my knuckles, then open the door and go inside.

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At first I don't hear or see anything.

A second later I hear a shuddery breath and a congested wheeze, followed by the unmistakable sound of a person vomiting.

Very quietly, that is. If water was running, you'd miss the sound entirely. But it comes up in a spurt of liquid-intensity.

Then panting.

More vomiting.

"Sherlock?" I say softly, though my voice seems to reverberate and come out far more loudly than the sound of the man retching up at the end of the hallway.

I tread carefully, stopping when I see the familiar black boots, the swoosh and flow of a navy blue trench. The blue scarf has been discarded to the floor - probably to keep it away from the line of sick.

I pat once more against the stall with the back of my hand, my body frozen in place. The vomiting has seemed to stop, but the sound of gasping - and something else, something I can't identify - streams out into the air.

"Please leave me alone," comes the voice - soft, barely there. A cloud of words plumed out into the air like smoke.

"Sherlock?" I try again, feeling helpless.

Please don't shut me out.

Please.

When I don't get a response, I open the door slightly - as it hasn't been locked.

My friend is gripping the toilet with white knuckled hands. His back is to me, and his knees look like they are going to buckle.

I rush to his side, and help support him around his midsection, while a new bout of vomit comes up.

"Go 'way!," he pants, leaning over again to rid his stomach of whatever had been in there moments ago.

"Nothing I haven't seen before," I mutter, one hand pressed into the core of his belly, the other to the small of his back.

"Come on. Let yourself sit down," I add a moment later.

"It won't come out," Sherlock whispers, his hands grasping the porcelain, his mouth choking on spit. "There's more inside."

I help him away from the toilet, and grab some tissue before he goes down in a heap.

"If I don't get it out now, it's going to come up later," he gasps out, still trying to get air into his lungs.
"Try to calm down. The feeling might go away on its own, and I doubt you had much in your belly to start with..."

Sherlock closes his eyes at that, seemingly calming down. After a few seconds, he opens his eyes again and ice blue meets my own with stunning fervor.

"I'm sorry," he starts, as if on impulse.

I frown, pick up his scarf off the floor. Dust it off on my lap.

"What in the world do you have to apologize for, Sherlock?"

He squirms against the tile, blotting at his mouth.

"Please - I'm good now. I promise. Please go."

While typically I would abide by his request, this time I know it's only a matter of time before Lestrade trails back here looking for him just as I did.

"Not going to happen," I whisper. "The others are wondering where you are as it is," I mutter, my hand floating in the air - inches from his back. I finally let my hand drop to my side.

"Still feeling nauseated?," I ask dumbly. "Or has it passed?"

"Mmm'mokay," he gets out, still staring at the toilet bowl.

"Let's flush that now, why don't we?," and I reach over to pull the lever, watching in a sort of abject fascination at just what Sherlock could have brought up this morning. From the look of things, it's not much - which doesn't surprise me in the slightest. He's a paltry enough eater at the best of times.

I stare as the remains whirl down the drain: a white, mushy substance that is undoubtedly crackers or biscuits. Possibly toast. The smell of bile assaults my nostrils, and I move away quickly.

"Still feeling like you might be ill? Do you want to head home?"

Sherlock shakes his head resolutely.

"I'm not sick. I'm fine, I-"

"The vomit I just flushed away seems to contradict your words there, bud."

Sherlock moves away from the toilet, buttoning up his jacket. His hands are still shaking.

"I'm sure the others can continue on today without your assistance," I try once more. "We can tell them you are feeling sick and-"

Sherlock starts to shake his head quickly back and forth at that - rising shakily on deer thin legs.

"Just leave it. I don't want them to know!"

"We can say you have a flu," I try to offer, reasonably. "But you look sick, and they are not idiots."

"Yes they are," he grousers.

I smirk at that, helping him reaffix his scarf.

"Come on. Let's get you tidied up."
My friend cups his face in his hands.

"They'll know. They'll know why."

I sigh, then crouch down along the wall, sitting side by side to Sherlock. Our bodies touch in the center, and that's with us using a handicap stall with the additional space for a wheelchair. Normally we'd have to have had this little chat in a hallway or a private room - like all the other normal people. Not crouched down by a toilet in a handicap space with grouting on the tiles and the scent of lemon disinfectant in the air.

"Sherlock - all they will know is that a very disturbing case with a traumatized little boy has impacted you. It'll give Donovan something to think about next time she wants to call you Freak, now won't it?"

Sherlock crosses his arms, brings them over his knees.

"No one else is throwing up in the toilets, though."

I fix him with a glare. A glare without much heat, but a glare all the same.

"So you're not a robot. So they were wrong. So everyone who thought you were heartless and cold and unfeeling was foolish, and stupid and wrong. And now you can throw in their faces if they dare make mention of it. Other than that - this isn't like you. When do you care what other people think?"

He doesn't seem to be listening. His hands are wringing against the material of his jacket.

"You are not observing, John. You don't get it and I can't make you get it, and I don't want you to get it and-"

I grab for one of his hands impulsively.

"Woah. Hold on. Take a breath, okay? What am I not getting? Tell me."

He doesn't meet my eyes.

"I wasn't sick," he mutters, his throat swallowing convulsively, his hand holding onto mine with greater force than before.

A smirk passes over my features.

"I beg to differ. Perhaps we have different definitions as to what constitutes getting sick, but-"

"No. I felt like I had to throw up but I didn't feel sick," he says stiffly. "Do you see?"

His hand is cold and clammy and holding onto mine with such force now. And he's right - I don't get it. I finally let my other hand trail up to his back, to the nape of his neck. I apply light pressure there, feel him tremble, then frown.

"Can you tell me what that means? What does that even mean?"

He looks up at me quickly, as if jolted.

"Forget it," he whispers.

"Sherlock-"
"Forget it! Let it go! It's not going to happen again, anyway!"

He stands up quickly then, wipes his mouth on some more toilet paper, then moves to exit the stall. I respond first, and slam the door closed. Something is not right.

Something is so wholly not right.

"Stop it right now and explain. Explain now. What is going on?"

Sherlock swallows again, his eyes burning around the clasp of my hand on the door frame as if trying to burn away my presence with his line of sight.

"I don't know what I meant. Please let me go."

I squint at him, running his words through my head.

It's his please that finally gets to me.

"Okay. This time. But you start to feel bad again, you tell me - okay?," and I reach for his head out of a doctor's impulse. Feel around his temple with the pads of my fingertips, and then take note of the sweat around his ears: the wet-matted curls against his skull.

"You sure you don't feel nauseated?," I clarify again. Because he's sweaty, but he's certainly not running a fever. If anything he feels too cold, and-

oh shit.

"Do you feel lightheaded? Hmmm? Do you feel like you've been doused in cold water? Numb limbs, Sherlock? Unreal?"

I mentally go through the symptoms of shock, wondering if he's just had his fill of overwhelm: his limit of bad images and horrific memories.

"I'm not in shock, John," Sherlock says gruffly, moving past me. His cheeks - I note - are pink. As if embarrassed.

I let him pass to the sinks, where he washes up meticulously, and I do the same, scrubbing around the webbing of my fingertips, then blow drying my hands under the dryer.

"Hold on. One thing -"

"John!"

"Let me feel your throat. You could be coming down with something. I want to check your glands."

The eye roll that follows my words is actually what puts me at ease, but I give him an 'I'm Serious' look, and hear him sigh.

"I'm not sick, alright?," he utters softly, not meeting my eyes.

I let my hand trail up to his throat, and I press lightly along the back to where his throat dips around near his ears, and then I move forward until my fingertips are stroking and feeling for swelling around his Adam's apple. I finally reach for his hand and take his pulse before he can stop me.

"For god's sake," he complains in softest utterance, swallowing once more as if nervous.
"It's fast, and thready. You didn't bring up much, but it could still be compounded with low blood sugar. What's your blood pressure at as an average? Do you know?"

"85/50," he answers, clipped. "At last exam, anyway."

"Mmmm," and I'm sure my face takes on a disapproving cast. "That's edging towards too low to be healthy. If you were an athlete, maybe."

"I will take a kip when we get back to Baker St. I will be okay, John. I won't let myself get sick again," and his words are insistent and strong and said with such intensity that I feel temporarily relieved. But only slightly; he's still not meeting my eyes. At that moment the door to the washroom opens and Lestrade ducks his head in.

"We're about to speak to Toby's mother. Do you want to be present for that, or have you had your fill of stuff today, Sherlock?"

Sherlock's eyes suddenly break complete contact with mine, and his mouth clamps shut while he takes a step back from us both, as if to get his bearings.

"I'm fine. Completely fine," he says firmly, an edge of something sharp and harsh and unyielding in his tone.

"Okay. Well, good," Lestrade starts awkwardly. "Then we are situated in the conference room. B17. Come as soon as you are ready. You seem to put Mrs. Thiesen at ease."

Lestrade departs quickly then, leaving us alone again.

After a few seconds, Sherlock reaches for the handle to follow the DI.

"I'm going to be fine."

I nod with reservation, somewhat off put by the insistence.

"Is that what he said?," Mrs. Thiesen barely gets out. "Did he speak to you?"

Donovan looks over at me, then glances over to Sherlock. Of course, Sherlock isn't looking at anyone: he is tracing lines of the conference table with his right index finger. Loops or swirls. Or he's possibly spelling out a word or a name. It's really hard to say.

"He didn't say anything vocally, Ma'am - but from the sheets and his interactions he indicated that he's in pain. Internally. He'll need to be re-examined."

Mrs. Thiesen turns away suddenly, her shoulders shaking. It takes me a second to realize that she's crying silently.

"Can it be done later?," she gets out after a moment - her eyes trying to meet Sherlock's. "He's gone through so much today as it is."

That connection that has been there from the beginning seems to have intensified this morning - undoubtedly because Sherlock was the one who made the initial connection with Toby. Who actually found Toby, who provided the mouth to mouth resuscitation and CPR that saved the child's life. Who got pink back into a small face that had been a ghastly shade of blue. And who then had wrapped the child up in his jacket and had cradled him to his chest, keeping him as protected from
the rain and the wind as possible.

Sherlock finally looks up, his eyes pained.

"He indicated that it hurts him now. A doctor should see to him as soon as possible. If he's cut or if he's ble."

At Mrs. Thiesen's look, Sherlock abruptly stops talking, then looks to my left, then back down to the table.

He seems to be debating something, and I see him gulp before speaking again.

"Your little boy is extremely scared right now. He's scared and he's hurt and he's ashamed in a way that no child should ever have to experience. But he's experiencing it right now, and he's likely been ashamed and hurt for some time. So he's going to need to be able to rely on you to help him through this. He needs to know that you can be strong enough to help him cope right now, or he'll not be able to deal with this properly."

"I can't force him on anything else. Don't you see that?," Mrs. Thiesen gets out, her voice breaking off into a sob while Lestrade offers her over a box of tissues.

"He's not speaking, which is bad enough. You're right. But allowing him to keep all the things in his head to himself isn't going to help him in the end. He could begin to regress, to dissociate - and you don't want that to happen to him. It'll make it that much harder for him to address what has happened. That much harder to heal."

Mrs. Thiesen is shaking her head back and forth quickly.

"If he doesn't want to talk about it, he doesn't have to! I'm not pushing my son. We will solve this a different way."

Sherlock bites his lip then moves forward slightly in his chair, his eyes flickering over to Mrs. Thiesen's, and then back down to the desk.

"Please listen to me and hear me when I say this: Toby needs to feel. He may not like those feelings at first, but it's better he gets them out now. Whatever is inside him is akin to...shards of glass. Clear, hard to detect but sharp, and painful. Right now your son is full of broken glass, and if you don't remove the glass - if you leave him alone to tune everything out and deny what's happened - it'll hurt less right now, that's true. But then the skin will grow back over the top of all that mess. And the glass will still be there. Inside of him. Only one day he'll be grown up, and the glass will still be inside him and it will still hurt for him to do normal things. Because even normal things will scare him. And it will still be painful. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

I catch Donovan's look - hawkish and severe as she glances over to Sherlock, alarmed. For a second, I think she's going to interrupt - going to intervene. I hold up my hand, gently, to indicate that she should hold off. She looks back up at me, eyes owlish and huge in her petite face.

"They told me yesterday that it was lucky that Toby wasn't conscious because with the injury to his skull, his brain - they wouldn't want to administer sedatives," the woman says tensely. "And now you are saying that Toby needs to be examined like that? While he's awake? Can they even give him anything?"

Sherlock winces with realization.

This kid is coming out of a mild coma. They are not going to sedate him with a concussion.
He then presses his palms against the oak table as if for grounding.

"Nothing I say is going to make it easier for you to want to do this. There is no wanting to do this. There is just needing to do this. Do you see? If he's internally bleeding, or even if he's dealing with injuries that haven't been treated properly - he could get an infection or he could get a fever. He could get sepsis. We don't even know how badly he's hurt yet. To ignore his injuries would be irresponsible at best."

Toby's mother pushes away from the table and moves to back of the room, her body quavering. Her voice is rapidly repressed as Sherlock approaches cautiously and assists her back to the table.

Lestrade seems to make a decision at that point, and ushers Donovan and myself out of the room.

Sherlock, however, remains behind and gives me a nod before the door shuts. I take in his voice as he leans in closer to the broken woman.

I see him cup her hand in his.

A quiet display of solidarity.
Sticky like blood

Chapter Summary

John and Lestrade speak about certain subjects in roundabout fashion. Lestrade tries to tell John to watch Sherlock.

"Where is home? Where is It?" - Bloc Party

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At Sherlock's insistence, I call Sarah back. She's been sending me texts all morning, even though it's my (quote and quote) 'day off.'

I take the call with reservations. I don't want to leave Sherlock here, with the kid, all alone. We both know what's coming, and I also know he won't leave Toby during the exam. Perhaps everyone else will be absent - likely the less people around, the easier this will be for the boy - but Sherlock looks committed to seeing this through. I can feel the determination come off him in waves.

My mobile beeps, and I read the message:

Can you come in? I'll buy you lunch. - Sarah

I put my phone on mute and decide to get a Pepsi from the vending machine. Something with some caffeine. It's not the healthiest thing, no - but it will do in a pinch. My energy is flagging. Then I slump down in a chair in the 'family room.'

A few minutes later Lestrade makes his way over, looking spooked. I twist off the plastic cap to the beverage, feeling the bottle sweat in the relative heat of the room. I listen to the sound of the fizz, feel the pressure build beneath the cap, and quickly bring the lid to my mouth before the beverage can swell and foam over and onto the floor.

I then give him a nod with my head.

"Sherlock still with Mrs. Thiesen?"

Lestrade is studying me with a penetrating gaze. I take another sip of cola.

"I'm guessing he'll stay with Toby. He's - well, it's not going to be an easy thing."

No, it's not.

It's going to be damn hard for both of them.

My guts twinge in sympathy. In outrage for Toby and in solidarity and equal protectiveness for Sherlock.

"He's being inordinately...sensitive about this, John."
I raise the bottle in a toast.

"Yes, well-"

Lestrade scratches his neck with his left hand. I suddenly realize that his hair looks different.

More salt and pepper.

The inspector clears his throat.

"Is something going on?"

And there we have it: the crux of the issue, and the main concern Sherlock had about this case. About potential revelations on this case. As expressed not more than an hour ago in that dingy restroom that spelled of lemon antiseptic. Near a toilet filled with vomit.

The fear that others would find out: that was his fear from the beginning, I suspect.

And what had he said to me after?

'You don't understand'? Was that it? 'You don't get it and I don't want you to get it'?

Something like that.

My head plays with his words now as I eye Lestrade. Take another sip of fizz to gather my thoughts.

"John?"

Lestrade is studying me intensely, in the vein of Sherlock himself. His ease, his warm and bright smile is now gone. His presence of softness, yet competency, has now become competency merged with a steely, vacillating nervousness.

He's concerned.

"It's been a pretty rotten case. And it's gotten worse over time hasn't it?," I question with as much stability as I can muster.

He "mhmmm"s me, in agreement.

"And Sherlock doesn't do emotions well. You know that."

I hope he buys it, but I have my reservations.

Lestrade lets out an exhale, runs his hands through his buzz cut.

"John," he starts, "what I've seen with Sherlock these past few days - with that little boy, and with the mother? That's not Sherlock handling emotions badly at all. That's him knowing exactly what to do and say to make everything just a bit less of a horror show for that little kid."

He curses under his breath.

"Hell - I'm a dad. I have young kids myself. My youngest is around Toby's age. You know that I think, yeah? And when Sherlock told me what he suspected had happened - even when we first saw that body by the train tracks, just motionless? Bleeding and wet and how he looked like some little stuffed doll? The rain - everything - it just froze me, John. I couldn't stop thinking...'what if that was my boy?' And I'm supposed to be good at separating my emotions. But I couldn't. Because some
part of it was personal to me, in a way. Because Toby reminded me...of my kid.'

I tilt my head, wonder if I can get through this without lying, but also without revealing the ghosts and the demons of Sherlock's past. I hope I can. But I'm not certain of it. I'm not certain Lestrade just won't intuit what is going on, even if I'm silent.

Because I won't reveal what Sherlock wouldn't want me to make mention of, even if he needs to face his past. Even if he needs allies that could help him. At the end of the day, the decision of whom to tell, and when, and how - all need to be Sherlock's.

To be fair, if the situation were reversed I doubt I'd want people knowing at all. Ever. Even my friends. Maybe even Sherlock, himself. So it'd be hypocritical of me to demand he deal with this differently. Because how he is dealing with this makes perfect sense when you look at the psychology of how victims often feel after being brutalized. Especially by a parent figure, and especially when little.

Hell - his whole identity is probably linked to those sick events. His sense of self, of where he fits in, whether or not he accepts the label of freak, his reluctance - no, his downright mockery - of even the construct of sexual relationships.

And who could blame him? If sex by force was the expectation - his very reality - even before he'd have a concept of what sex was supposed to mean to couple in a consensual sense - then certainly romance would seem foreign. A media construction to make movies seem poignant, perhaps. A falsity. The interplay and the words that adults use when considering a potential sexual partner might even seem abhorrent to him growing up with the views that must have solidified at a tragically young age. As a bloody toddler, really.

Fear, pain, anger, shame, aggressive rejection of all social dynamics to minimize future threats, and perhaps most deeply covered up would be a boundless rage. Because I know if it had happened to me and I hadn't properly dealt with it? That rage would be inexhaustible.

Sherlock's seen the worst of a person brought out for nothing more than willful delight in carnality. Between a parent and a child. And he was that child.

The thought is still foreign. Still hard to accept as true. True at all, for anyone. That people could do such things to little kids.

But some do.

And so everything would have been skewed, as I know it must have been. But there's no way to really broach the topic with him without causing further embarrassment. Or, perhaps even worse - doing real damage.

I'm not a therapist.

I'm not trained to deal with sort of stuff. I'm trained to help the physical body recover. Not the mental one.

And there we have the contradictory nature of emotions and logic. I logically know that Sherlock is the victim. I fully appreciate it emotionally. Yet, just as intense - I know my own emotional feelings wouldn't be all that different to Sherlock's. He obviously went through a much harder adolescent than even I did, but the feeling of wanting to hide? Of feeling as if you have something *to* hide?

I know that feeling. I knew what it was like with a parent that drank, and with a sister who drank even more.
The throwing of dishes. The screaming. The lashings of a belt when I was seven, after I had stolen money from my dad's duffle. I had wanted to get a Batman comic book and watermelon gum from the corner store - just like the other kids in my year three class. But we didn't have much money, so I didn't get an allowance. As a result, I 'borrowed' what I needed. I borrowed what I thought I needed - and got beaten for it. It was the first and last time I ever took something that didn't belong to me.

Alcohol played a role, I'm sure. Especially in the severity of the 'discipline.' If you can call it that (which you really can't. Not when you break your son's leg).

But worse than the broken bone was how it made me feel wrong. About myself. A bad son. Not only was I terrified my teachers would find out (and so conveniently left my sports kit at home multiple days in a row, even though it was eventually discovered - the injury, if not the cause) but I vowed to never be 'bad' like that again. Of course, I was 7 and I had been lashed until the backs of my thighs and the soft skin of my knees bled - but it wasn't child abuse. Not in my mind.

It was me being a bad kid.

And it took a good chunk of my life to rid myself of those misguided beliefs.

Yet Sherlock...

My brilliant friend.

Did he know from the beginning that he had been abused? That it was abuse? That it was unnatural?

Or had he considered it a punishment? A sick, dreadfully perverse punishment - and nothing more?

My strange, aspergerish flatmate. Who talked to a skull up until he met me simply because he really didn't have a friend.

Does he really understand that he was completely blameless?

Even now?

Especially now?

Sherlock - who pushes himself beyond normal endurance levels just to solve a case. Who I still worry could start up again with the hard drugs. With cocaine, or with morphine, or whatever dark substances of his past could come back onto the scene. A tempting offering to obliterate thoughts that really hurt too much to be kept inside.

Addiction.

He is at such risk for a full blown relapse.

Now more than ever.

The thought flaps about the periphery of my consciousness. An almost destined warning: it could happen again. You could witness Sherlock become a junkie. It could happen.

Because, dear God - if anyone would want to escape the horrors of the mind - it would have to be someone like Sherlock. The words spoken by Mycroft himself had seemed too obscenely real. Just the words alone had made me so ill. I couldn't even fully connect the words to the shame that Sherlock must have felt. The violation, the sense of being so worthless to a man who should have acted as his father. Who should have picked him up and read bedtime stories to him, but instead
picked him up and removed his pajamas, removed his pants. Molested him. And worse.

If I fully connected to the weight of the betrayal, it would lash out in my guts just as a physical wound. And I was never the recipient of abuse of such a heinous nature.

So the knowledge that he's his pushed all this away? It scares the bejesus out of me.

"John - has he said anything that makes you think that-"

Lestrade fumbles with the words, trying to read my features and gauge my emotions.

"Shitty case, Lestrade. Not even Sherlock could be in good spirits with a kid involved. I mean, he's not that socially out of it. And he's not cruel."

"So he hadn't said anything to you?"

It's vague. It's purposefully vague. I know that.

"Said? Said what?"

I'll play dumb if I have to. If that's what it takes to preserve my promise, and Sherlock's confidence. Lestrade fixes me with a long stare.

"Do you think maybe-?,” he begins, then shakes his head as if the idea burgeoning forth is ludicrous. He obviously considers a direct question too nosy. Too intrusive.

Or maybe he just doesn't want to consider the chance that he'd be right. And I couldn't blame him for not wanting to see.

"It would explain some things, wouldn't it?,” he tests again, his brow furrowing.

I know where he's going with this. Anyone would know where he's going with this. But Sherlock will flip out if Lestrade lets on that he's concerned around him. That he's even close to discovering what Sherlock, sadly, feels needs to be kept from the light of day.

That he's considering the dynamic of my friend engaging so skillfully with a traumatized boy as being evidence for something more.

"He just cares. Probably about a lot of things. I know he can be abrasive at times, but he's not without the ability to feel for others. He's not a sociopath, despite his self-labelling."

Lestrade continues to scan me. I can feel his gaze roam over my body, my face.

I never was a very good actor. And I'm an even worse liar.

"Well, there's very little we can do here until Toby decides he's willing to talk to us."

I nod.

It's obvious. We have no more physical evidence. We only have a kid who won't talk. Scotland Yard agents can't stick around for a kid who won't talk.

"I'm going to wait for Sherlock. You'll call us if there's anything else we can help with?"

Lestrade sighs.
"Tell him to take care of himself. I mean it; he needs to seriously watch it. He's getting too thin again."

It feels like a warning. A commandment from a boss to a subordinate. There is a note of something in those words. An acknowledgement of a reality outside of the one I've been exposed to, and I don't like the suggestion one bit.

"Watch it?" I raise a brow in question.

"He's lost weight. I can see it plain as day, for all he'd deny it. I know this case has wrecked havoc with his nerves. I can't have him on cases if he's going to be sick-"

Of course the DI would piece that together.

I give him a look. My heart is rattling around harshly in my chest.

"It would take a lot of getting sick to lose weight, Greg."

Lestrade opens his mouth to say something, then shuts it abruptly.

"Sherlock doesn't...well, when I met him he wasn't very good at taking care of himself."

And he is now?

Lestrade pauses, evaluates what to say next.

"He had problems, John."

I feel a sudden tightness in my chest. A rapid onset dizziness.

"We all have problems. Things that are problematic..."

Lestrade rubs his face.

"No, forget it. Just-," and suddenly his face fixes into something rigid and set and knowing.

Please don't ask. Please don't.

It killed him to tell me, and it didn't take the pain away.

All I did was remind him of horrible things. Horrible events.

Nothing more.

"Mrs. Thiesen wants him to be there. When they...you know," I reveal quickly, feeling like we're both close to truths we're not ready to deal with this morning.

Lestrade swallows. I see his adam's apple bob. He's pinching the inside of his cheek with his teeth.

I wonder if it bleeds.

"Okay," he allows. "Are you staying?"

I hesitate.

"Sherlock wants me gone. And Sarah has asked me to come to the surgery. They are backed up, so-," I look away. Because if I don't then everything is going to register in my face.
"John...," and the DI's eyes looks suddenly so sad, suddenly so aware; I think he's connected every puzzle piece that relates to Sherlock's moods, and behaviours, and atypical ways of being to make a discernible picture. A picture of something I will not reveal and which Sherlock himself would deny.

And he's done it immediately.

"Don't, Greg. He'd -," I stop abruptly. "Whatever you are thinking right now - you have to stop thinking about. If Sherlock has something he needs to talk about and-," I stop here entirely, letting the obvious sentiment of my words hang in the air, voiced without sound.

"But if he...John-"

I sigh and it comes out as a huff. Because I know Greg is coming from a position of compassion and concern. Newfound awareness. And Sherlock can be a livewire at the best of times.

"He will keep it together," I say, resolute.

"John - I can barely keep it together. This case has me wanting to punch someone, except we don't even have a suspect!"

I nod in agreement.

"Sherlock will get that little boy to talk. Maybe not today, or tomorrow. But he will. He can, so he will. He's not going to let it rest. Obviously this was an attack on Toby. My guess? Toby was going to say something. Going to expose his abuser. So the stakes are high, right? It's likely someone Toby knows quite well."

Lestrade rises from his chair and I hear his knee pop.

"I'm going to ask Sally to pull out the main contacts we have for Toby. The list of teachers, of school friends. Anyone who might have an inkling of something not being okay. If we can at least determine who to start pressing, we would know the best way to proceed."

Normally Sherlock would have already determined the predator. The monster who could have done something like this.

Yet on this case, he seems to be uncertain.

Because he is distracted.

But maybe with the knowledge that Toby will be leaving the hospital in the next week, he'll have some ideas.

So that's my hope, now. One of them. A larger, fuller hope is that Toby can do this on his own. Confide in someone with words. And have that someone not be Sherlock. I know in some ways that it's a selfish thought. Borne of my own need to protect my friend, and my feelings of inadequacy if I don't.

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I speak to Sherlock. He's pale, with pinched lips.

He's (as I suspected) resolute. He's going to stay with the boy. Even Toby's mother had been asked to leave. Toby eventually given a mild sedative. Not enough to totally put him out, but enough to reduce his anxiety. Thank goodness for small mercies.
I look over through the window now; the little boy is laying on his left side, concentrating on a portion of the wall in front of him. The curtains around his bed are pulled open, but soon they will be closed tightly. The blinds too.

My throat aches with the knowledge that he needs to go through something like this. Again. Because it must feel the same. Sure, he'll know it's a doctor touching him. Not a person intent on using his body. But will that difference and that knowledge be enough to take away his fear?

I doubt it.

"Do you want me to stay?," and my tone is one of feigned nonchalance. Or that is my hope as Sally turns to look up at me, just I catch Lestrade call to her from the edge of the hallway.

She eyes me, she eyes Sherlock. She seems to stall for a second, uncertain if she's going to speak or what.

Finally, an awkward, "It was good of you to do this. You-," and her voice drops off. This woman, after all, normally calls him 'freak.' Mind you, this time she's still not calling him Sherlock, but progress is progress; I guess even his sensitivity isn't enough to totally negate the years of bickering and bad blood between them.

"Good luck," she finally says hesitantly, as if expecting a scathing retort.

Sherlock stares at her almost immobile, then finally gives a slight nod of his head in acknowledgment that he's heard her words. But it is to me that he actually speaks next.

"You should head to work, John. Who knows how long this will take?"

He doesn't look me in the eye, just sucks in a deep breath and then walks through the door. It clicks with a metallic 'shlock,' and a few seconds later I see him as he joins Toby near the hospital bed. At long last, I see Sherlock drag a plastic chair to the edge of the bed, and I see mouthed words. Barely moving lips.

He must be whispering.

The child gives no indication he's heard anything and remains as solid as he had been second before. Finally I see Sherlock's hand reach out to grab hold of Toby's much smaller one. The boy still doesn't move. He doesn't even bat an eye.

The last thing I see before I turn away is Sherlock's thumb moving back and forth rhythmically against the palm of Toby's small hand, and the boy suddenly closing his eyes as if he's slipping into a dream state. Sherlock then leans down and presses his mouth to Toby's ear.

Not a kiss. I see his lips moving.

A question?

Toby finally nods. Nods to whatever question or statement Sherlock had stated or asked; I'll likely never know.

And now a doctor comes and pulls the drape taut around the bed, blotting out the sight of my friend, and the child. All I can take in now is the scuffled sounds of footsteps in the hallway. The beeping of machines down the corridor. The sounds and sights of nurses at the main desk.

But the scene before me has been terminated.
I feel like I've been witness to the drawing of a veil. An execution of sorts. A psychic execution. Something as weighty as capital punishment. An unfair connection, perhaps - but the reality of what must be occurring in that room right now is almost overpowering. The reality for what that child has lived through and now is enduring yet again is making it hard to breathe easily. When I back away from the window, I realize Sally has long since departed, and I'm glad.

I toss my Pepsi bottle - now half consumed - into a nearby bin as I walk away. The soda feels sticky on my fingertips, and all I can think of is that it feels a lot like blood that has dried on my flesh.

Suddenly the innocuous has become the demonic. The innocent is dark and brutal and laden with sickness and threat.

Even the giraffe on the children's corridor wall mocks me as I walk towards the elevators.
Victor

Chapter Summary

Again, in John's POV.

John comes home to find that Sherlock is sick, and has taken solace in John's room. John tries to touch on some of Sherlock's fears. Sherlock admits that he's had a boyfriend in the past. This revelation does little to reduce John's concerns for his best friend.

"It is such a secret place. The land of tears." - Antoine de Saint-Exupery

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My shift is, thank God, relatively untroubled. Two children with strep throat, one adolescent girl with mono. A woman about Molly's age with tendinitis. Easy to discover, diagnose, and easy to treat. Efficient.

I head on over to Tesco's when I'm done work. An agitation resides low in my belly. I scan the magazine aisle, the junk food section. Chuck some tiger bread into my trolley, and go to place some drink mix as well, when I suddenly find myself staring at the glass and orange Ovaltine canister. The child on the canister is smiling. Her milk teeth are polished white, her hair in braided pigtails. The image winsome, wholesome. Like something from a 1950's Norman Rockwell painting. I return the canister to the shelf, suddenly feeling unnerved by the overly sweet image.

I walk a few paces away and find a sugar-free cappuccino mix. Wonder if this will be suitable for my fussy flatmate. There are no smiling children anywhere on this package. I deem it safer for that reason alone.

A sudden impulse has me pulling out my mobile, checking for messages. It's after 6 pm. Sherlock's probably been home for hours. If he went back to the flat at all, that is.

I decide to send out a test text.

'At Tesco's now,' I type, 'wanted sweets. You want anything?'

I give it a solid five minutes, debating if a large papaya will rot before it's consumed, or if I can lure Sherlock to nibble on something that actually contains vitamins.

I check my phone again.

Nothing. No stored texts at all, either. From any point in the day since I left him at the hospital, which is actually highly unusual.

I text Lestrade instead. 'How'd everything go?' I press send, then step up to an express aisle and let a young mother and her toddler girl bypass me when my mobile begins to shrilly chirrup.
"Sherlock?," I ask hopefully, not even checking to see whose calling.

"No, it's Greg. Can I talk to him? He's with you, yeah?"

I blink quickly, moving the trolley aside when the cashier in front of me waves me over. I hold up a finger to indicate that I need a minute and take myself out of the line.

"Sherlock's not with me. He hasn't even sent me a text since I left Evelina."

There is a pause in the conversation.

Then, tensely, "Can you have him call me when you see him?"

Not text. Call.

Lestrade never calls Sherlock. He knows Sherlock prefers to text.

"How's Toby?," I rush to ask, feeling heartless for not doing so before now.

I hear Lestrade hesitate.

"Sedated," he says primly, "although Sherlock kept him calm through most of it, I hear."

"Sedated," I repeat, suddenly feeling doom.

"Not completely. Just enough to take the edge off. It was actually Sherlock's doing - or rather, his recommendation," Lestrade mutters, his voice dropping in tone. "Put his jacket over him, forced everyone to stop until they could give the boy something to reduce his heart rate. That little boy...he lost it, John."

I squint against the words, not really understanding.

"What?"

"Toby started screaming. Thrashing. He tried to bite the doctor. The way I hear it - one moment he's still as a statue, and the next he's screaming bloody murder - clawing at the physician in charge. Sherlock actually got between the doctor and the kid. I just saw the tail end of everything. He looked-"

I hear a giggle behind me, and look over to see a four or five year old holding up a package of wine gums over his younger brother. The younger child is hopping up over and over again, trying in vain to reach for the package, while the slightly older one keeps holding the treat just out of reach. The scene is so normal that I suddenly realize I'm in a god damn supermarket, and shouldn't be getting into anything weighty with Lestrade right now.

"Look, Greg - I'm in Tesco's. I...can I-?" and I stop and calm myself, "can I call you back in a few?"

"Course you can."

"Five minutes?"

"Good."

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A drizzly rain sheets down against the pavement, and the outside world looks excessively grey. The
sky is also grey, but edging towards purple as black clouds edge in over the buildings and threaten to envelope the parking lot. I holler for a cab, and deposit myself into the black compartment after giving instructions to head to Baker Street.

Once firmly seated, I retrieve my phone and punch out Lestrade's number.

"Thanks for getting back to me. I'll keep this quick," he mentions by way of greeting.

"Al-right," I drawl. "Did something happen with Sherlock?"

I hear Lestrade take in a deep breath. He doesn't speak for at least five seconds, but the wait feels like several minutes.

"I've tried to ask you before, but I'll just ask it properly now. Should he be on this case, John?"

I cringe, tie up the grocery bags. Debate answering at all.

"Why are you asking me that?," and here we have it. The two of us talking from a distance, in every sense of the word. I am reminded of a child's game of dodgeball - when both players want to run out to throw the ball, but are simply too afraid of being smacked to even attempt the throw. Of course, that's not exactly an apt analogy because Lestrade and Sherlock are on the same team. Only Sherlock may not see it that way when it comes to certain subjects.

"He was extraordinarily aggressive to some of the doctors. One in particular. And this one doctor was just giving it right back. I felt like I was witnessing something of an emotional transaction there. Like it was going to come to fisticuffs, especially on Sherlock's side, and I've never sensed that before. That he'd physically assault someone. But lately? I've seen this new side to him, and I don't like it. I need to know I can trust him to maintain basic composure."

Lestrade exhales deeply, and I know we are both thinking about Mr. Thiesen. Or rather, more to the point - Sherlock punching Mr. Thiesen, and the potential ramifications for Lestrade's career if he continues to allow a self-proclaimed detective to tag along on sensitive cases if he's going to end up punching witnesses and civilians.

"Look, I know he cares about this kid - and that's a good thing - but he can't be acting like-"

"No, he can't be," I concede, knowing that the man I am speaking to is more than reasonable. I already know where Lestrade is going with this, after all. I know I'll agree with his assessment. "Did anyone complain about him?"

"No, but John - he left in a hurry afterwards. He looked enraged. They sedated the boy, and he stayed with Toby until they were done the exam - but then he just left. I asked him to wait, and he just ignored me outright. He looked - volatile."

I feel a pinprick of coldness from my adrenals at Lestrade's words, then realize I'm nearing Baker Street, and utter a soft "here's good" to the cabbie.

"Greg? I'm home now. I will talk to him in a bit. Try to get a feel for what's going on."

Lestrade 'mhmmms' his agreement, then says with obvious hesitation, "he might need your help here, John. I think he needs something, and I think if you are careful in how you ask, he might just tell you."

The comment itself could mean so many things, and I feel my ears burn as I remember Mycroft's insinuations from just a few days prior.
"I don't know if I can help anything, but if he would even listen to you-," I begin, but the DI utters, "you are his friend, and he knows that. You're maybe the only one he's ever considered a real friend. But I can tell when a man is about to lose it, and what I saw today? Sherlock's about to blow. I thought I could at least give you a heads up."

I swallow, then hand over a 5£ note to the cab driver.

"I appreciate it, Greg," I say, before disconnecting.

And suddenly I'm standing in front of the egg white door, with the iron numbers proclaiming my arrival to 221 B Baker Street.

I'm usually relieved to get home.

I don't feel relieved this time.

I feel anxious.

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I shake my head to dispel the light rain that's worming its way through my hair and seeping down and around my neck, wetting my back. It makes the skin pucker in protest at the chill as I remove my leather jacket and deposit it on the coat rack.

I don't know if seeing Sherlock's jacket makes me feel better or more nervous.

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I cart up the groceries and deposit everything onto the main counter, which is conspicuously free of any manner of current experiments.

"Sherlock?," I call out and let my voice ring through the flat. I suddenly sight a mug with about two ounces of goat's milk. There is a line around the glass as I pour the milk down the drain, indicating that the milk was poured probably more than an hour ago and the fat has congealed against the glass.

"Sherlock? I need to talk to you!," I call out again, lightly, and without threat. Like one may call out to a teenager playing music too loudly.

Still nothing.

I hit the button on the electric kettle, and dump two generous servings of sugar-free cappuccino mix into our respective cups, topping Sherlock's with a bit more milk to cool down the concoction.

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Carrying the beverages - one in either hand - I ascend the stairs and pad on over to Sherlock's room. He must be in his room. His coat is hanging on the coat rack in the foyer. His scarf too. He wouldn't leave either at home. Even in the summertime he wears his coat, and besides - he's almost autistic-like in certain aspects of his daily routine.

I rap against the frame and push the door slightly open. To my surprise he's not present. I glance over to the end of the hallway. The bathroom door is open, but the light is off.

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I eventually find him in my room. Sleeping on top of my duvet, but under two additional throws.
Shoes off, thank goodness. His entire body is curled up against the mattress and his eyes look strained, despite being closed. I go to turn on the light when he rasps out, "Keep it off, please."

The beverages quickly get deposited to my bedside table as Sherlock cups his head with his hands. His face is lined in pain.

"You okay?," I frown, padding over to the bed. What he's doing resting in my room at all I don't know, but for whatever reason he's decided to drop here. I try to tell myself that this means he trusts me enough to come to me when he's in pain.

That's a good thing.

He licks his lips.

"Light hurts my eyes."

I touch his forehead. It feels damp. Similar to how he felt earlier at the hospital after getting sick.

I suddenly feel like a really pathetic doctor. I haven't even put the obvious together.

"Migraine?"

Sherlock swallows, almost as if his throat is sore.

"Or else I picked up hemorrhagic fever at the hospital," he mutters.

I smile, despite the subject matter. He often seems to insinuate he's suffering from something deathly, even in the midst of something relatively minor. And that assertion clashes so intensely with his frivolous view of his own physical health, and the way he treats his body, that it almost makes me laugh.

"Prime spot to rest if you thought you were carrying something so dangerous and contagious," I quip, and watch his mouth quirk into an almost-smile.

"That amuses you, does it? No, seriously Sherlock. What are you doing in my room, huh?" And the question slips out on it's own, because I honestly don't care if-

No.

It's only that it's a silly, isolating question to ask.

Silly because if Sherlock doesn't want to answer it, he won't. And I highly doubt he'd want to answer such a question.

Isolating because I know, deep down, what he's doing here. He was feeling wretched. Whether due to a migraine, or just everything else that's happened lately - it would be understandable. I should have surmised that in his quiet moments Sherlock Holmes seeks the comfort of familiar things to soften a dire landscape. Just like someone seeks out a hug when they feel especially starved for physical touch.

Yet my room is not familiar. It shouldn't be consoling, or comforting.

Sherlock turns against the bed spread, his cheeks flush with heat and his entire body compressed upon itself.

"A bit not good?," he asks in a garbled tone, his eyes dropping. "My room smells like chemicals, and
it's cold. It was making me sicker."

"Maybe that's indication you need to pick up after yourself, eh?," I say with mock smugness, and my flatmate nods.

"Your room smells like wool sweaters and sandalwood. Binders glue from your books. And the radiator is nice and warm," Sherlock mumbles. "Mine doesn't turn on properly, so I'm always cold in my room. And your pillow smells like soap. And like your shampoo."

Then he turns towards me, and even in the relative darkness, I can see that his eyes are puffy.

I swallow and hunch down to rest on the edge of the bed.

"You need a painkiller, maybe?," I ask cautiously, softly. Loud noises can be just as bad as harsh lights when you are suffering from a migraine. "Or is it just auric symptoms? Nausea and the like?"

Sherlock draws a line across his head, diagonally, from ear over left eye.

"My brain has been segmented into two. Division," and he makes a slicing motion again, his eyes rather dull and sightless. "But it doesn't hurt."

His eyes droop as he faces me then, trying to blot out the light from the hallway.

"I just felt a little dizzy," he gets out finally, frowning at the bed sheet before pulling it up to his chin.

I look at the beverage of cappuccino, and debate offering some to my friend. He nods against the pillow as if reading my mind, the sheet moving slightly with his action.

"I am thirsty," and he turns to his side, tucking his knees up until his body seems even further compressed. "Is Lestrade upset?," he asks quickly in a rapid departure from our previous discussion.

Studying Sherlock - and reading him accurately - has never been my strength. The man can act with finesse and skill. I like to think I know him. But what I know of him, I learn after the fact. After a blow up, after an outburst, after a display of ill-tempered emotionality. I don't learn anything without his expressed allowance.

"Why would he be upset with you?," I ask seriously.

Sherlock slouches over to half prop himself up against the bed.

"I made them stop. I tried to make them stop."

I breath out heavily.

"The doctors?"

"Mhmm," he turns onto his back. "I knew one, actually."

The words don't make a lot of sense. I can only take them literally.

"One of the doctors?," I clarify, frowning.

"Mhmm," Sherlock agrees. "I knew him. He used to work at The Priory."

My heart beats faster against my ribcage.
"What's the likelihood?," he rasps, squinting at my pillowcase. "He was a prick, too."

I move closer to Sherlock on the bed, not letting the surprise at his language show on my face. His face is flush with heat now, but that just could be due to his layered form huddled up under two layers of blankets. I'd be boiling, myself. Interesting that he'd find my room 'cozy' when I usually find it a tad on the hot side.

"Did you act with Toby's best interests in mind?," I ask carefully.

Sherlock waves the question away.

"Toby wanted to stop."

I frown again.

"Toby wouldn't have wanted the exam to have started. That's not good enough, though. Not when you thought he had serious internal injuries."

I feel like an idiot as soon as the words are out of my mouth.

It is serious.

How could it be more serious?

"They found evidence of infection," Sherlock hedges, his voice dropping.

I feel my teeth bite into my lip. Tense.

"Infection," I repeat.

"Internal lacerations. They had partially healed, so there was no need for stitches. They gave him an anesthetic. A sedative."

At least that lines up with what Lestrade mentioned to me earlier.

"I'd expect that much," I mutter, my eyes dropping down to where Sherlock's hands play with the fringe on one of the blankets, seemingly without notice. "You stayed."

It's not a question. Of course Sherlock stayed. But I ask the question regardless.

He nods his head, needlessly.

"When did this...skirmish occur?," I ask quickly.

When he speaks again, his voice sounds hoarse.

"Skirmish?"

I sigh, heavily.

"Lestrade said you'd gotten into it with one of the doctors. I'm assuming this was the doctor you knew?"

Sherlock's mouth forms into a taut line.

"He's sadistic," he hisses.
"Sadistic?," I repeat dumbly, helplessly. Because Sherlock's memories and fears and anxieties are clashing with the present now, and I can't help but think he's seeing sadism in a typical brusqueness that's all too common with doctors, unfortunately.

"I'd know him anywhere. I don't want him interacting with this child, John," he gets out. His voice is clipped. "I demanded another doctor, and things got heated."

I bet.

I'd bet if I were a nurse or an assistant, overseeing a procedure whereby a traumatized child is crying, and another adult is lashing out at the residing physician - I'd be confused, too.

"Did this doctor do anything wrong in this precise case, Sherlock? Specifically as it relates to Toby?"

Sherlock squeezes his eyes tightly.

"Does it matter?! Do you let a person whose cruel around a child whose scared? You don't! Not when you know better!"

I can quickly envision what must have happened. At best, the scene must have been fraught with anxiety and anger. At worst, it was likely to have made Sherlock look unstable.

I compose my thoughts, trying to debate how to continue on without offending my friend, or without having him jump to conclusions about my loyalty.

"That may be the case. But if he's not been dismissed by his profession. If there are no charges set against him, your animosity is not going to be understood. Are you absolutely sure it's the same doctor?"

Sherlock's face has taken on a stone cold look of anger. It's twisted into a snarl, almost like a gargoyle.

"Dr. Barrett is a beast," he gets out. "I'd never forget his face."

I shut my eyes, worried at what harm Sherlock may have inadvertently caused.

"So," I begin to reiterate, "Dr. Barrett is someone you know. From when you were in clinic."

Sherlock nods slightly, his hands clenched into fists. The blankets are trapped between his fingers.

"You're going to have to explain this to Lestrade. He doesn't get it, Sherlock. He thinks you are going off the rails. First with Toby's father, and now-"

Sherlock's head is shaking back and forth with insistence.

"I'm not bringing anyone else into this, John! It's none of Lestrade's business! He can take me off this case, for all I care."

"But you do care! Everything you've done shows how much you care. Look at it from his point of view: he sees you act out, even act aggressively-"

"Aggressively!," Sherlock growls, sitting up and releasing the blankets. "I never acted aggressively! I acted protectively, and anyone with half a brain-"

"Now wait a minute-"
"Anyone with any brains at all could tell I was helping that little boy," he seethes, "Dr. Barrett is a megalomaniacal brute! I don't put it past him to actually find it all so amusing."

"Find *what* amusing?" I get out, frustrated and angry. For him. For Toby. "Explain it so I can understand. I am not a mind reader. I can't do what you do."

Sherlock swallows, seems to compose himself.

"He's horrible," his voice breaks off, suddenly. Laced with something that sounds suspiciously like tears. "I almost couldn't believe it when I saw him. It's been more than twenty years. And at a completely different hospital?"

I nod, in agreement.

"Go on."

"Why? It's done."

"Obviously it's not 'done', Sherlock. Or we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

Sherlock kicks back one of the blankets, exposing his frame.

The shirt clings to his rib cage, outlying the thinness of his form. Ridge lines from the bones distract me from looking him in the eye.

"You know you've been a little off. On this case. Explain it to me, and I'll explain it to Lestrade."

"I didn't punch anyone this time," he mutters, suddenly looking exhausted. "I don't see how it matters now."

"What exactly happened? I can talk this over with Greg, or I can talk this over with you. Your choice."

When he doesn't respond, I sigh, and get up to leave the room. Suddenly Sherlock's hand reaches out to stop my departure.

"I asked him a question," he whispers. "That's all that I did. I didn't do anything wrong."

I turn around, replacing my mug on the table. Rubbing my hands against my thighs.

"And what was that?"

"I asked him...if he was still getting off on scaring little kids."

I exhale, suddenly connecting the dots. Suddenly knowing how quickly that conversation must have devolved into caustic words and progressively and rapidly accelerating tempers.

"What else? Aside from accusing the physician on staff of being a sexual deviant."

Sherlock winces then.

"It wasn't an accusation."

"But it wasn't right, was it? If anyone had complained about him - properly complained about him - especially about something like that...he'd be under review!"
"He should be under-

"Then tell me! Tell me so I can actually do something! You're not the only detective Sherlock. You might be the most brilliant person I've ever met, but that doesn't mean that others miss everything. Because they don't. And I don't know what to do or say when you give me absolutely nothing to go on."

Sherlock sits up properly now, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. The two of us sit parallel to each other; Sherlock stares at the floor.

"I was 13, and Mycroft thought I was having some sort of...," and his voice trails off. "I don't know what Mycroft thought, honestly. I don't know what it was. It was stress. Mycroft may have thought it was a 'break.' That was in his oh so humble opinion. He was only 20 himself, mind."

"A break?," I repeat, for confirmation.

"A psychotic break," and Sherlock swallows loudly in the room.

"Is that what happened?"

He turns to me then. "You mean - you don't know why? Mycroft didn't tell you? You two didn't have a nice little chat?"

I wince.

"He told me that you had taken pills. A lot of pills. That you had cut yourself. Your thighs and other parts of your body."

He waits for me to continue speaking, and when I don't, I hear the faintest sigh. I don't know if it identifies relief, or disappointment in my answer.

"That is the condensed version of events," Sherlock agrees. "I'm sure he told you why," and this time his voice is almost shrill.

I find myself crossing my limbs across my chest.

"He said you had difficulties adjusting. To physical changes. To puberty."

Sherlock closes his eyes.

"Mhmmm," he concedes. "I did. I was miserable then. I didn't understand that when you grew up, you could retain what you cared about from when you were young. I thought growing up would make you crave things, need things. Things that were ugly. That everyone else said were good things to want - but which were wrong to want. Because I knew they were painful, even if everyone else thought they were fine. Do you see, John? I thought it would consign me to a fate I abhorred. Not just for myself, but for anyone I came across. That it would make me want things that would hurt others. And maybe I thought that if I could stop that, I would keep myself from turning into something I hated. Someone I hated," his speech is rapid as he finishes his exposition.

I suddenly feel winded. I suddenly feel as if I have fallen from a substantial height, and all the air of my lungs has been evacuated. All this time, I had assumed the primary fear was in the superficial aspects of growing up.

Perhaps due to the responsibilities, or the expectations. Maybe even the expectations of sex.
But I never had considered that Sherlock was scared that he'd change into someone monstrous.

I had never considered that as the possibility. The one true reason.

"I didn't know that," I whisper. Because all I can do is whisper right now. My throat is too tight for anything else. "Does Mycroft know that was your fear?"

Sherlock wrings his hands.

"I have no idea what Mycroft knows. We never talk about it."

"Have you ever told anyone else those concerns before?," I ask, my voice hurting as I speak.

Sherlock shakes his head back and forth quickly.

"As I got older, I realized I wasn't changing into someone I dreaded. Maybe because I didn't care for anyone that way. That it'd be okay," he looks at me abruptly. The expression on his face is odd. The light from the hallway creates a razored line dividing his features into light and darkness. "And I never did. I never even thought about it. It was just...absent. Attraction, I mean. And I think maybe I did that to myself, too. Wanted not to feel like that so much, that I made it permanent. So I'd never be able to understand it at all."

The talk is roundabout. It's euphemistic. And that in and of itself is problematic. I could be assuming a great many things about Sherlock right now - about his past - simply because the words he is using are merely hinting at truths. They aren't fully articulating the concerns.

I decide to test the waters with terms that are a little more precise.

"You've never been interested in anyone sexually, you mean?"

Sherlock has gone rigid. His back is rim-rod straight now.

"No," his voice is tight. "Never."

"Okay. That's completely okay," I breathe, giving him a restricted smile.

"Is it?," he glances up to me hesitantly. He suddenly looks terribly young.

I nod, give him a fuller smile than before. "Wasn't that your concern?"

He nods again, less forcefully now, but doesn't speak.

"So what is confusing you now?"

He leans sideways into the frame of the bed, suddenly looking exhausted. When he speaks again, his voice is muffled.

"It doesn't work that way. You don't just wish for something to change, and have it happen. It's doesn't make sense, biologically, John. But I did it, somehow."

I frown.

"Certainly there are others that lack that impulse. That drive. I'm sure you've done research on it."

Sherlock flinches, his hands coming to play with the edge of his shirt.
"It's not gone. Not completely. I just don't...want...anyone else. Do you understand?"

He looks more uncomfortable right now than I have ever seen him before, and it takes me a few seconds to discern what he is admitting. My voice is tentative when I speak, because I know if I've misunderstood him - my questions might generate quite a bit of upset.

"So you still have a libido, you mean? A sex drive? Just no interest in having sex with another person?"

Sherlock stops playing with his shirt. His face suddenly looks ashen.

"That would be worse, wouldn't it? To not want someone. To just feel that way?"

The resignation in his tone alarms me.

I move a foot closer to him, grasp his hand firmly in my own.

"I don't know what that means, Sherlock. Can you help me to understand? To feel what way?"

His breathing is suddenly faster. I can hear it speed up, being such a close distance to him.

"Calm down. It's okay. Nothing's wrong with you, do you hear me?," and on impulse I grasp his shoulders, turning him gently so he faces me. "There's nothing wrong with having sexual feelings, if that's what is upsetting you."

Sherlock's mouth is moving, but no words are escaping.

"C'mere," and he finally leans against me. His head coming to rest across my throat, dark curls limp from sweat. I wrap my hands around his back.

"It's not all the time," he says finally, his voice quiet. "Just once in awhile, like when I was a boy. Almost never, really. And I'd never act on it."

I suddenly feel a true stab of fear. Not just for what he's saying, which strikes me as disordered, but for his concerns that somehow he'd be doing something monstrous if he had a so-called 'adult' relationship.

"I never imagined there was anything scaring you about this subject. I just thought you didn't care," I admit at last. "I guess I had started to think you were an asexual," and I let out a little bark of laughter to helpfully get him to relax.

"I am," he says firmly, his voice strident. "That's exactly what I am. I have never had any sexual attraction to any person. Man or woman."

I close my eyes, drop my hand to hold one of his own. He's still leaning into me, radiating exhaustion. My voice is hesitant when I next speak.

"Maybe it's a little premature to assign labels like that to yourself, don't you think?"

Sherlock suddenly leans away.

"Premature? I'm 36 years old."

"You know what I mean. You're not just someone who grew up without any trauma. There is trauma here for you. With this subject. Maybe you shouldn't be so quick to assume anything."
"Quick? How can you say-"

"I don't think you've overcome your past, Sherlock. Not at all. I think it still scares you, and I don't think you can be certain how you feel about others until you get over what happened to you."

"Overcome?," he repeats, his tone angry. Almost mocking now. "I thought you said there was nothing wrong with me?"

I can sense that if I don't get this under control, it's going to devolve into something awful.

"There *is* nothing wrong with you, okay? Your reaction is completely understandable. I just think there is too much fear associated with this subject for you to be able to make that determination about yourself."

And suddenly he is on his feet.

"That determination. And who gets to make that determination? You? It's never been an issue for you!"

I try to interject something - anything - to calm him down, but it's a loss.

"You think I'm like Donovan? Like Anderson? Wanting some sort of mindless exchange of fluids in the back of a vehicle? Like anything like that would interest me! Like I'd find that anything but disgusting!"

Suddenly he's pushing past me, trying to exit the room, and I maneuver to block his retreat. If I don't clarify some things right now, he's not likely to let me ever clarify them. He'll assume I think certain things about him that I don't actually think or feel. And our relationship will fester with those assumptions.

"Please sit down."

"I'm not talking about this with you anymore! It doesn't concern you!"

"It does concern me! I'm your best friend, and I can see that you're hurting! I can see that you're confused and you're angry - and I understand that. I'd feel just the same if it had happened to me."

He takes a step back, his face twisted into an expression that doesn't bely anger, nor pain. But something else.

Shame, I think.

"I'm not hurting, John. You don't need to be so maudlin about everything. It happened a long time ago," he breaths out shakily. "I could argue that it doesn't even matter any more."

"Of course it matters! Do you think anyone else would be so conflicted right now if they hadn't gone through what you went through?"

I turn on the bedside lamp and the room is enveloped in an orange glow. Softer than the main light.

Sherlock still hasn't moved, and I step marginally closer to my friend.

"I might never understand how this feels for you. How could I, really?," and I pause, collecting my thoughts. "And we don't have to talk about this, even if I think you should. Because you're right, Sherlock. It's your decision. I just think it would help."
Sherlock looks confused. He looks like a man with a thousand questions being blocked by one persistent, stubborn fear of exposure.

He suddenly moves towards the door.

"I need to get some water."

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And he does.

He fills up a tumbler with water. Adds ice.

Sits on the chesterfield in the living room. Wraps an afghan throw around his body, despite his previous words of feeling too hot.

I sit down on my chair, finally getting to taste my cappuccino.

It's cold.

I sip it anyway, almost equally thirsty.

"I know what I am, John," Sherlock says after a few seconds, swirling the water around in a circle.

"Okay. What is that?"

Sherlock rests the glass on the coffee table.

"Detective. Violin enthusiast. Bratty younger brother."

I smile. "Ah, so you admit it? Mycroft will be so pleased."

Sherlock cocks his head to the side.

"Never to Mycroft, I won't."

I swallow another taste of cappuccino. Try not to laugh at his admittance. "But of course. Anything else?"

Sherlock crosses his legs, ties the sash on his gown. Stares at the yellow smiley face on the wall.

"I've had sex, you know," he starts gruffly.

"Abuse doesn't count," I bite out, angry that something so obvious needs to be spelled out for him.

"I don't mean...that," he says with equal rigidity. He looks at me nervously for a few seconds. I hear him expunge a pent up breath. "How did you feel when your sister came out?"

The departure throws me for a loop. I am used to his off topic ramblings though, so I respond simply, "I didn't feel much of anything. I wasn't surprised. I had suspected how Harry felt for other females for a long time. I think I knew before she did, even."

Sherlock's left leg is jittering up and down against the floor.

"I used to have a boyfriend. His term, not mine," Sherlock rushes. "When I was 21, 22."

I must admit, I don't find the admission that shocking, as far as admissions go.
"Oh?"

Sherlock takes an additional sip of water.

"You don't seem surprised," he grouses.

"Very little you could do would surprise me. I'll never underestimate your potential there," and I rest my cup in its saucer, suddenly wondering if this is part of Sherlock's problem. Certainly - if his sexual tastes veered towards attraction to males as opposed to attraction to females, it may explain some of his anxiety. He might simply link his father's abuse to a physical exchange between two males. Emotionally it would complicate things, even if intellectually I'm pretty damn sure Sherlock would clearly see how ludicrous the suggestion would be.

Sherlock's father, after all, didn't hurt him because he was homosexual.

Sherlock's father hurt him because he was a child abuser. Because he was a monster.

Sexuality had nothing to do with what happened.

But I have no idea how Sherlock has come to make sense of his ordeal, and if this could have been part of his worry.

"His name was Victor," Sherlock admits, at long last. "He was a few years older than me."

"He was involved with you intimately?"

Sherlock nods. "I didn't care for it though. Not that aspect, anyway."

I fresh wave of anger heats up my core, and Sherlock must be aware of it, because he rushes to soothe me.

"It wasn't Victor's fault, John. It was completely consensual. I encouraged it."

I bite my tongue to keep myself from saying anything rash.

"Did he know?," I grit out. "Know about your past?"

Sherlock shakes his head, then stops.

"Well, I never told him - though I think he may have suspected. He was always very gentle with me."

I cringe then, the anger not dissipating as it should. Sherlock’s assumption that gentleness should only be granted in cases of fear or anxiety highlights just how little Sherlock understands about healthy relationships.

"Why are you so angry?," he asks carefully, no doubt surprised at my reaction. "It helped me realize that I'm not like everyone else."

"I'm not angry," I say, my voice clipped. "I'm confused. You say you didn't enjoy sex with this guy, but I'm assuming you had it more than once?"

Sherlock nods, almost hesitantly.

"So you didn't care for Victor, and-"
"I cared for Victor," Sherlock amends quickly. "I think I may have even loved him."

My face feels numb. My lips and tongue feel numb.


Sherlock gives an anxious little laugh. Almost as if he's berating himself for admitting that it was even a possibility. His ability to love someone.

"I think so. I don't know. How do you know if you love someone? And if you do, is it the same thing as being in love with them?"

For a second I feel as if I am in a parallel universe. Because this discussion is the antithesis to a typical Sherlockian conversation. But when I look up and over to my friend, he's watching me with pursed lips. I see his tongue come out and wet his bottom lip in anxiety.

"I think that depends on what sort of love you're talking about, Sherlock."

"Romantic?," he tries, as if he's offering up suggestions to his past. I realize he's likely as confused as I feel.

"Are you asking me or telling me?," I quip, then rapidly realize that my response sounds flippant. Here Sherlock is divulging aspects of his life he's never told anyone, and I'm responding horribly. "I'm sorry. That came out wrong. I just...look Sherlock, it sounds as if you cared about this man. He was kind to you, right?"

Sherlock nods slightly. Almost with reservation.

"But you did things with him that you admitted you didn't like. Didn't feel comfortable doing. Why?"

Sherlock frowns, looks up again.

"Because I cared for him, John. I wanted to show him that. That's what - that's what you're supposed to do when you love someone, isn't it?"

"Jesus, Sherlock! Do you hear yourself?! You forced yourself to engage in sex with this man, because you thought *he* wanted to have sex? What about what you wanted?"

"I wanted to see if I wanted it! Victor tried to help me with that."

'Oh, I'm sure he tried', my mind supplies snidely. I realize I feel anger in measure that isn't appropriate.

I realize I feel jealous.

And then I realize I don't know what to say next, so shocked by this self-admittance.

"John?," and Sherlock is watching me carefully, his eyes skirting back and forth. Studying my face for clues.

I shut my eyes, effectively trying to cut Sherlock off from realizing what I've just realized myself. What I've just admitted to myself.

We don't need that added component to deal with right now. Finally, I open my eyes again and look to my friend.
"How do you know that you had romantic feelings for Victor? Not simply affection? He was kind to you after a period when many people had been horribly cruel. It's understandable that'd you'd appreciate his kindness."

Sherlock seems to hedge for a few seconds, then speaks.

"I liked it when he hugged me. When he touched my hand. I wanted to kiss him, sometimes. On the mouth," and his face is suddenly scarlet. "I wanted to hold him. I wanted him to hold me. I didn't even mind after we were done with sex, because he'd hold me very tightly. I knew he cared about me," he staggers with his words then, and then abruptly stops speaking, his cheeks now bright red.

"Sherlock-"

He holds out a hand, to pause my concerns.

"I need more water," he says a few seconds later, padding away to the kitchen.

He doesn't, however, return to the living room for the rest of the night.
"I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for." - JK Rowling, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Damn it. Damnitdamnit.

What the hell is wrong with me? Divulging all that to John?

I admit, part of me wanted to put his mind at ease. Show him I'm not so destroyed as a person as to have never attempted anything considered normal or 'healthy' with another individual.

But my attempt was for nought. I have a rather prominent suspicion that somehow my words have made him all the more upset, for whatever reason. I could tell that he was angry, too. And he seemed to become angrier as the conversation continued, not less.

Which is why I ultimately decided to leave the room. Keep everything from escalating more so.

I swallow the ice water quickly, until my stomach aches with the weight of it, and wander back to my room.

I need to put some distance between myself and John. Perhaps in the morning, after we've both had rest, the situation won't seem so dire.

Finding an extra blanket in my closet, I re-make my bed. My room does get a lot colder than the rest of the house. That part wasn't a lie.

Next I change into silk pajamas. A gift two winters ago from Mycroft. They are grey-blue, with little flying geese all over. A gift skirting on being just odd enough, just different enough for me to truly like it, but also lacking in any real masculine style. I don't know if that has any bearing on the fact that I rarely wear these garments or not.

Wandering on over to the bathroom, I void the accumulated water from my bladder, and swish a good couple ounces of Orange Listerine around in my mouth, then haphazardly brush my teeth. I truly don't have the energy to do it properly tonight. All in all, I still look grubby: my hair is straighter than it normally is, matted down to my skin by sweat, and I feel foul. But I also don't want to mill about in the bathroom tonight, lest John suddenly needs to use the restroom. A shower will have to
wait until the morning.

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When my head hits the pillows - at slightly after 7:20 in the evening (how utterly pathetic is that?) - I already start to feel my eyes shut with the weight of sleep. Before I finally succumb, I can hear carnival music, and the sounds of a little boy laughing. I can smell candy apples, and caramel fudge.

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I wake up abruptly, hearing the clock down the hall. I can hear the swaying of the pendulum, the mechanical click of the seconds as they pass. My eyes flutter about the room and take in the drapes near my window. Mummy has left them open again, which I don't like. Sometimes squirrels and ravens look into my bedroom and stare at me in the dark. Sometimes the ravens caw at me in the night, and tell me horrible things. That they are going to kill me. Gut me with their beaks.

I turn about in my bed, knowing something awful is coming, because I can see the trees and the trees are growling at me. Their branches are swaying 'run, run, RUN!'. But it is dark, and the moon is full, and I don't know where I could go. I could put my red sweater on, and my wool socks are already on my feet. I could get my denims on and my boots with the 'fox-fur'. That means not real fur.

But there is frost on the ground, and the estate is too far from the main road. My legs will freeze into leg icicles. I stare at the trees and whisper back, 'I don't know what to do.' The trees stop moving. They stop speaking to me. All they ever do is tell me to run. That's all they ever say.

I look across my bed, and look at the mound of sheets and blankets creating craters and ridges. Like being on Mars. And I, Sherlock Sherrinford Holmes, am a great explorer. An astronaut. I have come to help the Martians. To make a peace treaty.

I cannot leave.

The Martians speak into my head - directly into my brain with a hiss. Another explorer is coming in for a landing. The door to my space compartment shuts with a loud click. The explorer has descended to the planet, and he's almost here now.

'Move over, Sherlock,' the explorer says quietly, driving up to me in his little space car. It's a bright and flashing space car and the light is reflecting off the sun, and hitting my eyes. I close my eyes tightly, so I don't go blind from the light, but move my little car to the side so the new explorer can make way.

I suddenly realize that a stream of cold air from my oxygen tank is leaking out against my belly, and I press with my hands against it to get it to stop. I grasp my belly and try to keep the cold out. My spacesuit is damaged. It's open, and I'm cold.

'Let me help you with that,' the other explorer says into my brain. I keep my eyes closed because even his helmet is too shiny. It still hurts my eyes. It always hurts my eyes.

Soon I can't breathe very much at all, and the explorer removes his helmet, and picks me up out of my space car. 'Come here, baby,' the explorer says, and I feel woozy. Because I can't breathe on Mars without my space helmet and oxygen tank. I shake my head back and forth. It's too far to go. I won't make it. I will die from not enough oxygen.

'Can't breathe,' I whisper, 'please don't.'

The explorer laughs softly.
'You're just getting yourself worked up over nothing, now aren't you?'

I shake my head back and forth and push at the Explorer with the shiny helmet.

'No, no. I can't!'

I'm going to die.

'Stop it, Sherlock!,' the explorer says. 'Be quiet! You'll wake mummy,' and the explorer is getting mad, and his words don't make sense, and I still can't breathe. Then I feel the explorer's lips on mine, giving me oxygen from his oxygen tank. The air is warm, not cold. I start to shake and gasp because it's not right, it's not right!

My head is pulled back quickly, from my neck, from my hair. The explorer is holding my neck in his hands.

The explorer is not a nice explorer.

The explorer could snap my neck with his hands.

Snap. Like a twig. Snap.

I let out a whine, hoping the explorer will realize I'm "more work than I'm worth," as mummy says.

'You stop it right now, Sherlock! I don't want to hear any more from you tonight, you hear me?'

I nod and open my eyes to look at the space explorer. He's not from my space fleet. In fact, I think he's a rouge Martian come to take me prisoner, and not a human being at all. That's why I can't breathe his oxygen. He's taken me hostage. He must have taken me hostage. So I must do as he tells me to do until my space fleet comes for me. Until then, I must absolutely not question the Martian, or he might hurt me worsener. I must do what the Martian tells me to do.

'You're going to behave?'

'Yes, daddy,' I whisper.

The Martian smiles at me.

'Good boy,' he whispers, his mouth turning into a growly bear mouth. His teeth becoming shark teeth. If I run, he will bite me. He will rip me to shreds and cut off my legs. Snap. Twig legs will break. That's what the Martian told me before. 'If you fight me, I will break your legs.' That's what the Martian said last time, when I was loud.

The Martian will gobble me up from my feet to my head.

'You know what to do, love. Take off your pajamas and your pants,' the Martian hisses at me, his tongue reaching out to lick my neck. He's licking me, tasting me. Maybe the Martian wants to eat me. I close my eyes and push down my space suit. I pull everything off as the Martian asks. I even take off my wool socks, even though the Martian doesn't tell me to take off my wool socks. Mycroft made me the wool socks. He made them in a class called 'Home EC,' at his old school, and the Martian will get his slime on the socks. I want Mycroft's socks to be clean so I can put them back on again later when everything is DONE.

D-O-N-E.

I say the word over and over in my head.
I won't no way be able to run away now. I should have listened to the Trees. But where would I go? Even if I could get to the gate, the Martian would send others in space vehicles and they'd pick me up. And they'd take me back.

I look up and the Mars trees whisper to me, 'We're sorry. We told you to run. We told you to run home.'

'I know you did,' I think-speak to the Trees. 'But I don't know where home is from here. I don't know what to do. Which way was I supposed to go to be okay? To have everything Be Done?'

They are Martian Trees, and they are the only good beings on this Planet when Mycroft isn't here.

'We won't watch,' the Martian Trees whisper to me. They sound sad, and their eyes close until they are like Regular Trees. 'We're sorry, Sherlock,' the say to me before they go quiet and they stop looking with their eyes.

'No, don't go please!,' I think-speak to the Martian Trees. 'Stay with me. Please don't go!'

But they go anyway. Because they don't want to see, either. Nobody 'cept the Martian wants to see this part.

And now I am all alone with the Martian. I could cry.

But I don't. Because he's not DONE.

'Turn over,' the Martian rasps. 'Onto your belly. Thatta boy.'

I get an image of a fish with a split belly. Guts everywhere.

I get an image of me with a knife stabbing it into the Martian over and over and over and over. Ripping his guts out.

Then the thought vanishes.

I hear the Martian remove his space suit. I feel the Martian's skin touch mine. His skin is slimy. It feels like snake skin. I keep my eyes shut tight and try not to scream.

'You're such a big boy, aren't you baby?,' the Martian speaks. His voice is buzzing in my brain, like an insect. Like an insect eating my brain. It makes it hard to think. 'Aren't you?'

I shake my head back and forth.

'Not. Mmnot big,' I plead with the Martian. He laughs against my neck. 'Mmm little,' I say. 'Too little.'

If I'm little, he may not want to eat me.

'You're not little,' the Martian replies firmly, and his voice is like ice. 'How old did you turn today, my love?'

I push my face into the sand. It's soft and muffles my words.
'Eight,' I explain, hoping the Martian will know I'm not big at all. Eight is not big at all. 'Only eight.'

'Only eiiight?,' the Martian hisses. 'Eight is not little, is it? You're a big, big boy now. Aren't you Sherlock?'

The Martian likes to play games with me sometimes. I shouldn't have come back to Mars without Mycroft. He's the only space explorer I know I can trust. He always keeps me safe when he's near. He brings me Ovaltine, and I drink it when I'm cold. He picks me up and holds me. He tells me what to do to keep me safe. 'Stick by me, Sherlock. Stay by me tonight.' That's what Mycroft says.

Mycroft's the only one I can trust on Mars, 'cept for the Trees.

But Mycroft always looks like he's going to cry when he has to go away.

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'I'm going to get a flat soon - the day I turn 18. I'm taking you then, okay? Just hold on a little longer, Sher. You'll be with me, and he'll never touch you again.'

I nod against Mycroft's throat. He puts his hands in my hair.

It's Christmas, and I'm still seven. And Mycroft has to go back to school tomorrow, so I'm trying not to cry.

'It's only three more years, Sherlock,' he whispers, rubbing my back. 'One day, three years will seem so fast. Like you blink, and it's all over.'

'That's a long time,' I whine, 'I might die first.'

Mycroft shakes me, his cheeks wet.

'You're not going to die. Don't be silly! Just don't fight him. Don't make him angry.'

I grab Mycroft's back and press my fingertips into his spine.

'Take me with you now! Please Myco!'

Mycroft bites his lip. He looks miserable.

'I have to go back to school, Sherlock. And you're too little to go to boarding school.'

I grab his wrist and squeeze.

'I can hide. I can stay under your bed and be quiet! No one will know.'

Mycroft gives me a sad smile.

'They'll take you right back when they find you.'

I shake my head 'no,' and I grab Mycroft's hand.

'No, I'll hide real well.'

Mycroft looks at his lap. He looks sadder than me.

'Please take me with you. Please! I won't make any noise.'
Mycro sighs, his form disintegrating. He loses height.

But he never says anything to the Martian.

Mycro is an older space explorer, but he's scared of the Martian too.

I know he is.

'I'm still little. I'm little!', I start to cry against the sand when I feel the Martian climb on top of me.

'Are you?,' the Martian whispers again, then snickers against my neck. His snake fingers rub up and down my legs, making them slimy with his hands. His Martian hands are wet with Martian slime. 'No, I don't think you are."

I press my face in the sand and want to scream. But I don't.

I don't because the Martian will rip my guts out if I do, and that'll be even worse.

'I want Mycroft,' I hiccup to the Martian, hoping he'll maybe be nice just once. 'It's my birthday, and I want Mycroft. It's my birthday and I get to Be Done now. Be Done, Dad. Right now,' I command, my voice shaking. 'No more, please.'

The Martians fingers are playing on my tummy. Stroking my legs where my pants usually cover.

'You think Mycroft is yours, don't you? You always want Mycroft. Never Daddy. Only Mycroft is good enough for the Little Prince, is he? Well Mycroft is mummy's, and mine - and you are no one's. And no one is yours. And no one will ever be yours, because you don't even want to love anyone. Look at you, Little Prince. You don't even want Daddy to touch you.'

I start to cry, but without any sound at all.

I start to scream in my head.

In my head. Always in my head.

I scream back all the way to Earth, hoping Mycroft will hear me and come.

'I want Myco,' I cry against the pillow. Daddy stops moving.

'Mycrof'ts not here. Mycroft's at school, isn't he?,' the Martian pushes my legs apart and I start to shake.

'Please don't. Please not,' I whisper into the sand. 'I don't want it, please. Please - I want to go back home. Be Done. Be Done now,' I beg.

The Martian almost laughs. I can feel his Martian body rumble with amusement. He always thinks I'm so funny. He thinks it's funny when I beg. It makes him happy.

'It's okay, buddy. It's okay to be scared about getting big. But what sort of daddy would I be if I didn't help you to grow up?'
I stop talking to the Martian. He never listens to my pleading.

Then I feel the Martian put his hands on my body. I feel something cold against my backside. I play the numbers game because Myco is too far away. Maybe he can't hear me. He'd come if he could hear me. I hear Myco in my brain. Not the real Myco, the old Myco, from when I was very, very little.

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My tooth came out in my hand, and my hand filled with blood. And I screamed.

I was so scared of the red that I closed my eyes and screamed.

Mummy had to pick me up from Kindergarten because even my teacher couldn't get me calm. Couldn't get me to Be Quiet. And I screamed for Myco. Because he was gone.

Because Myco was away at boarding school then, and he couldn't hold me.

Later he talked to me on the telephone. Mummy got me from the play room and smiled at me, and stroked my hair.

'Your brother is on the phone for you, Sherlock. We've had enough of this silliness, haven't we?,' and I nodded, sniffled. Grabbed the phone, and shouted into the receiver.

'Myco, that's you? I lost a tooth!'

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'You think of a number, say 100 - and you subtract a number. Like seven. You keep going, whenever you are scared, and you won't be as scared. You never stop, okay Sherlock? Just keep counting until everything is okay again.'

Myco always knows what to do.

I smile at him in my mind.

If Mycroft was here, he'd have helped me. But he's not here, so I start thinking of the numbers.

I start with 100 and detract by seven. 100.

93.

86.

79.

72.

65.

I stop counting.

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The pain comes at 65. Fast, hot pain. The Martian has skewered my body with his weapon. The Martian is killing me. I let out a holler.
Maybe mummy will hear me. Maybe she will come. She's never come before, but I'm always quiet.

Maybe if I scream...mummy will come. Like Myco.

'Be Quiet, Sherlock!,' the Martian gasps out, then makes a sound like in my ear. 'Just relax. If you fight me it's just going to hurt more. Don't move.'

I stop fighting the Martian, but it still hurts.

After a few more seconds the Martian starts to move his sword around in my body.

'Please no more,' I beg the Martian. 'Don't kill me!'

The Martian stops moving. Stops moving immediately.

Laughs. Low in his throat.

He finds it funny. He finds what I've said funny.

So he stops for a second. Just a second.

Then he starts to move again. Starts to move the sword around in my intestines.

I hear him pant against my ear.

'Is that why you are scared?'

I nod my head.

'You'll be fine,' the Martian cackles. 'It won't kill you. You need to learn this, Sherlock. This is big boy stuff,' the Martian pants besides my head, moving again. 'In a few years you'll have to do this, but how will you know what to do if daddy doesn't show you first? How will you know how to love?'

I put my head into the sand and cry in my mind again.

If I don't Be Quiet, the Martian might hurt me worser.

So I scream in my head, where the Martian will never hear.

'No Daddy. STOP!'

'STOP, STOP. NO! DADDY, PLEASE NO! NOO!'

The Martian will never hear if I scream in my head.

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"Sherlock - oh God, please, fuck! - wake up, Sherlock!"

I'm being shaken. The Martian is shaking me.

"Sherlock!," and my eyes open quickly. I suddenly feel dizzy. There is no sand, there is no-no, please-no.

Nonono.
"Sherlock?," and John's hands are to his mouth. He looks wrecked. His eyes are large and luminescent. Shimmering with tears. He looks incredibly ill. Like he's going to vomit all over.

I look away in shame. I make a sound. Or the sound plays me, like a bow running over a violin string. It comes out of my mouth, like I wanted to do when I was a little boy. It's a screeching sound. I think there is a 'no' in there somewhere.

My throat is convulsing with a sob that I won't let escape.

I keep the sob down in my throat, low. I will not start with this. I will not let even one escape.

I won't make everything worse than it already is.

"It's okay, Sherlock," he gets out. And all I can think of in my head is, 'LIAR!'

But I don't speak the words aloud.


My stomach hurts.

I shift on the bed.

I can feel wetness all over my lap.

I look down, and realize with horror that I've urinated all over myself. I turn around, slide out and come to rest on the other side of the bed, pressing my face against the wall. Willing myself not to hyperventilate.

nononono!

John quickly traverses the distance.

"Go away, John!," I almost scream. My voice is high pitched and frantic, and I know it is - but I can't change it right now. My voice is coming out on its own, like water pouring through cracked glass. I cover my face with my hands, mortified.

He doesn't go away, however.

A few moments later, he's at my side with my dressing gown tucked under one of his arms.

"Put this on, okay?," and his voice is wavering. The voice doesn't sound like John at all. If sounds gruff. Old and strange and sad. "Put this on, and we will go to the bathroom. Get you cleaned up."

I take the dressing gown, and place it over my body, but don't get up off the ground.

"Please leave me alone," I get out, my voice sounding shredded. Like ribbons that have been torn from full sized to thin little pieces. Torn and falling apart.

If voices could bleed, my voice would be bleeding.

"I can't do that, Sherlock. Not tonight."

I suddenly have an impulse to put my hand in a blender.

I suddenly have an impulse to drag a razor blade over my wrists.
The images come to me quickly. Unbidden. Like they did in childhood.

Violent.

Self-violent.

Self-termination.

My child self whispers to me, 'there's always that. There's always that if you need it.'

I lean forward and try to stifle the need to retch, and as I move about I realize that I smell like warm piss and sweat.

"Go away and leave me alone!," I cry. "I don't want you! I don't need you here!"

John shakes his head.

"Not going to happen," John wheezes. "I'm not abandoning you when you feel like this."

I cross my arms over my legs, and place my head in the pocket of space that remains.

"I don't want you here," I garble out, repeating the words I've just used. The thickness in my throat making it hard to speak cleanly. "I want to be alone."

But he doesn't leave me.

So I fold in upon myself, disgusted with what I've done, and yell at him to go.

To go away.

To please go away.

Please, I don't want you to see.

Can't you understand that?

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John doesn't leave me.

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He helps me to the washroom some time later.

I think I've yelled at him some more.

But he's still there.

I don't know if I am furious with him, or grateful.

My whole body is shaking.

I know I haven't cried, which is something.

I don't cry anymore. I can't.

I haven't actually cried in years.
But I've shouted and screamed at him and pushed at him.

And now he's helping me to the bathroom, because I feel faint and strange.

"I'll draw you a bath. Put some of those blue bath crystals in," and his voice trails off.

I stare at the ground. At my feet. At the long, lean line of the cut from the Horlick's container. It's gone pink instead of red. Was that only three nights ago? Four?

'Aren't you putting on a good show for your John?,' and that ugly, slimy voice of the Martian laughs in my skull. It's not a memory. It's like he's really here. It's like he never died.

"Fuck off," I hiss to the voice, keeping my eyes shut. "Fuck off, you bastard."

I hear John pad back to the bathroom. He's holding a canister of blue Epsom salts.

"Did you say something, Sherlock?," he asks carefully, looking even more concerned.

I turn away and shake my head.

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John leaves the bathroom while I strip off my ruined pajamas.

I leave my underwear on, then lower myself into the hot water.

I'm surrounded by bright, blue water. Tinted blue bath crystals.

'Fit for a space explorer', I think with mockery. At myself.

For being so stupid.

I lower my head under the water and scream out my anger.

The water muffles the sound.

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John is back in the washroom a few minutes later. Sitting on the toilet with the lid closed.

Watching me.

Probably to make sure I don't drown myself.

The thought makes me laugh.

I hiccup a laugh, and I hear him stir in surprise. Feel his gaze burn the back of my head like an intense laser beam.

The little voice in my head, chirrups - 'this isn't funny, young man.'

I laugh against the water again.

It's not really a laugh.

It's almost a cry of pain.
Just mingled with a laugh.

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It is several minutes later before I realize: I can't stop shaking. Even though the water is warm. Hot, maybe.

I bring my hands out of the water. My fingers are trembling.

I can't get my hands to stop shaking.

"It'll stop soon. You've had a shock," John says simply, his voice sounding oddly distant.

My head whips back and forth in denial.

"Just a nightmare. Just a weird dream."

John ignores my comments.

"I've changed your sheets," he says simply. "Everything else is in the wash."

I ignore his words. Cup my hands in the blue water.

The water doesn't really look that blue in my hands. Not in such a small concentration of fluid.

"Can you pass me the shampoo?" I whisper.

John ambles over to the edge of the tub, not letting his line of sight come down further than my neck.

He passes me my pear shampoo. Then Rainbath body cleanser. It says Neutrogena on it.

It's not mine.

I sniff it. It smells like John.

I dunk my head under the water again, then pour the shampoo out into my cupped palm. Work up a lather in my curls. Mentally count over the areas I still need to clean. Cleansed areas are green. Dirty areas are red.

Fast. Faster, I itemize.

Hair, face, neck, ears, teeth, chest, arms. I can't do my lower body with John in the room.

I hesitate to ask for a razor. I can see my little self playing on the floor, shirtless. Underpants, that's all.

Eight years old, and eyes swollen and red. Daddy's straight razor in my hand. My underpants are stained. The boy hiccoughs out a cry, and runs daddy's straight razor over his wrist lightly.

His curls are plastered to his small head with sweat. Mucous runs down his face.

He looks dead.

I blink and the image vanishes, and John stares are me more intensely.

I stop, and repeat the parts of the body I need to clean. Stop and repeat.
Repetitious words eventually take away the horror of the nightmare.

The memory.

I just say it faster and faster in my head, in my mind, until my traitorous brain causes me to think of something else.

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65.

65.

I had counted to 65.

In the numbers game.

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I was eight years old when I had lost my virginity.

I had gone into the bathroom, late in the night. Afterwards.

I have been very quiet. I had gotten down daddy's shaving kit, pulled out the boar bristle brush. Grabbed the straight razor with shaking hands. I had looked in the mirror and pressed it to my throat. Stopped.

Sat down on the floor. Muffled a cry because it hurt to sit on my bum.

Took the razor and whipped it over my wrists. I felt the heat in the metal.

And I knew it was alive, and it was my friend.

I knew it could help me, if I ever needed its help.

And then I thought of Mycroft, and I put the blade back in to dad's shaving compartment and zipped everything up.

And I had forgotten that.

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How could I have forgotten that?

I turn away in the tub, and stare at the white porcelain - shivering against the heat.

I don't even feel the warmth.

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John returns a second time. Back with fresh pajamas.

The silk ones are probably ruined. Probably stained and ruined.

Mycroft's flying geese pajamas. Those weirdly girly pajamas.

The ones John brings back are cotton, though. Striped blue and white.
I realize it's one of his sets. I don't have any cotton pajamas.

"Only the bottoms will fit you, I think," and his voice is still off. His voice still hasn't gone back to normal.

I only really had the one pair, because usually I don't sleep with anything, except for pants.

I hate the feeling of anything on my throat when I'm trying to sleep.

"Dry off. I'll be right outside, okay?"

His voice is very, very soft and very, very quiet.

I hate that.

"You don't have to talk like that to me," I bark.

John just stares at me, his mouth crumpled up. Like I've hurt his feelings or something. Like he wants to say something, but can't.

"I'll be right outside."

I nod despite myself.

I want John to leave.

I want John to stay.

I don't know what I want.

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The pajamas are too short on me. The fit in at the waist, but they are about five inches too short at my ankle.

Not that it matters.

I change into a large t-shirt. It reads RAMC.

It's baggy on John.

It swims on me.

The knock jolts me from my musings, and I look up. My throat doesn't work.

I wonder if this is how it is for Toby.

The ease with which you can fall into not wanting to say a word is alarming.

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John steers me to the living room. He's pulled out the chesterfield. Fitted the pull out with extra sheets, fresh blankets.

A sleeping bag has been rolled out on the floor.
The sleeping bag is too small for me.

I stare at it, not comprehending.

I stare at the chesterfield and walk over to it. Touch the sheets.

"I'll be over here," John says simply, touching the sleeping bag. His voice closed in upon itself. Like an echo of a voice.

"A sleepover?," I ask, my throat not working properly.

I want John to laugh. I want him to at least smile.

Or look irritated with me.

I want John to look like John, and treat me like Sherlock. Not like a stranger.

He ignores my comment, and I see him plug a book light into the outlet near the bookshelf.

"Do you want this turned on?"

My brain doesn't seem to process his words.

Do I want it turned on? The light?

So he can see me? Read my expressions?

I stare at him in the relative dark, with only the moonlight streaming through the blinds to light the space.

"I don't need a night light," I snark.

John nods his head, and doesn't plug the light in.

"Tell me if you want it on at any time," he says softly.

This time I ignore his words.

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The sheets are cold as I pull them back over my body.

Funny how I can feel how cold the sheets are, when I couldn't really feel how hot the water was.

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The ceiling looks like a crater. Pock marks of white and grey in the darkness.

A Martian terrain.

"How did you know what was happening?," I whisper in the dark, wanting to know exactly how much of an idiot I've made of myself.

My voice still sounds loud in the room, even so.

I hear the crinkling of John's sleeping bag as he turns towards me.
He doesn't say anything for a few moments, and then: "You were screaming, Sherlock."

I suddenly feel John's warm hand envelope mine. I guess my hand had fallen down and away from the chesterfield. Dangling above the floor.

"I don't remember that," I admit.

John opens his mouth, and I hear some blended consonants, then: "you were having a night terror, I think."

My head shakes against my pillow.

"Just a nightmare. Not real."

"Sherlock-"

"I was always quiet!," I hiss, a quick and irrepressible furor filling my cells. "I never made any noise. I didn't even cry! I wasn't-,' and I stop because I'm saying too much. I'm saying way too much.

Then John is up, and at the side of the bed, straightening the blanket up and over my body. Hands in my hair. Brushing my hair out of my eyes, which I close at his touch.

"What else? What else, Sherlock?"

I turn away from John, stare at the wall. Feel his hands moving through my hair.

I don't know if I like the touch or not.

It's making me upset just as much as it's making me feel secure.

And I can smell his soap again. This time it's on my body.

It's spicy. But soothing.

Before Icould smell sick, and urine.

That was me.

But John makes me clean.

He makes me clean, when otherwise I'd be dirty.

He makes me good. Better than I am without him.

"Hmm? What else happened?," his voice enters my mind.

I shake my head. Because John really won't want to hear the rest.

"I do know," I cough into my pillow. My lungs are stinging now. Prickly heat, as if I've breathed in a noxious chemical. Something caustic. Something deadly.

"You can tell me. Come on," he says faintly, in the dark. "It's okay to tell me."

My face is hot, and my hair is wet. It smells like pear shampoo.

Candied pears.
It smells clean.
John got me clean.
"I used to imagine I was somewhere else when it happened."
John barely even breaths.
"When you were a little boy?"
I nod against his hand, against the blanket. And against the darkness.
But I keep my eyes shut tight, like I did in the nightmare. If I can't see John, then it almost feels like he can't really hear me. Not really. Just sort of. Which isn't as bad.
"What else?"
"I was on Mars. And I got attacked. A Martian took my clothes off. Put a knife in my body. I was bleeding to death. I asked the Martian not to kill me. The Martian laughed at me. Told me he was loving me, not killing me."
John's rapid intake of breath causes me to open my eyes. Causes the spell to break.
"Do you have these dreams a lot?"
I shake my head quickly. No. No.
No.
"Do you think you can get some sleep? If I'm right here?"
I nod gruffly, not meeting his gaze.
"Alright," he replies, sotto voice. "It's okay. I'm not going anywhere."
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A soft susurrus of sounds causes me to rouse.
My body shifts against the chesterfield, and I open my eyes gently, rub the grit from them.
Stare at the venetian blinds, and the soft yellow glow of the early morning light.
A small plug in clock grants me the time.
7:38 am
I realize, abruptly, that I can hear the faint murmur of people talking.
Glancing towards the floor, I see that John is no longer resting in the sleeping bag, and fresh shame assaults me as I recall the previous nights events.
After a few seconds I am able to make out John's voice, and John's voice alone.
He must be talking to someone on the mobile.
"Yes. Yes, it was scary. He sounded like a child. Yes - out of touch. Mmm hmm."
I feel my face flush with the realization that he's talking about *me.*

"No, he didn't say much more than that. Said he went away when it happened. Yes, like
depersonalization. Uh huh. I don't know, Mycroft! No, not that. No, nothing like that, no."

I hear John sigh.

"No, he wasn't crying. He seemed fairly composed. More or less. Angry, yes," a pause then. "Yes,
he did," and John's voice in insistent and high, "why? Oh, that doesn't make sense! No it doesn't!
Why?! No? Then you get him to discuss it. I'm not asking him that! No, he didn't want to!," John’s
voice drops down to a lower octave, and I can only hear the mumble of sounds then. None are
discernible.

John's voice has taken on an edge, though. A tightness. I can hear the elevated frequency indicating
upset.

"I think he may be up. Yes, right now," I can hear an exhale. Frustrated. "I will if I need to Mycroft.
No, no - I have to go now. Okay. Yes, later."

He doesn't say goodbye. Just disconnects the call.

I put my head against the pillow, my heart rapidly beating. I can hear my pulse in my head.

John ambles back into the room a few seconds later. I hear him roll up the sleeping bag.

I barely breathe. I don't want to talk to him right now. I can hear his words repeat over and over in
my mind.

'He sounded like a child. He sounded like a child. He sounded like a child...'

"Sherlock, you awake?"

I decide I'm angry at John, and glare at the wall.

"Sherlock?,” he repeats again, his voice nothing but patience.

I suddenly feel enraged.

"Called Mycroft the first second you could, didn't you?,” I hiss, turning around suddenly. Furious.

"Now wait a minute...,” he starts.

"It's none of his business," I seethe. "It's none of your business! It's my life! Those things happened to
me! Not to Mycroft. Never to Mycroft, and never to YOU!"

John’s mouth clicks shut. I like that it clicks shut.

I turn from my back and move up on the chesterfield. John continues to stand rigidly, unmoving.

Ever the solider.

"I don't want you to help me! Not with this! I never wanted you to even know about this. Look
what's happened since I've started speaking about it! Everything is falling apart!"

My face is probably flushed, and I probably look wild. I know I do.
"I never have had anything like this happen before! Not ever! But it is now! I covered it all up for a reason, and all you're doing is ripping all the covers off and making me look at it. And I don't want to!"

John's breathing is ragged now. His hands have come up in a gesture of peace.

Even that makes me furious.

"Sherlock-"

"No! I'm not some wild animal! You don't need to talk to me like that! I hate it when people talk to me like that!"

"Talk to you like what? I'm just trying to treat you as I would anyone-"

"I'm not anyone!"

John takes a step closer.

"No, no of course you're not 'anyone'. Please c'mere."

And my voice hitches.

I pick up a paper weight. Something else. I want to throw both.

"Sherlock, please put those down, and come over here."

"No!," and my voice sounds strangled, even to my own ears. My words are childlike, just like he said. I know they are. But all the words flitting around my brain, available for picking, are the words I've always wanted to say and never have been able to get out.

"Come on, let's put those down now. You don't need those."

"Don't talk to me like that!," I yell. I know I'm scaring John, but the anger is bubbling over. It's inflamed my entire body. If I keep having to look at his face - knowing that he saw everything - I'm going to lose it.

And it's yell, or it's cry.

And I'm not going to cry. Not in front of anyone else.

"Sherlock!," and his voice is louder then, but I don't feel scared. I just feel angrier.

How dare he try to tell me to stop. When I've begged him to leave me alone?

How dare he talk to me like I'm a scared little animal!

Doesn't he have any conception of how mortifying this is for me?

"Get out of here!," I scream, "Go gossip to Mycroft about me, but leave me alone!"

My voice is garbled, and I know I'm a few breaths away from sobbing, and he can't see that.

I can't have him see that.

I hear another body pad into the flat, and look up.
Mrs. Hudson looks completely alarmed, her eyes large and full like twin moons in her skull.

"What in heaven's name is going on in here?," she demands, her voice wavering. "I could hear you down the street, young man! All the way from Speedy's!"

I throw the glass paper weight across the floor. It - remarkably - doesn't smash. It just hits the fireplace with a terribly loud sound.

Mrs. Hudson flinches, takes a step back.

"Stop it right now, Sherlock!," John yells, his voice draining away as he continues. "Stop it. You're scaring everyone."

"Everyone?," I mock, my voice loud and hateful. "Oh how bad for everyone!"

"You're scaring *me*!," he pants, his eyes huge. "You're scaring the hell out of me!"

And then he's beside me. Pulling whatever else is in my other hand away from my side. I don't even know what it is, but it clinks against the desk as he returns it to the table. My eyes catch a glint of metal.

I realize my hand is bleeding.

I had been grasping onto my paring knife.

The image of me, as a child, running a blade over my wrist, humming "Mary had a Little Lamb" while crying comes to me immediately, and I step back from the table alarmed. Stare at the pealing blood as if dribbles over my wrist. Over my radial artery.

One little nick, and it's all over. You just tug on the wires in the forearms and expose them to air, and all this sadness could go away.

"John," Mrs. Hudson demands, "What is going on?," and to me, equally confused, "oh Sherlock, I think you've gone and got yourself a little worked up over-"

I rub my hands through my hair, pulling on the tendrils until my head stings.

"Get out-," I hiss. "Get out! Get out! LEAVE ME ALONE! GO AWAY!"

Mrs. Hudson flees quickly. It takes a moment longer for John to depart. But not before he picks up the paring knife, and deposits it into his jacket pocket, out of my grasp.

"I am trusting you, Sherlock," he pants, sounding scared. And isn't that what he said he was? Scared? "Don't go into the kitchen. Don't do anything rash. Just stay in here. Stay in here and calm down."

He shuts the door behind him.

He doesn't return.

I pull the cold pillow off from the chesterfield and throw it to the floor.

The pillow from John's room.

It smells like his soap. Like his soap on a rope that Lestrade gave him for Christmas.

It smells like his aftershave.
I push it to my face to muffle the sounds, and then I finally do what I haven't done in years.

I finally begin to cry.
John's POV again.

John has a brief discussion with Mrs. Hudson, and admits to Sherlock...that he loves him.

Sherlock admits that he's scared he can't actually love anyone.

"It's getting late, it's getting dark. At the end of the night, I can feel your heart." - Zola Jesus

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I close the door to the living room and linger out in the hallway for a few moments. I suddenly hear a mewling sound, like muffled sobs. I step closer, just a little bit closer, and listen attentively.

Yeah.

Damnit, yeah - he's crying. It sounds more like a hiss; I imagine he's used a pillow to keep the sound down.

Not that I blame him for needing to do so. Cry, I mean. In a way, I feel almost relieved to hear the sound. I hate for him to be hurting, but when he seems absent mood-wise - that's when I get really scared.

I turn abruptly to head up the stairs so that I can give Sherlock a bit of space, only to see Mrs. Hudson on the landing, one step down. She seems to be wavering with indecision about whether or not she should leave, or if she should stay and talk to me.

Closing my eyes, I recall Sherlock's previous words - spoken only a few minutes before:

'It's not his business. It's not your business. It's my life! Those things happened to me! Not to Mycroft! Never to Mycroft and never to you!'

Of course he wouldn't want me calling his brother. I get that, I understand.

But he had been experiencing something a little more intense than a bad dream. A flash back perhaps, and later on in the bathroom I had even heard him almost laughing. It was bizarre behaviour. To anyone else he'd have looked insane, whispering in growling tones something low against the water, making motions against his wrist in jerky, frightening ways. As if he was considering something horrid and didn't even have the presence of mind to realize I was still in the same room as him.

And maybe that's my fear too. A little bit of it. He doesn't have a self preserving nature. He seems to care relatively little about his own body, and he's not coping well with the new memories that have been coming back to him lately.

"John?," Mrs. Hudson asks in plaintive fashion, her eyes wide and haunted. "What's going on with
Sherlock?"

Sighing, I turn to her.

"He's been having a rough time lately. Some real bad stuff related to a case," I trail off, not wanting to divulge more than that. I know I have to say something; she could hear the shouting from Speedy's, for God's sake. And who knows what she heard last night, or if we even woke her up. Or if Sherlock woke her up, rather.

Her face falters, displaying nothing but empathy.

"My poor boy," she whispers with an exhale, "I-I am going to make him something to cheer him up a little bit..."

I wave my hands in dismissal, "That's lovely, Mrs. Hudson - but you really don't need to worry about having-"

She shakes her head, interjecting before I can finish: "Oh nonsense. I have little else to do with my time, and I know he'd probably feel better if he had just a little treat. Maybe a Red Velvet cake. Sherlock loves my Red Velvet cake you know, John. Told me before it's his absolute favourite dessert," she adds with a knowing grin.

I give a tight smile, my heart not really behind my appearance of calm.

"Did he? Oh, well then I guess you're right," and I go to give her a hug, which she accepts sweetly, tapping the small of my back in solidarity. "The fact that he eats your baking at all is high praise, coming from Sherlock."

"Oh, he'll be feeling better soon. You see, John. He has you," and she pulls back and examines me, her face softening, "and what a good friend you are, too. Although he can be a bit of prickly beast, can't he? I imagine hugs don't work on him the way they do for me."

I let out a heavy breath.

"No. No, they don't, I'm afraid," while Mrs. Hudson gives my hand a gentle squeeze.

"Well, no bother. He knows you care for him. He just needs to calm down. And he's not sleeping properly is he, love?"

My gaze connects with Mrs. Hudson's and suddenly I realize she knows far more than she's letting on.

"Did he -," and I debate saying anything more, "did he wake you up last night?"

Mrs. Hudson looks at me knowingly.

"No, he didn't. I couldn't sleep myself," and she holds up a finger to pause the apology she knows is about to leave my mouth, "but it wouldn't be the first time Sherlock has had nightmares, John. Well, maybe it has been - since you've been around, that is. Like I said, you're good for him. Good for his mind, you understand."

She smiles back at me warmly, and suddenly I feel even more ignorant about Sherlock; it's pretty obvious that Mrs. Hudson knows far more about Sherlock than I had previously considered.

She starts to ascend the stairs, then stops and turns to me again.
"Would you like a cuppa? We could talk a bit more, too."

I nod, resigned.

Yes.

Because like it or not, I need answers.

And it sounds like she may have some to give.

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The kettle is whistling away and she pulls it from the burner.

I'm afraid my selection is poor today. I haven't been to the shops at all this week. I do have an organic Earl Grey though that's really quite good. Or Red Rose."

I come and assist her, and fetch a sugar bowl and creamer.

"Mhmm, Earl Grey is perfect. Truly," and Mrs. Hudson retrieves two bone china tea cups with saucers from a small oak hutch, and a glass canister with clotted cream.

I'm about to protest the use of fine china, when she knowingly responds, "Life is too short to put all the special moments on hold. Besides, this day probably could use a bit of something good now, couldn't it?"

I nod slightly, then pull out a chair for her, which she settles into easily. We let the tea steep, and she puts a plate of raisin scones out in front of me.

"Made them this morning. I have whipped butter for it too, if you'd prefer."

I find myself grinning, despite the gravity of this morning's situation.

"Could we be any more British if we tried?," I quip, amused, reaching for a jar of marmalade while Mrs. Hudson laughs.

"Of course we could, but I should have realized. You're a jam man. I have a plum jam, too. And a raspberry."

I stick my finger in my mouth, licking off some of the remnant sweetness that's transferred to my hand.

"Oh I'm good. Because this right here? My favourite," I smile back, topping the baking with a solid coating of orange rind and tangy citrus.

"With Sherlock, it's just the exact opposite in almost every way. Heavily sweetened coffee, no jam to speak of. Definitely no clotted cream."

I frown at my plate. "No scones to speak of either, I bet."

Mrs. Hudson pauses from taking a sip and nods in my direction, "There is that, of course. Bit of a sparrow with his eating, isn't he?"

I pull the scone apart, debating on how to proceed.

"You make it sound endearing, and not troubling. Was he ever different with it? His eating is pretty
Mrs. Hudson nods, understanding what I'm asking.

"It's French," she says with conviction. "Very standard French. Nibblers - many of them, I think."

I squint at my mug, and say, "Sherlock is French?"

Mrs. Hudson smiles. "There is French lineage, on his mother's side. Did you know that he and his brother actually attended a public school in France when they were little boys?"

I take a small bite of scone, swallow. Realize I'm actually quite hungry indeed.

"Didn't know that."

"Yes. Chavagnes. Outside Paris just a bit. All boys Catholic school, if you can believe it."

I almost choke on my scone.


Mrs. Hudson actually giggles.

"Well, he may not be a believer himself. His mum's side was, and so he was sent to a Catholic boarding school. When he was quite little too, if I remember correctly."

I take another bite, chew it around for a bit, still confounded.

"Nine," I say hollowly.

"Yes, that's right. Jumped a good two years. But, that hardly surprises me," she says with a chuckle. "Can you imagine him keeping pace with the other children?"

"I can't imagine Sherlock at a boarding school, period. Wearing a uniform? But a Catholic school?"

My flat mate and best friend has never mentioned any of this to me.

But he's mentioned this to Mrs. Hudson.

And now I wonder why, and when.

And under what possible circumstances. Because Sherlock usually is not chatty about his past.

I clear my throat, try another question.

"How long have you known Sherlock? If you don't mind the question."

Mrs. Hudson goes to pour me a couple more ounces of tea, refilling my cup up to the brim once more.

"Oh, dear. Not at all. I guess - I guess it's coming up on, oh, 14 years now? Near enough."

I feel my expression change into one of surprise.

"I had no idea you've known one another for that long," I admit, now understanding a little better the warmth that I often see pass between Sherlock and our landlady. It certainly hadn't been a recent development. I knew that. But I hadn't known that it had taken over 13 years of cultivation.
"How did you two meet?"

Mrs. Hudson pauses, puts her cup back into its saucer.

"It was shortly after New Years. 2000, big one. London was nuts on New Years eve then. All these young people everywhere in the streets. And I was coming back from a friends house, and saw this young man sitting off to the side of the road, blood streaming down his face."

"Sherlock?"

"Yes, indeed," and her smile turns sad. "Looked rather okay, aside from the mess. But - furious, John. He was angry. And something about him seemed younger than young. Even then, and at 23 - he seemed quite young."

I listen attentively, wondering how the story will unfold.

"All these other people were hooting and laughing and just - noise everywhere. And Sherlock was near the steps to subway, with his hands over his ears like he just...couldn't deal with the noise, and I just had an urge to ask him if he needed help. You know, I could tell something was wrong. But couldn't determine what, other than the fact that someone had hit him."

I frown at the table, silently begging her to continue.

"Turns out he sometimes had - has - excessive reactions to noise. Still does, but he covers for it."

"I've never seen him act like that," I say with a frown.

"Oh, he's good at covering for it, John. But his mind works differently than ours, and I guess I knew he needed the help."

"What was wrong with him?"

Mrs. Hudson lets out a sigh, suddenly losing what remained of her smile.

"He had been using, and got booted off a case he had been asked to consult on."

"Using?," I ask dully, shivers climbing my spine.

"I'll get around to that," Mrs. Hudson admonishes gently, "I believe it was Sherlock's first consulting job. With Scotland Yard. Greg wasn't-"

"You know Lestrade? I mean, beyond-"

"Beyond your recent cases?" she smiles at me, "In a sense, yes. He's been to a handful of my holiday parties in the last 12 years or so. But back then Greg wasn't DI. It was some man named...Morrisey, I believe. Detective Inspector Morrisey, yes. And Sherlock was just this young little thing. Believe it or not he was quite different then too. He's calmed down, some."

I almost choke on my tea.

"He's...calmed down," I clarify slowly, in disbelief, wanting to know I haven't misheard something vital. Maybe I did. Maybe I got that backwards.

"Oh yes, John. He was very much without a compass then, I'm afraid."

I bite my lip to keep myself from interrupting again, suddenly furious with everyone whose ever hurt

"What was he like before?" I ask faintly, not sure if I really want to know.

Mrs. Hudson seems to lose herself in memories for a few seconds before speaking yet again.

"He was a whirlwind of activity. All the time, not just sometimes. He's much the same now, but he's a bit softer around the edges. Bit more polite."

I snort into my teacup, shake my head. Oh Sherlock. What are we going to do with you?

"I didn't live here, then. I moved here in 2006 and Sherlock showed interest in getting a place in '09, and then you came along, so I can't speak to all his habits, of course. But he's more composed now. Tidier certainly. He cleans up so wonderfully well when he puts the effort in; I've always told him so," she finishes fondly, her tone maternal and kind.

A flash of Sherlock's morning routine invades my thoughts: Sherlock picking up anise toothpaste at Tesco's, Sherlock buying toothbrushes with tongue scrapers, Orange flavoured Listerine. Cinnamon flavoured dental floss. Salon quality shampoos. He may be messy with his things, and he may rarely pick up after himself and leave his papers about - but he's usually very clean. His hygiene is usually impeccable. Nails scrubbed, never any scruff, clothes clean, smelling faintly of after shave and menthol.

"Did he used to be sloppy with his hygiene?" I ask, suddenly concerned.

"Oh, dear. I'm not explaining myself very well, am I?"

I give her an encouraging smile to continue.

"He was almost 23 when I first met him, John. Heavy into all the sorts of things young men who've gone astray are into, mostly. He drank, some. Mostly it was other stuff," and she makes a waving motion with her hands, not liking the subject change.

"You mean drugs?" I qualify, intensely. "Street drugs?"

"John, he was very...without purpose, you see. Brilliant mind, like Sherlock's? Wasting away? Of course he was aching for some sort of meaning. Everyone wants meaning in their lives, but for Sherlock I imagine, more than most. Plus, he didn't have his work back then. I guess he felt aimless. Ungrounded."

"He did take drugs, though. That's what you're telling me," I say again, my anxiety creeping in through the back door of my mind. "What did he take?"

"Oh John, I don't feel-"

"Please tell me," I urge her, "it's very important. I mean, what if he were to feel aimless again?"

Mrs. Hudson's eyes narrow onto mine like a laser, and she suddenly seems very upset.

"No, no. No, John - you don't need to be worried about that happening, now. Or in the future. Sherlock had a difficult time of things back then, and almost worse - getting off all those things he was taking. But he's good now. He wouldn't throw away all that he's worked for - he wouldn't."

"Please," I say once more. "Please tell me. I'm his flatmate. I'm the only one whose able to check in on him daily."
The woman sighs, straightens her cardigan. As if by making herself neater, she can make the situation neater. Cleaner.

Tidier.

"Cocaine, I believe. He grew terribly gaunt John, and we all know how he is anyway. All bony. But back then, he was like a skeleton. Was in hospital for it."

I swallow and try to keep my nerves - and imagination - from getting away from me.

"And you're sure it was drugs?"

Mrs. Hudson nods sadly. "Oh, yes. What else could it have been?"

I swallow, not wanting to betray Sherlock's confidence.

"Maybe - depression?"

"At the size he was back then? All ribs and ankles and bone? No, it was drugs, I'm sad to say. He was in clinic back in-," and she apparently stops talking to do some mental math, "2002, and then later in late 2006. I visited him the first time around. He forbid it the second time. Told me it was for my own good. That'd he'd see me again when he got out. Just a little bit embarrassed, I think," and her voice drops to a low murmur, as if she's keeping that aspect a secret too, merely by being quiet.

"But he got clean. I mean, he couldn't still be using," I say aloud, more to myself than to anyone else.

"Of course he got clean! He's right as rain now, John. Hard work for him, too. It's why I think he keeps himself so busy, see. Doesn't want that old anxiety to come calling. You know how he likes to keep busy. Keeps saying he's bored. But it's more than boredom, I think. It's his need to always be...ahead of any impulse that would take him back there," and Mrs. Hudson suddenly clasps my hands, lifting them off the table and giving me a brighter grin. "Don't you go worrying about that. It's an old chapter of his life. He's a strong one, and that chapter is done now."

I give a smile back, although I think it wavers as I do so.

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I return to the flat about an hour and 15 minutes later, armed with a Tupperware container full of raisin scones and a little clotted cream. I knock hesitantly on the door to the living room before I enter.

"Sherlock?"

When I enter, the chesterfield is still pulled out, afghan throw on the ground - but Sherlock is gone.

Heart pounding, I race to the kitchen - having an awful image of the plastic dummy Sherlock uses - hanging from the ceiling, rope entwined around its neck.

"Sherlock!"

But the kitchen is empty too. I do catch sight of a mug out on the table. I pick it up and sniff it.

Cranberry juice. A bottle of Nyquil is off to the side, the blue-green syrup still semi-coating a plastic measuring spoon. I touch it, and determine it's been recently poured, then pick up the bottle.

Mostly full.
My heart is beating double time by the time I get to his room, knocking hastily.

No response.

The handle turns easily and when I enter, I can see that Sherlock is curled up on his bed, covers over his body. Facing the wall.

My mouth is still dry with anxiety when I speak.

"Are you sick?," I ask dumbly.

Sherlock doesn't turn, and I go to him quickly, nudge his shoulder back and forth with my hand.

He finally turns, face the perfect imitation of annoyance. His eyes are terribly swollen, but there are no tear marks on his skin. He must have washed his face.

"What is it?," he asks petulantly, as if my anxiety is not something he is observing. As if I'm just waking him up from a nap for the sake of being a pest.

As if the previous fucking night from hell never happened at all.

"Sherlock," I start, wired and almost mad. "I told you-"

"You don't get to tell me what to do," he huffs indignantly, turning back to the wall with a flourish. "Besides, I need to sleep. Toby's being released in a few days, and he still won't talk. I need to get him to talk, or he might be walking back into a snake pit and the person who hurt him again might have access to him a second time."

I exhale, suddenly understanding that if this is just how he needs to play it, I'll do my best to follow along.

The it-didn't-happen-if-we-ignore-it game.

I know this game. Intimately.

Our mother used to play this game every time Harry came home way too late at 15, 16 years of age. Came home smelling like alcohol and sex, only to vomit her guts out all night in the bathroom. My father used to play this game after he'd lose his temper and belt me, and act surprised when I couldn't sit down at the dinner table the next night without wincing.

"What's up with the Nyquil?," I ask carefully, not knowing what's likely to earn me a scowl and what's likely to cause a blow up.

"I took it to sleep. A reality that you are making increasingly more difficult right now by refusing to leave me alone."

My breathing starts to slow down, assured that he's more or less okay if he can act like his snarky self.

"Not what the Nyquil is for," I drawl, half-hearted in my attempt to chastise him for self medicating.

"Works just as well as the prescription stuff where I am concerned. Easier to obtain."

I sigh, and stand up slowly disliking the emotional bridge that he's trying to build between us. That he feels he needs to create.
"I'm sorry about Mycroft," I start, not knowing if I should even attempt an apology right now.

Sherlock shifts slightly, then lazily opens one eye. It reminds me of a lizard on a hot rock, basking in the sun. The silver of his iris captures my interest as I realize how sharp and burning his gaze can be.

"What about Mycroft?" he clarifies.

"I'm sorry I called him. I know that must have upset you. I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

I take a step back, almost instinctively. Something about his tone unnerving me.

"Why what?"

"Why are you sorry?," Sherlock asks again.

"I'm sorry for calling him, I guess. I didn't mean to embarrass you," and my face feels flush. I suddenly feel badly in adding to Sherlock's sense of shame. Because it's normal to want to preserve your sense of dignity at all times, but especially during something involving such trauma. "I just didn't know what else to do."

Sherlock lays his head back down against his comforter.

"'Else'? What else did you possibly need to do? I wasn't dying, John. What else was there to do?"

I frown.

"Sorry," I whisper, feeling his shame as if it's my own now.

"I asked, 'what else did you possibly need to do?' I didn't ask you to apologize. I had a bad night, to be sure. You ensured I got cleaned up, like an infant. I was in no way demanding or needing the assistance-"

"Sherlock, wait-,"

"And I did not need to be watched while I took a bath to cleanse the urine off - like a toddler," and he's looking at me again, his body now propped upright. High spots of colour, of infused pink, swim along his cheekbones. "Why did you stay with me? I wanted to be alone. Anyone would have wanted to have been alone."

His voice cracks, and I can sense the desperation swelling over his enforced attitude of irritation.

"You may not recall the events of last-"

"I recall 'the events of last night' perfectly, John!"

"You were extremely upset-"

"Of course I was upset! I had just woken up from a horrible nightmare!," and the words come out as a hiss. A long, drawn out hiss. Like an engine that has overheated. "Was I supposed to be okay with remembering how my father had worked up to having intercourse with me? On my eighth birthday, no less, the sick bastard," Sherlock finishes, his whole body the very picture of misery. "Except I was the bastard, wasn't I? Fucking sick...monster," he whispers to no one. To his duvet perhaps, which he suddenly swats away with his hand as if it is an irksome fly.
My throat spasms, and I almost trip in my effort to pull back.

"I thought, I thought you said."

"Don't be stupid, John," Sherlock rasps, his eyes filled with rage, "You and I both know what the dream was about! I just didn't remember how hard I tried to make it."

He stops talking all at once, his mouth clamping down around his words.

I hunch down, low on my haunches.

"Sherlock, what?" I ask insistently. "What is it? Please, you can tell me. We can work it out together."

His voice tangles in his throat. Heavy and strange and knotted.

"I hadn't been able-," and he stops and takes a big breath, fresh tears wetting his eyes. So he shuts them, "I had forgotten how I tried to rationalize it."

"Rationalize the abuse?," I clarify, my voice almost as constricted.

He breaths out rapidly.

"Yes. I-I...used to pretend I was a space explorer, and he was a Martian, and it was a Martian hurting me. It wasn't...sexual. It was just physical pain, because he was an alien to me. What we were doing was alien to me because I was so little. I had no context for it back then. I didn't even know it was abuse. It was just foreign. But I had forgotten that. I didn't even want to-," and he breaks off, all falsity and look of indifference or irritation completely absent.

"Sometimes I used to pretend I was a pirate, and I'd board a ship and sail away, and when he'd hurt me sometimes - and it was always at night, when it was dark - I used to tell myself that I was being hurt at sea. M-maybe," and his voice is shaking now, "sharks, or something like...an octopus. Because I'd fallen into the water, where it is cold and dark and where things like that can hurt you. So it made sense then, see? A shark would bite you, and an octopus would tangle around your legs and maybe even take your clothes off. But your dad's not supposed to do those things to you."

His eyes turn up and look to me with such need. As if he needs me to understand how he made it all 'okay.'

Needs me to tell him that he wasn't wrong for doing so. For changing it in his mind, as a child. For making it out to be something less horrific than it was.

I sit down on the floor, my legs cramping.

"You are in no way responsible for what your father did to you, Sherlock. You in no way consented to what he did, either."

He shakes his head quickly.

"I wouldn't even cry. Or say no," and his voice breaks off, "I let him. I let him so many times! I let him have sex with me, John!"

My whole body feels sick. Sick with the horror of what he's trying to communicate to me right now.

"Can't you see that you're right on edge, Sherlock?," I ask a few seconds later, when I trust myself to talk again. "That maybe all those years of pushing everything away just barely allowed you to get
by? But now it's just too much, isn't it?"

He rolls on over to his back, and looks up to the ceiling. His breathing is incredibly fast. I can see his rib cage rise and fall quickly.

"It's never felt this raw before. It hasn't hurt at all. I don't even think it hurt this much when it happened the first time. Why now?," and his voice is barely a whisper, as he looks at me - as if imploring me to help him make some sort of sense out of a situation that makes no sense at all. And never will make sense.

"I wish I could say," I give him a very weak smile. It's all I can do at the moment. "I know sometimes things hold onto us for a long time, and don't let us go. And then one day we wake up, and the rawness of something...that has hurt us for a very long time...is gone. Or diminished. But I can't tell you why that happens, or what makes one random day the day when it hurts less."

His eyes are scanning the top of the wall now, as if looking for patterns. Likely another coping mechanism, so I don't call him on it.

"But this is the opposite," and his voice is rough when he speaks next, "there was no pain before. None at all. It happened so long ago. And now I feel like-

I maneuver myself between his bed and dresser, feeling more snug in the small enclosure of space.

"Feel like what?"

He holds up his hands, as if he has no words to explain the complexity of what he is feeling.

Actually, he probably doesn't have any words that fully express those emotions.

His hands eventually fall back down to the bedding.

"Like...I want to hurt him. Not like he hurt me, of course. But physically hurt him."

"Punch him? Kick him?" I try, clarifying.

"No," he utters softly, "like...stab him, John. Take him outside, somewhere cold and very far away from other people. No one to rescue him. No one to hear him or see him or offer him any hope. Tie him up and stab him over and over again. With something not quite sharp. And maybe put something into his mouth so he can't make any noise."

I close my eyes and let the string of expletives run through my head.

"Jesus, Sherlock. You said when you were little, you felt like you had been stabbed, and now-

"I said non-sexual! Nothing sexual!"

I open my eyes and see that his own eyes are almost wild.

"I know you did. And I know you meant it. But if stabbing has taken on a sexual connotation-

"It hasn't! Don't be sick!"

The conversation is getting out of control. And one of us has to keep a relatively cool head.

"I'm not trying to be 'sick'. And I'm not saying you mean anything sexual about it. But what he did to you, what your father did to-"
"He wasn't my father!"

My breath is shuddery with anxiety when I breath out.

"Not your biological father, no. But he was supposed to act as your father, and he was supposed to take care of you. Keep you safe. But he did the opposite. He hurt you. He hurt you over and over again, for years. Violently. Sexually. And it makes sense that you'd have all this anger inside of you. It makes absolutely perfect sense. But you *can't* hurt him Sherlock. You can't actually take out your rage on him, can you? And I would never let you stab him or kill him, even if you could."

Sherlock's breathing is furiously fast now. More so than before. And he looks conflicted. As if I am, likewise, betraying him.

I move up to the edge of the bed.

"Hurting other people hurts you. I know you know that. It doesn't even matter if they were cruel people or not. Hurting them - just to hurt them? - that isn't justice. They learn nothing and they keep on hurting other people."

"I know that!," he exclaims, the sound rupturing in his throat. "Don't you think I know that? I'm just telling you what I feel! You asked me to tell you what I feel, and that's how I feel! Like I want to stab him over and over again until he's nothing! Less than nothing! And even then, I know it wouldn't even make a difference, but that's how I feel!"

The words scare me.

The words scare me a hell of a lot, but I try to keep my face more or less impassive.

"When you feel like that - all that rage - what do you do?," I ask uneasily. "How do you get rid of that anger?"

Sherlock clenches his fists, closes his eyes.

"There is nothing I can do that will take this anger away, John-"

"But at one time there must have been something that helped you. You must have found a way to get that anger out."

"I told you! I made it into something better. Something not sick. And I haven't felt anger like I'm feeling...in my entire life. It's new."

"Since Toby," I ascertain.

"Since this case, yes."

"But-," and I lick my lips, not knowing if I am overstepping a personal boundary, "you told me you were in the clinic. At Evelina, when you were 13. You told me you had cut yourself very deeply. Don't you think that maybe - for a long time, perhaps - you've been doing things to yourself to get that anger out? Harming yourself because you can't harm him?"

Sherlock stops moving about, his whole body stilling.

"What?," and his voice is very small and very uncertain. Nervous almost.

It makes me want to hug him. It makes me terribly want to just grab him and hold him and ensure him that everything will be ok in the end. That he'll be okay. That he won't always feel like this.
I clear my throat, "You said you were in clinic because you had hurt yourself with a blade. You had cut very deeply. Mycroft told me that much, and you admitted that happened to me. But, Sherlock - what you did to yourself was...violent. Sort of like stabbing yourself, isn't it?"

Sherlock's face squishes up into something tormented as soon as the words leave my mouth. It happens quickly, and he jolts against his headboard as if shocked by something electric - hot and searing.

"Hey - hey," and I reach out for him. He resists the hug I attempt to give him and I feel my sense of weariness increase. I don't want to have to fight him every step of the way just to deal with his mood issues.

"Come on, it would make me feel better," I manage to get out, while Sherlock finally lets me hold him. He lays his head against my shoulder.

"As long as you feel better," he gets out in a barky, broken laugh.

"Infinitely better," I say quietly. "Because it's all I know how to do."

"Hug people is all you know how to do?," he responds just as quietly, aiming for a sarcastic tone and failing miserably. "And you are still employed as a doctor, how?"

I smile, despite the subject matter.

"Hush, you," and I infuse the hug with a little bit of pressure, aiming to put my empathy, my concern, my love into the hug. "We will find a way to help get all that anger out of you. I promise."

"Maybe we can't," he breaths back to me and pulling away suddenly - prematurely ending the hug. "Maybe it's who I am now."

"Sherlock, no-"

"John, it's a known fact that severe child abuse can cause...distortions in personality."

"Distortions in personality," I echo, unconvinced with his self-diagnoses in the past and likely to be as unconvinced this time around, too.

"Problems with relating to others. With bonding. With attachment. Problems with empathy," he finishes, looking glum. "I fantasize about killing my own father. I want to hurt someone, John. I want to cause them pain. That's not normal. But it would make sense - if I were a sociopath."

"Oh god, not this again, please. You are not a sociopath!"

Sherlock shakes his head back and forth in frustration that I won't just accept his self-labelling.

"You don't know that for sure."

"Sherlock, you're not!"

"I could be! I'm incapable of feeling love, John. I've never felt it. Not for my mother. Not for Mycroft - even though Mycroft was kind to me when no one else was. I want to feel it, but I can't. The very idea of it terrifies me, and I don't know why! I'm scared of the one thing that everyone says you need before anything else!," his voice has taken on a frantic edge.

He is afraid.
Afraid that he will never feel what he yearns to feel.

I press my hands to the bridge of my nose, to my temples. My head pounds with the pain in his words.

"You said you loved Victor, Sherlock."

"I said I thought I might have loved Victor. I have no idea! How do you know, anyway? How do you know when or if you love someone? No book, no encyclopedia - nothing you read or watch or see can tell you for sure. You are just supposed to know, but I don't know. Because it's one thing to act like you love someone and another thing to actually love them! And I never feel anything!"

My mind quickly presents about fifteen scenarios of the last week where Sherlock has shown intense emotionality. Passion for music. Irritation regarding a stupid comment from Anderson. Compassion for an inquired squirrel that lay bleeding in the frost. He actually picked the animal up, and wrapped its little body in his jacket, returning to Baker Street so he could try to save it. Horror over what was done to Toby.

"Sherlock, you just have to trust me when I say this to you: out of everyone I've ever met, you - more than anyone else - are the person I believe feels things the most acutely. You feel things incredibly strongly, Sherlock. Your interest in subjects, your passion for science, your devotion to your music-"

"That's not love, though, John! It's - it's only interest," and I can see where the problem awaits me, now: for every example of devotion and care and, yes, love that I present to him - he's only going to tell me that those are variant conditions. Not the real thing.

"Okay," I sigh, "then what is love to you? Tell me that much. What is this condition...that everyone except you can feel?"

"Not everyone, John. Sociopaths don't feel love."

"You truly are exasperating when you're like this," I mutter. "Please don't make me repeat myself. Look, there is a way to put your mind at ease, perhaps. If you want, we can find a psychiatrist for you, some who can-"

His eyes go wide, almost horrified.

"Just to administer a battery of tests. To determine if you are a sociopath - which, I'm telling you right now - you are not. A doctor - a psychiatric doctor - they'd be the real determiner of that label, not you."

He shakes his head, seemingly unnerved.

"No. I don't want to do that," his utters so quietly, he's barely audible.

"Why not?," I ask, when I realize he's gone mute. "That would solve the problem of you not knowing for sure."

Sherlock suddenly lets out a gasp, as if in pain.

"Because I don't want to know for sure, John! I don't want it confirmed!"

"What? That doesn't make any-"

"Because I don't want to be one, John!"
Then the image before me solidifies into something understandable. I finally see.

I finally Get It.

I stand up, knees weak.

"I'm going to tell you something as your best friend, Sherlock. As someone who does, in fact, love you very much. You are not incapable of feeling love. I know it without question, and I know you're terrified that I'm wrong about this. Because I can be stupid sometimes. Idiotic, even. Compared to you I'm always an idiot. But I am not wrong on this and I'm not wrong about you, and I need you to believe me."

Sherlock closes his eyes and turns back towards the wall.

"Sherlock - please. Say something."

He's quiet for a few seconds, and then:

"I need to stop talking and get some rest. Can you close my door on your way out?"

I stare at the back of his head, sweat slicked and trembling.

And I want to scream.

But I don't.

Instead, I turn around and slowly pad away, feeling defeated as I close his bedroom door.

The lock resounds throughout the hallway with an exceptionally loud reverberation of metal upon metal.

I'm accosted with an image of a jail cell being slammed shut, and I press at my eyes to get the image to depart.

It doesn't.

For the rest of the day, it doesn't leave me.

An image of Sherlock, in his self imposed jail.
Chapter Summary

Back to Sherlock's POV.

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Sherlock decides to act more like his old self around John. John notices that Sherlock is looking physically unwell and attempts to broach the subject with him. Sherlock, being Sherlock, argues that everything is fine.

Everything is not fine.

I let John pad away. He looks resigned, and I almost feel badly. Almost.

I also feel an emotion that's almost like...anger. It's nonsensical, but there you have it.

His words echo in my head:

'I'm going to tell you something... As someone who does, in fact, love you...'

'Love you.'

The anger returns and I chuck my pillow against the wall.

No one has ever said words like those to me before. Not even Victor. Victor said he cared for me. He cared for me, and he knew something was wrong, and 'please Sherlock, just tell me. We can work it out, but I need you to be honest with me. If we can't talk about what's bothering us, what hope do we have for us?'

Stuff like that.

But love? I honestly don't think anyone's ever said that word to me. Not in relation to me. Maybe about someone else. Maybe in the generic "peace and love to you this holiday season." Molly's Christmas cards, maybe.

But never like how John said it, this morning.

And in that moment, when John said those words? I didn't feel happiness, and I didn't feel peace.

I felt anxiety. A sense of dread, almost.

Because Victor didn't even love me, but he still decided I was 'too much' for him. He still decided he couldn't deal with everything that was wrong with me.

And I know what it's like when someone seems to care enough to want to help but you just can't let them, because you don't know how to open up enough to make that possible. As fond as I was of Victor, I couldn't be the sort of man he needed, and now with John? Now it's even worse, because apparently - in some way - John loves me.
So when he decides I'm too much for him to deal with, it's just going to be all the more cutting when he goes away.

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Because eventually they all get tired. They get tired because I don't want to talk about things, discuss things, 'work through things.' And I can't say those words back. Words like "I care about you." Or to say "I love you, John"? That seems insurmountable, even though it's just four silly words.

Three, if I drop the John. Two if I keep it really simple. Just a 'love you.' But when could I say something like that? When getting the paper? When watching a show? At Angelo's? After a case? Anytime I say it would sound wrong.

And how stupid it would sound, out of the blue. And what's worse! If it's not out of the blue, it sounds feigned, or it sounds like I'm just repeating the words that so effortlessly seem to flow from John's own mouth because I am supposed to do so. He won't think it's because I want to do so. And that's half of the problem right there. I don't even know if I want to say them. If I mean them. There is just a buzz in my head when I think about them in relation to anyone, and that buzz intensifies in sound when I think about the concept of love in relation to John.

After all, I don't know if I love anyone, and I don't want John to assure me that I can. How ridiculous is that assurance, anyway? To have to assure a 36 year old man that they can do something that most infants can do?

The whole endeavor is mortifying, and thus - best left alone.

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To be sure, I know I am inordinately fond of John. Almost to an absurd degree. To a degree that mucks up my ability to concentrate. But is it love? I don't know.

And so here I am, after the disgusting events of last night - and he says that? At a time like this? When all I want to do is check into a motel until the images have - possibly (is it possible?) - weakened a bit in his mind? Of a full grown adult, urinating over himself like a newborn. And I must have made noise. I might have even said or shouted something in the first place that alerted him to the situation. What's worse - I have no idea what.

It's not like I can ask John, either. There is no casual way of bringing it up. There is no way I can ever know just how badly I've made myself look. Just how disturbed he's going to be with me, going forward. The horrible things I may have said without consenting to speak. Not really.

So why now?

Why would he say something like that to me right now? When he knows I can't reciprocate?

I fall back into my comforter and force myself a bit more rest.

Sometimes - rarely, but sometimes - complicated situations seem to make more sense after rest.

On that point, John does make sense.
I sleep for another three hours, and rouse drowsily. I've never slept this long in my life, not in one day - and when I glance at my bedside clock I'm informed that it's past noon. I crack my neck, relishing the pop and the sudden rush of looseness, and then groggily rise. My hands ghost over my cheeks, my chin. They feel rough, sandy, and I grimace in distaste - remembering that I didn't shave yesterday. My hair also feels damp. Sweaty. I look down and notice an extra duvet on the bed. One that suspiciously looks like nothing I own.

I hold back a groan, my heart beating rapidly in my chest. I tell myself he's just being as he's always been.

(Except he's not, is he Holmes? He said he loves you. He is putting blankets over you while you sleep. He's staying with you when you're in the bathroom because he thinks you are a lunatic.)

I finally do let myself groan. Put my face into my comforter and groan at what's happening between us and the fact that I can't make heads or tails of it. Is it romantic? What John feels for me? And if it is, wouldn't I have known about it before now? And if it's not, why did he say he loved me? I'm not his child. I'm not his brother. Maybe John thinks you can love someone as a friend. In that Universal sense of love. Maybe that's all there is to it.

Which, of course, is frightening enough if you really think about it. But it's not quite as overwhelming as the other possibilities.

The possibilities that I will never ask him about. Especially since my own traitorous mind is yearning to confuse me as late. Like the other day, when I had the impulse to kiss him. And I've never had the impulse to kiss anyone. Not even Victor, after sex.

But if I tell myself it's John's idealized notion of friendship and loyalty and sympathy?

Then it's not so hard to consider.

Maybe that's all there is to it. Not that it makes this feeling totally abate in my chest. My heart still feels like someone is squeezing it.

But I suspect I'm going to have to live with this feeling for a bit longer, yet.

When I was a little boy, I always wanted someone to say "I love you, Sherlock."

Just once. Just one time, so I could just trap the sound into my head and pull it out when I was really sad.

No one ever did.

Even Mycroft talked around it. He'd whisper, "I'm here now" in the darkness sometimes, after I was calmer, or he'd show me he'd care in his own strange, Mycroft way with hot beverages. Sometimes he'd even give me a hug. Stiff and awkward. Almost as bad as my own. But it was an attempt at expressing some sort of brotherly affection, and back when I was a child - I appreciated the effort. I'd even hold on, and press my body back to his and grab his pajamas between my fingers like he was a buoy, and I was drowning.
To be fair, I don't think I ever said "I love you, Mycroft" either. So I can hardly fault him for never saying the words that I couldn't, myself, say.

But it wasn't just Mycroft.

Victor never said them either. Mummy - definitely not. I honestly don't think she told me when I was an infant. Too small to remember.

I used to dream that maybe when I was little - very, very little - that mummy would have come and picked me up out of the crib and stroked my hair, and would say, "I love you, Sherlock" or even just "love you." "I love you, Sherlock," would have been better, but any sort of affection would have made me so pleased. So I used to imagine that this is how she would have spoken to me when I was really small. Too young to have been a problem yet. Too small to be hated.

But then I grew up and realized what a stupid thing that was to dream about.

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I stare at my fresh, clean clothes. My purple shirt, which is made of Ahimsa Silk and is incredibly soft, and a pair of black corduroy trousers that I haven't worn in about three years. I found them in the back of my closet, looking pressed and decent. My other trousers could likely do with a washing. I grab a belt just in case, not having measured my dimensions in a good six months. Then find some wool socks and silk pants and bring everything back with me to the bathroom, too.

I strip out of my pajamas - or rather, John's pajamas. The RAMC shirt clinging to my chest, dampened by sweat. I suddenly feel filthy. I can't give these back to him. I sweat in his army clothes. Even the bottoms he gave me feel damp as I remove them, and I make a mental checklist to complete a couple loads of laundry this evening after I return home. My scarf could do with a washing too. Lately it smells sour, when it's pressed against my mouth. Like sick. Or something worse.

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I lather up my hair, and apply extra shaving foam to my skin, holding back the impulse to shave over the cleansed skin until it stings and peals with blood. If I do that - and I have before - it's going to sting, and that's going to be a relief - but then it's going to scab, and I'll just have the impulse to rip the scabs off, and it's all going to get very messy, very fast. But I do shave three times regardless, just to grab any errant hairs that have decided to bypass the razor.

When I stand up under the jet of hot water to rinse off, I suddenly feel the blood leave my head and see black spots. My heart begins to pound forcefully, and I suddenly can't hold back the wave of nausea. A second later, I'm vomiting out old tea, that smells of bile and whatever fermenting tea purged from my stomach would smell like - suddenly filling the air. Acrid, hot and disgusting.

My legs feel like jelly and I move back down to sit at the bottom of the tub, letting the stream of water beat down over my head. My arms are shaking - less prominently than last night, although the cause this time is likely blood sugar. Low blood sugar, low blood pressure, low electrolyte balance - low something.

Suddenly feeling cold, despite the steam and the heat of the spray, I close my eyes and try to focus on absorbing the heat from the water.
I dry off quickly, my skin prickling in the cooler air of the bathroom. The mirrors are foggy, and I find I don't mind that. I don't honestly like looking at my naked form as I get changed.

After I am more or less dry, I pull on my socks and pants, then my shirt, and finally my trousers. The trousers sag at the waist a little bit which is odd; they used to sit comfortably, merely relaxed. I work a belt through the appropriate places and tighten everything up several notches, somewhat surprised to see the gap of space between flesh and clothing. The bones of my hips are creating a ridge of empty space and I sigh in discomfort, the tightness of the belt making the skin around the bones ache even more than it normally does. When I inspect my sides, I realize they are lightly bruised. Not badly - but speckled with green and yellow bruising. I try to determine if I've recently fallen, or walked into anything clumsily, but I cannot recall any such event. What's more - the bruising is fairly evenly distributed, on both sides of my body.

A further perusal of my belly shows slight bruising elsewhere. I frown at the reveal, and wonder when my body started to look so injured and pale.

My shivering has increased since the shower, and now - even with the clothing, I find I am feeling pretty cold. I decide to check my wardrobe for a jumper, which I eventually find. A soft wool jumper all in navy blue, that I haven't actually donned in about a decade, believe it or not. A turtle neck fashion, so it compresses against my body a bit more than I'd like, but the benefit of it is that I quickly do feel warmer. And right now, I will take heat over some ridiculous Mycroft-purchased style.

Then I think of John, and his habit of always wearing layers. I've never even asked him if he's cold. Just assumed that it was his preferred style too.

At any rate, someone will have to talk to Mrs. Hudson about the heating in our suite.

The shower gave me time to determine how I'm going to proceed with John.

Polite, definitely. Maybe a little reserved. I can't let him think I'm this open book right now. I want the discussions of the last week to stop. Abruptly. And the only way they will is if I reign in my emotions. I can't have any more nightmares around him, I can't be acting so differently. If I feel oddly sad, I need to keep it together until I can deal with it on my own. John shouldn't have to concern himself with me more than he typically does. All that is going to do is stress him out, and he's already tried to be so loyal for me. He already works so hard at it. At being a good friend to me.

"Afternoon," I say civilly, when I see he's seated at the table - conspicuously free of my experiments. John eyes me for a second, looking almost wary.

"I didn't chuck them out," he says quickly, in assurance. "I just moved everything to the living room. Cleared your desk a bit."

I wave his concern away.

"That experiment was over anyway," I say evenly, the tone of my voice neither affectionate nor annoyed. Just me. Just how I always sound, I hope.

Which is to say, probably colder than John deserves. But I can hardly help the way I am designed.
"He's frowning at his plate for some reason.

"What?" I snap, not being able to help myself. So much for my goal of being polite today.

"Sherlock - you're shivering. Are you cold?" he asks gruffly, not seeming to care much for my tone of voice. Pointing to me with his rye toast, the butter glistening in the light of the kitchen. The oil dribbling off the bread, and falling to his plate.

He must have used a lot of butter.

I don't know if I suddenly feel hungry, or if I suddenly feel sick to my stomach. I don't know if I want to suddenly eat toast, lots of toast, with deep slabs of butter.

Or if I am repulsed by the idea.

My stomach gurgles in mock hunger, and I press lightly against it with my hand.

An old voice hisses in my brain like a wasp.

'You'll know you'll feel worse. Bloated. Swollen. It'll just touch you all over. The food. From the inside. Until you get it out again.'

I turn away, my heart thumping away. I rub my tongue over my teeth, realizing that they still feel porous from my earlier vomiting session. They feel porous and contaminated, and if I eat right now - when I feel like this - it's just going to make me retch again. I know it will.

"Come on, sit down. You look a little peaky," John says a few seconds later, when I realize I haven't responded. He suddenly is tugging on the hem of my jumper, and my hands clamp down over his own. Quickly. Without thinking.

"What are you doing?" I ask impulsively, hating the high note. The strained sound, almost like I'm afraid of him.

"Nothing," he says with a sigh, suddenly sounding sad, "just never seen you in a jumper before," and again he makes a little tugging motion on the corner of the garment. Not to...take it off, I realize dumbly. Just a physical reference to what I was wearing, I guess, Just a way to show a form of what - affection?

He goes back to his toast, eyeing me.

"Did you think I was going to take it off you? Keep it for my own?" he says, with false levity, his eyes revealing concern.

I suddenly feel flush with embarrassment.

"Of course not, don't be stupid!," and I rise to get a mug from the cabinet, anxiously searching for tea.

My gaze settles on several packages of teas and flavoured coffee. Gingerbread tea...apparently. Some sort of German Coffee Cake coffee. I pick up the coffee, and sniff it. It actually does smell like dessert.

"This smells...decent," I say a moment later. "Can I?"

John rolls his eyes.
"Sherlock, you can always help yourself to whatever is in the kitchen. I'd want you to," and he bites off a bit more toast, swallows, speaks again. "In fact, I'd be insanely happy if you'd let yourself have a bit more."

My neck suddenly feels prickly with heat.

"Let myself?," I ask harshly, turning with a flourish. "What is that supposed to mean?"

John presses his hand against his left eye, dropping his fork against the plate. The plate is smeared with ketchup, and the remnants of some sort of omelet.

The ketchup looks like blood.

"You know exactly what I mean. Come on, Sherlock - take a look at yourself for once."

I feel my brow furrow, and let my gaze travel up my trousers, and over my jumper.

"I'm clean, I'm wearing pressed clothes, I've gotten sleep-"

John chucks his napkin down onto the table. Probably saturating it in the blood-ketchup on his plate.

Mrs. Hudson knitted those for us, and if he stains them with ketchup, she's not going to be amused.

"Look in the mirror. You're losing weight! You haven't eaten much on this case, and God Sherlock - I get it," and his voice softens abruptly, "I do. I've tried so hard to ignore it, but you don't look...healthy. You haven't looked healthy for weeks, and I'm concerned."

I finally put the coffee back onto the shelf, feeling attacked.

"Oh come off it! I am exactly the same size I've always-"

"No you're not! Damn it Sherlock, you look... I know something is wrong. Please, please let me know what's going on."

I huff out my anger quickly, slamming the cabinet shut with a bang.

"Nothing is wrong," I parse, my voice steeling into something sharp.

"If you don't want to tell me, fine. But please don't lie to me!"

"I'm not lying!"

John looks frustrated, and wipes at his mouth with the napkin.

"I've ignored it for weeks, partly cause I didn't know if I was right or not. But I can see now, it's not all in my imagination."

I retrieve a tumbler, petulantly certain that I won't be touching any of John's tea or coffee any longer. Or any of his treats or food. I'll get my own stuff, thank you very much.

"Oh, I know what this is," I start lazily, "More telephone calls to Mycroft, right? He does love to be dramatic, you know. Create a drama where none existed."

I see a vein throb at the corner of John's temple.

"This has nothing to do with Mycroft, and everything."
I fill the tumbler with tap water and drink slowly, feeling the water drop down into my stomach. I'm reminded of a cave, with water splashing up over the edges. Something hollow and untouched by man. And it makes me feel calmer.

"I don't have time to discuss pointless drivel, John. I need to get back to the hospital and speak to-"

John stabs his eggs with his fork.

"Not going to happen. Lestrade says you're not to go speaking to Toby on your own. Not after the stunt you pulled with Dr. Barrett."

"Stunt?," I hiss, "I didn't pull a stunt!"

"Regardless, if you want to speak to Toby, you have to speak to Lestrade first. You defy him again Sherlock, and I don't think he'll be very lenient with you going forward."

I bring the tumbler down hard against the cabinet. Hopefully cracking it.

"Take it easy!," John hollers, "You can't just damage things because you are in a bad mood!"

And why oh why does this conversation seem so familiar?

I start to depart when John rises, and hurriedly runs up to me, grabbing my arm. I let him turn me around - he obviously wants to talk to me - and stare at him with irritation.

"Come on. Let's just...," and he sighs again, "I don't want to fight with you, Sherlock."

I pull my arm back from his grasp and fold it over stomach, suddenly aware that my belly is hurting.

"I'm not fighting with you."

John gives me a weak smile.

"Good," he hurries to add. "Good. Now, can I at least make you some lunch? Or some coffee? You can't go running around on no fuel."

His eyes are demandingly hopeful.

"Fine," I say uneasily, knowing that given the mood I am in right now, anything in my stomach is likely to make me feel worse. Sicker, not stronger.

John grins up at me more fully now.

"Great. What do you want? I'll make you anything you'd like. An omelet? I can make you a cheese and mushroom omelet? Maybe with some toast?"

I suddenly can think of nothing else but that syrupy sweet blood-ketchup coating John's plate.

"Yogurt," I say quickly, "and coffee. Please."

John frowns but doesn't say anything. Not for a few seconds, and then: "Just yogurt?"

I hedge, then give him a partial truth.

"My stomach hurts."

John gives me a sympathetic smile, then ushers me to his place, quickly clearing away his own
dishes. I smear a drop of blood-ketchup with my finger.

"Yogurt it is. Blueberry or coffee? Which would you prefer?"

"Coffee yogurt?," I ask carefully, unsure if I am understanding him correctly.

John laughs.

"Yeah. I'd figure you'd eat anything if it was coffee flavoured."

I bite my lip and then nod.

"Okay," I sigh, and John busies himself with measuring out the German Chocolate Cake coffee, starting up the Mr. Coffee coffee maker. A couple seconds later the little brown machine gurgles to life, and the sweet aroma of chocolate and cherries permeates the air.

"What black magic is this?," I quip.

John suddenly looks far more relaxed than I've seen him in ages, and I realize I'm doing the right thing, indulging him.

"Got this from that little café where I bought the biscotti. They have this whole...line of beverages that taste like desserts."

"That's helpful," I say, my leg jumping up and down against the lino, "Maybe we can wean Mycroft off his cakes with this."

John rolls his eyes, and then a few seconds later presents me with a steaming cup of the stuff. A huge bowl of yogurt is soon to follow.

I realize he must have given me the majority of the container.

"Just eat what you can comfortably manage," he says softly, placing one hand on my shoulder. I feel the other at my back, and suddenly my stomach clenches in anxiety at the touch. About the increasing amount of times that he's been touching my back, or my face, or my shoulders in the last week. The increase in hugs. The increase in everything that indicates emotional...connection. It feels soft and warm and safe at first. But then once I start to think about it - then it feels wrong, which in turn makes me feel wrong. Because I am fond of John. I shouldn't be so awkward about this. How insulted would he be if he knew how strange his touch makes me feel? He'd likely be hurt. So I can't tell him, "please don't touch me." I can't hurt him like that.

And what's more - I can't differentiate if I like it or dislike it. His touch, I mean. All I know is that it makes me feel wrong. Ashamed, almost.

Moronic brain.

John takes his hands away a couple seconds later, and I finally let myself breathe.

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About 15 minutes later, I've consumed most of the coffee, and a little more than a half of the yogurt.

"I'm done," I say emphatically, ignoring the twisting in my gut. The protest of the cells inside my belly that are screaming out at me that I've just done a really idiotic thing.

"A+ for effort," John says with a smile. "Want me to accompany you to the Yard?"
I hesitate. Decide that if Lestrade's going to be pissy with me, I'm likely to get irked in response. And John's seen enough of me acting like a child recently.

I clear my throat.

"No, I've got it. I'm good," and then I wonder if that's a sufficient response, or if a normal person would take such a response personally. "Thank you for offering," I add a second later. I probably sound robotic.

John retrieves my coffee mug, and I rise quickly, placing my hands over my belly. I can already feel the slight swell of skin as my stomach puffs out with the weight of the food.

I feel dreadful.

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By the time I get to the Yard, I am feeling a tight band of pain across my lower back. My stomach is clenching like I've consumed something bad.

In and out of here. That's my goal. A quick appeal to Lestrade about how I won't let my temper get the better of me again, and then off to Evelina.

Unfortunately, I run into Donovan before I can complete my objective.

"You really think you'll just be able to say some meaningless assurance to him, and get total clearance again? Are you insane?"

I smile, despite the pain in my belly.

"Ahh Sally, you always know how to brighten my day."

"Cut the crap, Sherlock. What do you want?"

I feel my expression change at her appropriate use of my first name. I don't know if I am amused or a little disappointed at the change in her.

"Ahh, the use of my first name. Am I no longer your most beloved freak?"

And then, just like that, a ripple of something stabbing cuts into my gut and I clench my teeth in pain.

"Sherlock?," Sally says rapidly, her voice tinged with alarm.

She turns to Fred Gregson, and hisses at him, "get me a chair. I think he's going to faint."

Then her arms are at my sides, holding me still. The entire Yard is staring, I am sure - and I push at her arms with my hands.

"Stop it. I'm trying to help you!," she growls at me, having none of John's sensitivity or warmth.

I growl something back to her - have no idea what, really - but am thankful when the chair is finally close, and I'm able to sink down into it.

"I don't need your help," I wheeze a couple seconds later. "Just a stomach-ache. Just a bit hard to breathe."

"Like that's normal," Anderson says amused, coming up around the bend. He's finishing what looks
like a chocolate éclair, and my stomach screams in protest at the food.

When I look back up to Sally, she's looking at me with a slight expression of disbelief.

I typically never reveal when I don't feel well.

"Stay here. I'm going to get you a painkiller and a glass of water. Though you look like you should see a doctor. You're pale as a ghost. And Anderson - don't antagonize him for once."

I dismiss her with a wave of my hand, more concerned by her relative kindness to me than anything else, and then realize that Gregson is hanging around, probably wondering if something interesting is going to occur. Evidently my reputation precedes me, even if I've never worked a single case with the man.

"I don't need anyone else gawking at me, Gregson. I'm not a lab specimen."

Sally just stares back to me, mouth a hard line as she walks away, "Yeah, it's alright Fred. I've got this. Stupid idiot always runs himself into the ground," she mutters. "And you-," she commands to me, as if I'd be one to listen to her directive in the first place. "Stay there. Don't move."

I wrap an arm around my belly, and curse John for his noon force feeding.

Sally wanders off, and I have an immediate thought to just...leave. Certainly if Lestrade sees me as I am currently, it's going to flitter back to John in some capacity. And more than that, I likely won't get the okay to talk to Toby. Not looking 'sick' as John puts it.

So after Gregson departs too, I stand up and make my way down the hallway, and out past the break room. Staggering into the stairwell, I walk to the second floor and make my way into the larger washroom and shower room. It's technically just for Scotland Yarders - not 'guests', but the others have seen me around enough to know my presence doesn't indicate an intruder.

By the time I get to the last stall in the bathroom, the yogurt is coming up on its own. I run the last few steps, as my body projects outwards cords of black, gritty stings that never seem to end.

I spit into the bowl feeling some of the pain abate with each heave and with each release of yogurt, and whatever else is coming out of me.

Finally I step back, feeling lighter and less full of acid and pain. I flush the vibrant mess away, and go to wash up; cupping my hands under the faucet, I catch the black markings streaked across my skin, and rub at my lips, realizing the taste is hot and salty. I gulp a couple swallows worth of water and rinse out my mouth by spitting back into the sink.

The water swirls away in a lurid dark burgundy red as I void the residual sick away into the sink. Then I quickly realize what I'm staring at - no doubt in my mind that something is wrong.

Because I'm bringing up blood.

At that second, a sliver of pain ripples across the interior of my stomach like a shard of glass being pulled over flesh.

I drop to my knees and continue to bring up red. Gritty red, like coffee grounds. The colour so dark as to almost look like old oil.

Abruptly, the fluorescent lights seem to explode over my head and then, rather strangely - I don't feel any pain at all.
Bleach and lines

Chapter Summary

John gets called to the A&E by Lestrade where he is forced to deal with the fall out of Sherlock's self neglect, and of something even more alarming. Sherlock confides in John about something that he finds shameful.

John's POV

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I watch Sherlock amble off, slightly crouched over. His face looks lined, almost hard. I almost want to ask him if he's okay, but I know he needs a bit of distance right now. He must feel like an overexposed nerve.

Sometimes even balm on an exposed nerve hurts like hell. And for a person like Sherlock? Who pretends to be hard and cold and insect-oid, no emotions, no padding, no heat inside? Sherlock would probably yearn to have some alone time. To decompress. More than the average person.

Resolute that I must give him his space, I go to tidy up the kitchen - washing the dishes, the cutlery. I then quickly tidy the cabinet, chucking out two boxes of crackers that Sherlock has left open and exposed to the air (they're stale now, of course), and compressing three empty boxes of tea that he's left in the cabinet. Completely empty.

It would just be like my flatmate to consume every last teabag in the package, and then to leave the package behind. This, of course, coming from a man who has a sock index. A clashing of traits, nonsensical at times.

I quickly hash out a quick list of groceries. We're out of creamer, honey, Sherlock's favourite tea. We need some sort of fruit and veg, too. Before the two of us (well, mostly Sherlock) succumbs to scurvy.

I recall Sherlock eating a banana once, and add "bananas" to the list. I jot down custard too, and rice pudding. Soft, mushy foods that are likely to sit easier on his stomach. I affix the list to the fridge with a magnet that depicts a biohazard waste symbol. An amusing trinket from Lestrade that got tossed into Sherlock's last Christmas stocking.

Finally I grab a bottle of tilex and some scrubbers and gloves and make my way to the bathroom. Heaven knows when it has last been cleaned; it likely needs a good scrubbing. The moulding is even starting to look a tad blackened. Bachelors or not, we can't let ourselves sink into utter disorder.

Flicking on the switch, I realize the light is dim. At least the fan works. Spritzing out some of the spray, I let it set against the sink and start in on the tub, frowning when I catch sight of the bottom of the steel around the drain. It looks corroded, as if someone has poured bloody acid down the damn thing. Quote unquote 'someone.'

Sighing, I do my best with it and then fill a bucket with Lysol, deciding to give the toilet and floor a scour too. I make my way around the exterior of the base when I notice flecks of something brown
and mottled on the bottom of the floor. Fine, almost misty, like a spray of brown. I frown, and scrub harder, starting to succumb to the dizziness caused by too much bleach in too little a space.

When the phone rings, I rush to it, eager to get out of the chokingly, now over-bleached bathroom.

"Hello?" I say amicably into the phone, wondering if Sherlock's finally retracted his decision and is asking me to join him.

But it's not Sherlock on the other end of the phone.

"John! Thank God you're there! Look, you have to come-"

It's Lestrade. He sounds frantic.

"Woah. Calm down, Greg. What's going on?"

I hear a rushed exhalation of breath.

"It's Sherlock. He's - I don't know - Sally says he was holding his stomach, and we had to call A&E and-"

"What?," I gasp out, "What are you talking about? What's wrong?"

"He was so pale, John. Vomiting up a storm and-"

"What?!"

I hear a muffled curse.

"There was blood, John. A lot of it. I think it was blood, anyway," and his voice drops off into a whisper. "Dark red and tarry. We called an ambulance."

I close my eyes and feel the start of tremors assail my body.

"How much blood?," I try to ask as calmly as possible.

"It looked like cups. Sally rode with him. I took my car. He was-," and I hear Lestrade's voice shake. "He looked so scared, John. He was holding onto Donovan like she was a lifeline."

I try to picture that.

I find it difficult to imagine a reality whereby Sherlock would ever willingly hold onto Donovan at all.

"Which hospital?," I get out a second later, feeling dazed.

"Charing Cross."

"I'm leaving right now. If you get to see him - tell him I'm coming right now."

Lestrade doesn't say anything and I disconnect.

I offer the cabbie a 100 £ note for expedient service, and get to the A&E in record time.
I approach the reception desk, my heart pounding against my ribcage.

The nurse looks up at me briefly, almost disinterested.

"I am inquiring about a patient. He would have been brought to this A&E recently," I get out, resisting the impulse to run my hands through my hair. "My name is Dr. Watson, and my friend-

The nurse's features soften slightly, and I hurriedly show her my ID.

"When was he brought in?," she specifies a bit more kindly. She must wonder what sort of horrible atrocity would cause a doctor to go to pieces like this.

Swallowing, I add, "last half hour, I think. By ambulance. His name is Sherlock Holmes. H-O-L-M-E-S."

The nurse types something out on the computer, her eyes quickly scanning the files, when I suddenly see Donovan rushing forward towards me.

"John!," she says rapidly, her eyes wide and heavy. I catch sight of red smudges along the forearm of her cream sweater.

Blood.

Sherlock's blood.

The blood is dark red. Almost black.

I stare at it in disbelief.

"Where is he?," I ask quickly, not trusting my voice.

"They took him down to surgery."

Donovan still looks spooked and I make my way back with her to the waiting room where she's resting.

"How was he last?," my voice comes out as a whisper.

Sally stares at her shirt, seems to notice the blood. Rolls up the sleeves.

"He was scared," she says softly, almost with a look of incomprehension. "I've never seen him look like that before. Not once in all the years I've known him. I didn't think he could get scared."

I frown at the floor and she gestures to her arms.

"He grasped at me so forcefully, I'd be surprised if I don't have bruises by tomorrow," and she lets out a sound that could almost be taken as a laugh. Almost. "He asked me not to go, John. Not to leave him. Me. He hates me."

I wrap my arms around my body, trying to keep what little heat I have left inside.

My stomach feels exposed to air. Cool and prickly and wormy with adrenaline. I could easily vomit myself.

"They had to sedate him. He didn't want to go in," she whispers to me, her eyes scalded by the memory. "He wouldn't let go of my hand. And he hates me," the woman repeats dully. "Everyone
knows he hates me, and he-

I won't dignify that comment with a direct response.

"Did he say anything else?"

She starts to shake her head, then stops, looks up at me.

"He did, actually. He asked me to get you. 'Get John.'"

I disentangle myself from the chair and walk back to the receptionist, and the nurse holds up a finger to pause my questions.

"Dr. Watson? Your friend is in-

"Surgery," I huff, fear making me biting and reactive. "I know that already."

"Yes," and the nurse, to her credit, doesn't take my tone personally. "But as soon as he is out, we will inform you."

"Do you have any more information about his condition?"

The nurse shakes her head.

"No. But we will definitely alert you if we get an update or if he's stable enough for you to visit."

I flinch at the words.

Stable enough.

I turn on my heel, and trudge out of the waiting room and into the hallway leading to the stairwell.

"John - wait!," and Donovan looks shocked at my departure, her face strung into odd positions.

"I'm not leaving," I bark. "I just need to get some tea."

The words are asinine.

What I really need is to punch something.

To hug Sherlock.

To grab my infuriating best friend and hug him and tell him not to panic.

That everything is going to be okay.

That he doesn't have to be scared.

Because I am here, and I'll fix it. Somehow.

And if I can't do that, then at least I won't let this get worse.

I round the corner, and push against the EXIT door leading into a neon yellow hallway of stairs and more stairs and a precipitous drop to the basement.

It takes all my energy not to punch the wall, and I let myself take in big, voluminous gasps of air.
When I feel slightly more composed, I wind on over to the vending machine and deposit some coinage, selecting a hot chocolate from the few options available.

Hot chocolate which ends up tasting like hot water, and nothing more.

No taste whatsoever.

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Lestrade is in the waiting room by the time I return. He looks marginally more composed than Donovan did.

Then again, Donovan actually rode with Sherlock to the A&E.

"I sent Sally back to the Yard," he says needlessly.

My head nods of its own volition. And honestly, I could care less where Sally has buggered off to at current.

"I need all the details. Right now," I hiss. My fear is making me act like a bastard, and distantly - in the back of my mind - I realize this. Realize I likely am going to piss enough people off today that I'll have to send out fruit baskets or something by the time this is all over. I realize this, but still don't care.

Lestrade's air streams out in a tide of tension. I can feel the heat from his body and wonder why in the hell the waiting room has to be kept at freezing temperatures.

"He came in. Probably to bug me about the Thiesen case. Probably to check in with that kid," he starts dismally, and I nod.

"Yes. He was worried that Toby was going to be sent home before he could determine who had attacked him."

"I wasn't there, John. So it's all just...guessing and second hand commentary from Gregson and such. Apparently Sherlock was in pain when he got to the Yard. Sally told him to wait for me. He didn't. I found him in the second floor restroom... It looked like a crime scene. At first, I didn't know what I was looking at because it wasn't red. It looked almost like oil, you know?," and Lestrade looks weary. "Like oil glistening on the pavement on a hot day. Then I realized it was all over his clothes, down the front of him. On his jumper. He...he had wedged himself under the sinks like a child. Near enough. Just sitting underneath, holding his stomach. Donovan was there, and she tried to talk to him. Asked him questions. He didn't seem to know what was going on, John - he just grabbed her hands and wouldn't let go. Wouldn't even talk."

My teeth bite into my lips. I feel something close to grief heat up under the lids of my eyes.

Neither of us had been getting much sleep lately, and the weight of the last few days is starting to wear me down.

Pressing my palms against my knees, I let out a forceful breath of air. I turn away from Greg, and bark out a sound congested with tears.

"John?," and Lestrade's voice is suddenly at my back, my neck. A pace away from my ear. Gentle and kind and nothing if not the voice of a friend.

I turn back to him, suddenly putting my head into my hands.
"Hey, hey - no, none of that, John! He's going to be okay."

I squeeze my hands against the back of my neck. I feel hot and cold, as if I have a flu.

"No," my mouth contorts in anger at the utterance. "Nothing is okay," I get out before I can stop myself.

Turning, I take in Lestrade's eyes. His kindly eyes and his face that looks over at me with hope and compassion.

And I can't take it any more.

"What's going on, John?" Lestrade mutters a couple seconds later, and that's it. That one question is enough to grab hold of me - to make me realize what I'm actually doing.

"Nothing," I breathe. "Everything," and I wipe at my eyes and try to sound more composed when I speak next. "I don't know. I'm just worried about him."

Lestrade gives me a puzzled look, contemplative and focused.

"Do you think it would help to-"

"No," I growl. "No, it wouldn't help. I can't say any more."

"John," he presses, inching his plastic chair across the hospital laminate. "What's going on?"

I press against my knees. Feeling the tension coiling in my belly.

If I feel this pressing need to lance this poison from my throat, then what is Sherlock dealing with?

"I've said way too much already," I whisper, hating myself for what I've said thus far. For what I've said in my weakness.

Greg leans forward, slightly. A show of support, I guess.

"No - you're said precisely nothing. But I know you're worried about him, and call me paranoid - but I think this is a recent sort of worry. Last bit only? Not Sherlock's-going-to-overdose-on-nicotine-patches, though. Something else, am I right?"

"Stop. Don't," I plead, my throat quickly etching in guilt for what I've almost admitted. What I have, in part, already have indicated.

"You haven't done anything wrong, John. The fact that you're acting like you have makes me think that...this is something that probably has ripped a pretty big whole in the side of him."

I swallow a cough, a cry. A pleading sort of sound tries to burrow out from under my teeth.

Because I know Sherlock needs help.

But I also know I can't expose this deep, dark demon that's sunk its claws into his frame. Not without causing him to lose the frail trust he's already placed in me.

So I don't respond.

"Look," Lestrade starts patiently, almost reserved in tone. "I've known Sherlock since he was...God...since he was 23 years old. It's insane, but true."
I look up abruptly, wanting to hold onto sliver pieces of Sherlock's life, his past, or time when he wasn't feeling how he's feeling now.

"Can you imagine him at 23? He was horrifically rude. Petulant. Brilliant - always, no question - but no social skills at all."

My smile is weak, but it's an attempt at salvaging my dignity.

"How is that any different from Sherlock at 36?"

Lestrade gives me an attempt at a grin.

"Trust me. There is a difference. He knows well enough, now. If he has to - he can manage a civil conversation. He can reign himself in. But back then? No. Not at all. In some ways, people could see...more of him, then. They could tell that something wasn't always quite right, and I think that made them less likely to take it personally, maybe? He couldn't always deal with people, noise, the pressure of all the outside world clashing against his inner one. I knew something was wrong, but he wouldn't ever tell me what was happening to him. For a time I even suspected - and this sounds crazy, maybe - but something like autism."

I stare at the DI with what, I'm sure, is the expression of a dullard.

Lestrade seems to hesitate next.

"When he was 24, he really started in on drugs. Or else it got to the point where he couldn't hide what he was doing any longer, I'm not sure. Maybe he had been on and off them for a long time, but at 24 it got bad, John."

I rub at my mouth with my fingertips. Both feel numb.

"What's 'bad'? I hear these references to times before I knew him, but I don't have any context. I don't know what any of this means."

A rush of air is expunged.

"He lost weight. A considerable amount. He was always wired - always - and after a consult one day I cornered him in the break room. Wouldn't let him leave until I got the answers I wanted. No, the answers I needed. And it wasn't just drugs. Drugs were the least of it, in some ways."

Throats shouldn't be this sore.

"What was it? I clarify, not really sure if I even want to know.

"I got him to show me his arms, and he looked defeated. Right before he did, well, that spark of indifference, that intensity - it sort of seemed to fall away like an ember going out," and he suddenly seems reluctant to carry on. "When he showed me his arms I couldn't even count all the needle marks; it had been so frequent, his usage. He'd hidden tracks with his watch. Bruising all the way through his veins, tracing the pathway of blood lines. His arms were a right mess too - pocked and scarred by the jabs. I just remember thinking, "how can you not be dead yet?" He was emaciated, and yet he somehow kept going. Kept his body going. But I knew we were gearing for a crash."

I listen soundlessly, almost too scared to comment, but equally wanting Lestrade to be done with his admissions.

"And it wasn't the only bad time for him, John. I have never really known a person to be so badly
addicted to any such substance and still - in some manner of speaking - be able to retain their ability to work, to think and focus - all simultaneously. His mind kept working on problems and cases, even as his body started to collapse in on itself."

The nod is automatic; I can't help but relate, and perhaps - just a little - be soothed by Lestrade's assurance. His relay of the fact that Sherlock has been in worse positions before yet managed - somehow - to make it through.

"Of course, I couldn't keep him on during that time. Not even in a consultant capacity, not doing what he was doing."

I lean back against the hard, red plastic of the hospital chairs. The curvature of raw cut plastic digs into my back, but the pressure is grounding.

"How did you get him to stop?," I ask carefully. Needing to know.

Needing to be able to help him, if this is what is happening again.

Lestrade stares at me with a frown.

"Is he using again, John?"

I zip up my coat. Give a fast shake of my head.

"No. No, not drugs. I don't think drugs. I don't think that," I breathe, my words almost a mantra.

"Well - something is very wrong with him. He's always been thin, sure - but this last month? The weight has fallen off him."

I stare at the piebald pattern of the tiles - brown and gold and green, organic and soothing - and agree with that assessment.

My lips, however, never move.

Even without meaning to say anything, I've said way too much.

The front desk nurse walks over to where we sit, raising her hand in a slight wave.

"Dr. Watson?," and she tries to interrupt without interrupting.

I nod, and Lestrade rises as if ready to go into battle.

"I was able to get more details on your friend. His file actually lists you as his emergency contact."

I suddenly feel dizzy. Me? Sherlock's emergency contact?

"No, I think that's his brother," I say uneasily. Knowing that - at one point, for sure - Mycroft was Sherlock's primary contact. Not knowing if I like that the fact that this has changed. Especially when I consider that I know so little about Sherlock's past. Not as much as Lestrade, and certainly not as much as Mycroft Holmes.

"Well, you're the primary contact now, and his appointed proxy. At any rate Dr. Watson, he's still in surgery."

I breathe out heavily. From what Greg had described - the vast amount of blood, Sherlock clutching at his stomach in pain - I had suspected as much. The details sounding like some sort of rupture.
"How's that going?," and damn it - my voice comes out as timid. Almost scared.

"I'm sorry; I have very little additional information. But when we get an update, I will alert you. And one of the surgeon's may speak to you once they are finished."

I nod, and Lestrade's mouth purses into a frown as the nurse walks away.

"I have to get back to the Yard. I'm sorry, John," and his eyes are apologetic. "Will you please call me, as soon as you hear anything more? Soon as he's out?"

My head nods automatically. My whole body is on automatic pilot.

When Lestrade walks away, I retrieve my cell phone from my jacket pocket and call in to the surgery.

"Hi, Sarah," I say quickly, my voice trembling, "I'm not going to be able to come in for a few days..."

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Mrs. Hudson comes by later, with a bouquet of wildflowers. The two of us are sitting in oversized chairs near a canteen on the second floor.

"He's probably going to...," and I trial off, not even certain what I was about to say, so I look at the flowers sadly, my fingertips touching one glossy petal with care. "These are beautiful. Thank you."

Mrs. Hudson is watching me with what Sherlock would call her 'clueless' manner. Which is actually not clueless at all. Quite the opposite, really.

"He's going to be okay, John. We'll figure out what's going on with him."

I pull my fingertips away from the vase. The oil on my hands is not going to help the flowers at all.

"I know enough of what's going on with him," I whisper, my chest heavy with overwhelm, "and I still don't know how to help him."

Mrs. Hudson frowns at me, at my tone.

"Well, he's in clinic now. If something is beyond you, there are others that can help," and I feel light pressure at my hand, then warmth. She gives my fingers a light squeeze. "It'll be okay, in the end. It will be, John."

My hand goes to grab at a now-cold cup of chicken noodle soup. The pasta has gone a neon yellow, absorbing the dye from the broth. The noodles feel limp in my mouth, but I swallow them down hurriedly, knowing that once Sherlock is out of surgery I may not get another break for some time.

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It's almost three hours from the time when I first arrived at the clinic when I get back to the waiting room. Mrs. Hudson gives me a light kiss on the cheek, and tells me she'll back later.

"You're leaving?," I ask in confusion.

"Only for a bit, love. Sherlock won't like too many people around all at once. You know how he is."

But he's sick now. He's sick or he's injured, and he's definitely hurting.
People that care about him should be around right now.

Mrs. Hudson indicates to a doctor waiting off to the side, apparently waiting to speak to me.

"Go find out what's happened."

My heart is fluttering away quickly beneath my ribcage.

"Can you please stay?," and the words come out in a broken laugh, because I'm so tired of what's been happening lately. Sherlock - revealing more and more, exposing more and more of himself - even without meaning to - and the layers are like layers of something fetid. Something that has started to rot. And my biggest concern is that I'm going to get to see all the way down to the core, and there won't be anything I can work with. Nothing I can salvage for him.

"Dr. Watson?," and the physician extends a hand. "My name is Dr. Marcus Riley. I was one of Sherlock's surgeons, and-

"It's all complete?," I ask nervously. "How is he doing?"

Normally I don't rush at doctors like this. As a doctor I know how difficult it can be to speak to family and friends about sick loved ones. Interruptions make it even worse.

"Let's go into one of the meeting rooms, can we?"

And I like this doctor instinctively. His hazel eyes are kindly. He's slightly older than I am if I had to guess, and he has a compassionate tone. Not short or brusque like so many who work in the A&E.

I follow him soundlessly into one of the meeting rooms, and he closes the door behind us, while I lower myself into a horridly uncomfortable black plastic chair. It's starting to become something of a theme.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions, a lot of concerns, so I'll start with letting you know that Sherlock's surgery went as well as could be expected."

My hands are sweating, and I rub them against my jeans. Again, "Sherlock" - a first name address. A way of showing familiarity and warmth? Some doctors try to reach out to family members by softening blows and hard things to hear with kinder references. I wonder if that's what is happening now.

"That sounds ominous. That doesn't sound good," I say uneasily, hating the fact that my voice is wavering.

"Your-," and the doctor bites his lip, having no idea our relationship to one another, and obviously not wanting to overstep any boundaries or inadvertently insult me by insinuating that we are partners. "Sherlock-"

"We're flat mates, and best friends," I say cleanly, but my hands are still rubbing against my jeans, and I know I must look like an anxious lover and not, in fact, a best mate.

And then another deeper, fuller thought inserts itself into the barely conscious portion of my mind.

That Sherlock is a loved one. We may not be lovers, but that doesn't mean that he's not loved with the same intensity and focus that I've had for any of my sexual partners. In fact, if I were being completely honest to myself, I would have to admit that none of my sexual partners came close to inspiring the same feelings of protectiveness and affection as Sherlock generates within me.
"Sherlock is currently sedated. He won't likely wake for several hours. But he's stable."

Stable? Of course he should be bloody stable. He was completely fine when he left the flat this morning. He ate his yoghurt, he had gotten a shower, he looked a tad pale - but he was walking around and grousing and talking.

He was more than stable.

My mouth dries out at the words.

"Why shouldn't he be? What happened?"

Dr. Riley looks at me, almost softly.

I hate it.

"Your friend has likely been very sick for a very long time."

I cross my hands over my chest, as if to keep the words out.

"You are listed as his medical proxy, and for that reason I will explain the basics of what is occurring with Sherlock, but the situation is also much more complicated than what I can divulge to you right now."

"What does that mean?"

Dr. Riley rests his hands across the table.

He doesn't seem nervous at all.

"When Sherlock arrived at the A&E he was lucid, but very frightened. I was one of the initial doctors ascribed to him, and later assisted with his operation. At initial intake he presented with a rapid heart rate, low pulse. So low that I was surprised he was still conscious. He had arrived with a woman, a detective, I believe."


Dr. Riley sighs, "The female detective actually did a great job of keeping him calm. But it was difficult to examine him. He was extremely hostile when we tried to determine the source of the bleeding - and as he presented with massive bleeding, which I was fairly confident was from an internal bleed, we needed to work quickly."

"Some sort of rupture?," I guess, my voice sounding stupid to my own ears.

Dr. Riley nods.

"We had to sedate him, as he would not let us assist him. He became almost violent when we tried to remove his shirt. I needed to palpate his abdomen, and he was causing - potentially - more harm to himself. But we were able to determine after mild sedation that he was bleeding internally and we prepped an OR at that time."

"Mild sedation?"

"Initially," Dr. Riley admits. "During the examination. We thought it best to try to work with him, provided he could answer any questions about his condition, but he was too worked up to avoid sedation altogether. Unfortunately, he was not in a state to tell us much. Once we had later fully
sedated him, we were able to complete an endoscopy and see the source of the bleeding."

"Perforated stomach ulcer?," I guess, suddenly feeling haunted. Sherlock always complained about not being hungry. How much of that assertion was caused by poor health, and how much of his poor health was caused by his negligent habits and refusal to eat normally?

"Exactly. Unfortunately the site of bleeding was too profuse to stem via the avenue of the endoscopy, and so we determined that he'd need surgery to stop the bleed. Another concern that I had during this time was the presentation of necrotic tissue. Not simply a rupture due to ulceration, but tissue that would need to be excised in addition to stopping the primary bleed. That was actually the reason for the length of the surgery."

I suddenly feel like I've had the wind knocked out of me.

"That sounds...that sounds advanced."

Dr. Riley's face suddenly looks hard.

"Your friend has been sick for a long time, John. There is no way he felt okay for the last while. Not for a long time, now. Not with necrosis setting in. That alone could have killed him. In some ways, the perforation was the sign that we needed to address his problems. I don't mean to sound harsh, but if he continued on as he had been, the necrosis itself could have taken him."

I try to formulate a response. Anything in defense of my completely irresponsible flatmate.

Realize I have nothing.

"He's not always the best at taking care of himself," I agree, feeling some lap of dread lick at the sides of my chest. "He's so bright, in so many ways - but not when it comes to himself."

I realize I'm babbling. To a man that doesn't even know Sherlock.

"We were forced to perform a partial gastrectomy," Dr. Riley says resignedly. "So he'll have to stay here a few days."

I nod dully.

"Can I see him now?"

The doctor blinks and seems hesitant to continue.

"That may not be possible today."

I suddenly rise from the table, the tension of the last few days culminating into something without patience and concern for my actions.

"Why not?," and the dread uncoils a little further in my belly. Like a living, breathing, biting snake.

"Because he will require a psychiatric evaluation first."

I step back, alarmed.

"What? Why?!"

"I am limited by privacy laws in terms of-"
"Don't give me that! I'm Sherlock's medical proxy, and if he's to undergo examinations that could further impede his recovery—"

"I assure you, Dr. Watson - we won't be doing anything that could impede his recovery."

I feel like pacing, so I do.

"You don't understand. He's gone through hell, recently. He's not going to cooperate with any of your psychiatrists."

"That may be the case, yet."

"Please," and my voice drops to a low hum, "he's my best friend. I know him better than just about anyone. He'll never admit to it, but I know he's going to be scared. Please let me do what I can."

The doctor eyes me cautiously, his mouth turning into a frown.

"I can't promise. But if you think you can help him, I might be able to get you temporary access once he awakens."

"Thank you."

Dr. Riley is still not done, however.

"And the evaluation still needs to occur. He won't be able to go home right away."

I grimace at how that sounds.

Because in some ways it sounds far more serious than a ruptured ulcer.

"I understand."

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I'm led into a small room, starched white. Everything here is the colour of snow in bright sunlight. Sherlock is resting, eyes drugged into false sleep. Long lashes have fallen against milk white skin, and blue-purple markings outline his eyes. Eyes, that I realize sadly - are far more sunken than I had previously realized. Corpse-sunken. He's wearing oversized pajamas. Hospital pajamas, with blue snowflakes. His arms are bare, and I run my hand along his left forearm. He feels cold, and so I reaffix his blankets up over his torso. Up to his neck. Trying to give him some slight protection from the blankets; as if I can help him emotionally cope with the intrusion into his space by creating a physical barrier between him and the air. Him and the doctors.

"Oh, Sherlock," I whisper, tiredly. "What mess have you gotten yourself into this time?"

I stroke his hair, lightly. His curls are damp, as if he's sweated profusely, and I pat the errant locks away from his eyes feeling a surging and protective tenderness unfurl in my center. His hair is abnormally soft, like a child's.

"It's going to be alright," I speak softly to my friend. "You don't need to be scared. I'm going to do my best to stay with you. You'll get through this."

The fact that I can never be this open with him when he's awake isn't lost on me. Even so, I hope that some small part of him is hearing me right now. Hearing my words and stashing them away for such time when I can't be with him.
I drag a chair across the laminate floor and take a seat next to Sherlock's bed.

"All you have to do right now is rest. Rest, be still, give yourself a bit of a break. Because you've been pushing yourself for far too long, haven't you, Sherlock?"

His chest rises and falls slowly, regularly. I realize the consistent breaths are soothing to me.

"And in the next little while, you might have to talk to some people. I won't always be able to stay with you, but I'll still be in the hospital. I'll still be close by, and soon as I'm able, I'll take you home. So you just have to be honest and talk to the doctors. I want you to try, Sherlock. To really try to be honest, okay? Not to lie about anything. Because they just want to help you. Please trust me on that."

My hand finds his yet again, and I stroked the skin lightly.

I watch him for what seems like hours until I feel my eyes start to shut.

Just as I am about to nod off, I see the fluttering of lashes and the swallow of his throat.

"Sherlock?," I ask earnestly, now sitting fully upright.

His eyes continue to flutter, and for a second I am reminded of a man caught in the midst of a seizure.

"Sherlock, it's okay. It's me, John. You're in hospital."

Sherlock slowly opens his eyes more fully; I can see that one of his eyes is almost fully occluded with red. I push away considering what that means, and grab for his hand once more.

"It's okay. I'm going to go get your doctor; just hold on-"

"No. Don't go!," he rasps, looking far more fearful than I would have suspected.

"Okay," I say calmly, "Okay. I'm not going. I'm staying right here."

He tries to sit up and let's out a cry of pain. I rush to his side.

"No, don't get up. You just had surgery on your stomach. Your belly probably feels terribly sore right now."

He blinks and lets his head rest back down against the hospital pillow.

"Sur-gree?," he gets out, his words somewhat slurred.

"Perforated ulcer," I say grimly, "You collapsed at the Yard. They called the ambulance."

"Yo-grt made me s'ck," he grimaces. "T'ld you not hn'gry."

"No," I huff, "the yogurt didn't make you sick. You ignored a bleeding ulcer, Sherlock. For god knows how long. One of your doctors told me that part of your stomach was necrotic. That doesn't happen overnight, and that doesn't go unnoticed."

I don't see any point in lying to him about that right now.

His eyes drop back down to the bed covers. To the blanket. He starts to fiddle with the fringe on the blanket with his right hand.
"Always makes me sick," he admits.

"I know," I frown, suddenly feeling like crying. "But you shouldn't have ignored the symptoms."

"I didn't know it was anything more. I thought it was just me."

"Sherlock," I breathe out, off put by his words. By the tone, by his self-derision.

"Thought it was just in my head," he says quietly. "I didn't want anything in my stomach. Not ever."

I close my eyes, press my hands against my thighs and take a deep breath.

"It's understandable. The ulcer would have made you nauseous, and-"

"I don't like anything inside me," he whispers, "at all."

I ignore what he's really trying to say with that admission.

"There must have been pain, though. Physical pain. Why didn't you tell me it hurt to eat?"

He looks confused.

"It didn't hurt to eat. Not that much."

I let out an exhale. It's loud in the quiet of the small room.

Sherlock flinches.

"I'm not mad, Sherlock. God, no. Not at you. But I'm scared because you have been pretty sick for awhile now, and you're telling me you had no idea that anything was wrong?"

He pokes at the blanket again, his eyes trained on anything but me.

"You don't need to be scared," he gripes, his cheeks flushing red with embarrassment.

"Look, Sherlock-," but I'm suddenly interrupted by a knock on the door.

A young woman of about 25 enters the room.

"Hi there, Mr. Holmes. Doctor Watson," and she gives us both a tentative smile, "I'm going to inform your doctors that you're awake, Mr. Holmes. How are you feeling?"

Sherlock glances over at me quickly, then back at the bed sheet.

"Like someone has run over my innards with a lawnmower."

The nurse gives a sympathetic grimace, yet seems to be holding back a half smile at the admittance.

"That's descriptive," she says brightly. "How's the pain? On a scale from 1 to 10?"

"Aside from informing you that I feel like I've been gutted by a lawn instrument?"

"Sherlock," I hiss. "Answer the question."

"It's okay," he relents, "hurts when I move, obviously. I'll give it a 4, on your arbitrary scale of 1 to 10. Doesn't hurt too much if I stay still. Again - obvious."
The nurse nods, jots down his responses.

"I'm thirsty," he says suddenly - imperiously - and out of the blue. "I'd like some orange juice. No pulp. And no ice. A straw."

"For god's sake, Sherlock - she's not a waitress!"

The woman gives me a smile.

"I'll see what I can do. Give me a few minutes; I just need to let Dr. Riley know that you're up and about."

"Not 'about'," Sherlock grousers as the door shuts and I glare at him. "She's not listening at all, John. These health care 'professionals' are even more useless than Scotland Yarders, and that is a terribly depressing thought."

I roll my eyes at his nerve.

"What?," he asks, seemingly affronted.

"Play nice," I command. "You are in clinic for ignoring some very serious symptoms. Some people could argue that you brought this on yourself," I add tersely.


He then lets out a sigh, and a moment later the door opens yet again.

"Sherlock," and it's Dr. Riley that smiles this time. It looks authentic, simply because he's never spoken to Sherlock while the man's been awake. "How are you feeling?"

"Bored. And I'm sick of tedious questions," Sherlock says quickly, licking at his lips.

I realize, abruptly - almost revelatory - that he's nervous.

Extremely nervous.

"Aside from sick of questions, how are you feeling?," the doctor clarifies. "Physically, emotionally?"

Sherlock's hands clench and unclench.

"Can I go home soon?," he asks anxiously, and the doctor looks over at me - as if I'm the cause of my friend's aberrant behaviour.

"Well, we'd like to keep you in clinic for a few days to see how your incisions heal. We just want to make sure you're getting on okay."

"Why?," Sherlock asks, bristling suddenly, "John's a doctor. He can do that. He can monitor my progress."

Dr. Riley takes a neighbouring chair, sits down about a foot away from me and several feet more away from Sherlock's bed, obviously giving my friend some distance.

"There was an excessive amount of bleeding. You're likely to be feeling very sick for quite awhile. We don't want to put all that on John now, do we?"

Sherlock doesn't say anything. Not for nearly half a minute.
"What else?," he grits out, his whole body suddenly tensing. "What else aren't you telling me?"

I close my eyes waiting for all hell to break loose.

"We want you to speak to someone," Dr. Riley admits softly.

Sherlock swallows heavily. I can hear the sound, rough and raw, in the quietude of the space.

"'Someone' is very vague," he says in irritation. "I'm speaking to you right now. Tell me what you mean, or don't talk to me at all. I don't like to have my time wasted."

"We want you to speak to one of our liaison psychiatrists," Dr. Riley says evenly, not seemingly put off by Sherlock's rudeness.

Sherlock tries to sit up higher in his bed, most likely to feel less vulnerable, and lets out a cry of pain with the motion.

"Sherlock, stop it! You'll rip out your stitches!" I scold him.

He is not listening, however. His eyes are weighted and he's pushed back against the bed frame, as if wishing to be anywhere but here.

"I don't need to speak to anyone else," he gets out, his words racing together, "there's nothing wrong with me!"

Dr. Riley glances over at me suddenly, as if finding my presence distracting.

"Sherlock, maybe you'd like to talk about this alone? Maybe without John-"

"I want John to stay," he says quickly, his whole face projecting more fear than any sense of command he likely wishes to give off.

"Okay," Dr. Riley says soothingly. "Okay, that's your call. I just thought you might want a bit of privacy, but if you wish for John to be present, we can work with that. If that's okay with John."

Sherlock looks over to me, suddenly seeming far more exhausted than when he first woke up. I don't blame him.

I feel exhausted myself.

"We don't have to 'work with' anything," he says in exasperation. "I understand that I pushed myself too far. I understand I made myself sick, perhaps, by ignoring pain. I don't see why I have to talk to some sort of shrink when I understand all of that."

Dr. Riley glances over to me, his eyes serious and firm.

"You're staying?," the doctor asks me gruffly.

"Sherlock's asked me to stay, so I'll stay," I say reasonably, noticing that my words seem to marginally calm down my friend. For that reason alone, I will stay.

"Okay. Very well then," Dr. Riley breathes out in frustration, "Sherlock, we want you to talk to our mental health team because we are concerned that you've been hurting yourself deliberately."

The words are so clean cut - no euphemisms, no hints veiled as truth - as to make me wince.
Sherlock's face contorts into one of anger a few seconds later.

"I haven't been hurting myself!," he says aggressively, not sparing me a look. "Don't be insane."

Dr. Riley doesn't even hesitate when he speaks next.

"We found evidence of self harm on your body when we got you prepped for surgery. Concentrated mostly on your upper thighs. Some wounding on your genitalia too, which is an exceedingly dangerous place to cut."

I look over at Sherlock quickly, something in my throat stopping up.

"Those are old," Sherlock breathes, the sound rattling and drained and not meeting anyone's line of sight. "Old marks. Just leave it alone. I've already had to deal with those. I've already been through 'therapy'," and the words come out like a curse, angry and heated and painful.

Dr. Riley is looking at Sherlock with nothing if not sympathy.

"But not all of those cuts were old Sherlock, were they? We found quite a few recent cuts. No more than a few days old, by my estimate."

My head whips up in alarm.

"Sherlock?," I question, moving my chair closer to his bed.

Sherlock is staring rigidly at the bedspread.

"I'm not hurting myself. Certainly not there," he says with an embarrassed half-smile, as if the thought is ridiculous. "Don't be asinine."

The doctor is quiet, as I try to appeal to basic common sense. Of course, whether or not Sherlock has ever had any basic common sense is debatable.

"Have you been cutting yourself? Cutting yourself anywhere? Tell me that much, and don't lie to me!"

Sherlock glowers off in the distance, then closes his eyes.

"Sherlock, answer me!"

"John, stop it," he begs suddenly, balling his hands into fists and smacking at his lap in frustration.

"I'm not fooling around, Sherlock. Not about this. Tell me the truth. Right now. Is what Dr. Riley saying true?"

Sherlock starts to turn away from me.

Which is an answer all on its own.

"Jesus, Sherlock!," I reach out for him, and his pushes at me with his hands.

"It's none of your business!," he screams at me, and the rapid change in volume and demeanor has me scrambling back in shock. "It's nobody's fucking business! It's my body! I get to do with it as I please!"

"No you don't!," I hiss, just as angry now. "You don't get to hurt yourself like this and expect people
who care about you to stand around and do nothing! Friendship doesn't work that way!"

"It's my life!," Sherlock screams, his voice sounding raw. "It's nobody's right to interfere! Not yours and certainly not yours," and he turns to Dr. Riley with a snarl. "You don't even know me, and you are certainly not my friend!"

He suddenly turns away from the both of us, curling up into a small ball, giving a barely repressed cry of pain at the movement.

"Can you please give us a few minutes?," I ask Dr. Riley without turning around. "Please?"

The doctor doesn't respond, merely walks away quietly and shuts the door behind him.

I hesitate by the bed and then walk around the other side, crouching low by the frame. Sherlock's contorted himself into an almost fetal position. His eyes are crushed in upon themselves, as if willing to block out the light, the noise, the reality of the hospital.

My hand drops down to Sherlock's skull, and I stroke at his temples in a circular motion. He flinches, but doesn't turn away.

"It's okay," I whisper, "It's going to be okay."

He presses his face into his pillow and lets out a quickly concealed sob.

"How long has this been going on?," I ask gently.

"I don't want to talk about it," and his voice is shuddery and sore. Barely exposed. "Not with you or anyone."

"It might help," I say encouragingly.

"It's mortifying," he gasps against his pillow and I frown. "It's wrong, and no one else understands and I know that. But sometimes it helps a bit."

"Helps?"

Without realizing it, Sherlock is - indeed - talking.

"Makes it less...something," and his hands clench in frustration at not knowing how to describe his emotions. "Be less tight inside, maybe."

"Tight?"

"My chest gets tight. Like I can't breathe. And sometimes it makes it less tight."

"Cutting," I clarify.

"Yes, of course!," he wheezes, then grows quiet again. "Yes. That."

"Why does it help, Sherlock?"

"I don't know! I have no idea!," and his eyes now are wild, if not scared. Almost as if he's scared of his own emotions. "I don't want to talk about this!"

"Okay, you don't have to tell me any more," I relent, my hand trailing to the nape of his neck. Eventually he starts to calm under the rhythmic motion of my hand. "You've done really well,
Sherlock."

His hand jumps out for mine; his fingers play with my fingers. I'm suddenly reminded of a child. He taps at my thumb with his pointer finger as if trying to get my attention without meeting my eyes.

"I'll stop, John," he whispers, "I promise I will. Isn't that enough?"

My chest feels heavy.

"I don't make that determination."

Sherlock closes his eyes again.

His cheeks are fuchsia with shame.
Sherlock is questioned about his injuries and relies on his standard contemptuousness to keep others at bay.

Sherlock POV for this chapter.

A/N: in the series, I feel that Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock looks healthy. He's thin, yes, but svelte. I just thought I would mention that, lest I get comments informing me that TV-Sherlock looks fine (he does). Also, odd patterns of behaviour don't translate to eating disorder, and I would never argue that. In this story, Sherlock is developing a pattern of disordered eating. Perhaps not full blown anorexia, but something decidedly unhealthy. That aspect will come up more in the following chapters, but is slowly being introduced now.

As always, feedback is extremely appreciated! It's hard to imagine how Sherlock would respond in such a situation and my primary concern since the beginning has been keeping his character well, in character. Watson is easier for me to write, because his nature is extremely protective and he is concerned with helping people, yet I can't imagine him babying anyone. Sherlock is trickier.

I hear, rather than see John depart; my body releases a pent up breath with relish as I turn in against the wall, my mind frantically racing.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

I can be impulsive at the best of times. I know this. But what I've done lately is beyond my ordinary display of impulsivity. I have screwed up on such a mammoth scale as to put Mycroft's blundering oversights - his very worst ones - to shame. And that, sad as it may be, is what really burns me.

Because I was more or less home free. Running myself ragged would be something potentially 'problematic' - but it wouldn't necessarily indicate disorder. A firm talking to, some meaningless promises, and I would have been out of here with relative ease.

However, now in my rare display of idiocy I've really shot myself in the foot. Because who in their right mind cuts up their legs? Or anywhere else? That, to be sure, wasn't something I did more than once. It was truly a muscle memory response. My hand grasping the straight razor I kept in the bathroom, and bringing it down against my thigh - almost something non-present in my actions. An anger at how I had been acting around John in general, my vast departure from my normal emotional façade disrupted - and then a lulling calmness in the welling up of blood as it started to peel against my leg and run in rivulets down the side of my skin.

And then without thinking, I just continued on because I truly felt calmer. And if I'm honest with myself now, I might admit that there may have been a note of dissociation in the action. A placid acceptance of the redness, and the memory in my mind then - of being 13, and smashing the bathroom mirror with my hand, then slicing the same parts.
There was something grounding about recalling the events that seem so nebulous, with renewed colour. The original memory, of course, is generally hazy - which is a fact that generates alarming anxiety for me. Any time before when I had fashioned my mind palace feels somewhat unreal, and I've always been afraid of that very thing: feeling unreal. And those memories? Those precise memories?

They've been yellowed and dulled by time. But the marks were obviously still there, the scars - and the cell memory of release? Of recalling how much better I had felt as a kid after I had done what I had done? Because I know that I had felt better. More composed. (Mycroft can argue all he wants that taking half a bottle of anti-anxiety medication would have mellowed anyone out, but I know better. I know that I had started to feel better after that first perverse rush of endorphins, that first shrill display that I could do the one thing to myself that no one else could possibly expect. That I had some modicum of control, even if the action of control was somewhat disturbing).

I know that it was something that would make my heart slow down, and destroy my keening need to cry, and that's all that really mattered to me then. And all that really matters to me now, if I'm being honest.

And so while John spoke over his concerns about me with Mrs. Hudson, I engaged in the most pointless action indicating - if anything - that his concerns were nothing if not valid. That was the irony: that he had given me a moment alone to compose myself, and I had spent said moment doing one of the few things he probably would feel he'd need to protect me from - and of course he had no idea what his departure was allowing me to do.

When the moment passed, and my pulse surged forward into my skull - I felt sick with the simultaneous bodily sensation of calmness and the frightening realization that what I had just done to myself was more than just a little bit 'not good.'

It was beyond anything mildly not good on such a grand scale, that I was almost afraid of myself as I quickly wrapped my leg up with gauze and Polysporn and changed into fresh undergarments.

And vowed never to do it again.

And I didn't.

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It was a one time deal, and the sense of shame that followed truly eclipsed and overpowered the momentary calm. The momentary benefit. Because I knew what would happen if John ever came to learn about what I had done.

Of course, my biggest, most idiotic moment in the last 23 years...and it had to be discovered following an unprecedented gastric attack landing me in the A&E?

I close my eyes, and for the tenth time since hearing that doctor's condemning words, I silently wish for a get-out-of-jail-free card. A way to bypass the impending invasion into my personal life.

A way to assure whomever is sent to examine me that my actions were plainly stupid, rather than overtly sick.

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Right on cue, a sharp knock reverberates against the door frame and I cringe with the knowledge of what is to come.
I don't bother responding. The less I give a psychiatrist, the better. Provided I'm not completely mute - I can get through this. I just need to play up the fact that my actions were a departure from normal and in no way representative of how I typically handle stress. Just a stupid, crazily impulsive moment. And anger played a role, too. Perhaps I can use that.

Full repentance, and can I act contrite? I'm sure I can; I haven't honed my acting skills so I can be shuffled off to some sort of mental ward at the most inopportune time. The entire idea is ludicrous.

"Sherlock Holmes?" a man asks. He isn't portly, but he isn't thin either. Maybe 5'10, or a tad taller, with an age edging towards 50 or so. Dark blue eyes, horned rimmed glasses (oh, the cliché). Hair several shades lighter than John's. In no other way does he resemble John however; his face isn't engaging in the same way that John's is and he seems brisk, but not cold.

To the point, if perhaps a shade or two blunt.

Which really must be an improvement on how I seem to most people; it would be grossly unfair of me to complain about someone else being blunt when most consider my blunter moments an improvement on how I normally act.

But this - to be clear - is obviously the shrink.

I clear my throat, then nod my head.

Even more obvious is the fact that I am the man he's looking for; my room is a single.

A screeching of metal against laminate is heard as the doctor pulls a chair against the floor, bringing it about three feet away from my bed. I try to sit up so I don't look as pathetically vulnerable, my self-hatred rearing its mental attack as I quickly itemize the best responses, the best avenues of answering the standardized questions relating to depression, maybe suicidal ideation, and of course self care (or lack thereof).

"I'm Yuri," the doctor says, waving a hand in a motion of self reference. "I'll be conducting what should be a relatively short mental health assessment, and then I'll let you get back to resting. I'm sure you need to rest."

I stare at him with a feigned composure.

Because - while in most day to day interactions very few authority figures could ever generate a sense of anxiety for me, if there is one group of individuals who come close - it would be psychiatrists. Probably some ugly holdover from my early adolescence and Mycroft's enforced therapy sessions.

Which ironically enough did more harm than good, I think.

"Yuri-what? What's your last name?" I know I sound rude, but I don't really care.

The newcomer stares back at me with an equal sense of control.

"Yuri Pascal. Good?"

I study his features, take in his eyes, the cleft of his chin, his frame size.

"Russian or French? Or both?"

The man sighs softly, but it's faint - and likely not planned or pointed in intention.
"Russian born, French adopted."

I give him a cold once over.

"Oh, I see. Orphan child forever trying to fix himself by fixing others," and I let out a hum, feeling marginally more relaxed, "that bodes... if not well, exactly, then at least more favourably than the alternative."

Yuri, to his credit, doesn't flinch or in any way seem off put by my words.

"How does that bode well for you?," he says a few seconds later, placing his papers on my bed side table.

I give what I hope appears to look like an indifferent shrug.

Nothing in my body really feels indifferent right now.

"I'd rather deal with a man who sought out the profession of your choice as a result of intimate familiarity with emotional problems, rather than have to deal with a power hungry megalomaniac with a God complex, as would be the case for most psychiatrists."

Yuri gives me a slight grin, which I hadn't been expecting. Then the grin slowly fades away, indicating that it was more or less an automatic response and not something he had intended to reveal.

When he responds his words are not frosty, but they are stern.

"All done?," he says in a clipped manner, and I pull back at his phrasing. "Or would you rather extend the length of this afternoon visit derailing the conversation by asking me questions about my personal life?"

And just like that, my nervousness begins to dissipate. Because if the mental health professional assigned to my so-called 'case' seems so raring to leave, then I likely have very little to worry about. If I play my cards right, maybe acquiesce on certain points - I should be okay.

My biggest obstacles going forward have thus changed; I need to keep Mycroft out of my business - and since the idiocy of my actions will undoubtedly be revealed to him soon enough - then I have to do some serious damage control. Mycroft, of course, dislikes discussing 'mental health issues' almost as much as I do myself, so hopefully that task will be easy enough to pull off.

It is John that (without a doubt) is going to be my biggest challenge.

But John is also very trusting, and also very willing to forgive. And despite his history of involvement in the army, and his job dealing with sick and diseased people - he always seems to want to lean towards thinking that all ends can be optimistic ends. Something I've at times envied in him. His ability to have some sort of hope that things will turn out okay, regardless of what came before.

"Proceed whenever," I mutter, reaffixing my blanket over my belly and pulling it halfway up my torso.

Yuri passes some forms over to me.

"These are the basics forms I've filled out based on the recordings of your primary doctors since your admittance earlier today. If you can read over everything - make sure it's accurate - that would be a
huge help."

I stare at the man in slight disbelief.

"You want me to change my own psych eval notes?" I ask dumbly.

"Not change, as such," Yuri clarifies, "I just need to know if you agree with what's been written. If you disagree on a point, let me know and I'll add the relevant extras to your file."

"You are asking me to let you know if the surgeons or admitting physicians...what? Lied about me?"

Yuri sits back against his chair. I can hear his underlying accent now. Slight Parisian. Barely noticeable, but it comes out once in awhile when he pronounces certain words.

"They will have done a fast intake, to be sure. Your stomach was ulcerated, correct? I don't think the primary concern then was a deeper analysis of your wounds. So your involvement here would be appreciated."

I startle at that; I've had very few people in my life speak to me so formally. And never a shrink with even a modicum of respect.

"Ok," I mutter, picking up the forms and scanning the intake notes warily. Almost feeling as if they could bite me.

Or cause me harm.

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Intake details:

Holmes, Sherlock Sherrinford

Date of Admission: 10/12/12

Address: 221 B Baker St., London NW1 6XE, United Kingdom

Telephone: 44 20 7224 3688

DOB: 01/06/1976

Sex: Male

Primary GP contact: Dr. John H. Watson, 44 20 7224 3705

NHS: 943-476-5919

Blood type: B

RH factor: negative

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I look up and give what I'm sure is a bored and pointed look.

"Everything seems to be in order," I grouse.

"Keep reading, please."
Clinical Details.

Presenting Details:

Patient is a 36 year old male who presented with severe stomach pain, low bp (75/40) and considerable bleeding from the mouth. Blood appeared dark in colour, and given patient's symptoms, indicated potential gastric rupture or ulcer perforation.

Patient was highly agitated and would not let admitting physician (Dr. Bryony Evans) perform palpation of abdominal area. Sedation was low dose haloperidol administered to calm patient. Low dose haloperidol allowed for functional cursory examination. Patient was examined by Dr. Evans and Dr. Marcus Riley. Endoscopy revealed gastric perforation due to ulceration and necrosis at lower quadrant juncture/ duodenum. Patient was prepped for surgery. Surgery was extended (2+ hour length) with necessitating partial gastrectomy due to presentation of necrotic tissue. Bleed was successfully stopped. Patient was administered fluid drip IV to restore electrolyte and hydration level for a time frame of approx. 1.5 hours. Patient was moved to private room post surgery.

Principle diagnosis:

Duodenal and peptic ulcer presents with ulcer perforation; high risk related necrosis of duodenal tissue located

Other conditions present:

Borderline emaciation. Bruising of the spine. Inflammation of gums and throat. Moderate dehydration. Electrolyte disturbance following post-surgery blood draw. Low weight in conjunction with ulcer perforation and electrolyte disturbance could indicate eating disturbance. Recent wounding along right thigh and penile tissue consistent with self-harm. Wounding superficial and partially healed, suggesting several days healing prior to admittance. Previous scarring of these regions evidence of long term/previous SI.

Follow up recommendations:

Recommend psych eval for risk assessment of parasuicidal ideation; suicidal ideation; mood disturbances. Recommend eating disorder assessment/ SCOFF questionnaire. Recommend complete physical examination and BMI analysis following primary surgery. Patient will need briefing on gastrectomy diet for post-surgery management of nausea and gastric disturbance.

"Sherlock?," and I realize the voice is suddenly louder and suddenly all the more present in my head. As if he's called my name several times without a response, and is now edging towards alarm.

I look up abruptly, all but flinging the papers away from me as if they are something hateful.

Pascal takes the papers - one of which has lilted away over the edge of the bed and fallen to the floor.
He retrieves the notes, then re-orders everything.

"Ok. So this is where I'll need your feedback, Sherlock. Anything to add?"

My mouth and brain are screaming at me to stay quiet. To stay quiet, and deny. To avoid.

And yet, every seedy detail of my recent life seems to be recorded on those forms in stark black and white. My throat convulsively swallows, but I find I have nothing to say.

"Does anything need to change?," Yuri asks abruptly, though not unkindly.

I force my limbs to unfurl.

'I'm not," I hiss, 'I'm not suicidal. You can take that off the form, for starters. It shouldn't even be a question."

Yuri gives me an encouraging nod and jots down something on the form.

"Good. No suicidal ideation. Great, actually. What else can I add?"

My heart is racing. Perhaps as much as it did just the other evening when John had to wake me from a night terror.

Or perhaps even more than that night, I don't know.


"Everything?," Yuri clarifies. "Really? Did they get your date of birth wrong? Your NHS number? Or maybe your blood type?"

I'm sure I am glaring at him right now.

"Don't play games with me. Everything else," I growl, low and contained. The sound hurts my throat, which is already throbbing.

"So you didn't present with stomach bleeding? Ulcer perforation and necrosis?"

I close my eyes to contain my anger.

"Everything else," I ground out once more.

"What else?," Yuri goads, while I stay still. Motionless in the bed. "I can tell that you are a man of precision - so do us both a favour. Be precise now. When it really counts."

And psychiatrists wonder why so many people detest them.

"Ok, Sherlock," the doctor finally sighs, when I don't respond, "let's go through this point by point. Were you agitated when you arrived?"

"Oh, what does it matter? My stomach was bleeding! I was in pain! If I was agitated, I'm sure I had the complete right to be!"

"So that's a yes, then?"

I resist an impulse to cross my arms.

"And the haloperidol was overseen by several attending physicians. So it's likely that's accurate too,
wouldn't you say?"

"Are you being intentionally dense?" my voice grits like steel.

"Are you?" the other man challenges. "Or do you agree that your weight is under what would be classified as ideal for your height? By quite a bit actually."

I budget my breath. Neither breathing out too forcefully nor too restrictively. Even with the regulation, I quickly feel dizzy.

"I fail to see how that has anything to do with anything."

"You present with gastric rupture symptoms, and signs of being moderately underweight - and you make no connection between these two conditions? Do I really need to explain to you how this could look like long-term restrictive behaviour?"

"Other than the fact that gastric disturbances cause nausea and therefore increase the likelihood of someone's appetite being reduced? - then no, I see no correlation."

Pascal writes something down on his pad.

"Your electrolyte level was low. Your potassium was abysmal. What caused that?"

"Other than vomiting post-gastric rupture?" I ask with what I hope is a formidable sneer. "That's not sufficient on its own?"

I'm not looking to make friends.

I'm just looking to get out of here.

"Your mouth showed signs of inflammation, which could indicate a previous history of vomiting. Have you been recently been sick, beyond today?"

I stare at Pascal, but don't answer.

Won't answer.

"Should I write down 'yes'?"

"Yes, sometimes I get sick. I think, given my condition - that is more than understandable."

"And why didn't your attending GP document the decrease in your weight and the increases in gastric disturbances? There's nothing in your medical file. Nothing at all, and such pronounced ulceration would have caused considerable discomfort in the months and weeks leading up to the rupture. It's not something that would have gone unnoticed by you, or by your doctor."

"My GP?" I blink.

Yuri picks up the file.

"A Dr. John H Watson?"

I suddenly feel queasy all over again.

"Leave John out of it."
"You're on a first name basis with your GP?"

"John is my flat mate, and my friend. Hence he has become my GP. When I need a GP, that is. I haven't needed a GP in a considerable while."

Pascal jots yet something else down on his sheets. I blink down quickly at the forms to see if I can make out what he's writing.

I can't.

"Was your flat mate - John - aware of this setup?"

"What do you mean? 'Setup'?"

"Was John aware that he was to oversee your annual exams? That you had appointed him to this position?"

I try not to laugh - and fail.

Yuri Pascal's face is graced with the slightest whiff of a frown now.

"What's so funny?"

"You are under the assumption I have annual health check ups. That I need them."

Yuri lays down his pad, his pen.

"Don't you?"

"Not especially," I mutter. "Doctors are there for if I break a bone and need it set, or if I catch strep. No other reason. I can take care of all other aspects of my health myself."

Pascal frowns then. As if my non-hypochondriacal response is somehow unsatisfactory.

"When's the last time a doctor has actually looked you over? When you've had a complete exam? Blood pressure, UA...I take it checking for hernias is something you feel is superfluous too?"

I lean back, and curse my heart for racing.

For racing this entire time, and refusing to stop its tempestuous beating.

"You forgot prostate," I say in icy tones, then wince at the reveal. "Can't forget that one."

Pascal raises an eyebrow at the uncharacteristic addition.

"I don't have the most amicable relationship with doctors," I concede, "I don't like them, and they don't like me. So unless I'm sick, I don't go to a doctor."

Pascal doesn't look impressed. Nor surprised.

"And that answers my question, how?"

Our eyes meet. Hold.

I blink.

"I don't know. Maybe 2006," and I wave my hands in the direction of the folder. "I'm sure it's in
there, somewhere."

Pascal writes down the date. Can't be much more.

"And what happened in 2006?"

Letting myself recline backwards against the bed, I will my stomach to stop cramping. To stop clenching and unclenching.

"I overdosed on cocaine," I say breezily, as if bored with the conversation.

It's as honest as I'm going to get. I hope the admittance is enough to help turn the tide of inquisition. The doctor appears to be debating something, and then:

"Are you using again?"

I roll my eyes.

"Absolutely not. Don't be ridiculous."

"No? It would explain your weight loss."

"You assume I've lost weight. I've always been this way. This is my set point weight, and I'd prefer if you didn't critique my physical appearance, please."

Yuri's eyes flicker over my frame, and not appreciatively; I resist in pulling the blankets up over my torso more so.

"There's nothing wrong with my weight," I manage to get out, while he seemingly nods in distraction.

I don't buy his laid back attitude for a second. It's a ploy.

All of it.

A trap. Laying in wait, ready for me to overextend myself and reveal something gritty and juicy and admission-worthy.

Yuri picks up a pen and clicks it back to attention. It responds like a dog being called to a whistle.

"Alright," he says in acceptance of my position, "I'll hold off on any additional suppositions until we get more data back."

My skin suddenly prickles.

"Absolutely not. After this, I'm not doing any more tests. I'm not a lab rat, or a minor. I'm not someone you can manipulate, nor am I suicidal, or homicidal, and neither you - or anyone else - can hold me here against my will unless I am one or the other. And since I'm neither, I'd appreciate being left alone to recover my strength now."

The man before me removes his glasses, and lays them on the table.

"Sherlock," Yuri begins.

"No! I know my rights, and I've answered the only two questions that truly need to be fulfilled: 'am I
planning to kill myself?’, and ‘am I planning to hurt anyone else?’ - and the answer to both is a no. A resoundingly loud no."

The shrink sighs, then rises slowly, dropping a bundle of pamphlets on my side table and indicating that I should take them.

"You may think you have everything together, but you don't, do you? If one day you need to discuss anything - anything at all - I have included my card there, too. I oversee an OP group for a variety of conditions, including depression and group counselling. Think about it. Don't just write something off if it could help you."

I glare at the bundle of forms, my eyes settling on words that make my guts squirm - and that's more than enough for me. I know I will have very little interest in continuing onwards in any vein with any psychiatrist. Even a Russian born, French adopted psychiatrist with a more bracingly honest approach than most.

"Why would you actually care if anything helps me?,” I mock. "You don't even know me."

Yuri Pascal, to his credit, looks a little sad at that.

Picking up his jacket, he looks back over at me and adds, "I don't really need to know you that well, Sherlock, to know that you need help. And if I can see it, do you really think your friends or family can't see it? That John can't see it? You say he is your friend. Is it fair to put him or anyone else through stress just because you don't want to face your problems?"

I suddenly have a vision of John, face pinched, watching me with a pained expression as I shake and sputter in a bathtub full of artificially generated blue water. And then later - once it was truly morning - John's words, his face looking so close to crumpling into tears as I shouted at him and Mrs. Hudson:

"You're scaring me! You're scaring the hell out of me!"

The anger pulses out from my adrenals. A taught anger, riled by his accusation that I'm so pathetic as to be nothing more than a living, breathing poster child for 'pathetic.'

"In your opinion, which hardly matters to me, I need help. In my opinion, I don't. Whose opinion matters more to me, do you think? Yours or mine?"

Yuri's hand hesitates at the door handle, ghosting over the knob.

"And isn't that the crux of your problems? That you can't even see that you need someone to help you? That you can't even see that you need help at all?"

I start to respond, then realize the words I was going to utter have departed my mind. I finally choose something practical, if not as effective at making my point.

"Please turn the light off on your way out."

He leaves abruptly, and I realize not a moment later that I don't feel victorious at all.

Not like I thought I would.

I just feel slightly hollow and despondent as my room is suddenly cast in darkness.

Cold yet again.
I collect the pamphlets that Yuri has left on my bed carefully, and in the shady space of my room I stash them under my mattress. The sun is rapidly settling and my half closed blinds are illuminated pink and rose red as the last of the sun's rays assail the earth. I stare out the window, and with faint attention can hear the siren of an ambulance below. The cawing of a crow off in the distance. My hand tentatively reaches out to the radiator near my bed, and I lay my fingertips against the glowing warmth of the metal, feeling it infusing my hand. Relishing the heat, and feeling slightly better because I feel slightly warmer, when usually - I feel nothing but an aching, gnawing sort of coldness.

It's the coldness that really is the worst part.
Chapter Summary

Annnnd we're back to John's POV.

This chapter will deal with John's residual anger (not only anger, but sadness too) over Sherlock's most recent activities and his self-harm. It will deal with Sherlock coming home from the hospital, and his concerns over a recently released Toby.

More than that, Sherlock reveals some new factors about why he may have done what he did to himself.

I am getting back to Baker Street as the sun is setting. The weight of styrofoamed Indian cuisine in plastic bags is cutting off the circulation in my fingertips (the bags are affixed with bright orange smiley faces that say "Thank you for your purchase!" - something that would normally make me grin, but not tonight).

The sky is, for its part, gorgeous. Pink and red and swirling, and seeming almost alive. Relatively few clouds, just open and warm - especially for such an otherwise cool day. The cement is drying from an earlier light rainfall, and so the ground seems grey, but the sky seems colourful, and everything is cast in pink light. My hands, the glass of the cars lining the streets, the little pools of water that have collected here and there on the pavement. Everything is pink and rosy and pretty. It's a romantic sort of evening. The type where you'd kiss a newfound love for the first time. Even the skyline seems grander; taller and glistening from its recent cleaning.

But something about the prettiness troubles me. Suddenly makes me feel unwell. Strangely nauseated.

Perhaps it is the impression that there is so much beauty in this world, but also so much deadening pain. Perhaps it is the knowledge that if anyone is really suffering, really badly hurting, that it would be so easy to look past the sky and not see beauty. To not be comforted by anything that exists. Anything beautiful or good. What would the gloriousness of a beautiful sky matter to a family, taking their little boy home from the hospital after he had been raped? Would anything seem as beautiful again?

Sherlock is likely in his hospital bed right now, and I seriously doubt he's contemplating the gorgeousness of the sky.

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I serve myself the food; depositing a good portion of curry potatoes with turmeric, and Palak paneer. The scent of garam masala is spicy and hot, and makes me feel disproportionately sad. I can recall Sherlock taking a small serving of potatoes and peas, paneer and chutney - on a case not even three months back. It had taken him a ridiculously long time to eat his serving, and he had chewed every bite at least 30 times before swallowing. But he had eaten it, and commented on how much he loved East Indian food, especially the spice garam masala. Or spice blend, perhaps.

Now, in recollection - I realize I haven't seen Sherlock take more than a bite or two of toast or a
nibble of a digestive biscuit in...some time. And even that is not "eating properly."

I realize that I should have called him on his behaviour a long time ago, and that my willingness to indulge his odd little 'quirks' is not actually helping him at all. Especially since I know no one else would ever look out for him, like I would.

Lately his eating has become even more fractured and strange. While he still makes it a rule not to eat anything while actively trying to solve a case, he doesn't seem to go back to normal eating once the case has wrapped. Instead, he seems to be even odder than normal with how and when he eats. Eating mostly at night, and eating odd combinations of foods. Three or four weeks ago, I came across him putting caramel popcorn into his coffee, and swirling everything around until the popcorn was mushy. When I commented that such a concoction seemed like an odd 'soup', he shrilly informed me that it was basically more or less just like adding sugar to his coffee. Caramel sugar coffee.

But after I had spoken, he didn't take another bite (or sip) of his strange mixture.

After that, I learned to bite my tongue, and didn't say anything when Sherlock started eating dozens of pickles, sliced into long, thin lines that he would dip into salsa, or grey poupon mustard. Or when he started bringing home miso paste mix and making himself pots and pots of miso soup, cutting up celery and adding it to the watery concoction. He'd even douse the soup (if you could call it a soup) with hot sauce and soy sauce when he was done - something else I found odd.

At the time, I had done some research into the causes of intense salt cravings - because that's what it seemed to be: an inordinate need for salt. Sherlock was adding it to everything. Adding spices to everything. Dumping 6 and 7 packets of Splenda into his coffee, when normally he'd take two sugar cubes.

The only information I got at the time mentioned that salt cravings could be caused by electrolyte disturbances, or nutrient deficiencies - especially inadequate protein or magnesium in the diet. Which I didn't doubt at all, given Sherlock's rather pathetic eating habits.

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I finish up my serving of food, then package the rest up.

Cold East Indian food sounds perfect for a morning meal, and I'm not even joking. Which is a good thing, considering the flat is low on anything actually edible.

Looking around the cabinets and the fridge and freezer, I realize that the kitchen has been taken over by condiments: four different mustard containers (which Sherlock, amazingly, must have purchased); a bottle of Heinz ketchup; Worcestershire sauce; six different salad dressings; several glass bottles of mineral water from Germany; two tubs of Miso paste; a bottle of probiotics that I didn't even know we had; Marmite; and then some of my remnant purchases - such as a carton of eggs, and an almost finished box of pizza pops, and some older produce that really needs to be tossed.

Sherlock's recent purchases stand out in sharp contrast to mine, and I can't help but think - 'there is nothing of substance here. No wonder he's lost weight.'

A ripple of something very much like anxiety goes through me, and I make a mental note to buy a combination of nourishing and comfort foods for when he gets back. Maybe I can even stock the shelves with some treats.

I think he likes ice cream, though I can't recall him eating any in quite some time.
Two days later, I'm on my way back to the clinic. I haven't visited him in all that time. The reason why is...tricky. I feel somewhat angry with him, but more than that - I feel hurt. I feel hurt that after all my attempts to make him feel like he could trust me, that I would never hurt him or criticize him for struggling with whatever he is obviously struggling with...that he'd still inflict harm on himself.

It's not even a profound hurt. I know Sherlock wouldn't have done anything to knowingly hurt me. I can tell by the expression on his face when the doctor revealed what he revealed - that Sherlock honestly did not intend for me to ever find out about his activities.

But that makes me even more anxious.

That makes me wonder...what else is he doing to himself, in the hopes that I will never find out?

I try to stop thinking that thought by being proactive. I end up rooting through his desk drawers and removing anything excessively sharp. I package up some extraneous cups we don't really need (all glass) and leave the sturdier, hard-to-break plastic mugs in their wake. I scour the bathroom, and find a pouch with a straight razor and confiscate it immediately. The fact that I can see remnant flecks of dried blood on the edge makes me queasy.

Last, but certainly not least, I check through Sherlock's room - looking for anything that looks questionable. I don't know what I'm looking for, exactly. Another straight razor? No.

I tell myself I am not violating Sherlock's privacy, not really. I tell myself that any concerned friend would check over his space if they could. I then pull out a long cardboard box from underneath his bed; blank on the outside - no writing.

I expect to find notes or books inside, or something odd that could pertain to a case.

What I find is a scale.

One of those hospital grade scales. Black, with a glass top and an electric read out. The tape along the box has been cut, indicating it's been opened. The top flap is also bent indicating it's been pulled out, too.

I stare at the scale and press the ON button; the last weigh in digitally pops up on the display screen. 122.4

I frown at the display, not really understanding. 122.4 lbs? That's way too low for a person edging towards 6 ft 1.

Suddenly my chest feels tight.

Why would Sherlock be keeping this in his room, in a cardboard box, and not in the bathroom? Unless he wanted to keep this from me?

And why would he want to keep this from me, unless he was convinced he was doing something wrong? Or that I would be convinced that he was doing something questionable?

I try to think back to anything that gives me something to grasp on to - a starting point, a word, something that anchors Sherlock's declining health in chronological time. I can distantly recall Sherlock telling me he weighed "141, John. My weight is resoundingly stable" about two years ago. I forget how the conversation came up, but I recall the number. Because I remember thinking at the
time that it was a low number, 8 lbs under my own weight back then - despite the fact that I was nearly six inches shorter and therefore, logically, should have weighed even less.

And now he's gone and lost almost twenty pounds off from his already thin frame?

I turn off the scale, pack up the box, and move it back into the position that I had previously found everything.

I have a bag to pack for him, and I need to address one issue at a time. If this is even an issue.

But, given everything that has happened lately - how could it not be?

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I can hear talking as I approach the room, and I knock tentatively.

I then hear the rustling of someone getting up abruptly, and Lestrade's distinct voice - "Yeah," calling out.

(He must assume I'm just another doctor).

When I enter, I can feel the fake smile gracing my face. My skin too tight, like scar tissue.

Sherlock is sitting atop his bed, wearing silk pajamas and a new tan-brown dressing gown. Obviously new, and obviously from Mycroft.

His socked feet are jostling back and forth in pent up anxiety, or manic intensity - I'm not certain which.

"John," he says with a tight grin of his own, almost something that looks decidedly unhappy.

Donovan is sitting in a chair off to the side, and I'm surprised to see her.

"We're discussing the case?," I ask by way of greeting, depositing the bag I had packed for Sherlock on the floor.

"More like discussing what motivated Sherlock to punch Mr. Thiessen, if he's not our man," Lestrade says sourly, "And we're not getting anywhere. Plus, we are almost out of time."

"We are out of time!," Sherlock exclaims, "I've told you both to stop accosting me and to put pressure on Toby's father. He knows something without knowing he knows."

Sally snorts.

"That doesn't make a lick of sense, Sherlock," she grouses. "We can't be seen antagonizing a stressed out parent - especially not since you've already assaulted him. We're lucky he's not going after your head."

"Don't you see?," Sherlock hisses, "He seemed...guilty. He gave me every sign of actually being guilty, but he didn't hurt his son."

"But you didn't realize this until after you had punched him?," Lestrade clarifies.

"Oh - he's guilty, all right. Not of hurting his son...but he's done something to betray the trust of his family. Most likely his wife," Sherlock continues on, as if he hasn't heard the question. Most likely because he doesn't have an answer that would satisfy anyone.
Because he did punch a man that was innocent of hurting his son, apparently.

And because apologies don't seem to come easily to Sherlock. Probably because he's so rarely ever wrong. At least his deductions are rarely wrong, even if his behaviour and social skills could use a tune up.

"We need an angle, a way in," Donovan clarifies, "unless you want us to accuse a man of having an affair when we have absolutely no proof whatsoever. Which, after your actions, will make us look like the most incompetent team ever - especially if you are wrong yet again."

Sherlock is about to open his mouth in response, when Lestrade quickly interjects, "Be real careful what you want to add to the conversation right now, Sherlock."

His mouth closes.

"Then maybe I can speak to Toby again. I'll get more data this time. Because I have to," Sherlock squeezes his hands into fists, and the tension in the room increases.

"Uh, no," Lestrade finally says, when it appears as if my flatmate is not about to add anything more. "No. I want you to head home, get some sleep."

"All I've done for two days is sleep!"

"Then rest - no running around. Read a book, watch some telly."

"Boring," Sherlock mutters under his breath.

"Go to the zoo," Lestrade continues on as if he hasn't been interrupted, "Or the aquarium. But you're going to get better. I don't want you anywhere near this case - or any other case - until I'm confident you're not in danger of having to go back to the A&E, do you hear me?"

Sherlock rolls his eyes, and plays with the sash on his new, silk dressing gown. He looks like a posh socialite lazily passing the time at a hotel. Not a very sick patient recovering from a perforated ulcer at the hospital.

"Sherlock? I'm serious. Do you understand what I'm saying? How royally pissed off I'll be if I find out you've put yourself in a compromised position again?"

My best friend finally gives the detective inspector a pointed look.

"Yes, I understand you. Nothing out of your mouth is ever so difficult to comprehend that I don't immediately understand."

And it's then that I realize Sherlock is more that disappointed. He's extremely angry. He wouldn't take personal pot-shots if he were just slightly disappointed.

And more than that - he's angry, because he feels like he's failed Toby. Even though the truth of the matter is that Toby would be dead right now if it weren't for Sherlock.

This case, however, is personal. He takes Toby's welfare personally. And while none of us could imagine how we'd feel if that kid got hurt again, Sherlock would see it as a personal failing. I know he would.

"Without causing offense, what direction do you think we should go?," Sally interjects - oddly enough, playing a peace maker role for the time being. It's an odd departure from her common way
of interacting with Sherlock.

"The Thiessen's themselves are okay. Mother and father only. The father is, likely, hiding an affair and I think that has something to do with their son, but I can't make sense of the details."

"You think that a woman has hurt Toby?," I ask dumbly. It was true that no one found any semen on the child. Tearing, but no DNA.

"No; I think Toby's father is gay. I think he's always identified as gay, but has never been out. I think if he's having an affair - it's undoubtedly with a man. I think Mrs. Thiessen suspects - deep down - that her husband prefers men to women, sexually if not romantically too, but I believe they both love one another, or initially loved one another and since then...they both are more or less keeping up appearances. Which is usually detrimental to relationships. I don't believe Mrs. Thiessen suspects her husband is cheating, and I think that her husband feels sick about what he's done, because he still cares about her well being. He doesn't want to hurt her, anyway."

"Right," Lestrade sighs, "that is definitely one avenue of investigation we will not be taking...accusing the man you punched of having a sexual relationship with a man, when he's not even openly gay. If he's gay."

"He is," Sherlock mumbles.

"Really not any of our business, though, is it? Look, Sherlock - if what you say turns out to be true - and Mr. Thiessen is caught up in something that he doesn't even know about, truly: if his lover, or whatever you want to call the person he may be cheating with...hurt his son? Do you know what it's going to do that family?"

"It'll rip them apart. But at least they'll be alive."

"Come again?," I ask, frowning.

"Oh you people," Sherlock whispers, evidentially very frustrated. "Someone tried to KILL Toby, or have you all conveniently forgotten how his skull was partially bashed in?"

"Ok," Donovan says hurriedly, trying to bring order to the scene. Sherlock, with his bleeding gut. Sherlock, who vomited copious amounts of blood and stomach acid and clung to her hand in fear on the ride to the hospital. Sherlock - who seems almost frail and unnaturally thin, wrapped a little too tightly in his silk robe and pajamas, which only makes him look all the more gaunt: pajamas that slide over his meager form like water, highlighting and accentuating his recent weight loss, and the bones projecting from his shoulders, the ridge of his spine protruding when he bends over. "We'll ensure that Toby is kept at home. No access to anyone else. Just his mother and father. No school - he can temporarily have his books and assignments sent home, and Mrs. Thiessen doesn't work, so Toby won't have to be placed in the care of anyone else. And we will try to determine who may have had consistent access to him. Okay?"

And damn it if things haven't changed, because Sally is obviously trying to do soothing. It's strange, and almost surreal, but if Sherlock feels as odd about it as I do, he doesn't let on.

"Yes. Good," and he repeats the word under his breath several times - 'good' - like a record stuck on the same part of a song. A glitchy cd. Repetition that sounds more pathological than anything else. "We need to know who Toby could be alone with for any extended period of time, likely each week. Perhaps biweekly. Whomever has hurt this child has done so for awhile, and has likely used fear and threats to keep Toby quiet. Actually, scrap likely: it's almost guaranteed. Hence, the mutism. Usually
that sort of relationship doesn't spring up over night."

"That we can do," Lestrade admits, grabbing his scarf and gloves and rising from his chair. "And I'll even keep you in the loop if we hear about any new developments, so long as you promise to take care of yourself - and not argue with John if he asks you to do something."

"Eat all my broccoli and lima beans?," Sherlock chirrups, sounding amazingly hostile considering I hardly get on his case for anything. Not even for putting eyes and body parts in the fridge! And here he's making it sound like I nag him repeatedly. "Make my bed and clean behind my ears?"

"Don't be an ass, Sherlock," I grumble, and toss his bag to the bed.

Lestrade and Sally leave without ado, and close the door.

"Ready to go?," I finally ask once everyone has departed.

"I am always ready to go when it comes to hospitals. I hate these places. I could be half dead, and I'd hate these places."

I don't actually articulate my thoughts, then: that Sherlock was, indeed, almost half dead when he got to the hospital not even three days previously.

"Your doctor has discussed everything about the diet you are to follow? Your post-gastectomy plan?"

"That lovely little surgery where they cut out part of my stomach? As if that will increase my appetite. Cretins."

I feel like screaming at him.

"Maybe if you hadn't let your symptoms advance so far that parts of your duodenum were necrotic, then maybe they wouldn't have had to perform any sort of surgery at all."

Sherlock, thankfully, doesn't say anything. Merely pulls a green jumper I had packed for him on over his pajama top. The collar of his pajama top now sticks out against the green, looking a bit strange, but I don't say anything.

"Before we head home, do you want to catch a bite?," I throw out easily, as if the suggestion is nothing.

Sherlock points to the brochures, a whack of brochures sitting on his bedside table.

"If there is anything I can eat at a restaurant on this new diet plan I'm on, then sure."

I don't like how he calls it a 'diet plan.' I don't like that at all.

"You just need to watch out for anything hard to digest, anything fried, or with sharp edges - like kernels or husks. Your stomach is scarred, so liquids are easier and less painful to digest. Maybe we could go for something like soup? Eggplant well cooked, in a coconut sauce? Something light like that?"

"Okay," Sherlock agrees, letting out a shuddery breath. "That's fine with me."

Of course, it doesn't sound fine with him at all. Not by a long shot.
We are sitting at a little Chinese-Thai-Vietnamese hybrid restaurant. I'm looking over the menu for foods that won't make Sherlock deathly queasy. Our server - a little Vietnamese man of about 60 - comes to take our menu and our order about 10 minutes in.

So far I've added a request for two waters, a Vietnamese coffee for myself, and a Jackfruit smoothie that I wheedled Sherlock into accepting. It's a start, but it's still not a meal.

"All done?," the man asks in a high, soft voice. "You need time, or you done order?," he asks in broken English.

"Yes, mmm," and I quickly look over the menu, while Sherlock taps his own closed menu with his chopsticks, apparently in no mood to help me order anything at all. "My friend here can't eat anything fried, or anything hard to digest."

The little Vietnamese man glances over to Sherlock, looking bone-thin and weary, one arm holding his head up. More pallid than I've ever seen him. Which is a frightening thought.

"Soup? Good for blood?"

I have no idea what the man is asking but I nod anyway.

"Make blood happy soup?," the man - whose tag reads as Bao Binh - adds, "vegetable broth? Herb?"

"Okay, yes," I say in encouragement, "something like that."

Sherlock snorts, while the man suddenly looks hurt.

"Ignore my friend. We appreciate your help. My friend has a lot of stomach pain," I say, keeping the language simple, while Sherlock glowers at me.

"Oh, coconut help belly. Make light and free. Have lemongrass helps. Cháo for friend, like congee - nice on belly. Lemongrass Cháo, yes?," and the little man - who can't be much taller than 5 feet - is now talking directly to Sherlock. "Number 81. No meat, just Cháo - I add lemongrass, make tasty?"

"Yes, that would be fine," Sherlock says gruffly.

"And you too, sir?"

I smile warmly at the man, who seems so eager to help. "I can eat anything, and I absolutely love Vietnamese food. It's one of my favourites."

Bao Binh smiles back at me.

"Cơ hến we make good. Authentic. We add shrimp or clam or what you like. Gỏi Huế rau muống with water spinach. Many people loves Gỏi Huế rau muống."

When he speaks, the word water comes out as 'waa-taa' and spinach comes out as 'spin-eech.'

I nod, and try to ignore Sherlock's murky smile as he rips the paper into a million tiny pieces over his place mat, obviously finding Bao Binh's pidgin English amusing.

"Yes, I will take both of those. The first one...Com Hen?," I test, knowing I'm probably bastardizing the pronunciation, "can I get with scallions?"

"Yes, yes, yes," the little man says, grabbing my menu and shuffling off. "Yes, yes, yes," he repeats while walking away.
"I guess the answer is yes," Sherlock grins at me, ordering the paper bits into a little line along the edge of the table, before pulling up the menu.

"You're born in 1971, right?" he asks suddenly, and I nod in resignation.

"You were born in the year of the metal pig, John," Sherlock rambles, proceeding to read my Zodiac. "The influence of the Metal Element makes the Metal Pig the most assertive and structured of all the Pig types. The Metal Pig is hardworking in their personal pursuits and in the protection of their ideals. In this sense, it is not usual to see a Metal Pig fighting fiercely for justice. In communication, the Metal Pig adopts the same intensity, which explains why they are often considered blunt - hmmm...maybe this should be mine, don't you think?" Sherlock queries, before continuing, "Luckily, the Metal Pig's dependable reputation outshines their weaknesses.' How do you feel John, knowing that your dependable reputation outshines your so-called Metal Pig weaknesses?"

I just sigh.

"Let's hear yours, then."

Sherlock's eyes glance over the paper.

"Apparently I am the 'Fire Dragon.' Ahem, 'With the influence of the Fire Element, the Fire Dragon is the most energetic, passionate and dynamic of the Dragon types. At times, the Fire Dragon is truly fearless in their pursuits and their passions are nearly impossible to derail. While it may not be as easy for the Fire Dragon to make friends, these qualities can lead directly to group or individual achievement. The Fire Dragon is willing to take on any challenge alone and at times, would probably prefer to reach their goals alone.' What do you think? True or not true? Should I start reading my daily horoscope next?;' the mockery in Sherlock's voice is impossible to resist.

"I think these things are meant to be for fun."

"Tell that to Mrs. Hudson," Sherlock mutters, and I smile - just as Bao Binh places a huge Jackfruit smoothie in front of my friend.

"Good fruit for stomach," Bao Binh says, then wanders back off to the kitchen.

"Do you want to bet that whatever he brought out, he would have said it would have been good for my stomach?"

I laugh, and take a sip of my water.

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When we have finished our meal - Sherlock, yes, eating an entire serving of Vietnamese congee - we take a cab back to Baker Street, and Sherlock darts up the stairs.

I find him hesitating to fully enter the living room, his eyes darting around the room in examination.

"You've cleaned," he says warily, almost nervously.

"Somewhat," I say, my voice sounding much more clipped than I had intended.

Sherlock goes to his desk, opens up the drawers, roots around for something - I'm not sure what.

"You've taken things out of here," he says softly, not angry, but certainly not happy. He closes his eyes, seemingly aware as to what I've done. "John," he whispers, "you don't need to do this."
I decide to play dumb. If I make it easy for him, he's not ever going to admit what he's done wrong.

"Do what?"

He turns to me suddenly, his eyes bright with pain. His mouth is crumpled and tight at the same time.

"It was a one time thing. I-I," and he stops talking, closing his eyes yet again, "I never intended for it to happen."

I just stare at him for a few seconds, not comprehending the words.

"You didn't intend to cut your thighs and your penis?," I whisper, and I know the words are harsh, and I know Sherlock is mortified when his face goes red and he looks down to the floor. "How could ANYONE accidentally do something like that, Sherlock?"

And part of me is screaming internally - SHUT UP, shut up right now! - because this is not how I wanted to approach this subject. Because I wanted to wait a bit, until Sherlock brought it up himself, maybe - and not throw it in his face like he's done something wicked.

Because Sherlock is the one hurting. It wasn't supposed to be me.

Until I realize that I was - and am - upset, too. That Sherlock's actions have hurt me, too.

"I don't know," he whispers, his eyes wide, imploring me to believe him. "But I'm not ever going to do it again. I promise."

"How could you do it the first time? I need to understand why Sherlock, or your words are meaningless."

"My promise is meaningless?," and damn him - he sounds like a wounded little boy.

"Your intentions are good, and I appreciate your promise. But this is bigger than your intention, especially if you don't know why you did it in the first place!"

"I told you why!," he exclaims suddenly, twin fuchsia spots rising on his cheeks. "Oh God," and his voice warbles, "I don't want to talk about this!"

He starts to stalk away when I move for the door, effectively blocking his exit.

"Tough," I growl, the anger that I had been keeping bottled up for three days now threatening to be exposed. "You need to talk about this, so we are damn well going to talk about it. About what you did to yourself. Especially since you had me to come to; you weren't alone. I would have helped you in any way I could have!"

Sherlock takes a step back, his throat swallowing convulsively.

"You were busy talking to Mrs. Hudson," he says, and the sound is petulant. Like I had done something wrong in giving him space. "Busy eating scones and drinking tea."

"So that's when you did it, huh? When I was consoling our landlady that you'd be...okay? You took that moment of trust, and used it as an opportunity to hurt yourself?"

Sherlock looks like he's been slapped.

"Why are you so mad?," he whispers, stepping back from me as if he's scared. "I didn't do anything to hurt you. I didn't even do anything to hurt myself."
And just like that, I feel rotten. The anger I had previously felt is rapidly dwindling.

Now I just feel gutted.

I press my hands against my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I wheeze, "I'm sorry, Sherlock. I'm just-" and it's then that I realize that my right hand is tremulous, shaking.

Stress.

I go to sit down on the sofa, while Sherlock stands awkwardly in the middle of the room, four feet from the door - looking indecisive.

"I don't understand how you could do that to yourself. I've tried to understand, but I just - I just can't. I don't get it, and it scares me, because it's violent, and I have no idea what I need to do to get you to stop."

"I won't," Sherlock's eyes are wide in alarm, "Not again."

"You say that, but I'm not sure that you-"

"I won't hurt myself. What can I do to make you believe me?"

I press my hands against my temples, debating with myself for what I am going to say next.

Finally, I decide to go for it.

"If you are going to stop hurting yourself, you can get rid of the scale in your bedroom, for starters."

Sherlock's expression goes from earnest pleading, to a recoil so intense he almost falls over.

"You've been going through my things," and his voice is tight and high, and tinged with tears.

"I wanted to make sure there wasn't anything else in there that you could hurt yourself with," I say strongly, not letting the look of upset on his face sway me from saying what I have to say. "And until I found that, I thought you were only hurting yourself with sharp things. But that's not entirely true, is it? Damn it, Sherlock - is that why you haven't been eating?"

"You had no right!," he exclaims suddenly.

"I had every right!," I say just as suddenly, getting up off the sofa and stalking over to where he now moves, immobile. "You are my best friend, and your welfare matters to me!" Furiously resolute. "I have no idea why you are doing what you are - why you are doing anything that you're doing, and I hate it! I hate that you're so confused about how to feel that-"

"I'm not confused!," he explodes, his voice nearly hysterical.

"Do you think you need to lose weight? Is that it?"

He runs his hands through his hair and I see his jaw clench in upset. If only highlights his weight loss; I can see the ridges of his skull so easily.

"Did you really think I wouldn't figure it out, Sherlock?" I say a bit more calmly now, not wanting to scare him off. "Scale or no scale?"
"This has nothing to do with you, and it is none of your business!," and his eyes suddenly look red. He also looks ready to jolt away from me, so I reach out and touch his hand with my own.

"Please - c'mon, sit down. We'll talk. We'll talk calmly. We'll figure out what we are going to do. We'll fix this."

Sherlock stares at me silently. Absolute quietude. I hear him swallow. I can sense the tension in his lean shoulders, the weariness in his entire body.

He lets me guide him back to the sofa, and he sits down tentatively.

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I let him play around with a couple coloured Jenga blocks. The aspect of having something to physically fiddle with seems to redirect some of his nervousness. To his credit, he hasn't left yet.

"What's going on?," I start with a soft question.

He stacks four blocks on top of one another. His shoulders are still tight, and he gives me a strange, childlike shrug.

"Can you articulate that with actual words, please?"

"I don't know," he says rigidly, adding another block to the pile.

"You don't know if you can articulate it or you don't know what's going on?"

"I don't know what's going on," he says tightly, nudging the blocks with his hand so they line up.

"How long has this been going on? Whatever this is?"

"Little while," Sherlock breathes out, and abruptly stops playing with the blocks, sitting back against the sofa, and wrapping one arm around his belly. "Not long."

"How long is 'not long'?," I pry.

Sherlock lets out an exhale.

"Maybe four or five months?," he asks me, which isn't really that helpful.

"You're asking me?"

"Five months, maybe," he says evenly.

"When did you get the scale?"

He pokes at the blocks now with his foot, and they all fall over in a clump.

"Maybe four months ago," he says quietly, staring at his lap.

"So you are trying to lose weight," I say with determination.

"Not...not exclusively."

I'm sick of this roundabout talk. No one can weave a tale of bullshit quite like Sherlock Holmes.

"What does that even mean? Come on, just tell me."
"I...I like to see it change."

"The numbers on the scale, you mean?," I ask.

Sherlock just nods.

"Not up, I imagine," my face morphing into a frown, I can just tell.

"No, not up," Sherlock whispers.

Ok. Good. At least we are getting somewhere now.

"And how far down do you want it to go? Those numbers?"

"I don't...I never had a number in mind. I just like to see it change, knowing I made the change happen. I did. No one else did that, I did that."

The rush of something cold very much afraid courses through my head, and I feel almost faint with his revelation.

"But you more than need to stop now. You realize that, don't you?"

"It makes me feel...calmer inside. To know I can control it. Most people can't drop it that much, but I can. Most people can't lose weight even when they are heavier. And I like that I can say no to something that almost everyone struggles with and find hard to control," and Sherlock is still speaking in that quiet, shuddery whisper. Just like he did the night of his night terror, when he spoke as if removed from his words, and removed from himself.

I reach out and touch his arm.

"You've lost about 20 lbs in a few months, Sherlock, and you were already about as low in weight as you could have been, healthfully, before hand. You realize that, don't you?"

"You must think I'm insane," Sherlock mutters, his face turning away from my own.

"No, no," and I reach out to touch shoulder, not wanting him to turn away. "I definitely don't think you're insane. But I think you have a problem, and I don't think anything is going to get better if we ignore reality. What did you say about how "keeping up appearances" is bad for people?"

"It makes me feel calm," he admits a few seconds later, staring at the wall.

"I know it does. I mean, I know it must. But it's still unhealthy."

"I don't want to stop it," he says, his throat choking on the words. "I know you want me to, but I don't want to. I can't...," and his words break off - almost as if he's been winded and lost all the air from his lungs.

His arms have resumed their tight wrap around his body, so I tentatively position myself closer to him.

When he turns to me, I see a few errant tears that have leaked onto his lashes and have made them seem darker.

I gently turn him against my torso and he leans into my body.

"I'm sorry, John," he says quietly, his voice hot pants against my neck. "I didn't want to disappoint
"I'm not angry with you, Sherlock. Just...I'm afraid. This stuff is scary and-"

"It's not a big deal."

"It is a big deal! You absolutely should not be trying to lose weight, but you are - you know you are, I know you are - and I know it's not exactly a new idea for you. How long have you been dealing with this?"

Sherlock's arm has come out to grasp my back.

"It's always sort of been there," he mutters, in admittance.

"For a long time, right? Since you were a kid?"

He nods slowly, and the pain I feel for him only increases.

"But for a long time...you didn't try to actively lose weight. Your eating was never 100% healthy, but it wasn't...this. Except, lately you have been deliberately trying to drop weight. Lately something changed. What changed, Sherlock. What is it?"

I feel his arms clench up against mine.

"Idunno," he mumbles.

"Come on - try to think of what it is. If we can determine what-"

And he pulls back and stares at me, his face flushed and his eyes huge and scared.

"Sherlock, what is it? What's going through that clever mind of yours? You can tell me. I promise, nothing you tell me is going to make me angry with you, or turn away from-"

Suddenly, before I can register what is happening, I feel his lips against mine.

The soft, pert sensation of warm skin against warm skin.

It's not a lustful kiss. But it's full of pressure and need. He leans in and puts effort behind it. Closed mouth, no tongues. Nothing but a sense of intensity and urgency.

I pull back first, I think, overwhelmed and extremely confused.

And I watch Sherlock's face fall with my action.

"I'm sorry," he gets out, his voice sounding mangled and hurt. I see him quickly get up to flee.

"No, Sherlock - wait, it's okay, just wait- let's talk about this-"

"I shouldn't have done that," he says with tight, pinched eyes, in an equally tight, pinched voice. "I'm sorry. Please just...please delete it."

He rushes out of the room and up the stairs. I can hear the rapid, light pattering of his feet and the swift, shlock of his door shutting behind.

An errant thought flutters through my brain, and the thought is this:

'I'm glad I checked his room over for sharp objects.'
Feelings

Chapter Summary

John's POV

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The first few seconds after Sherlock's departure is strange. In some ways, I don't feel anything. Just oddly numb. As if a bigger, fuller part of me could see that this was coming. Maybe coming for awhile now.

In other ways, I feel everything. My body is certainly cataloguing reactions, and it takes only a few heartbeats before my legs feel weak and bloodless. I slide down against the wall and try to sort through the mess of my mind. I need to make sense out of Sherlock's admissions, and ideally - as soon as possible.

Ok. So here is what I know:

He's not eating properly.

In some ways, he understands that what he is doing is very, very unhealthy. He's admitted as much.

The impulse to do what he is currently doing has been with him for a long time. Maybe the majority of his adult life.

He's letting that impulse have free reign now.

He thinks that he has control of his eating, when in actuality - he's operating much like an addict would: trying to hide aspects of his behaviour, being sneaky about his lack of eating and his weight loss.

He's scared at the prospect of stopping his abnormal habits and eating normally. Or, as normally as he ate before. Which certainly wasn't normal, by any stretch of the imagination, but it was certainly better than his eating as of late.

And when I asked him to tell me what prompted the behaviour he...kissed me.

My insane flat mate and best friend actually kissed me. On the mouth.

Then seemed to recoil in horror at what he had done. But that was after I pulled back first. After I had reservations, and displayed those reservations.

And a weird thought, now. One that should be more unsettling than it is: what would he have done if I hadn't pulled back?

Would he have continued kissing me? For how long?

Would he have tried to do anything beyond kiss me?

And of course, it's a complete hypothetical because the fact of the matter is: I'm not gay.
I'm not bisexual either. I know I'm not. Because I know how much Sherlock matters to me, and how much I almost didn't want to pull back - if only not to hurt him any more than he's already been hurt.

Damn it. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to fix this.

Demand that he speak to me?
Demand that I speak, and he listen?
Not demand anything...just try to get him to talk?
Give him his space?

I can't do all of the above. Not at the same time. I can't give him his space right now, and also talk about this promptly.

But one of those avenues is certainly going to be better than the others.

Yet I can only choose one option here. And while we will undoubtedly have to discuss the enormity (or potential enormity) of what he's revealed today (and what is that, really? That he's attracted to me? And in what way? Sexually? And if not sexually, why would he kiss me?), the primary question I need to ask myself right now is: what is best for Sherlock?

To be alone right now, or to not be alone?

But then I recall how he told me that it was when I had gone to speak with Mrs. Hudson, after that terrible nightmare (not even a week past), that he had hurt himself.

So really, the decision is already made, isn't it?

It's not really a decision at all.

He's already showed that he'll hurt himself when he's upset. When he's overwhelmed.

And I know he's both upset and overwhelmed right now.

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I decide to make tea first.

I know it seems crazy, but when I'm upset tea always makes me feel a tiny bit better.

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I can't knock with my hands full, so I tap at his door with my socked toe.

"My hands are burning! Just open up, 'kay?," I holler. "Before I get this all over the carpeting!"

Not that Sherlock likely cares about the carpeting. But he cares that I might burn my hands.

The door opens a nudge. Then more fully.

"What are you doing?"

His voice is hoarse, as if he's been crying - but I know that he hasn't. His eyes are bone dry.

He looks exhausted.

"Do you want the Da Vinci mug, or the tea cup?"
We had gone to see a Da Vinci exhibit a year ago. An exhibit of Da Vinci's contraptions, all fleshed out, so to speak. Sherlock had had a blast, and had bought me a sketching of a horse and the mug in the gift store. I had no idea he'd be so interested in art, but he quickly informed me that the master was every bit as much a scientist as he was an artist.

"I don't want any tea," he says dully now, none of that verve or interest present in his voice.

It makes me feel a little bit sad. That he'd be so scared or upset. Or so worried, perhaps.

I mean, it's me. Me. John Watson. His best friend.

Things haven't been easy lately, but I'm certainly not about to drop him like a hot potato. He doesn't have to seem so end-of-the-world about it all.

"Teacup for you, then," I mutter amicably, and he takes the cup, and deposits it on the counter near his bed. He's since removed his green jumper and is back to just his pajama top now. Pajama top, and jeans - given that the rest of his stuff is still downstairs. He tugs at the edge of the top as if wanting to tie the stash, even though he's not wearing a gown at all. A holdover tic-like behaviour, perhaps. Something comforting.

The Sherlockian version of drinking tea, maybe.

And then I realize that for some, it's said - that tea is like a hug in a cup. It's warm. It envelopes you from the inside out and is sweet and soothing.

But what if you never liked hugs? What if something happened to you to make hugs seem unnatural or tainted? What if you then had to move away from sensorial routines that were intended to be soothing, to habits that were rooted in protection?

Creating a cloak about your body. Flipping up the sides of coats in a gesture that could almost indicate "keep out," tying a sash around your belly to wrap yourself up in a gown or something that would further conceal your body.

Oh, I'm being ridiculous, certainly. If I wanted to find something - some meaning - in Sherlock's every motion, I'm sure my mind could see patterns indicating 'something more' almost everywhere. I could possibly see symbolism in almost everything he does. It doesn't translate into trauma. It doesn't mean all that. I just have to know and accept that people can be quirky, can be different, and if Sherlock is going to admit to anything at all - and to asexuality, in particular - then I might have to accept that it may not be something that was triggered by abuse, either. And maybe that's how I should broach the topic now.

By showing him that despite everything that's happened, I trust his perception of his own self. Because right now, he's doing so many things that indicate disorder, and I think he needs to know that I have trust in his self analysis, in his appreciations of life and maybe even in terms of how he loves. His capabilities, and not just the choices he's made that have been self-harming. Because he's likely focused on the negative right now, and what I think he needs to hear is that I have faith in him. Faith that he's going to get better, can get over what's happened to him, and can move on in his life. What's more - that I have faith that everything will remain the same between us.

But if I start this discussion on a note that indicates that I don't really think he understands his own emotions, then we likely will not have any sort of civil discussion at all.

"I believe you, you know," I say primly, then take a sip of chai. "Regarding your...self analysis."
Sherlock is not drinking his tea. Merely has his long legs pulled up to his chest, and arms entwined around his legs.

"My self analysis?"

He doesn't look nervous, but it's seeped into his voice all the same. The true nervousness, so well concealed.

But I can hear it.

"On all fronts. But on what you said, about your sexuality, for starters."

He looks confused - just for a second. Then I hear him swallow.

"That's what you want to talk about." It's not a question. Not really. "After everything that has happened today. You want to talk about that."

"Mmm," I say in response. "I think we should."

His limbs seem strained now. Clenched.

"Why?," and when Sherlock speaks this time, it comes out croaky.

"Because I think that is somehow worsening," and I make a full body motion with my hand, "this. This problem. These problems. Not just with eating. With everything, in a sense. I think it's connecting a lot of things - a lot of fears - for you. The red thread tying a lot of weighty stuff together."

"You do," he breaths, and almost sounds like the Sherlock I had first met, "Why do you think that?"

I pause, place a finger over my mouth. An automatic gesture, and one that I have never fully been able to stop.

"Why did you kiss me?"

He looks away, and I give him a second. 10 seconds. 15 seconds. He opens his mouth. Shuts it. Frowns. Looks at me quickly. Looks away.

"I don't need a dissertation, Sherlock. Just a word. A couple words. It doesn't have to be everything, just something."

"I," and now he hesitates, "I like you." Just that. Just that childhood expression, and nothing more.

And I hear another swallow. His throat must be dry. He really should drink his tea. It's why I made him tea in the first place.

"In what way?"

His eyes want to meet mine; I can sense that. I can also sense that he can't quite make himself do that much. Which alarms me.

Sherlock's not supposed to be afraid of anything. That's half of what makes him Sherlock. The man who almost swallowed poisoned pills (or what could have been poisoned pills) on the second day
that I knew him. And now he can't meet my eyes?

"Obviously in *that* way. I think."

But that's the clincher, then: it's not so obvious at all.

"Obviously, yet...you think? You're not sure?"

"No, I am," he breathes, looking at his lap. "I am."

"Hmm," I breathe out, "and here you told me you were asexual."

Sherlock taps the teacup lightly with his finger. The tea rolls over the top - just a little bit - and then runs down the side of the cup. I know better than to tell him to stop.

"I am asexual," he breathes. "That hasn't changed."

He sounds upset. Frustrated and upset, but not yet alarmed.

"Okay, so we are getting somewhere then. That's good. So you don't have any sexual or romantic feelings for m-"

"No, it's not...," and he trails off, "You can't say it like that. They are not one and the same, so that's-"

"What? What's wrong with that statement?"

"Sexual, no. I don't. But I don't know about anything else. Everything else is a maybe. Or maybe even a yes."

He's now twisting his hands together, so eager to fidget with something.

"So you think you feel...what? Something romantic for me? And that means what, exactly? To you?"

"I told you! I like you," he says quickly, closing his eyes. "Oh GOD this is a stupid, pointless thing to talk about! I've already apologized! I said I was sorry!"

"You don't need to apologize," I hurriedly say, if only to enforce the fact that he hasn't done anything wrong.

Sherlock is quiet. And remains quiet.

"Okay?," I test.

He nods, but still looks upset with himself.

"So what's upsetting you? Right now?"

Of course, that list could be rather voluminous.

I know that.

"I've probably made you uncomfortable. I mean, you're handling it well now, but that will change. People leave over things like this, and-"

"I'm not going to leave, Sherlock. Certainly not for that. Don't be silly."

"I'm not being silly! You are acting...okay right now, but I know you don't feel-," and he exhales
harshly. "I don't know what is wrong with me. I'm never that impulsive."

Despite the seriousness of his expression, of the topic, I can't help myself: "You're always that impulsive."

Unfortunately, he doesn't smile.

Instead, Sherlock looks to his teacup, and grumbles. "Do we have to do this now?"

"You think leaving this is going to make it easier to talk about? Shouldn't we get this over with?"

He nods gently, finally, nudging the cup yet again. Even more tea spills over the side.

"Don't like chai?"

He scowls at me, then brings the cup to his lips. Takes a sip.

"Is good," he mumbles, "you added sugar."

"Yes, I did," I reply cleanly.

"You don't even like sugar in your tea," he says softly.

"Not really. But you do."

He lets out a humorless laugh.

"And you wonder why people like you."

And when it appears as if he's not going to say anything else, I continue. "Okay, Sherlock, this is what I think might be going on. Tell me if I'm wrong. You are feeling...off. Ever since this case, certainly, but maybe before this case. In fact, undoubtedly before this case, because your eating has been a bit not good for about five months now, right? So I think maybe you've been becoming more aware about certain subjects ever since I moved in, and it's starting to weigh on your mind more and more."

"What subjects?," he asks quietly, taking another sip.

"Relationship subjects. Not just friendship, though friendship can be complicated enough. But sexual relationships, perhaps. You've seen me date women, make time for them, try to work with others to find a partner for an...activity that you really don't get the point of, or at least don't understand the attraction for, and I think maybe that's been making you feel isolated or perhaps even more different. Or am I completely wrong?"

"It hardly matters to me who you have sex with," he grumbles, suddenly putting his teacup back on its saucer with a slam.

The noise seems to obliterate Sherlock's previous words.

"Why would it matter to me who you-," and he pauses, not wanting to extrapolate; his tone and pitch more controlled now when he continues,"or if you do anything like that at all?"

The fact that he doesn't even want to say certain words is fairly revealing all on its own.

"I don't know. But I think that's a pretty tricky subject for you, isn't it?"
He pulls his legs up to his chest now, and looks over my head. At a spot on the wall.

"Well, of course it is. Don't ask stupid questions. I know you're not stupid, John."

I fight the impulse to smile, despite the gravity of this subject.

"Okay, thank you. I appreciate that. That's high praise coming from you. Even so, it does seem like every time I've gone out on a date, or met up with a woman - even just a potential girlfriend - well, it seems like-

"It seems like what?," he all but hisses.

"It seems like you almost want to see it fail. That relationship. Or even before it goes that far, because I know you detest it when I bring anyone back here - and that's why I don't. But you also seem to be in a bad mood if I stay over at someone else's, too, and I guess I'm just trying to determine-"

"Trying to determine WHAT?"

"Trying to determine if maybe what you really dislike is not me, perhaps, having romantic feelings for someone else, but the idea of me being with someone else. That way. Sexually."

Sherlock looks taken aback, and hops up off his bed.

"Sherlock, we're not done ta-"

"Yes, we are done! I'm not discussing that with you! About how that makes me feel, because you certainly won't like what I have to say, and it's all," and he makes a motion about his skull, a flittering, flapping motion that I merely take to mean 'noise', "nonsense anyway!"

I place my mug on his dresser, quickly wiping my hands against my trousers.

"It's not nonsense to me, though, Sherlock. If what I am doing - or have been doing - is upsetting you, even just a little-"

"It shouldn't!," he all but yells, his throat swallowing - once, twice, three times.

I take a step closer.

"But is it?"

He flinches as I approach, and I take that as a sign to hold some basic distance between us.

"Is it?," I repeat.

"It's not just you," he admits at last. "It's everyone."

"But that is part of it?"

He looks at the carpeting.

"If you were anyone else, I probably wouldn't care so much!"

My confusion must register on my face.

"It's you wanting to...or liking," he stops, whispers, "liking that. At all. And I know it's none of my business! You have every right to tell me off for-"
"I'm not going to tell you off," I say, resolutely, "I just want to know what I can do to make this, well, not as hard for you."

He goes to his door, and fiddles with the handle. He so badly looks like he wants to flee.

Instead, he closes his eyes, and speaks.

"I don't like to think of anyone I like in any way, wanting to do that. Any of that. Because it's wrong."

I feel like I've been slapped.

"It's not...wrong, Sherlock. It's not."

He bites his lip and shakes his head back and forth, almost frantically.

Disagreeing with me.

"It is? It's wrong?"

He nods, and I feel a coldness run through my veins.

This isn't just about fear any longer. Or memories.

His entire appreciation for the subject has been tainted, and far more extensively than I would have ever guessed.

"What makes it wrong?" I ask far more calmly than I feel, while he pushes and pulls at the door, his body swaying with the motion.

"What makes it right?," he volleys, starring at me with a sick expression on his face. Almost as if he's horrified by the words leaving his mouth, but unable to stop himself.

"You didn't answer my question," I respond, as patiently as I can.

He seems to be on guard now.

"What makes it right, John? I mean, everyone always says it's good, or it's...beautiful, and to me-," and now I can see his breathing has accelerated, and he looks close to tears. "I can't see that at all! It's ugly and it's bestial and its mindless. It's not good! Not to me! It's disgusting!"

He sounds perilously close to tears.

I rush to his side, and take his hands, his arms.

"It's okay, Sherlock! It's okay to feel that way! You have every right to feel that way."

"But it's wrong!"

"Sherlock, I know right now that it-"

"My feelings, John! They are wrong! And my thoughts! They are all wrong. They have to be. They've been wrong my entire life, and they never...stop. They never stop being wrong, and I know they are wrong because everyone - everyone! - thinks it's good, and I think it's ugly!"

"Because it was ugly for you, Sherlock. Because it was painful, and it was cruel, and it was wrong.
Very, very wrong. And it's all that you knew. So why should you feel any differently? When that's all you've ever known?"

He suddenly wraps his arms around his waist, and pulls back from me.

"I don't want it to seem good, John. I don't want it to change in my mind. I don't...I can't explain what I mean, what this means to me. I'll offend you, and I don't want to offend you. I don't want to hurt you. I just- oh GOD," and then he suddenly punches his door. Before I can stop him.

When I pull his hand back, I can see that the wood is fractured and there is a mottling of blood running down his knuckles.

"Damn it! That is NOT OKAY, Sherlock! Anything else is fine! Tell me how you feel! Get it out! I won't judge you for that, or for anything! Not even this - just to clarify - but that doesn't mean I can let you hurt yourself!"

He's deathly still and quiet, the rapidity of his earlier breathing starting to slow. As if the pain is grounding him.

"Let's get you cleaned up."

His eyes are glassy and he lets me maneuver his body to the bathroom.

"This is going to sting," I warn.

"It's peroxide. Of course it's going to sting."

His voice sounds robotic.

The snark is absent.

I pour the peroxide onto a cotton ball, and then gingerly apply it to his hand.

"It's not wrong to feel confused," I say tentatively.

Again, no response.

He doesn't even flinch at the contact of peroxide to open, broken flesh.

"This is going to bruise. Pretty badly. But I don't think you've broken anything."

He blinks. Disinterested.

"Can you wiggle all your fingers for me, Sherlock?"

He does. If it pains him, he gives no sign that it does.

"Okay, I'm going to get some gauze and butterfly bandages. And I want you to keep a cold compress on afterwards. It'll keep the bruising and swelling down to a minimum."

He nods.

"Look - whatever awful things you are thinking about yourself, I'd like you to stop now."

He raises an eyebrow at that, and finally meets my eye.
"I didn't realize you could read minds."

I ignore the bait.

"You haven't done anything wrong, you know. You haven't, Sherlock."

His expression is one of confusion.

"You honestly believe that," he whispers, as if uncomprehending.

"Of course I believe that. What do you think you've done wrong?"

"I kissed you," he whispers. "That was wrong."

"Yes, you did," and I give him what I hope is an encouraging smile. "But how was that wrong, exactly?"

"You don't - you aren't," he trails off. "You're not gay, for starters."

"Neither are you, by the sound of things. So the question remains: what motivated that action?"

He sits on the toilet seat, the lid down of course, flexing his hand. Pale as can be.

"You've always been there for me," he says at last.

"Ok. I'm glad. You deserve a friend who will always be there for you, Sherlock."

"You're kind to me, even when I screw up."

I'm sensing a pattern here.

"So you're...fond? Of me?"

He nods, carefully, almost resignedly.

"And you wanted to express that?"

Another nod.

"Why is that wrong?"

"That's not the way you are supposed to show affection."

"Says who?"

He closes his eyes.

"I like you most of all," he whispers, bringing his wounded hand across his lap. I can see the spreading purple.

He really pounded that door.

"Okay."

"More than Victor. I feel safest with you. Safe."

I swallow. It's hard.
"Good. Okay. What else?"

"My dad never liked kissing me."

Something is curdling in my core. Rotten, foul.

A choking sense of pain.

"He never liked to kiss you?"

My voice, amazingly, sounds calm.

"My dad never did. He didn't like me, John. Not really. My mum, and Mycroft never did, either. Give me kisses, I mean. But sometimes, I wanted them to show that they liked me. I thought, I think it means...affection?"

He's asking.

He honestly is that confused.

"I think it can mean simple affection. It can mean several different things."

"I meant...affection. But not simple affection," he says uneasily. "But I don't know what I feel. It's a mess in my head. You and me."

I tap his uninjured hand.

"And that's okay," I assure him, though I'm certain that this story is far more complicated and far more layered than Sherlock's need to express affection.

"Is it?" he asks warily.

I give him a smile.

"Yes, it is."

Because it really is.

Somehow, it is.

Because despite the many betrayals Sherlock's lived through, he felt secure enough to reach out to me. Through atypical means. In a way that could even indicate romantic affection.

But for some reason, I find that I'm able to cope with that reality.

Perhaps it's Sherlock's own overwhelm. His own fear. My need to assure him that everything will be okay in the end.

And out of everything that has happened recently, this is one of the few things that doesn't scare me.

"Look - you think about it. Think about whatever is bothering you, and think how you can put those thoughts into words, and I promise - if you need to vocalize those thoughts at any time, you can. And I will be okay with whatever you want to say. Whatever you need to say."

He's still looking at me with that wary expression, as if debating the veracity of my claim.

"In the meantime, I'm going to make dinner soon. But we have to go to the shops, first. We are
almost out of food, save for condiments. It would be helpful if you'd come along. I want your input on things you'll actually eat."

Sherlock makes a face.

"We just had dinner!"

"That was lunch, and that was - for you - a snack. Some congee. A few tablespoons doesn't constitute a meal; heck, it was barely enough to keep a sparrow alive. You need to eat more than that in a day."

He rubs at his temple furiously, anxiously.

"You can help me prepare dinner later, too, if you want. I'm not expecting you to eat a lot - it doesn't have to be much, but you do have to take care of your stomach, or else will be right back at the."

"John?"

His eyes are hesitant.

"Mmmm?"

At first I think he's going to speak, to admit to something, and then:

"Let me get changed."

And just like that, he's hightailing it away and back to his bedroom.

Even though I'm fairly confident that's not what he planned to tell me at all.
Smaller Breaths

Chapter Summary

We are back to Sherlock’s POV.

So sorry for the wait, guys!

In this chapter, John and Sherlock go grocery shopping - and Toby reveals to Sherlock who actually hurt him.

I get changed into a turtle neck jumper, and then add an extra jumper (in cranberry) over the top. The extra material, I hope, disguises my lines. My - apparently - newfound thinness.

================================

Sometimes I am torn between wanting to cut a thin, clean angle. Something that looks more than just thin. Something that could almost look sick. At least, those are my thoughts lately, and I know they are strange and possibly even disordered. But those are my thoughts.

And sometimes, I think it's because in a manner of speaking, I want to disappear. To not give any clues about who I am and what I need - or don't need and don't want - away. Not to anyone. Not even to John.

And to not have anyone see my form. My lines. My flawed lines.

Right now, I cannot tell what need is stronger. To clearly warn people away. Or to tone down everything about me so much that I fade into the background.

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I find an old pair of cords in a taupey grey, and readily pull them on, rather than sporting my jeans or my other black or navy blue trousers.

The assortment makes me feel warmer. And I want to feel warmer.

I have been feeling terribly, frighteningly cold lately. It's a side effect of feeling calmer, feeling more in control. But it's the one side effect I really detest. That, and perhaps the acidic heat that keeps rising up through my stomach, and up to my throat.

================================

"Ready?," and John's voice is muffled as he lightly raps against my bedroom door.

I stare at myself in the mirror.

My face looks ugly and gaunt. Blue marks line my under-eyes.

I feel distorted and drawn and stretched out like a Picasso drawing.

No matter what I do, I seem to hate how I look and how I present myself to the world.

"You look... cozy," he says lightly, giving me a once-over. I try not to tug against my exterior jumper. Puff it out and make it cover my body even more. "You look different."

I don't know what to say to that. Is different good?

I doubt it.

"My throat is hurting," I start, frowning at myself, my words. "I'm feeling cold."

John nods, as if not surprised.

"You are run down," and he takes a step towards me, and places his arm on my upper arm, my shoulder.

His touch feels like something intense. Not bad, exactly. But not exactly great, either.

Lately, when John touches me at all - even though he only touches my hand, or the side of my face, or tends to a wound (usually acquired through an idiotic maneuver on my part, I'm sad to say), I feel a sinking sort of shame, and maybe even wounded. Hurt.

It's almost as if the heat of his fingertips - his physical presence - generates this need within me. Not to kiss. But to cry.

I might even admit that my pressure and devotion to trying to kiss him (and how stupid was that?) had more to do with not wanting to cry than it did with wanting to kiss him.

Because I haven't really cried in years. And I'm scared to cry. Scared for him to see that come out of me.

We go to a Tesco's. A large one. Or maybe they are all this large. I don't know; I never do the shopping. Certainly not the grocery shopping.

The aisles assault me. Lights and sounds and smells and information too fast and pulsing. Rows and rows and rows of packaged food. Rows of labels and nutritional information and listings of chemicals and preservatives and healthy food advertisements and junk food touted as health food.

"We will get the fresh stuff last, 'kay? That way it stays freshest, longest. How does that sound?"

Sounds reasonable. Logical.

"I bow to your grocery shopping superiority, John."

John gives a light laugh, and we zip the cart down an aisle that reads 'AISLE 8: soup/ canned fruit & veg.'

"So imagine now, I'm not around one evening," John starts to ramble. "You're hungry. You open the cupboard, and have to take out something - beans, soup, tinned asparagus - I don't care. But what do you choose?"

I stare at the lane. The colours, the words, the flouncy writing, the numbers, the prices everywhere,
the size discrepancies of the cans.

"What do you choose?" John asks again.

'Nothing', my inner mind hisses. 'You choose nothing.'

"Peas?," I query.

"Don't look at me, Sherlock. This is where you put whatever you want - and will eat, not just experiment on - into the cart."

"What about you?" I volley back. And besides, more than that - we must have a budget.

This can't be just for my benefit.

'I'll eat what you'd like too; don't worry about me.'

I wander the aisle, picking up the cans. Imagining what the food would feel like in my stomach.

'Not good,' my mind shortles. 'Not good at all.'

My hands feel sweaty.

Because It's back, and It hasn't been with me for a long, long time. Not like this.

Not so present.

Just a distant, daily dose of something that used to control how I thought and spoke and acted. And how I planned what to do, and what to say to Mycroft, and what to deny, too.

"Sherlock?"

I know the moment I put anything into the trolley, I'm going to take a few steps - and then want to just take everything back out, and put it away, and leave the store.

"You should choose," I say gruffly. "I don't like any of this stuff."

John, I know, is frowning. I don't even need to look at his face to know it.

"There are hundreds of different things here. Just choose two or three different types of things so we can stock the shelves with something."

I am immobilized to the spot. My heart is beating faster than normal.

I actually feel something akin to nausea.

I feel something more pressing than nausea.

Eventually I feel John's dry, warm hand taking mine. Lacing his fingers into mine.

I look down at our joined hands, and lick my lips.

"People are going to think-," I say in a whisper. A whisper, but shrill in timbre.

"What are people going to think?," John asks softly.

"That you are gay. That we are involved. That we are partners."
John laughs.

"Sherlock, I've stopped caring what people think about me for a long time now."

John parks the cart at one end of the aisle, and walks calmly with me, hands still entwined.

I wish I could make myself feel happy over this display of affection. Because that's all it could possibly be.

Affection.

Maybe camaraderie.

Support?

Something more?

But it's fear that I feel.

Fear and warmth, all mixed together.

I would like to pull back almost, if only to analyze the situation.

But I wouldn't want my actions to cause John pain. To feel rejected.

Because I know how that feels, too.

And that feeling is far worse than *this* feeling.

Whatever this feeling is.

This atypical fear.

"How about split pea soup?" John asks a few minutes later.

"Too high in sodium," I respond automatically. "Bad for blood pressure."

"I don't think you need to worry about high sodium," John smiles tentatively. It's more an encouraging smile rather than his purely pleased-with-life smile. I can tell the difference.

"I was thinking about you. You live with me. I must raise your blood pressure enough already."

John shakes his head, but I can tell that he is amused.

"Then what about this? Organic vegetable soup. Low sodium. Says so right on the label. Conspicuously missing pesky chemicals, too - now there's a bonus."

I look at the can, read the label, feel the weight, and imagine myself eating this.

I take a deep breath and nod. Put the can into the cart.

John smiles and deposits 13 other cans into the cart.

"Allotted snack for us both for two weeks," he says reasonably.
I don't say anything, but I can't honestly see myself eating vegetable soup solid for two weeks in a row.

"Is that okay?," John clarifies, looking almost concerned.

I nod.

"Let's get this," I insert impulsively, a pace away - if only to change the subject. A container of Bird's custard.

"Something with absolutely no nutritional value whatsoever," John says under his breath, but to me: "Yeah, sure - pop it into the cart."

I do. I can flavour it with xylitol. And it's light enough that it'll likely not aggravate my stomach.

We are in the biscuits, crisps and cracker aisle when John's phone goes off.

"Hello?," he asks warmly. Everything about John is warm. Usually, anyway. He's like a sun, and at no time is his warmth even more apparent than when it is winter. An emotional winter. Everything else can feel like ice around you, until he looks at you, smiles at you. And then you feel some of the coldness dissipate. You feel the promise of heat and consolation.

"Oh, hey Greg. Yeah-," and his voice rumbles kindly.

My own confused feelings aside, I know I am in love with his voice. It's one of those profoundly calming voices. Not too many people can make me feel like everything is going to be okay like John can.

Not even Victor could do that.

I push the images away then, and watch John's mouth move - almost soundlessly.

"Not right now," he mutters into the phone. "We are shopping."

I stand at the aisle with a couple packages of Finnish crackers in my arms. The parcel is red and something about these foodstuffs seem doable. Maybe because they don't look like foodstuffs I've tried before. It's a new attempt. Something novel.

No memories of failure with a new product.

So I hold onto them with clenched hands, resolute that I will give them a go.

"No - later," John says firmly, "We haven't had dinner yet. He has an ulcer, Greg. He can't afford to miss meals like he has been doing. Not any more."

I deposit the boxes into the cart. Not like John would. Not gently at all. The edge of one box crumples in at the corner.

"Jesus, Sherlock!," my flatmate hisses, "be careful with those. They will all be in crumbles by the time we get home, otherwise."

For the record, I love it when John calls our flat, 'home."

"Lestrade?," I say loudly. "I can speak to him, John."
John grumbles something else into the phone (I can't make it out. Not fully), and then starts to pass the phone over to me.

"Not until you've eaten something and taken your meds," he warns me before he makes the pass. I nod absent mindenly.

"Yes?," I huff into the phone, once it is in my possession.

"Thanks for speaking with me, Sherlock," Lestrade breaths out heavily. "I hate to call you about this at all, but-

"Enough with small talk. What is it?"

I hear John exhale in irritation. Or possibly, in a constrained reprimand for my rudeness.

"Ok. Alright then," Lestrade says, "Toby was asking for you. Is asking, I guess."

The words feel foreign to me. I sort through the possibilities in my mind.

"He is writing things out again?"

"No, Sherlock. He spoke, I mean. Not much, but-"

"What did he say?," I ask insistently. "Exactly. It's very important."

"Just your name. Just 'Sherlock.'"

I toss in a package of honey graham bears - something decidedly childish, and something I know that John is just going to take out of the cart again and put back on the shelves in about two seconds from now.

"For god's sake," John mutters, putting back the bear biscuits, while I toss in a box of Wagon Wheels to keep him occupied.

"You're worse than a three year old," he laments a second later, and for a second - I grin.

"John sounds unhappy about something," Lestrade interjects. "Are you guys honestly shopping together?"

"We are shopping for biscuits for dinner," I say imperiously. "Evidently John has a problem with chocolate. Or marshmallow."

"Not even close, you lunatic," John grits out, while I turn back to the subject at hand.

"What was the context?," I ask Lestrade a few seconds later, "of Toby's request."

"His mum put him down for a nap - he's been profoundly exhausted recently - and when he woke up he apparently started to get very scared. Tore his calendar off the wall, and shimmied his way into a crawl space. He won't come out, and when anyone tries to go in after him, he screams bloody murder. Keeps saying, "Want Sherlock." Just your name over and over again. They know that you're under the weather yourself, Sherlock - they just don't know what else to do. I mean-"

"I can come right away."

"Sherlock, no," John says firmly. "Not now. We are finishing this trip, then we are having dinner, we-"
"I'll get a taxi and be there in about twenty five minutes."

Lestrade seems to hesitate and I disconnect the call and pass the phone back to John.

"You'll have to finish the shopping without me," I say quickly, buttoning up my jacket. "But I'll see you later. Unless you want to come, too?"

I try to play it cool, but I can see John's cheek twitching.

"So that's it, is it?"

"That's 'what'?," I ask impatiently. I really don't have time for this.

"You are just going to find another convenient reason to skip another meal, to get even-"

"For god's sake, John! That little kid is terrified, and he needs to talk to me. Now, apparently. And I don't care who gets that. The point is - I get that - and I'm going. Right this second!"

John recoils, almost as if hurt. I know he's not hurt so much as...stressed.

And that has everything to do with me, too. But I can't fixate on that right now.

I have more important matters to tend to at the moment.

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I ignore the dull ache of sadness at my memory of John - standing alone by the cart at Tesco's, the cart full with foods that he really didn't even like. His only concern being...me.

And maybe that's a problem as well.

One person shouldn't direct all their concern and focus on another. It's so overwhelming for the person of that focus, and too draining for the person cultivating that concern.

Maybe we should never be that concerned about anyone.

Because people let you down.

I let people down.

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"Where we heading?," the cabbie asks me, once I nestle myself into the back seat.

"Stoneybrook," I say tightly, looking at my watch. "As fast as possible, please."

Hopefully the driver will take that as code for 'please don't talk.'

I don't feel like talking to anyone right now. Not even Toby.

But I have to speak with him. It's the least I can do.

So I will stretch. For that kid. I'll do that, because I have to.

Because it's right. But small talk will have to wait.

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The small stone house is illuminated by two hanging lanterns. A flower garden swims out and around the house, and towards the back. Wildflowers, maybe some irises. It looks very natural. Very beautiful.

I wonder if Toby could ever appreciate it, given the hell he must have been living through for a long time, now.

And where was he hurt? Home is likely, though I have reconsidered my original conjecture.

No, Mr. Thiesen is not the predator here. But it's something close to home all the same.

I knock quickly against the door, and it starts to open quickly. Almost as if someone had been waiting right behind the frame, waiting for my arrival.

Probably exactly the case.

Because if I had a child, and they were afraid - really afraid - and I couldn't do anything directly, wouldn't I do everything I could to help? Even if I had to rely on someone else - wouldn't I act with speed and focus to douse that fear with as committed a resolution as possible?

Yes. Absolutely, I would.

"Thank you for coming, Sherlock. DI Lestrade said-"

"Yes, yes. It's fine. Where is Toby?," I say rapidly, no time for pleasantries.

"In his room. There is an opening for a storage space, and he's wedged himself between two filing cabinets, and old furniture. We don't want to move anything out of the way with him hiding...," and Mrs. Thiesen trails off, glancing over to Mr. Thiesen, perched on the last step of the staircase. He looks over to me, now, his eyes red rimmed.

"He screams if we try to reach for him," the man says. Apparently, there are no hard feelings here. Not overtly, anyway. Mr. Thiesen isn't holding my actions against me, and I find that curious.

But what would John say? That maybe he's a little preoccupied with his son?

Still, I find it notable.

"He's screaming?," I clarify.

"He's talking," he whispers. "Not much. But enough that we-"

He stops his explanation.

"He asked for you," Toby's mother interjects. "He feels safe with you. I think he remembers that you were the one that...saved him."

"I didn't save him; he saved himself," I say, uncomfortable with their words and assertions.

Because I didn't save him. Had I been able to help him in time, he never would have had his skull crushed in.
I didn't do much at all.

I've never been able to do much to help anyone.

I can't even help myself.

I climb about twenty steps to get to the second landing, and walk across parquet tiles. Framed photos on the wall capture images of the family. A few older ones, of baby photos of Toby's parents, apparently - and then photos of them as adolescents and young adults. Then photos together; hiking, camping, in airports. Many candid.

Then a large number of newer infant photos: less grainy, with eyes that are undoubtedly Toby's. Sitting up, standing up. Holding onto a chair leg. Huge toothless grinning. Train onesies and soft plush dolls and then Toby at two, and three and four.

And a curious thing happens as we progress. The photos become far less jubilant. There are less grins, less smiles, and by the age of five or so - there are no smiles. None whatsoever. Save for a kindergarten photo and some school prints. Even in those cases, the smiles seem forced, not natural.

I suddenly find myself in front of a purple door, with a glass inlay in four different colours. The interior nightlight is causing beams of red, yellow, green and blue light to spill out into the hall, painting my body and the wall in various hued light.

Opening the door slowly, I test out a "Toby?"

Predictably, there is no response.

I pass a small canopy bed, and a toy chest. The bed is made, and absolutely covered in soft plush dolls and stuffed animals. I recognize the grubby white snow owl doll, taking center space, along with a mammoth dragon, a brontosaurus, a mucky looking teddy bear wearing corduroy trousers, a satin hare, a bright pink pig, and a Cabbage Patch doll.

A fleeting smile passes my face, until I look around the room more; seeing knight and horse figurines arcing around the bed, almost in protective fashion. There are at least three night lights, and large towering bookshelves filled to the brim with all manner of picture books and - as I peruse - fantasy and science fiction novels.

This little boy wanted to escape.

My eyes lilt up to a poster, tacked over his bed.

'Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light. - Albus Dumbledore'

On the poster a little boy with dark hair and glasses is holding an owl, and staring at a bright, autumn moon.

I think I recognize the series; that Harry magician series for kids.

Yes, escape was Tobias Thiesen's primary means of coping with his life.

I open the closet and see the latch to the storage room ajar - the door open. A torch causes the room
to glow with spooky blueness.

"Toby?," I start carefully, "it's me. It's Sherlock."

I listen then, doing my best to take in any sounds. I can hear raggedy breathing.

"Toby? I'm going to sit right here, by the door, okay? I won't force you to come out of there."

I hear a hitched breath, and a broken sob.

And why did I have to isolate myself from John? He'd know how to handle this child far better.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

My voice sounds far more patient than I feel. I've never been a patient person, but I also wouldn't consider myself a cruel person.

Nothing. No response.

"How about you come a tad closer to the door? Your mum and dad tell me there are heavy things in there; they are worried something might fall and hurt you."

I hear a scruffling sound, like scratching leaves or chalk against a blackboard.

And then a tiny little voice, pure and sweet:

"Sherl'ck?"

My heart pounds with affection and need. A need like pain.

Because then I can see his face, tear streaked and spooked - his hair spiked up by sweat, and his pajamas coated in dust. He looks grey and blue and all-too pale in the dark of the space.

"There you go. Thank you. You must be cold in there. Do you want to sit in your rocking chair?"

The little head doesn't move, and the only sound is the breathing which he is obviously trying to regulate.

"Here," he whispers.

"You want to stay here?"

"Closet," Toby clarifies, nodding.

I try to inhibit my sigh, and slowly get up, stripping his bed of a duvet and pillow, which I then bring back to the closet.

"Wrap this around you. You'll heat up quickly. Put this behind your head."

The little boy does so.

"You?"

I blink, trying to ascertain what the child is asking.

"Am I what? Am I cold?"
Toby just nods.

"I'm okay. I'm wearing two jumpers. I'll be fine."

Toby leans against the pillow. He looks exhausted.

"Can I turn on the light?"

Toby nods, and I get up sorely, my knee popping, then flip the switch.

The room changes from shadowy and dark to a Peter Pan green. The closet, however, is still darker - as Toby has attempted to close the closet door once more - leaving only several inches open.

"You've made yourself a little nook," I say amicably.

Toby's head has lulled against the pillow.

"Toby," I start, not wanting to drag this out longer than we need to; it's hard on both of us. "Your mum and dad called me. They said you wanted to speak to me. What did you have to say?"

The boy looks startled. I am starting to suspect that he didn't so much as request to speak to me, as he did perhaps reference me in a moment of panic.

"I want to help you, Toby. But I can't do very much if you won't speak to me at all."

It may be blunt, but then again - I am a blunt person. I don't know how to be like John. Even Sally is good with kids. But I'm not. I'm direct, even confrontational. Because to me they aren't just 'kids' - they are smaller adults. Which John would argue isn't accurate at all, but I can't help how I feel about children. Maybe I see them as less idiotic, more open minded, and typically more genuine - but essentially, I don't care more or less about them than I would anyone else just because they are small. And maybe I'm lacking some critical part of humanity. Something I need to be a good person. Something that I need to be the type of person that can really reach this child.

But of course it was Toby that asked to speak to me, and not the other way around.

"S'rry," the boy lisps, and I suddenly am assuaged with guilt.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," I say emphatically. "I'm not...good at talking. I say things the wrong way sometimes. Most times. But-," and I take a sigh, "I want to ensure that I can help you, but I don't know how. Unless you speak to me. Do you understand?"

Toby's eyes are wide, and suddenly I don't see a nine year old at all. I see a toddler, and then I see a baby.

And then the images flitter away.

"Sc'red," he whispers.

I try to ignore the anger pulsing away in my stomach.

"You don't need to be afraid any more. Your mum and dad, and Detective Inspector Lestrade, and his team - they are all going to keep trying to help you. They will keep looking for the person that hurt you, and they'll lock him up, and they'll make sure that he can't hurt you ever again."

"Lock up?"
I nod, and indicate to my own skull.

"Yes, that's right. Whoever hurt your head and hurt you down below? That person...we will make sure they never see you again."

Toby's eyes fill with tears.

"What is it, Toby?"

"No. Keep. I love -," he breaks off now, his voice rasping and staggeringly pained.

"You love this person?"

And then - remarkably - Toby Thiesen reaches for my hand.

His smaller one is sweaty and cold.

"Not same," he whispers so softly I can barely make out the words at all. "Not same. Different."

And then I feel a queasy, strange feeling of falling - even though I'm sitting. Even though I'm immobile against the carpeted floor.

"Two different people hurt you?"

He squeezes my hand so tightly, it begins to tingle.

"Toby - do you know who touched you? Do you remember who hurt you between your legs?"

The child looks miserable. But he nods.

"Doanwanna say."

"I know you don't want to say. But how about this? You tell me - or you write it down, and then I will talk to Inspector Lestrade for you, okay?"

"Only that. Only that," he repeats - the obvious stress causing him to tremble.

"How about you just give me a word about how you know this person, and I will figure out the rest?"

Toby exhales. His hand is squeezing mine in a death grip.

"Piano," he responds tremulously.

Of course.

Piano.

His piano instructor.

Because when did the smiles stop? At 5, or thereabout?

And what had his mother told me, offhandedly one time?

That he started taking lessons at four and a half?

I bite down a growl, and try to repress my rage.
Because I had a violin tutor when I was small. And my tutor very likely saved my life. He was the only adult I really trusted. He was warm, and he was kind.

And I came so close to confiding in him about what had been happening to me, because I knew he cared about me in an almost parental way.

So in some respects, I feel that Stephen very likely kept me committed to life, and living, and he helped me see that not all adult males would hurt kids. That some cared about kids, but didn't expect anything else in return.

But Toby's tutor had been molesting him. For four or five years, most likely.

Even the beauty of music would have been contaminated to him now. And that was another saving grace for me: my music. It was free of pain and untainted and consoling and beautiful.

So it takes all my effort not to wrench my hand away from Toby's and punch something. Punch something hard.

Instead, I school my voice into something relatively composed.

"Thank you. I will take care of this. I promise you."

The boy looks anxious.

"Don't worry, Toby. You've been so brave, and it's going to be okay. I just have one more question now, okay? Just one more question."

Toby's face has morphed into a picture of nausea.

"It's okay, we'll just take this at your speed. If you don't want to talk anymore, that's okay too. But can you tell me the person who hurt your head? Who hurt your head on the night you went to the hospital?"

Toby looks down and gasps, shaking his head back and forth.

"You don't remember?"

The boy suddenly reaches for the lapels of my jacket and pulls himself to me, all but placing himself in my lap. All but hiding his head beneath my neck, and wrapping my arms around him. I feel awkward and strange holding onto a child like this, but he grasps at my waist, burying his mouth against my shoulder.

"Hmmm?"

"Sherl'ck, no," and he shakes his head again. "C'nt tell."

I ponder the words. The insistence that he can't tell.

He readily gave up the name of his molester, but he seems adamant and persistent in his need to keep the identity of the person who tried to actually kill him a secret. And it doesn't make sense.

Unless-

"Toby-"

"No jail," he whispers. "Not away."
"You don't want this person to go away?"

And then I remember what he told me. Or the word he used - interjected amongst the others.

Love.

He used the word 'love.'

"You love this person, don't you?"

"Mmm," he breaths, looking suddenly so much like a child-John that I almost pull away, feeling alarmed and disconnected. Feeling almost dissociative.

"You've loved this person for a long time?"

"Mmm. Love me," he breathes, looking very insistent on this fact.

"This person loves you."

He squeezes my shoulders, his mouth breathing into the top of my torso, his little body compacted. As if he's trying to curl up in on himself.

"Ok," I let out the word, my anger repressed once more. "How about you tell me who hurt your head, and I'll make sure they get help. I will do my best to make sure they get help, and to make sure that no one is mean to them. And that this person knows that you were trying to help them, so they got to see a doctor. That you cared about them. I'll make sure of it, Toby."

The words are infantile. Profoundly juvenile.

But I'm speaking to a child. A profoundly terrified child.

Something has to give.

"Pr'mise?," Toby lisps again.

"Yes. I promise. I will do my very best and I will let them know that you love them too."

Toby grabs my hand, now even more moist and cold than before.

"Doanleave," and his words run together in his anxiety.

"No. I won't leave you. I promise, I will stay right with you."

"Doango'way," he pleads.

"No, I won't go away. I will stay right with you. I will not abandon you."

Toby breathes heavily against my neck now. At this rate, he's going to have a panic attack.

And then I hear the croaking, groaning ache of the stairs as someone ascends. A few seconds later, there is a light knock against the frame.

"Sherlock?," Mrs. Thiesen says softly, opening the main door to the bedroom.

"Just a second, Hope," I mutter, as the door opens fully now.

Toby completely burrows his head into my shoulder.
"Toby?," Mrs. Thiesen asks sharply, her eyes narrowing. "What's going on in here?"

And the child's fingertips are digging into my back now.

"He's...he's just had a bad dream. Just spooked himself. We'll just be a bit longer, Hope."

The woman nods her head, looking back to her child.

"Well, I'm glad you're out of that storage closet, love. Heavy things in there. I don't want you hurt, honey. I never would want that, Toby. You know that, don't you? And I'm sorry you were hurt. That's never going to happen again. I'll make sure of it."

Toby nods against my neck; a silent answer to his mother's questions.

"Good boy. I'll be downstairs. I love you, Toby."

Toby nods again, and the motion is robotic and very, very regimented.

The door closes and I play the words over in my head.

'You know that, don't you?'

'That's never going to happen again.'

Toby's elevated breathing is now coming so fast and furious that he's starting to gasp for air.

I pull his petite body away from my torso and stroke his hair.

"You've got to take smaller breaths, Toby. Or else the scary feeling is going to get worse."

But he's shaking his head back and forth in alarm.

"Smaller breaths. Like a breath holding competition? And I promise it will be better soon. Can you hold the next breath?"

Toby does. He lets out a gasp, and then clamps down against his lips, his small hands railing against mine.

"Good job. Just a little bit of this feeling now, but it will go away."

And it works. Slowly.

Soon the panic has been averted.

"Tell me now, Toby. Right now. While I'm here, tonight. And I will keep you safe. I will keep you safe with every fiber of my being. I promise you that I will protect you, and I promise you that things will get better if you trust in me."

He stands up then - his body swaying and shaking, while his arms come to loop around my middle.

"Doan go," he stresses, his voice barely audible.

"I'm not going, Toby."

"Doan go."

The child is repeating himself; he's so traumatized.
"No. I won't. I'm not."

"I-I..."

"Just tell me. Please just tell me the name."

His arms fist around my sides - hinge-like and clasping, and I lift him up. Replicating my actions on the night when I found him, bleeding and alone and left out in the rain by the train tracks.

"I believe in you, Toby."

And the body stills, his body relaxing - but only marginally. Still, it's a sign. A precursor that he may be able to confide in me if I-

"Mummy," he whispers. "Mummy."

My body starts to itch. Starts to itch and sting and I suddenly feel hot and sweaty and angry. So fucking furious.

"Mummy?," I repeat.

"Mummy hurt my head," he says quickly, almost tripping over the words, and then: "doango'awy."

"No. No, Toby. I'm not going to leave you alone. You're coming with me. But first I am going to call Greg - you remember Greg, right? He's going to come in his special police car, and I'm going to go someplace safe with you. And I will stay with you. And I'll make sure we go someplace where you can sleep, and we will all make sure you stay safe. Me, and Greg and John and the other police people you met before, okay?"

He doesn't respond - merely clamps down further against my neck, his short limbs barely reaching my knees, as I brace his back and bottom with one side - gingerly - aware of his injuries.

"Hedw'g," he squeaks, pointing to his owl doll, and I reach down deftly, snatching up the grey and foul item and bringing it towards Toby's hands.

"Okay. You hold onto Hedwig, and I'll call Greg and everything will be okay. Everything is going to be okay."

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About fifteen minutes later, mentally calculating the time it would take to get Sally or Lestrade out to the Thiesen's household, I begin my descent - moving my way through the room with the small child, then down the hallway, and like a spook - soft and noiseless - down the stairs. Toby is shaking ferociously, and I say nothing. Just move down the hallway, onwards to the foyer.

My goal is to simply slip out of the house, and get the kid strapped into the squad car, and then have the details of my actions explained to Mr. Thiesen at a later time.

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"What's going on?," the voice of Mr. Thiesen cuts through the air, just as I'm about to turn the handle on the lock.

I turn in a gentle half circle, careful to not jostle the child.

"We have to go back to the clinic. Toby's dizzy," I lie easily.
"And you thought - what?! You'd just slowly flounce out of our front door without saying anything to either myself, or my wife? Jesus - what is WRONG with you? Toby is our CHILD! If something is wrong with him, you come to us - you don't."

"Your son is terrified of this house because he's been hurt in this house. Repeatedly, and for years. Right now he's shaky - possibly in mild shock. Can we keep this conversation from escalating, please? For Toby's sake?"

"You have some bloody nerve!"

And at that moment, Mrs. Thiesen enters the foyer, her face frozen in something decidedly scowling.

"What is going on here, Sherlock?"

"Please open the door, Hope. I am escorting your child back to the clinic."

"Toby?," Mrs. Thiesen cries in feigned alarm, and I feel a surge of hatred pulse out. I all but bite down on my lip. "Are you feeling badly, sweetie?"

And as she touches his back, the child screams. It's loud and raucous and horrifying, but it does the trick: Mrs. Thiesen jumps back as if scalded by boiling water.

"He's having head pain; I don't want to waste any time in having him see a neurologist."

Mr. Thiesen stands up.

"Where do you get off? Give me my son! Right now!"

I stare the man down.

"No. No I won't."

The vein on Mr. Thiesen's forehead begins to pulse.

"You WON'T? You are deranged! I'm calling Inspector Lestrade right now! Don't you dare take one extra step with my child!"

So I still my movements, and check my watch, while Mrs. Thiesen steps forward yet again.

Toby begins to cry, overwhelmed with the noise, the anger, the presence of his parents.

"Toby, love?"

The crying gets worse, and his voice begins to sound barky and sore.

"He's a little overwhelmed right now. But I've gotten Inspector Lestrade to come and pick us up, so that we can-

And then, blessedly, there's a knock at the door.

I stare down at Mrs. Thiesen, finally letting my anger show. But only in my face. Not in my voice.

"Can you open the door, please, Hope?"

The woman before me pales.

"Sherlock, I didn't-"
"I will ensure that Toby is able to get some sleep now. That he will be safe from here on out. And that you will get the help you need, as I promised your son. Because he loves you, Hope. He loves you, even if I don't understand why."

The woman backs away, running through the hallway - away from me, away from the door, and away from the knocking of Lestrade. With clumsy movements, I open the lock, shuffling the child to my stronger arm, while Toby lets out an alarmed shriek.

"It's okay. I'm just opening the door, and then we will sit in Greg's police car, and you just have to close your eyes. You can sleep now, okay?"

Toby doesn't nod, and he doesn't speak at first. He just lets out a deep, heavy sigh.

Then nods his head.

"Sleep."

"Yes. You'll get to sleep. And no one will touch you ever again."
Sherlock cannot continue his charade much longer. Angst-wise, the end is, well, not nigh' - because he'll actually be getting help soon. And that's important. But he's going to start improving, slowly but surely, starting next chapter.

We are back to JOHN'S POV

The atmosphere of NSY is incredibly tense when I arrive. Sally looks me straight in the eye - a harrowing moment, almost. Her eyes look wide, and blackened by sleeplessness and horror and a silent plea. A 'no.' Or something else I've never seen on her face before, and never want to see again.

"Sally?," I question.

"We have the mum separated, the dad separated. Lestrade has Sherlock separated from everyone. God," she exhales, "what a fucking mess. Toby is just - gone. He's just-"

She doesn't need to explain more, which is lucky - because I don't think she knows how to say what she needs to say in the first place.

I nod, slowly. My lips and face feel numb. Like I've chewed up and swallowed cloves. Or perhaps just consumed far too much alcohol. But I've never been much of a drinker. Not growing up, seeing how it impacted my father, and my sister.

So I have no idea why I am nodding. It is probably just automatic by this point.

"Okay," I express just as paced as her own words, a moment before. "And Sherlock - why is he separated?"

Sally almost glares at me.

"You need to ask that, or you really don't know?"

I blink, feeling sucker punched. Feeling far too exhausted for this crap.

"Can you comprehend that I might have just a couple dozen things going on right now, dealing with Sherlock alone?," I growl in irritation, and that seems to do the trick. Sally now looks away as if pained.

"Break room," she hisses. "Break room now."

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Break room it is.

"What are we doing? Because I really don't have-"

She shakes her head back and forth. Black ringlets shake in time to a lilac blouse, nearly see through, dampened with sweat.
Suddenly, and it's a real moment of deja vu, Sally Donovan holds up a finger. A be-the-fuck-quiet-and-let-me-talk finger.

"Your...friend," she gets out, almost choked, "Sherlock - he knows things. About Toby."

"Of course he knows things, he's Sherlock."

"Don't you play me," and she swallows, her face contorted and looking sour. Nauseated. "He should not be on this case at all, should he?"

I clench my jaw, and fight the impulse to turn away.

"John! Answer me!"

I take a step back then, feeling cornered. Feeling incredibly vulnerable.

"What?!"

"You know exactly 'what'," Sally breathes, harshly. "My God - it's all over him. Like soot. Like...something worse, and you know exactly what I'm talking about, so do not play games with me. He could have a neon sign swinging from around his neck and it wouldn't make it any more obvious!"

A flicker of red burns up under my pupils and I feel a level of aggression, if not rage, that I've rarely felt in the last five years. Not even when I was still in the RAMC fighting insurgents. It is likely out of control by now, my rage. Totally disproportionate, and it's present now - and that's what scares me.

"And what, Sally? You think you are onto something, and now you are owed an explanation? Sherlock owes you nothing! Nothing about himself! After how you have treated him, the terms you have called him! Since when does the personal issues of a 'freak' concern you, anyway?"

She looks to the floor, looking spent. Looking beaten.

"I'm sorry," she says, sotto voice, and that makes me feel cold. It makes me feel like the worst friend in the world to Sherlock because in that instance, for a flicker of a moment, I almost feel sorry for her. For a woman who probably has called my best friend cruel names hundreds of times in the few years I have known her. About a man with destructively low self-esteem as it is. And whether or not she knew or could see that his put-upon arrogance was just that, I don't care. Certainly not now.

"I didn't think. I didn't consider that maybe-"

"No," I snarl, "this case is all that you need to be concerned with; not Sherlock. Toby is your concern. So keep it about the kid, or count this discussion as over."

She straightens her jacket, and rises to her full height, looking both leaner and yet more formidable in one rapid movement.

"Sherlock has inserted himself into this case to this degree because it's personal, but if he's having some sort of."

"Don't you dare say it," I get out.

"Some sort of breakdown, or if-"

"Damnit, Donovan! That is none of your business! Sherlock's past is none of your business!"
"Well I think it is! I damn well know it is, because his past is shooting the present to hell and interfering with my job!"

My fist slams down against the mahogany desk in a wave, in a roaring crack of explosive contempt. An old mug and remnant coffee shake about a bit, but otherwise all is still.

"You've hated him! Since the moment you've known him, and you know it! So you don't get to play concerned friend right now."

Sally turns on her heel, stalking to the door. Furious with me, no doubt. But maybe - hopefully - furious with herself, too.

"Well, someone has to be," she grits out, her body tense, as if expecting that I'll strike her. "Someone has to be his friend, and be concerned."

The room is quiet, and I gulp away my bitterness. My bitterness is swapping places with fear. Being rapidly replaced by fear, actually. And a sense of doom and loss, and in this moment I feel the truth of it all. I sense that not only was I a horrid brother who couldn't save his sister, but I was also the useless son who couldn't save his mother, nor his father. And now...

Have I've failed my best friend on this issue, with this need?

The thought makes me feel the weakest and the saddest.

But I don't say what I feel. I say what I must, if only to keep up appearances.

"What the hell does that mean? Do you have any idea how difficult it can be to live-"

Her voice, now, has lost its heat. I can hear self-recrimination in her tone. A flitting realization that she's been too condemning of a person that stood by a social pariah, wounded by everyone else's inability to see him for what he truly was; and Sally Donovan's own inability to see a victim in one victimized far more than most will ever be victimized is probably upsetting to her, in its own right.

Serves her right.

So I can hear her shame, and feel my own. And it drives me to muteness.

"He looks like a skeleton," she pleads with me a second later.

I take in a gulp of air, hold it. Feel unnaturally scared. For Sherlock. For the truth so strong that Sherlock can't conceal it at all any longer.

For the truth that is eating him alive. Literally stripping flesh away from bone.

"He's working on it. He's been sick-"

Donovan's eyes are bright, knowing, and I feel a keening need to cry.

"Is he working on getting sicker? Because he has been steadily declining over the last few months. We have all seen it, God John, I may have been rotten to him. But I'm not deliberately cruel. And I know what this is. I'm not," and she represses an expletive only to more than make up for it a second later, "I'm not fucking stupid. He needs help. Serious help. Now."

"None. of. your. business," and my voice is a machine. A grating, gearing machine. Industrial music made manifest in words. "It's none of your goddamn business, Sally!"
"When it concerns a child? A child victim on an NSY case? You better believe that it's my bloody business!"

"You know he'll solve it! Why can't you just leave him alone?!"

Sally turns the handle, as if to leave; I can tell that the fight is leaving her body. Her eyes are hollowed and black, too. Sherlock is not the only one who has not been sleeping recently it would seem.

"Hate me all you want, John. But I know what this is. And I'll get him scrapped from this case if that's what I think he needs. We all know he values puzzles more than he values his own life, anyway."

She straightens her tan jacket then, and the motion - so proper - irks me. I feel an impulse to punch someone.

"Like you have any conception as to what he needs!"

"Maybe not. But I know what he doesn't need. He doesn't need a so-called friend that ignores the fact that he's obviously disturbed. He doesn't need anyone who would ignore how far he's let himself fall. And he certainly doesn't need someone who'd ignore the reality that he's just as human as the rest of us, and that he's killing himself, whether he wants to face that fact or not!"

My body arcs out in pain, because I know she's telling the truth. The truth I saw myself, and denied. Found excuses for - and in so doing, helped usher into our lives. Maybe even help take root in his own psyche.

Because maybe I did do that. Maybe I helped elevate a mere problem to a potential catastrophe.

And if Sally can see it, everyone can see it, and as she has asserted - many others have already been commenting on it.

"We are...finishing this. For Toby," I get out in haggard breaths, my words constricted because my throat is so tight, "and then I'll worry about realize that, don't you? Neither of us can open this up, and close it any time soon."

I look down at the table as I speak and notice that my left arm is trembling.

And it's then that I realize that I have never trembled out of interest or love of violence.

It's then that I realize that Mycroft was wrong all along. For all his brilliance, and his cleverness, and his ability to look at someone and just seemingly know them - he did not know me. Not on this.

Because I am not shaking out of repressed joy in violence or love of danger.

I'm shaking out of preparation and expectation of battle.

And that's a very different thing.

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I trail Donovan to the break room, and she gives me a look - more sad than angry - before turning and leaving. Through the slightly frosted glass, I can see Sherlock's tousled hair and long neck. He's bundled up in his coat, and the rain-patterned glass is giving the impression that all his body is weeping.
I rap my knuckles against the wood and see the blurred outline of his body startle before I open the door.

He gives me a tight smile, which is atypical for him. An expected expression of civility and order, and a thought - barren and tepid - rings through my head: 'he's trying to convince you that he's fine. Don't let him.'

But I give him a brief smile of my own, then saddle on over to a circular Formica table, revelling in the screech of the plastic chair as it grates against the floor.

"Have my rights been restored?," Sherlock mutters as I sit down, staring dully at a cup of black coffee. It looks rather grotty.

"I wouldn't drink out of that cup. Doesn't look very clean."

He grins, but it's a soulless sort of attempt at looking amused.

"The housekeeping here is atrocious, isn't it?"

I grin, this time for real.

"You know they don't have 'housekeeping' at the NSY."

"Obviously not," Sherlock retorts looking slightly amused, "and Lestrade's mug was the cleanest of the batch."

I let out a sigh.

"You asked, or--"

Sherlock takes a sip of the sludge and makes a face.

"If I 'accidentally' dropped this mug, do you think the world would be better for it?"

"You wouldn't dare," I intone mildly, not really caring one way or the other on such an irrelevant point. Not with Donovan's words repeating through my mind, mocking the triviality of his attempts to appear at ease. To appear ok.

"Lestrade might be better off for it. Might prompt him to actually invest in something that looks a bit more sanitary."

The mug is chipped, and looks decidedly ancient. To Sherlock, for all the horror of his life, he seems to have retained his rather posh demeanor. It's perhaps the only cover he took from his childhood that allowed him to come across as frosty, if not elevated, and he probably relied on those divisions in expected class and manner to keep a lot of awful things hidden from an awful lot of people.

But right now, he smirks at me, enjoying our banter, then swallows down the last bit of cold-grungy coffee. I hold back a wince. The drink does look quite unsanitary. There even seems to be a film of oil on the top of it, not unlike old pond sludge across the top of a diseased pool of water.

"Did you make fresh coffee, or did you just use up whatever refuse was still remaining in the pot?"

Sherlock doesn't respond, but dangles the mug over the floor, looping one lean digit through the handle and letting it roll back and forth through his fingers.

"Should we flip for it?"
"You keep it up, and Lestrade is going to lose it. I mean, there comes a point when even the most patient person will have their fill of you."

Sherlock’s smile drops then, and I realize my comments came out as more of a barb and less good natured ribbing.

It certainly sounds far harsher now that I have said it aloud.

I try not to look too guilty.

"They’ve already lost it, John. All of them," Sherlock finally intones a few seconds later, sounding sour.

I should really apologize. But I suspect that any apology I try to offer will result in mockery, and my nerves are frayed too.

"Mmm," I say, non-committedly. Best to let Sherlock ramble. He’ll reveal much more that way.

"I found that kid, when everyone assumed he was part of the Valadain profile. Everyone else just assumed he was a lost cause, but I saw the details. Could make sense of the non-sensical. I found him, not Lestrade. Not Sally Donovan."

He says her last name like it's a swear word.

"I know," I agree, sadly. Because it's true. It's 100% true. But it doesn't change the reality of what we are facing right now. What needs to take priority. Because with Sherlock, there will always be one more case, and one more case. He'd stop for nothing. Not for sleep, and right now - obviously not for food.

"I saw that there was a chance, and I found him. And it's not to my credit, John. It doesn't make me a good person that I continued on," his voice falters, and I repress an urge to hug him, "but I saw what I could do for him. And now, I can see what I can do for him, again, and no one else seems to see it. No one else is taking this seriously!"

Weeks of repressed misery play across his face.

"I'm sure they are taking it seriously, Sherlock. Perhaps, they are taking several things seriously right now," I venture cautiously, curious to see if he gets my meaning. Curious to see how he'll respond.

"Then they know I am best to help him! They know I solve cases. They know I get things accomplished, while they merely fritter away their time and still have the nerve to call themselves an investigative unit!"

I edge my chair closer to his now, noting that the action causes Sherlock to look away.

"You are one person that can help him, but you're certainly not the only one-"

"I know him," Sherlock hisses, shutting his eyes.

I don't need him to extrapolate on what that means.

"I know you do. I know you understand...this, but you have to look at the case from their perspective, too..."

Sherlock snorts.
"You do, Sherlock! The fact that you can't do that is what is disturbing them. You must realize that!"

My flat mate lays back lazily in the black plastic chair. It's an attempt at looking disinterested. Passive, in that posh-brat-schoolboy way. But I'm not buying his act for a second.

"People who cannot think cannot have a perspective," he drawls, as if deliberately trying to test my patience. "That's like saying that a single celled organism has a perspective about life-"

"Oh come off it!," I grit out, "Do you honestly think that you don't seem...," and I trail off then, not knowing how to say what I need to say without insulting him.

Sherlock blinks; I see his facial features harden into stone.

"Don't seem what? Or seem what, as I know you really mean. So, say it. I seem like 'what'?"

"Never mind, just forget it," I sigh.

"No. You brought it up. Aside from being reliably informed that I will one day drive away even the most patient of my allies and so-called friends, I-"

"Wait a minute, I didn't mean-"

"I seem like what? Finish the thought."

My hands come together, and the gesture seems rooted in an old need to express earnestness. Most likely I clasped my hands together when I begged my sister to get help for her alcoholism. It didn't work then, but Sherlock's not Harry.

Honestly, I don't know what will ever work for Sherlock. Even Mycroft's no doubt countless attempts to get his brother help, since childhood, have obviously not done the trick. All that money, all those resources, and all those no-doubt high powered shrinks haven't lessened the impact of what he had to live through, because that's what this is all about, isn't it?

Of course it is.

"What?," Sherlock snaps, "What is it?"

"Unhealthy," I start, looking down to the table. I have limited words I can use right now to express my concern. What's more - if I don't make an impact, Sherlock is going to try to run roughshod over me, like he always does.

"You seem...," I hesitate for a second, then continue on, certain I am doing the right thing. "We aren't playing, right? You want me to be straight. So I'll say what I mean. You are unhealthy, Sherlock. You are unhealthy, and you are scaring me. And I'm not the only one whose noticing what's happening."

"Unhealthy," he drawls, pulling back in his chair.

"You're sick," I say, and my voice dries out. "And I don't just mean that you have a duodenal ulcer. I think you know what I mean."

So much has happened in the last month, but this one issue is one that I've kept at the back of the huge closet of demons Sherlock has recently revealed to me.
Perhaps I thought I'd have time to get through the really bad stuff first, and that I could approach it gently with him, at a better time. But I obviously can't. Because he's losing weight far too quickly, and he's bringing up blood, and now is as good a time as ever to mention my concern. Since he seems so adamant for me to speak my piece.

Sherlock is straining against his chair now. It saddens me to think that he's so eager to get away from me. I see his throat swallow several times, as if nauseated.

"Sick," and his throat moves again. I can tell that he's on edge. Anyone could tell that he's on edge.

"Yes. I think you are very sick," I breathe out, my heart hammering against my ribcage.

He then brings his hands together, mirroring my own action. I can recall about a year ago when Sherlock told me about the power of mirroring another person's behaviour. How it can be subconsciously used to flatter, soothe or put another person at ease. Whether he's aware of what he is doing now, which is likely a means of calming me down, I don't know - but I don't put it past him to try.

"And more than that. It's, well, you are obviously struggling with something huge, and it's unnerving others. I know you are brilliant-"

"I don't need your backhanded compliments, John," Sherlock replies, evenly. Coldly. "You can say what you think you must say to me without having to wrap your words in fluff to make it more...palatable to me."

"It's not a backhanded compliment! I have always considered you exceptional. You are brilliant, and what you're going through doesn't change that, but-

Sherlock rises, but his form is not impressive this time. He has the gaunt, brittle look of a Tim Burton character. A Jack Skellington brought to life. And that's Sherlock covered in layers. Under those layers - two shirts, a sweater, trousers, and a very large coat - he's even thinner, and gaunter.

The thought makes me feel a little bit chilled.

"So what you are saying," and he affixes his blue scarf to his neck, "is that at my lowest ebb, I still managed to save a child's life. When - if it was up to the professionals at New Scotland Yard, he would have died. Most assuredly. So despite whatever I have had to deal with in my life that may be bleeding over into the present, my services are no longer needed. Because my 'friends' need to assuage their own concern. And what better way to get me to do what they want me to do... than to cut me off from working. Is that it?"

My temples are throbbing with pain.

"That's not it at all! You are taking everything out of proper context!"

"Am I? I highly doubt it. I can read between the lines, John. My physical form doesn't appeal to convention, and never has - nor my psychology, nor my temperament. So to 'revert' me back to a state that is a little less disruptive, should a case I'm consulting on become more publically known, Lestrade and Company have decided to take away one of the few things in life that I truly enjoy!"

I rise, too. I can't match him for height, and never will be able to - but I can more than best him in strength. Especially now.

"You are trying to see this from its least charitable side, aren't you? Can't you just admit that people care about you and can see that you are sick, and-"
"I'm not sick! There is nothing wrong with me! And you just want to manipulate me. Which isn't a situation I am unfamiliar to being put into, as you well know. Because I do know what this is, John. I know what it means to be forced against your will to do something that someone else wants you to do."

Sherlock's words come out in a pained hiss. Almost snake-like, but different.

I can't place my finger on what makes it different. A timber of grief. Like a wild animal that has been shot, and whose howls of anger are mixing with whimpers of pain.

"Please sit back down. Please, Sherlock."

"Why?! So you can try to-"

"I'm not trying to do anything but help you! You must know that!"

Sherlock is standing rigidly now. His arms are wrapped around his midsection. It's a gesture that I've only seen emerge in the last four or five weeks.

"And what, pray tell, do you think you have to 'help' me with?"

The question is spoken rapidly, and I can only guess that he's also spoken somewhat impulsively, because as soon as he stops speaking he seems to startle into place, as if wanting to leave the room. But he doesn't leave.

His eyes scan my face, and I honestly don't know what to say or do. My perception of what he's struggling with is likely to be outlined for its absurdity, and he's likely to resort to scathing retorts to any future attempt to discuss this issue with him.

But then a much stronger internal voice pipes up with me, and that voice says: 'who the hell cares if your words upset him?'

What the hell does it matter if my words upset him, when he's so obviously out of control?

"I think you know what this is. I think you know that you have an eating disorder. And I think you are scared."

Sherlock blinks at me, his throat still swallowing. He has a wild look in his eyes that I don't like, so I push back against my chair, stand up, and go towards him.

"I'm no expert, but if I hazarded a guess, I'd bet on anorexia nervosa. You know that, don't you? You know that if you came into the clinic - if you were a patient, and not my best friend - I'd be trying to get you a psych referral right now. Do you understand that, Sherlock? How sick you've gotten?"

I hear his breath, and feel its expulsion.

"Quit this right now," he says shakily, and in that moment - he doesn't look like Sherlock Holmes at all. He doesn't look like my best friend. He looks impossibly young and impossibly scared, and it takes all my reserve energy not to draw him to me and hold onto him.

"Why are you trying to make me upset, John?," and his voice is warbling. "Did Mycroft put you up to this? Overweight oaf thinks anyone who isn't horrendously obese is sick, so I expect this from him. But this? This is not funny at all."

"I know it's not funny. It's far from being funny, Sherlock. It's very serious."
I reach for his hand, but he pulls back.

"No! I trusted you!"

It upsets me that he feels he has to use the past tense, there.

"You can trust me," I whisper. "Of course. With anything."

"I told you things," Sherlock barrels on, and I can see that tears are forming in his eyes. "Things I never told anyone before. And this is how you repay my trust?!"

I've really upset him. Far more than I would have thought possible.

Especially since we've talked around this issue already. Hinted at it, certainly. I've never been so direct in my wording, or so serious in tone, but he has to have known that I knew something of this nature had been culminating for awhile.

Unless my words tonight have made this issue that much more real for him. Very real, very fast.

Unless something about how I've phrased my concern has hit a nerve.

Which, obviously, it has.

"I told you things, and you think you can use them against me?," his voice has taken on a shrill heat, as if he believes that I really have betrayed him.

I hold out my hands, instinctively.

"I know you realize that something is very wrong, and-"

"There is nothing wrong with me!," he all but spits at me.

"Do you honestly believe that?," I ask, trying to keep the incredulity out of my voice. Because - could he really believe that? Is it possible that he could really be that far in denial?

"I'm fine, John," his voice warbles as he speaks, his face is dusted with pink, and his shoulders are clenched tight and up to his chin in tension.

"You're not fine," I plead, "Just admit it. Just once. You won't be alone. I will help you."

Sherlock looks reflective for a few seconds, and opens his mouth as if to speak, his eyes turning to meet mine. His mouth opening and shutting as if he is trying to vocalize something he cannot even name.

"Please trust me, Sherlock. I promise - it will get better. But you have to do this part yourself. You need to admit that you have a problem before anyone can really help you."

I see his face clouding over with something hot then - abruptly - as if my words have angered him. But only for a second, for in the next moment a new expression passes over his features: something focused, and emotionally closed, and I know that this can only go one of two ways, now: Sherlock will try to focus his considerable intellect on a personal attack. If he wounds me enough, he'll suspect he can get me to give up on him. Or, more likely - he'll try to change the subject and will revert to his classic I-can't-hear-John mode. Which is actually a fairly typical state for him, especially lately.

"Tell Lestrade to solve this himself. Toby's mother tried to kill her own son. My guess? Well, the father is obviously gay, or bisexual at the least - I've never been that great with sexual-orientation-
guessing. Probably resultant from my extreme lack of interest with any matter dealing with sex. But you know how that goes, don't you? Or, I guess - you being, well, you...you don't."

"Sherlock," I plead, exhausted, "please don't ignore this. Please."

"His piano tutor has been molesting him. Most likely for years. But recently that changed. He was raped, wasn't he? That's quite a violent step, and it probably prompted Toby to action. So what changed? Did he threaten the tutor? Unlikely, given his chronic fearfulness. It takes a considerable amount of strength to confront an abuser, and he was undoubtedly terrified of the tutor harming him physically. It happens all the time. Abusers threaten children. Threaten to break an arm, or a leg. You wouldn't believe how effective that can be, I bet."


He looks away from me, but does not slow his tirade.

"The father, as would be my guess, was having an affair with the tutor. Whether or not Mrs. Thiesen was aware of this, I don't know, but Toby knew enough of it, and probably felt good ole' dad would be a bust, too, so that only leaves one person he could have confided in-"

"Sherlock, STOP IT!"

"So he confides in his mum. It must have torn him apart to do that. And a well crafted sociopath, like Mrs. Thiesen? She saw a way to achieve something more financially certain. Marriage on the rocks - and it must have been with a gay father already resorting to having affairs with any man crossing his path? Oh, she knew. And she knew she didn't want that marriage to end. Mr. Thiesen is well off. On her own? Not so much. And then we have the clincher, the one truly-"

I want to smack him. I want to shake him. I so badly want him to hear me, but he's having none of it. So I must be the one to leave, if only because he thinks he can exhaust me with his tricks.

But it's not going to work tonight.

I stalk to the door, ready to leave.

"Where are you going? I'm relaying what must have-"

My face contorts into a pained smile, and Sherlock stops talking.

"I know what you are doing, Sherlock. And it's not going to work."

Sherlock sneers at me.

"What I am doing is not wasting any more time, and-"

"I'm not giving up on you," I whisper. "You know that, don't you?"

My chest is suddenly so sore, it's almost unbelievable. My throat hurts too. Just standing there, watching him try to deflect, and try to deny. So scared, but pretending he's fine. In so much pain, but pretending he can't feel anything at all.

"There's nothing to give up on, John. In any sense of the word. If you walked away from this now, would you really be walking away from anything at all?"

It takes me a second to realize the potential double meaning there, and when I get it - really get it - I
find myself unable to talk. My throat is working, but isn't making a sound.

Sherlock stares at me tiredly then, then sighs.

"Tell Lestrade I'm leaving. If he doesn't want my help, I'm not going to beg. He has an entire department of lackeys, after all."

From the break room kitchen, I watch him flounce through the door, and walk down the hallway. Before he reaches the end of the path, I see his shoulders slump and his entire chest rattle and shake, his hands in taut fists at his side.

Then he stands up straighter before continuing his departure out of the building.

As he leaves, the lamps from the outside parking lot flitter over his frame, and for a brief nanosecond he is encased in white light.

In the next moment, he is swallowed up by the indigo darkness of the night sky. As wet and embracing as india ink.

And then he is gone.
Call John

Chapter Summary

Yes! New chapter up much sooner than the previous one. :) Makes me happy. As for Sherlock's change of heart, well, credit memories and realization of disorder that has been in existence for a long time. Credit the power of being there for someone, without pushing them. Because it's incredibly effective. Sometimes when you take the heat out of a situation, you allow someone to confide in you. There is something to be said for calmness. And now it's time for Sherlock's POV.

The air bites at my throat when I finally get to the NSY parking lot, and I walk quickly past the cars - my heart in my throat.

Damnit John. Damn. it.

Damn me, too. Because I've been asking for it, haven't I? I have. I know I have. I haven't exactly been coping very well lately. I know that.

But to imply that I'm psychologically sick? That I am mentally ill?

It was hurtful. Maybe because I've always credited John with being one of the few people in the world who not only noticed my differences, but accepted my eccentricities. But he's not accepting of them. Of me. He obviously doesn't get it.

He just sees sickness. Which, I guess, makes sense. He's a doctor.

But I thought he'd give me more credit than that.

I rest my hand against a black van, my heart racing far too much. Anger, maybe. But mostly upset. These sort of confrontations always take a lot out of me, and as I realize this, my hand brushes up against an old Altoids mint container in my coat pocket. I pull it out and open it up. There are three green apple glucose tablets inside. They've been in the container for years. For when the transport is acting up. At Mycroft's insistence, I keep them with me. And at Mycroft's request, I am to call him if I ever need to take one.

So I never touch them. I keep them for show.

But the ritual is more complex than that. I keep them for when the transport acts up, but when it does, and if I feel close to needing to take one, I go home. And I make coffee, and add sugar to it. And I sit and drink it slowly. And sometimes I rest.

But I never call Mycroft.

I'd rather pass out in the street.

Or, I reason - I could take one, and the earth might stop shaking, and that would be good. And then I could replace it with a new green apple glucose pill. And Mycroft? Well, he'd never have to know now would he?
But it would feel like failure. It would taste like failure on my lips.

Besides, how long have I kept these things in my coat pocket? As a reminder of past stupidity? A silent plea, to myself if to no one else, that I wouldn't fall that far again.

So I stuff the Altoids container back into my jacket and pull my blue scarf closer to my throat and continue on my way.

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It is nearing 8 pm by the time I get to Bart's Hospital. I wait, impatiently, for the elevator and as I wait I try not to vomit. Then I try not to vomit yet again whenever the old contraption lurches down to the basement level.

When I get to the lowest level, I extricate myself from the confined space and walk, tentatively, towards the morgue. If I can catch Molly before she leaves - and she almost always works late on Fridays - then I can possibly get some tea, sit down. Maybe even get her to give me those ears that she promised me last time. Or even just diseased tissues. She sometimes lets me have some of the remains for my experiments, if I am polite.

And an experiment would be just about perfect right now.

But ultimately, I do not want to head back to the flat without a distraction. If I have a project, I can put on my goggles, and tuck in my ear plugs, and ignore John until he stops his inane rambling and his over-the-top concerned pleading. I can work, and he can fuss, but I can remain distracted.

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The door to the morgue is closed, but I can tell by the glint of light behind the frosted glass that Molly hasn't left yet, so I knock gently.

Second later - which feel like minutes, truthfully - I see her pad from her work station and tentatively open the door.


All the same, appearances must be maintained.

Molly's face drops its slight smile, and she studies me for a moment before fully opening the door. The studiousness of her gaze makes me want to pull my coat even tighter around myself, but I refrain from doing so. To do so would be to look weak.

She then opens the door to let me pass, and my eyes search out for a chair or a stool. Something I can sit on. Some way I can rest.

Priorities.

A short moment later, a cool and petite hand is against my own.

I wonder, almost idiotically, how cold she must always feel down here in the morgue. I'm freezing, and I've only been here for a few seconds.

How can she stand it?

"Come on, come sit down," she says softly, and her kind tone - though not vastly different from how
she normally speaks to me - makes something jolt in my chest.

"I'm just a little bit tired." I admit, feeling less exposed given Molly's lack of information. She's operating in the dark. John's not. Not entirely.

"You look ready to drop," she agrees, and she leads me to her work station, where I sit down on a padded black swivel chair. The impulse to close my eyes and rest my forehead against the desk is almost alarmingly intense.

Her fingers, then, are at my skin again. Against my temple, my face.

"You don't have a fever," she murmurs, seemingly confused.

"No. Because I'm not sick," I agree, "but I am thirsty."

Molly is quiet for a moment, and then attempts to roll up my sleeve. I jostle awake, my eyes darting open.

"What are you doing?," I ask quickly, trying to keep a ridiculous and unnecessary alarm from seeping into my tone.

"Just want to check your pulse, Sherlock," she says evenly. It's then that I consider that she, just like John, is a doctor. I tend to forget that, sometimes. Namely because Molly deals strictly with corpses. But she's trained to deal with the living, too. Better suited to them really, if I were being honest.

Whereas I would be better off with the cadavers.

"There's nothing wrong with my pulse," I bite out against the desk, but even I know that is a lie. "I'm just a little dehydrated," I amend, a few seconds later.

"You're more than just a little dehydrated," she admonishes, and this time I do rest my head against the stainless steel expanse of her work desk. The coolness of the metal feels grounding against my skin. It diminishes the nausea slightly.

Then my wrist is pressed, and I feel the firmness of her fingers. She is counting, softly. But I almost don't mind. It feels...okay. It almost feels grounding.

"It's elevated," she says simply, a moment later, "a little too fast, and a little too thready for my tastes."

I don't respond. Merely keep my head down against her desk, trying not to pant out my nausea.

"Do you think you're going to be sick, Sherlock?," she says kindly, sensing what I'm trying to hold in, and her hand is now at my back. Gliding over the bones of my spine, and over the protrusions of my shoulder blades. I almost want to flinch away, but I don't.

I keep my eyes closed.

"I think so," I breathe out, my mouth acrid, and hot and filled with the salty tang of bile.

Molly rushes off and comes back a short couple seconds later with a metallic bucket. Probably one she uses to dump the innards of corpses in when she performs an autopsy. But this one, at least, is clean.

She does keep a clean morgue.

And for that, especially right now, I am grateful.
She holds it up under my chin.

"If you need to be sick, let yourself be sick," she intones softly, and her hands are at my waist, helping me bend over. I wrap one arm around my midsection too, and press in, against the turgid swell of my stomach.

Moments later, ripples of vomit and tangy old coffee stream from my mouth. Black, gritty ropes of fluid, and I gag against the sick, pushing away the shame that wants to creep to the surface at knowing Molly is seeing all of this. Knowing it's not exactly private.

After a minute or two I stop vomiting, and proceed to pant against the bucket, still holding it against my mouth with both hands. Molly, in turn, has wrapped her arms around my middle, and the thought of her touching me at all - even in kindness - makes me pull my stomach up, suck it in. The revulsion and the knowledge of what I am doing hits me, and I vomit again, this time bringing up only bile. Dry retching.

"It's okay," she soothes, and I shake my head in upset.

"No? It's not?," she tests, removing her hands from my belly, and helping me down to the floor, where I slide against the corner wall and come to rest in a heap.

"Can I have a tissue, please?" I ask quickly, not meeting her eyes, and refusing to answer her previous question.

"Of course," she acknowledges, and goes to another corner of the room. When she returns, she is holding up a box of Kleenex, and a Dixie cup full of water. I take the water first, and greedily drink it down. Then I take the tissues, and dab at my mouth.

"Thank you," I whisper.

She doesn't speak for a few moments, and then:

"You shouldn't be here, Sherlock. You need to be at home. You're unwell."

I gaze across the floor, and catch sight of the black rolling wheels of a metallic gurney. I wonder if one day, I will be placed on a gurney like that. Or if I will simply pass away in my sleep.

"I think I have a flu," I intone, the words akin to a rote memorization of multiplication tables. No heat and no certitude at all.

Molly drops to the floor besides me, and takes my hand again. Remarkably, I let her.

"You think so?" she asks, without guile. "You think this is a flu?"

I nod my head. "I also have an ulcer. It's bleeding. I've been in hospital," I admit.

She doesn't look shocked, just strokes her thumb over the back of my hand. It's soothing and it's gentle, and it makes me feel low. Because she's being so kind to me, and I haven't always been so kind to her.

"But I need a diversion. Do you have any spare parts?" I ask quickly, willing the world to stop spinning. "Anything will do, but ears would be best."

She doesn't respond. Merely continues to stoke my hand.

I let it go. I let it all go. I'm too tired to fight anyone right now.
"I'd like to listen to your heart, Sherlock. And take your pulse. Will you let me do that?"

I stare at her. Do not know what to say.

I swallow.

Then nod.

She gives my hand a light pat.

"Good man," she says. But her eyes are sad.

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"Right. So, I need you to take off your jacket now, okay?"

I stare at the floor, my stomach still rolling. There is nothing else to bring up - I am certain of it - but
my stomach is moving in waves.

I acknowledge, distantly, that it's nerves.

I rarely feel nervous. But I am now. Because this feels like a medical exam.

And I hate medical exams.

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She helps me with a few buttons. Namely because my fingers are trembling, if only slightly.

"My blood sugar is probably low," I admit.

"I think that is quite likely," she agrees, and it helps to dissipate the tension in the room, even though - with my coat now off, the biting cold of the building is more abrasive.

"How can you work down here?," I shiver, "it's freezing. You must feel miserable working down here."

Molly doesn't reply. Not right away.

"I don't think I find it quite as cold as you do. Anyway, we need to take your turtleneck off too, okay? It's not loose enough to roll up over your elbows."

I remove it, more tentatively this time, knowing I only have a t-shirt and an undershirt on underneath this particular article of clothing.

But I take it off. Because if I don't, it'll look strange.

Suspicious.

"We'll do this quickly, and then you can get heated up again, yeah?"

I don't even nod.

My green t-shirt clings to my frame, damp with sweat. Somehow - despite how cold I feel - it's damp with sweat.

Molly places the cuff around my right arm quickly and with dexterity. She squeezes the pump and
the cuff inflates with air. Then, my skin prickles with tension and pressure.

The cuff deflates.

"65 over 39," Molly intones, sighing. "That's a little on the low side now, isn't it?"

I nod against the floor. I can't argue with the numbers, so I won't even try.

"Good thing you came here then. You could have passed out in the street."

I close my eyes, feeling exposed.

"Can I listen to your heart now, Sherlock?" she asks carefully, from my left. Carefully testing each action.

Which is something I appreciate about Molly. Her sensitivity, and her respect.

I may not be a sensitive person. I may rarely act respectfully. But I appreciate the good in her, even if I have never told her any of that. Even if I fail to have an equal amount of goodness in myself.

"Can I have some more water first?" I say uneasily, suddenly feeling off. Feeling strange. I can smell a slight floral scent of her shampoo. Lily of the Valley, something like that. It reminds me of something. Something.

"Almost done, 'kay?" she encourages. "Just want to listen to your heart real quick, here. Then some more water, and I can call John."

"No," I bite out. "No John. You call John, and I will leave now," I rasp, staring straight into her eyes. No nonsense. Or as no nonsense as I can be right now.

She frowns in confusion, but nods in agreement.

"Okay. No John."

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The stethoscope is cold against my chest.

"Sorry about that," Molly says quickly, giving me a tense grin. "I know you are already cold. I'll be real quick."

"I can't believe I'm letting you do this," I whisper, uncharacteristically open. Then, as I realize that I've spoken aloud, and not simply in my head - I turn away. "I'm sure I'm okay. You don't need to worry."

"Maybe I should worry. You are acting unnaturally well behaved tonight, aren't you?," and she flashes me a smile, which I try to return.

It feels forced.

She moves the metal around, and touches my ribs. Ghosts over them. I try not to wince.

"Are you done now? With your exam?" I say next, not liking the feel of her hands against my torso. She's touching my ribs - not excessively, but I don't like that she is touching my bare skin at all.

"Yes. I'm done," she agrees, removing her hand, removing the cold metal, and pulling my t-shirt back
down over my chest and belly.

"Can I have more water now?," I ask quickly, shrugging back on my turtleneck, and then affixing my coat once everything else is in place.

"Yeah, of course," and Molly rises, returning a few seconds later with a second cup of cold water. The stethoscope still hangs from her neck.

I rise, and cross my arms over my stomach. It hurts. It almost burns. But the pressure of my arms is reassuring.

"Now about those ears-," I begin, but Molly cuts me off.

"How long has this been going on?," she asks cleanly, not exactly looking stern, but also not looking playful like she typically does.

"I-," and I stop, not knowing what to say. "They gave me antibiotics. At the clinic. They said my stomach is bleeding."

"Okay," she encourages. "You're taking meds?"

"They just gave me antibiotics," and I frown at her, not knowing where this is going.

"Do you take those with food?," she asks carefully. "You are supposed to take those with food, right?"

I swallow. Nod.

"Sometimes," I agree. "I try. When I remember to take them with food."

Molly bites her lip.

"The last time I saw you, Sherlock - it was what...about a month ago?"

"Five weeks," I reply quickly, remembering the date. "You gave me part of a diseased thymus. Very helpful, actually. Thank you for that."

Molly smiles quickly, but the smile doesn't last. She nods at the information again, to herself. As if I'm not even in the room.

But then she looks up, no trace of smile.

"Sherlock...what's going on?"

I lick my lips, stare at her. Stare at her eyes. No judgment. None at all.

Just a question.

Just a question.

And she's even calmer than John.

Calmer than me.

"My stomach is bleeding," I say solidly. Certain it must be the correct answer. Must be what she means. What she wants.
"You've lost a lot of weight in five weeks, haven't you?"


"Maybe a couple pounds. I fail to see what that has to do with~"

"More than a couple pounds, Sherlock. When have you eaten last?," she asks quickly. "And coffee doesn't count. Neither does tea."

I drop my hands to my side, debate how to answer. Repress the urge to tighten them into fists. I pat them against my thighs. Think. Tap.

"I've been on a case."

"With the little boy," she clarifies. "John mentioned something about it awhile back."

I swallow, nod.

"And I don't eat on cases. Everyone knows that," I add stubbornly, lest she need to be reminded.

"Not at all?," she questions.

"Not typically. Digestion impacts my ability to think. It is disruptive in my ability to make connections."

Molly tilts her head to the side, studying me intently.

"But you're done with the case now?"

I battle away a surge of bitterness and anger at the situation. At being demoted, so to speak, from the case at all.

"In a manner of speaking. The case is now in the so-called 'highly capable' hands of the New Scotland Yard."

Molly bites her lip.

"So, it's done. For you. You aren't on an active case right now."

I swallow, feel cornered.

"Not at present," I admit. "Why?"

Molly nods, securing her own buttons on her coat. It's a pale pink.

"Can I get you something to eat, then? Whatever you would like. My treat?"

I stare at her, debating what to say and what to do to end this conversation.

"I'm sure John will try to force feed me once I get back home," I say loftily. "Your offer is kind, but unnecessary."

"But I thought you didn't want to see John right now," she volleys back, looking at me intently. "I mean - I get it. You guys have had a row. It happens with flatmates. It can happen with the best of friends. But if you want to just decompress, you're welcome to come to my place. You can even take
a kip on my sofa. I have a rather extensive variety of canned soups too. If you want. No pressure."

I stare, consider the offer.

"No pressure. Just... if you want," she repeats.

I stare at the floor. My mind is racing with questions. Weighing options.

Molly isn't needling me for information. But she took my blood pressure, and she listened to my heart. She must know something is wrong.

Even I know something is wrong. I don't know exactly what. But I know something is.

Yet Molly didn't say I was sick.

She certainly didn't imply I was disordered.

She just asked why I can't eat. Why I haven't.

And when I told her the best that I could tell her, she just nodded.

And now she wants me to eat soup. Any kind of soup I want.

So I consider her offer, and then I nod.

She smiles at me.

"Good," she says warmly, touching my forearm.

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We take a taxi cab back to her apartment. It's a red brick building, and she's on the third floor.

"I hope you like cats," she grins at me as we climb the stairs to the top floor.

I think about the question that isn't really a question at all.

"I don't hate cats," I admit.

Molly laughs. It's more of a snort than a laugh, but it's a sound of amusement. The first of its kind this evening.

"A ringing endorsement, if I've ever heard one," she quips, and then adds, "Something you don't hate. Anyway, I have four. Two boys, two girls. They're rescues."

"Mmm, of course they are," I say without sarcasm, then study the colours and look at the banisters. Take in the scents and the imagery of Molly Hooper's apartment building. "Your hallway is very clean. It smells like Pine Sol."

Molly just grins at me, then removes her keys from her oversized duffle. I catch a large cartoon cat keychain. Hello Kitty, I think. Ridiculous keychain for a grown woman to have, in my opinion.

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She turns the lock and it opens with a 'pop.'

"Home sweet home," and she enters first, letting me trail cautiously behind.
The apartment, I notice, is very clean, just like the hallway. Surprisingly, it is not how I envisioned it to be. Dark wood floors, and a grey-blue sofa. Two sets of floor to ceiling mahogany bookshelves, crammed with books, papers, magazines, medical journals. And lots of plants. Climbing plants, ferns, potted trees. It almost feels like a forest. Yellow walls. Warm. And I can smell vanilla. I sit down on the sofa, and take in the soft throw, in something like a herringbone print. Grey and brown, flecks of black. Muted, subtle. More sophisticated than I'd expect.

"Mycroft would love your afghan," I mutter, giving her a mock sweet smile as she emerges from the hallway, holding onto a brown beast of a cat with enormous ears.

"No criticisms, or else I choose the soup. Here...you might like Bruno. He's the friendliest of the bunch, so give him a chance," and Molly deposits the animal near the edge of the sofa. The cat stares at me, inquisitively, then lets out a mewling plea for attention.

"Not in the mood for minestrone, so I guess I'll be nice to your feline," I respond imperiously, and Molly continues on her way to the kitchen - completely ignoring my comment, while I hold my hand out, waiting for the cat to come near.

Will I really sleep here tonight? On Molly's sofa, surrounded by her four cats?

The notion is almost absurd.

Still, I feel stung by John's words. Scared by his passion. The look in his eyes. And his distrust, of me.

It hurts.

I find it hurtful.

"That's Bruno," Molly repeats herself, emerging again, "he's an Abyssinian. They're like little dogs, Abyssinians. Affectionate. You can call his name, and he'll probably come closer. Might even purr."

I wait until Molly heads back into the other room, then utter a soft, "here Bruno." Sure she can't hear me when I do so.

The cat tilts his head, and takes a step closer to me. A moment later he sniffs my hand, then licks my fingertips.

I fight the urge to smile.

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Bruno nestles himself between my thigh and the sofa, and suddenly starts to purr as I pet the top of his head, his ears.

Molly returns with a couple cans of soup.

"Gourmet," I quip. "Reduced sodium and everything."

She rolls her eyes at my snark, and I bite back a grin.

"We have tomato, split pea, and clam chowder. Take your pick."

My brain hisses 'nothing' and I sit back against her sofa, a strong pulse in my mouth now. Pounding away.
'Nothing. Nothing.'

'Nothing.'

'You will not eat any of it.'

'You know you can't eat any of it.'

'Don't you?'

"Whatever you like most," I mutter, dropping my head back towards Bruno. "I'm not picky."

Molly doesn't argue. She doesn't even comment at all. Just heads back to the other room without meddlesome commentary, and a few seconds later I hear the sound of an electric can opener. Bruno's ears perk up, and then he is off to the races.

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By the time Molly returns, I've removed my shoes, and have stashed them neatly by her front door.

She gently places a hot mug of what I think is Earl Grey by my side, settling down a coaster first.

"Do you want any cream or sugar for your tea?" she asks gently. "I also have milk."

I stare at the drink, and consider my options. Consider how they will sound, but also consider what I will do if I add cream or sugar to my tea. Will I drink it?

Unlikely. The cream and sugar will make me sick. The milk will make me sick too. The fat. The protein. My body will try to digest it, and it won't be able to. Not well. And I will vomit. Which is understandable, really.

It's not a sickness. It's just how my body is designed.

But no one seems to understand that. They just see resistance. They don't see the big picture. The fact that my body, my transport, is defective. And has always been defective. I cannot eat like normal people without getting ill. I've tried, but I've never succeeded.

"This is fine," I say carefully, not looking up. "Just as it is."

"Just black? Because it's no bother," she tests again, and I shake my head.

She doesn't comment on my choice, and for that I am grateful. A moment later Molly places another mug of tea to my right - which I quickly realize is for herself, and cozies up in an overstuffed love seat. She, too, has removed her shoes. Her socks are green and tan, and from what I can see - seem to be peppered with embroidered squirrels.

"Please tell me those were a Christmas gift from a very young niece."

Molly just smiles.

"Nope. All my doing. I think it's helpful to hold onto a little bit of whimsy in life. Especially in my line of work."

I take a sip of the Earl Grey, and think over her statement. Knowing how empathic Molly is as a
person, she's probably correct in her assumption. So I don't say anything snarky. I just hold the beverage in my mouth. Try to enjoy the scent of bergamot and neroli oil. Swallow the tea. Tell myself it's okay. That I can digest this.

Tell myself to stop being so ridiculous about every little thing.

Tell myself it's just tea.

Tell myself that John is wrong. That I'm not sick. Not in the way that he thinks I am.

"This is very good tea," I say quietly, taking another sip.

Molly mutters her thanks, then fiddles with the tea spoon, and it clinks against her mug. It reminds me of wind chimes, on a sandy beach. Near Bristol. When I was a child. When I was 11, and Mycroft had more or less just adopted me. So to speak. And during our first summer away from our parents, we had shared a small apartment in the city, which Mycroft quickly outfitted with prints of grand master painters, mobile sculpture in the style of Alexander Calder, and a small library populated mostly with history and political science books.

He was 18, but he acted like a middle age man. If not older.

And I would sit in my room, which he had gotten some over-priced decorators to paint in blue hues. Replete with a painted sky, like something from a Turner piece. Cumulus clouds. Obviously meant to be calming. Obviously meant to help me to sleep.

Then there was a toy chest. Puzzles. A new microscope and chemistry set. He hadn't had much money back then, but he made the room my own, even with his modest funds: just the barest amount from his trust, with the majority held away until he was to turn 25. But Mycroft used all of it to rent out our new home, and he used the last remaining amount to buy me some toys, some books. Things I had never had before. A stuffed animal. My choosing. A small radio. He let me choose. He didn't buy anything for himself, really. Just stuff the two of us needed.

Then, towards the end of the year, I could not get the words out, and I couldn't talk to him at all, and I was changing, and growing, and hating it. So we went to the beach. And we took a beach house for a time. Rented it for five days, one week after school let out. Mycroft wanted me to get fresh air, he said. Walk on the sand. Get some sun on my skin. He said I was too pale. He said I was too thin. He said I needed to get my appetite back, and the sun and the sea would do that. That nature would make me healthy again.

And there were wind chimes. Hanging from the beach house next to ours. And the sound of the chimes would tinkle and flutter through the wind, and I'd hear them at night, sometimes, when I couldn't fall asleep. When I'd sweat into the mattress, and sometimes I'd even cry without noise. But then I would hear the wind chimes, and my tears would stop, and I'd feel safe. I'd close my eyes and Mycroft would sometimes rub my back, and tell me that it was over now, and it would never happen again, and I could sleep. I no longer would touch Ovaltine. Not any longer. So sometimes he'd get me Horlicks. But Horlicks was safe then, so I'd curl up against the duvet, and listen to the wind and the musical notes on the air. And feel the heat of the Horlicks swirl around in my stomach.

Only later, after I heard Mycroft's breaths - even and steady and indicating sleep - I wound wind my way to the bathroom. I wouldn't turn on any lights. I moved on autopilot. And if the drink was still hot and full in my belly, I'd close the door to the bathroom, and I'd flip open the lid on the toilet, and sometimes I would stick two fingers down my throat.
And I'd vomit into the toilet. Over and over again. Until I could taste the sour taste of nothing at all. But I was very good at vomiting without making any sound, too. Eventually I could vomit on command. I just would bend over, and everything foul would come back up, and I'd flush it away.

I would void whatever was in my belly, and I'd feel powerful, and I'd feel safe. Numb. And then I would head back to bed.

Then I would sleep. Knowing I was pure again. That everything was out of me.

I remember that.

I remember it quickly. Abruptly. Like a thunder clap of images and scents. Like a flashbulb going off in my mind.

"Sherlock?," and Molly's looking at me intently now. She's moved. From the loveseat, to the sofa, and I have no idea when that happened. How it happened. If I've been gone for ten seconds, or a minute, or longer.

"You okay?," she asks seriously now, her brows creasing into a line of worry. "You looked like you were a million miles away just then."

I stare at my own beverage, squint against the sight of heat rising from the porcelain.

"Molly, do you think I'm sick?," I whisper.

Molly doesn't speak. Just puts her own cup back down on the coffee table.

"Do you think you're sick?," she asks carefully. Gingerly.

I close my eyes. Bring my hands to my mouth. I want to bite them, to keep myself from speaking. But I don't.

"I think so. Not a lot. Just a little bit. Hardly at all. But a little, maybe. Do you think maybe just a little?"

I feel the sofa dip and settle, and feel the heat of her body next to mine. My eyes remain closed, and her breath tickles my ear. She's so near to me, and I don't like that, but maybe she feels that she needs to be close to me right now.

That's how normal people treat others who are upset. They try to show kindness in closeness.

"I think maybe you're more than a little bit sick, Sherlock," Molly says cautiously, as if defusing a bomb. Just little words, one by one, but they add up to something awful when you really think about the meaning. "I think you know that, too."

I nod.

"I yelled at John," I breathe out. "I yelled at John because he said it first. First to my face. And I didn't want him to be right."

Molly lets out an exhale, pent up, and then asks, "Do you want to call him? Let him know that you're here? That you're okay?"

My eyes catch her hands. They are petite, like all of Molly. Her nails are glossy. Painted in the
slightest pink. Like beach shells.

"I don't know," I murmur. "He might not want to hear from me."

"He could come here. Come here, have soup with us. Different place, different atmosphere? Might help."

I frown at my lap. I frown at the flesh of my hands. The bone of my knuckles. I hate how I look.

"I don't think I can eat soup," I admit. "Not really. I think I'll be sick. I think it might come up. I think I might have to make it come up if you force me to eat anything. If anyone does."

Molly hands me her mobile.

"Call John. Ask him to come here. He'll be relieved - I promise you he will, Sherlock. He'll be so relieved that you called, and we can work through the next step together. And you can try some soup, if you want. But I won't force you. And John won't force you either. Okay?"

"Okay," I whisper.

Then I take the phone and punch in John's number.
Help

Chapter Summary

Author's notes: I have such limited time these days. I wish I had more free time; I've been aching to update for weeks, now. I apologize for the delays...trust me, 90 hour work weeks equal limited productivity. I appreciate everyone's continued support and understanding. :)

Reviews = love. Even if I don't get back in touch with you guys right away, your kind words make me smile. :)

John's POV

'Damn you, Sherlock.'

'Damn you.'

The thought flitters around and around in my brain.

Because certainly the Universe wouldn't be so cruel as to do something drastic to a man in need when he has family - a best friend! - craving to help him. Wanting nothing more than to see him get better. To see him succeed.

So I can afford to swear, can't I?

Knowing he won't just drop in the streets.

Succumb to a heart attack. Or to a low electrolyte imbalance.

Because he's Sherlock Holmes.

Until I realize that who he is and how he thinks and how much he means to me - to my heart and spirit - means very little to the Universe, or to whomever governs Universal affairs.

Until I realize that, yes, the Universe really is that cruel.

That this Universe is a Universe full of pedophiles. Child abusers and rapists. This Universe, and the mess that exists in the hearts of so many, is the reason why Sherlock is the way he is currently; the reason for his wounding in the first place, and his subsequent self-abuse.

For his inability to beat off this demon that has sunk its claws into his mind.

This demon that controls his ability to eat and his desire to even want to eat. To care about his physical health, and potentially - to even care about his continued existence.

And with that thought, the anger dies away and all I am left with is a mighty dread.

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So I call him. Once. Four times. Seven times.
And his mobile keeps going to voice-mail, and I want to scream and throw my phone against the wall, because I know he's sick. So very sick.

And I honestly don't know how to help him any longer (and evidently, I never did).

Which is what is scaring me most right now.

I don't know what to do to fix this.

Because obviously loving him is not enough.

------------------------------------

The call almost bites at the air - cold, harsh, shrill (annnnnnnsweeeer meeemeem!) and I fumble for the phone, hoping it's him.

It's not, though.

It's Molly's number on the display screen. So I let it go to voice mail, and limp back to Baker Street, trying to envision him in the kitchen, working on an experiment. Safe and sound.

Five minutes later another call comes in.

Again, it's Molly.

I hit the 'talk' button impatiently, without thinking, without considering the possibility.

"Yes?," and my voice, I know, sounds terse and irritable, barely tempered down even though it's Molly Hooper: the epitome of sweetness in one little 5 ft 2 package.

But I cannot summon the energy to care how I seem to anyone right now. Not truly.

"Yes? Hello?," I say again, in rapid succession.

The guilt will come tomorrow. Like it always does when I take out my piss-poor moods on an innocent person.

"John?," the voice is faint, and nervous, and undeniably his.

"Sherlock?," I wheeze, my limbs starting to tremble with relief. "Where the hell are you?"

There is no noise for a second. My flat mate is undeniably digesting my words, my not-really concealed anger.

"I'm at Molly's. My phone was almost dead. I turned it off."

Oh.

"Ok," I breathe, feeling a spark of delirious happiness that to the rest of the world would seem out of proportion to what is really going on.

"I am glad you called, Sherlock," I start dumbly, "I was so worried."

I hear a ragged breath on the other end of the line. The choking of someone just barely holding their breathing together.

"Sherlock?"
A cough, light, strained, dampened down with effort.

"Can you come here? To Molly's?"

I blink against the light of the setting sun. My limbs still tingle with relief.

I want to shake him.

Hug him.

A small part of me wants to kiss him.

Like he kissed me.

On the lips.

And I push those thoughts away, so confused. Terribly confused, to tell the truth.

Because I am nearly 42 years old. Too old to be going through a sexuality crisis.

"John?"

"Are you okay?" I get out.

"I will be okay," Sherlock says after a few seconds of silence. "I am at Molly's," he repeats. "She wants you to come and eat dinner with us."

I feel a fuzzy white noise start up in my head. I don't know what to even make of that statement. Eat? Sherlock wants me to come over to Molly's... to eat?

Willingly? All three of us?

"You're eating?" I say quickly, before my brain can kick in. "Really?"

A scratchy sound on the other end of the phone at my question. Almost as if Sherlock has grasped the phone to his chest, lest it drop.

"I will try. I-," and again, a sound of scratching. And then I think he has actually dropped the phone. His voice is softer when he comes back on. "Do you want to talk to Molly?"

Do I want to talk to Molly?

Molly...who has somehow motivated Sherlock to eat something when I couldn't get him to eat a cracker or take a sip of tea?

Yes, I'd like to talk to Molly.

But not with Sherlock listening in.

"I'll talk to her later; I can be over in 20."

I hear a soft, "Ok. Ok John," and then the phone disconnects before I can process anything more or say anything else.

---------------------------------

I debate stopping at Tesco's for a bottle of red wine.
Debate with myself.

Decide against it.

Decide against emotionally connecting a moment of such stress-relief with the added intake of alcohol.

But I get biscuits.

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I buzz up to apartment 344.

It takes a few seconds for anyone to respond, and when someone does - it is Molly, as expected.

"Hi. It's John," I say quickly, and idiotically.

Surely she must know it is me.

I hold a package of Hobnobs and Digestives in a brown paper bag flush against my body.

Pathetic little offerings.

'Here, Sherlock. Have a little dessert. Don't think, don't obsess, just eat it.

Eat it and get better and let's never revisit this hell again.'

But life doesn't work that way. Does it?

Nothing could be that simple with him, could it?

These sort of problems don't usually just disappear overnight, do they?

The intercom lets out a high pitched ZZZZZEEEEEEzzzzzzz and the door releases.

I let myself into a darkened interior and bite against my lip.

I will not let myself yell at him, nor shake him.

I will hug him, if he seems amenable.

I must be there for him.

My emotions must become secondary to the pain he is experiencing.

----------------------------------

Molly's building has an old elevator in perfectly good working order, but I take the stairs all the same as I want to diffuse some of the tension coiling through my body like a snake. As I approach 344, I smell a scent - very faint - of pine, and see a door knocker of Hello Kitty. I give a small smile to the air.

Molly never disappoints with her whimsy. It's as strong a feature of her personality as Sherlock's eccentricity is a feature of his own.

I knock quickly, and a few seconds later the door opens to reveal Molly - hair in a messy bun - and a gentle smile gracing her features.
"Hey," she starts softly, "I'm glad you could make it. I'm making soup and salad. Didn't have much in."

I nod, soundlessly, then hold up the biscuits.

"Perfect," she says in encouragement. "My kitchen was a bit bare," she repeats again, too conscientious for her own good.

I look over now, taking in her living room and home. The air is softly sweetened - scented candles, perhaps? (vanilla? sugar cookie?) and at first I am a little surprised to catch two cats slinking by out of the corner of my eye.

There is absolutely no odor of cats lingering about, and I give Molly an extra grin.

"I have four," she explains, "but I might only have three by the end of the night. I think Bruno has taken an extreme liking to Sherlock."

Removing my shoes, I pad gently into the flat until I round a bend, several bookcases full - neatly - of books, cds, records, and catch Sherlock sitting cross legged on Molly's sofa. I know he is aware of my presence, but he keeps his eyes turned down to his lap, studying a small streaked tan, brown and black cat laying on its back. The cat is starring lazily at my best friend with the obvious expectation of continued petting.

I sit down in an empty love seat across from the larger sofa. Catch two semi-consumed mugs of tea. One is obviously Sherlock's, and is nearly full.

"This is Bruno," Sherlock says, intently studying the animal. "He's very friendly. He's not like most cats. He likes even me."

I don't say anything to that. Merely hold out my hand and make a tisk-ing sound, seeing if Bruno will come to me. I suspect that he won't - being cuddled by Sherlock (and who would have thought that, really?) but it's a good opportunity to help boost Sherlock's self confidence a bit. That people *do* and can like him. That animals do like him, too. That there is nothing repellant about him as a person, save for his obvious attempts to push people away with cutting comments and overly caustic analysis of the secrets of others.

The cat looks up and over to me, then yawns, before bringing his large paws back down over Sherlock's hands; giving the man a cat version of a high five, almost.

Sherlock suddenly smiles. A smile that looks so much fuller than any I've ever seen that I almost look away. It's a fleeting smile, too - gone far too quickly - and painful to behold.

He's been so stripped of joy as a person. So convinced of his utter lack of worth as a person. And who would have thought that, either, upon first meeting him? With his false bravado and smug sense of mock-superiority?

No, you'd have to dig a bit to see it was a false front. Covering the deepest of wounds.

"I think that one'll want to go home with you," I say softly. "And I think Molly suspects it, too."

Sherlock angles his head, and I know what it is: a defensive position. Not overtly defensive, but protective all the same. Protective to not let the pleasure splay across his features. Protective to not let me know how much the soft attentions of a rescue cat mean to him.

He's not meeting my eyes, but he wants to indicate he's heard me and gives a tight grin.
So he's not angry with me.

But he's possibly concerned about angering me. Or, more accurately, he's concerned about my concern. The entire situation is roundabout in an almost amusing fashion. Except that there is pain lurking behind his smile. This isn't just some odd comedy routine.

What's more: I highly doubt he's ever had someone whose cared about him with the same force and passion as I care about him, and I'm pretty sure that he knows that, too. Mycroft not withstanding.

And one day, I'll have to more fully thank Mycroft for the continued love he's shown his brother, even if Sherlock forever laments the fact that his brother 'intrudes' upon his space.

"Bruno likes almost everyone, I think," Sherlock says quickly, as if trying to assure me that the cat's vested interest in him is not personal. That had I arrived at the flat first, Bruno would have shown an equal interest in my presence.

"My coat is just warm," he says a few seconds later, and I frown. This degree of awareness - of needing to smooth out the edges - is something I usually don't see from Sherlock. "That's it. That's all."

"That may be the case, but all the same - it's warm in here. Aren't you warm?," I query, even though I already know the answer.

"No. I'm not warm," Sherlock says, his chest rising and falling in noticeable waves.

I reach out and hold his hand briefly, watch his mouth open, close. His eyes flash up, meet mine, then quickly look back down at the cat again.

"What happened?," I test, confused as to how Sherlock wound up at Molly's flat in the first place.

Sherlock's lean, pale finger reaches out and strokes Bruno's chin and I hear the cat purr louder in response.

It takes the edge off, somewhat.

Maybe we should get a pet.

"I went to see Molly. For...parts. I wanted to start an experiment. Any experiment. Just something...." Sherlock trails off.

I don't talk; I let him speak. I need to hear this.

"Experiments make me feel calm, and nothing else does these days. Sometimes," and Sherlock licks his lips now, nervous, "sometimes I think it's the only thing I have to hold onto, John. Numbers and certainty and things that should be. Input. Output. It all can be determined. Scientifically. I can...make it happen. I can control the data by controlling the input. With whatever substance I want; I can test it out, and see it change and it's an impact. An effect that I made. Does that make sense?"

My body feels drugged. Dizzy.

"Did I just get some sort of admittance, Sherlock? An acknowledgement that you have a problem?"

Sherlock's shoulders are tight against his neck now; pulled up in anxiety.

"I like numbers. I like to control them," he says softly, quietly, quickly. "None of this will change immediately, even if I wanted it to..."
"Can you not be so cryptic for once in your life?," I question with a harshness that I really don't feel. Mostly I feel drained.

Sherlock's blue-grey eyes meet mine and hold their gaze for microscopically longer this time.

"I got sick again," he says, imploring me to understand. Not to ask questions. Just...to get it. Just know what he means. The deeper meaning.

"Deliberately?," I say, trying to expel the breath that wants to hide out in my throat.

Sherlock fidgets, and I grasp his hand. Feel the internal coldness bleat out against the heat of my own.

He literally feels like ice. But he's not just cold to the touch. If anything, the coldness increases the longer I hold his hand, and the knowledge that his suffering is self-caused, self-generated, makes me as equally tormented as it does exasperated.

"I don't know how to answer that," he says primly. "There is my body and then there is my mind, and they are not in collaboration any longer."

I swallow down the bulge of soreness in my throat.

"Have they ever been?," I ask honestly. Because I need to know. "In collaboration?"

Sherlock looks up quickly, as if surprised by the question.

"I don't know how to answer that either."

"Sherlock-," I begin.

His face flinches, his eyebrows cinch together like material pulled too sharply under a sewing machine. Bunching up.

"You have to promise me you won't...force anything of me-"

"Sherlock-"

He's not finished, apparently.

"No. You can't force me with this. With taking anything in."

Taking anything in?

That can only mean one thing...can't it?

"With eating," I say, barely audibly. "That's what you mean, isn't it?"

Sherlock flinches.

"With anything. And you can't force anything out of me, either."

"Jesus, Sherlock - when have I ever forced you to do anything?"

Sherlock looks stressed, all the same. My words are not making their mark.
"I don't want you to be angry with me," he says again, in a voice very different to his normal one.

"God," I sit up in the loveseat, implore him to meet my eyes one more time. "I'm not angry with you, Sherlock."

He swallows.

"Yes, you are. You must be. I know you must be; but it's not entirely under my control. Do you understand? It's not under my control any longer," and the words come out so quickly that I blink back tears at what he is admitting. What I'm sure he's never really admitted to anyone.

"I'm not angry at you, Sherlock. I swear to you, I'm not."

He looks so lost.

"Please do not leave, John."

"Sherlock, I'm not going."

"Please promise me. Because I might not be okay for awhile, and I don't want you to leave. It might not be gone right away."

One striped sock peaks out from beneath Sherlock's trousers. They are off-white with grey lines. I didn't even know he owned anything with stripes on it in the first place.

"I promise you. I'm not going to leave. I promise."

Sherlock continues to nod to himself - so lightly that part of me doubts he's entirely aware of the motion.

"We are having soup," he mentions to me, and I feel a profound sense of deja vu.

"Ok."

"Soup is easy to digest. Soup is okay," Sherlock says, still petting Bruno. "It will be fine."

This time I say nothing, as I'm fairly certain he's not really talking to me at all any longer.

--------------------------------

Molly calls us to her small, yellow kitchen not five minutes later. I take the middle seat - Sherlock takes a chair closest to the window. He attempts to awkwardly open the window with the roll out hinge, which Molly assists him with right away.

I frown at the motion; it's still cold outside. Colder than warm. Brisk. And Sherlock is still bundled up in his coat. He's obviously not too warm.

"You feel okay?" I whisper, taking a seat beside my best friend.

"My throat is hot," he says speedily, his hands wrapped tight around his belly.

"Mmm?" I say, resisting the impulse to feel his forehead. "Feeling sick?"

Molly hovers near the entrance, not wanting to impose.

"I'm going to just go and get the rolls and the salad," she says with understanding, wanting to give us
a moment.

Sherlock wavers in place, staring at the mat marking his place at the table.

"Sherlock? It's okay. Just sit down."

His face looks ashen, and it is so strange, so bizarre. How can anyone be so afraid of eating a bit of soup, or a bit of salad?

"Hey, come on. It's okay," I breathe against his skull, my breath ghosting past his ear. "Eat what you can, and if you can't, that's okay. We can discuss it more later."

"I...John, I want to...I can't," Sherlock says in borderline alarm. "I can't. Before-"

"Ok. What you can eat, you eat; we will deal with the rest later."

Sherlock nods dully, as Molly approaches a few seconds later, carrying forward a bowl of salad, tossed, sans dressing.

A few paces later, she comes back with a plate of rolls, lacking butter. She adds a couple bottles of dressings and the dish of butter to the table a few seconds later.

"So, whatever you'd like," she starts awkwardly, in typical Molly-fashion, but with such compassion that I look up at her and give her a slight smile.

"John...salad?," she asks, and I nod, taking the serving dish first before I let it linger near Sherlock's plate, see his throat bob up and down in anxiety. See him remove a few cherry tomatoes, a few olives, about 1/4 cup of salad all in all. Then he liberally coats his entire plate in salt and pepper. Nothing else. No dressing. No cheese, or egg, or shrimp.

I don't comment on the oddity of his actions, merely take two rolls and then help myself to a ladle to serve myself some clam chowder.

Molly, likewise, does not comment and we keep the conversation light, almost breezy. Just a shade deeper than what Sherlock would call "insufferable small talk." A new TV series Molly is watching is mentioned, as is her volunteer work at the RSPCA. I fill them in about a teen girl (kept anonymous of course) who came by the surgery a few days back fearing that she had a brain tumor, which - for a fleeting few seconds - was a story that seemed to amuse Sherlock.

"Cluster headaches?"

I nod at him, give him a smile, and fill them in about other highlights of my week. Sherlock listens quietly, nibbling on cucumber.

It's something. And it takes effort for him to do that much, and I can see it now. Not just a disordered way of being in terms of actions alone, but the fear: I didn't see that before, didn't understand that eating generated so much fear in him or for him. I thought it made him feel dizzy and light, in the way drugs and alcohol did. I thought, too, that it covered up his upset, and gave him a sense of control - and I'm sure that on some level, I'm right on those counts, too. Starving does all of that, and more.

But the more is the sense of anguish he experiences when he does eat; not simply the high he feels when he abstains. Because I can see the misery play out against his features even now. The dread, the self-debasement going on behind the scenes, so to speak, while Molly and I just simply...eat. Pick up fork and spoon, and take a bite of this or a chew of that. But for Sherlock?
For Sherlock it's agony. I can see how badly it taxes his energy.

I let my arm fall to the side of my chair, then squeeze his hand underneath the table. Lightly. Softly. A rallying show of support.

A 'you can do this!'

He gives a sad smile to his plate, but I catch it from the corner of my vision.

Molly is finishing up when I rise to take her plate.

"No, don't be silly. You're my guests. Up for some Hobnobs?," she asks kindly and I nod slightly while she takes both of our plates. I try not to look to Sherlock in hope.

If salad was too much for him, then biscuits are obviously out of the realm of possibility.

"Just a few would be great for me. Thank you, Molly."

She pads away and I exhale more fully.

Sherlock's hand is clenching around one of Molly's Ikea forks with a green plastic handle. His knuckles are almost white.

"Just eat what you can," I remind him quietly. "For now."

Suddenly Sherlock pulls back and I can see his eyes are owlish and red.

"This is...fucked," he hisses, and I flinch at the expletive.

He wipes at his eyes with the back of his hand, swiftly, as if trying to stop the force of a tide.

"And do you want to know what the craziest thing about this is?," he mutters to the table, now that Molly is safely back in the kitchen, the can opener whirring in the distance. "I'm actually hungry. I'm hungry, John."

He pushes his plate back angrily, and I rise to meet him - action for action.

"Sherlock, come on. Just sit down."

"No, no. Just...eat your biscuits. I have to get out of here."

"Please - c'mon, just sit down."

"So you and everyone else can stare at me like I'm some kind of...freak?," he says in a voice barely tinged with anger.

"You know that's not how I think of you. Nor Molly. Please don't run off. You're doing so well."

"No, I'm not. Obviously I'm failing at everything!"

"But you are trying so hard."

He runs his hands through his hair, which suddenly seems longer and unkempt. Perhaps it's just his daily growing thinness, distorting his features, and making everything look too big on his frame.

"What does it MATTER if I am trying? Trying doesn't matter! Actions matter, and I can't...act properly. Please, I need to go. I need to get out of here. Please!"
His voice is fraught with anxiety, and I nod my head.
"Ok," I relent, feeling gutted. "Ok, go, but-

"Ok?"
I close my eyes.
"Just...keep it in."
Sherlock stares at me oddly, as if not getting what I'm requesting.
"Don't bring it up," I whisper, my eyes serious.
He looks sour now.
"I don't do it on purpose, John."
But is that true?
His words this evening have been nothing but ambiguous, leading to multiple takes on a single subject. The only thing he admitted to, really, is that he is having trouble eating. But how and in what ways, and accompanied by whatever else could be classified as a disorder?
He's not really said much on that at all. And, besides, it was Mycroft who assured me that he never though Sherlock would purge his food. Never thought he had previously, either.
But was Mycroft correct? He's correct about so much, all the time. But can he see what plagues his own brother with equal accuracy?

--------------------------
Sherlock is re-affixing his scarf when Molly wades back into the room with a jug of cream for tea complete with a plate of chocolate orange Hobnob biscuits.
"You're heading out?," she queries with false casualness.
Bless her kindness.
"I've left a time-sensitive experiment going for hours now. Completely forgot about it," and Sherlock gives her a terse smile; his lips covering his teeth, his eyes darting around in anxiety for his shoes.
"Riiight," Molly draws out, "do you want to take some soup for later, then?"
Sherlock shakes his head.
"No, no - that's more than alright. I'm going by Tesco's before I get back to our flat."
Molly must see through the lie, but she lets it go and gives Sherlock a sweet smile.
"Take care of yourself Sherlock. Keep your blood sugar up, hear?"
"Yes. Well. Thank you for a lovely dinner, Molly," he says stridently, voice crisply polite.
Molly nods at his words - looking flustered, while I stand at the entrance that divides her living room from her kitchen, immobile.
A few seconds later, Molly has locked the door behind my flatmate and turns to me, her eyes burdened and worrisome.

"I think we need to talk now, John. Right now."

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It's nearly 11 pm before I make it back to Baker Street.

Surprisingly, I do see several bags from Tesco's lining the kitchen counter. I blink up at Sherlock. He's currently donning goggles and staring through his microscope with a look of extreme concentration, which I can only assume is an act.

"So the Tesco's thing was legitimate?"

He almost snorts.

"We were almost out of coffee whitener. And we needed eggs. You said. And you like eggs."

I let the words echo through my skull before responding.

"I do like eggs. Thank you, Sherlock. But do you like eggs? Are they something you will actually eat?"

"I got a carton of egg whites for myself. High in protein, easy to digest. It's a start, right?"

His lips are pinched in a forced half smile-half grin. Given his pallor and his overt fear this evening, the words seem almost obscene.

"Will you really eat them?"

Sherlock breathes out in a huff, rattling the papers that now cover our table-cum-study-desk.

"I will try," he re-emphasizes. "Didn't I just insinuate that very point?"

"Will your trying be enough? I need to know if you can eat the bare minimum to keep yourself from getting sicker. If you can go through with eating say... 1000 calories a day?"

"Had a nice little chat with Molly, didn't you?"

I clasp the table edge with my hands to keep them from trembling in anger, and Sherlock's mouth snaps shut.

"1000 is a lot," he grits out a few seconds later. "A lot... all at once."

Except it's not.

Not really. Not for a full grown man who runs around and expends the amount of energy that he undoubtedly expends every single day. Because even when he doesn't go outside, he paces the flat.

In fact, on a long enough time line, he'd still lose weight on a 1000 calorie a day diet. But I also know it's multiples of what he eats right now.

"What do you weigh this week, Sherlock?," I start, almost conversationally, save for the waver of hesitation that paints my voice as nervous.
He seems to ignore the question.

"Sherlock, please," and I turn his swivel chair around, despite his yelping cry that I leave him alone.

"No. I will leave you alone in a second. But for now, just tell me. How much do you weigh. Last week is was...what? 121 lbs?"

Sherlock grimaces.

"Near enough."

I press my fingers to my skull and somehow manage not to shout at him.

"And now?"

Sherlock gets up abruptly.

"I want tea. Do you want tea?"

"Bloody stop this, Sherlock. STOP IT. I promised I wouldn't force you, but you're forcing my hand in the meantime. I can't in good conscience let you keep going on as you have been, can I?"

"I've said it before, and I will say it again: this is not your business!"

"You know that can't be true. You know-"

"What? You CARE about me?"

"I do care about you, you dolt!"

Sherlock blinks, not expecting such a ready response in the affirmative.

"I care about you, and you know I care about you - you have to know that much! - and yet we keep playing this game. Why? This pointless don't-talk-about it, talk-about-it, don't-talk-about-it game. Ad nauseum. When are you going to really face the truth? That your behaviour needs to change, and it needs to change right now!"

Sherlock bites his hand, lightly, before addressing my statements.

"You...promised me you wouldn't force anything into me, or out of me! You promised, John!"

"Because you looked ready to have a panic attack, Sherlock! In front of Molly. I didn't want to make things worse for you."

His face is red, yet again.

"So you lied, essentially."

"I didn't lie!"

"I was just...God damn it, it was an atypical situation for me! You know that!"

"Yes, of course - eating dinner. Eating a miniscule amount of salad. A most atypical situation!"

Sherlock looks hurt then, and I feel a stab of guilt cripple my gut.

"That's not fair," he says in upset. "You don't know anything about this! I could be trying my
"damnedest and it wouldn't look like anything to you, would it?"

"Maybe not. Because you won't talk to me! You talk around the issues, but you rarely address them directly. And I am a doctor, so I more than know that you can't continue on as you have been, on absolutely no food."

"I eat! I do!"

"Obviously nowhere near enough, Sherlock! Look at you - you're skin and bones!"

His mouth puckers into sick amusement, and a scoffing sound comes choking from his throat. As if he finds the suggestion hilarious and over the top.

"It's true!"

"Stop it John. Stop...stop it. Stop lying to me. I know I am thin by conventional standards, but you're making it sound like-"

"If you don't see it, then by God Sherlock...you are sick! Sicker than I ever thought!"

Sherlock steps back, his face distraught with the knowledge that I won't just look away. That it'll take more than a couple mouthfuls of dry salad to get me off his back.

"I'm dealing with this my own way!"

I press my hands to my temples, and will the throbbing to depart.

"Dealing with what? The best way to starve yourself to death?"

And if I have to play the bad guy, the tough guy, the flippanit asshole to get something out of him...I will. Because gentle words and unlimited acceptance aren't getting him to see how far he's falling.

So I'd rather play with his emotions than I would with his life.

After a few seconds, I realize he hasn't said anything in response, and when I look up, his face is wet with tears.

"Fuck you, John."

Sod this.

"Sherlock-"

"No! You have no right to mock me about this!"

"I'm not mocking you! I don't know what to do! What do you want me to do, Sherlock? Go to Mycroft? Confide in him that you're basically not eating 99% of the time, and then - when you do - you're throwing up what little you manage to consume?"

His face is heated and angry now.

"Did Lestrade say I make myself throw up? Did Molly? Well fuck them, and fuck you! I am not bulimic!"

"Then let me see your throat! Let me see your knuckles, too! And explain to me why a man who rarely picks up his own laundry has taken to bleaching the shower and toilet every day! Do you think
I am stupid?"

Sherlock turns around in a half arc and jets to his room, and I struggle to keep up with his pace.

The door clicks with the turning of a lock, and I pound at the base of the wooden frame with my foot, ignoring the sting against my toes.

"Open up, Sherlock!" I demand. "I'm not done talking to you!"

Of course, there is nothing.

But I don't let up.

Because I am not ready to concede defeat. And where Sherlock is concerned, I never will.

"You must want me to get Mycroft involved! Is that it? Because I will, Sherlock! I'll call him up tonight and tell him everything I know. I don't care if I have to section you, if I have to do that to get you help...I will do it! So don't bloody push me on this! Open the door and talk to me!"

Because if anything could stir Sherlock to action, I thought - it would be mentioning getting his brother involved.

And yet...nothing.

No turn of the lock.

I can feel the scream burgeoning up in my throat in helplessness.

Then, a few moments later, I see a slumped shadow fall towards the ground and hear the rustle of fabric against the door. His coat, I think.

"Sherlock," I soften my tone, my heart pounding violently against my ribcage. "Please. I...I don't want to hurt you. I don't know what to do any more and this is scaring me, and I can't ignore it any longer-"

"I never asked you to do anything," comes the wheezing sound of my best friend, fighting off tears. Always fighting his need to cry, but never actually crying. "Why can't you leave this alone?," he asks in a congested groan.

"Because your mind is playing tricks on you, Sherlock," I whisper through the slot between door frame and floor. "Because for once, your mind can't be trusted. It's not giving you the truth any more. Not about yourself, and you are all I care about right this second. So you have to let someone else take over. And I don't care if it's me, or not, Sherlock...but you need help."

'Please, open up.'

'Please.'

The door remains closed; I feel a gutted sense of failure.
I wait until I hear John stalk away before I remove my coat and pull myself up from my clumped space on the carpet.

John has an interesting pace and stride when he walks, and I try to focus on that now, because I find it inherently calming to focus on his rhythms and motions and expressions. I can ascertain whether he is angry, excited, happy, fatigued...all from his pacing alone. Which I can do with most people, but even more so with John because he is very open and present.

In almost every respect he is incredibly revealing. And right now his behaviour is revealing that he is fatigued and also disheartened. With me.

The fact that he is disheartened with me is actually makes me feel sick inside. Sick, anxious, and nervous.

Because I don't know why this is starting again. This issue. For years, I had this under control. And in the last half year, what started as a niggling thought now and again has blossomed into something as pernicious as it ever was in my youth, and in many respects - even more disruptive and consuming than it was even at its worst, previously. And that thought is fear inducing because I did get very, very sick before. Even I understand that.

I can't lie to myself about this being a choice any longer. I could barely eat salad tonight. Plain salad. I could feel the ripples of cold fear in my gut, feel the acid churning from the lack of food, and I could almost taste the growling hunger in my throat and mouth - my body demanding to eat something (anything!) yet my mind couldn't comply. The fear eclipsed the need to feed. And that's not supposed to be possible.

The hunger drive is considered even more powerful than the sex drive in every single animal species, and yet for me - the first drive seems conspicuously absent, while the more pressing drive has always been easily overcome.

Even so, my mouth is watering. Dreams are plaguing me. They aren't classically scary, or frightening. They are not of abuse. They are not of being hurt. They are not gory or perverse. But
they scare me all the same. Because in the last three nights, they have been dreams of feeding. Eating, but of out control eating. Feeding that doesn't stop.

Dreams of consuming anything and everything, which for me are dreams of panic and fear. And also, dreams of purging. Of voluminous cords of vomit spilling forth from my body. Reams of sick, bright red at first and then bright black like tar, just like before I went to the A&E, holding Donovan's hand. And it seems never ending, the sick - even though with each wave, a small, crazily joyous feeling of freedom from misery accompanies the voiding.

But before that point, whenever I feed in the dream - it is accompanied by an insatiable hunger. In these dreams I choose high sodium foods. High protein foods almost always. Beans and rice with extra salt. Slabs of cheese. Tablespoons of mayonnaise. Burritos stuffed with sour cream, and pizza slabs dribbling with mozzarella and extra dough.

I wake up even more ravenous than I thought would be possible, my body itching to go downstairs and gobble up pasta and chips and dough and cakes. Not salad, not soup - even though those are hard enough to eat right now. Eat and leave alone. Leave to digest.

I close my eyes and press my fingertips to my face and will myself not to cry.

Because I am terribly hungry. What I said to John wasn't a lie. I am hungry, but I am repulsed by my hunger. And I know I can't go back to the clinic. To their high fat, high calorie meals. Or worse, potentially - to their feeding tubes and threats of sectioning. To Mycroft's aimless visits, and Mother's too. Her eyes cold and aggrieved with my continual existence. Her eyes almost willing me to end this charade, so she won't feel the need to keep up appearances.

And John, too, is out. I can't go to him any longer. Not when he threatened me with sectioning and with getting Mycroft involved again. Because the only thing worse than imagining eating all the food they'd undoubtedly push on me is to imagine eating in a clinic, with absolutely no say, with everyone watching, and with everyone measuring me and constricting my movements.

I'll lose my mind if I go back to the clinic.

I know I will.

I'd rather be dead than live through that again.

----------------------

I try to sleep.

I do try to sleep.

Hot bile is scorching my throat, and I root around in my bedside night stand table. Open the drawers. Locate a small bottle of Gaviscon.

I don't like Gaviscon, but it is better than Maalox. Better than Tums.

If I eat anything containing mint, I'll gag. I can barely walk down any aisle featuring milk of magnesia without feeling severely nauseated because I associate it with feeling ill. With vomiting.

So I crunch up four butterscotch Gaviscon tablets underneath my tongue, then swallow them down dry; feel them foam up in my stomach, and will this hunger to depart.

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At 4:15 am, I waken yet again. This time my dreams are in technicolour as I was devouring red velvet cake. Large slabs of it with three inch high cream cheese icing. My stomach eventually became rotund with my mammoth ingestion. And what's worse is that Mycroft and John were watching my every moment of intake, silent and smiling and enjoying my consumption.

When I finally woke from the dream, I felt dirty.

Almost as if I had engaged in sex.

Could smell the scent of it all over my body.

The very thought makes my cheeks burn with shame.

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I tie my sash firmly around my stomach and pad down as softly as I can to the living room, and then into the kitchen.

I am on automatic pilot.

I am so, so, so furiously hungry.

I am starving.

My mind is screaming at me to stop.

But I can't stop.

------------------------

The light in the fridge flickers on, and I pull out Kraft singles cheese slices, a bottle of Ragu sauce and a carton of milk.

In the cupboards, I find a box of Shreddies, and a box of Cheerios. A little bowl filled high with brown sugar.

I take everything back to the countertop, then take out a salad bowl, and pour a gigantic serving of Shreddies and Cheerios into the bowl. Top with milk. Top with 1/4 cup of brown sugar. Eat standing up. I don't even pull up a chair.

Devour the cereal within a few minutes, barely chewing. Into my mouth, swallow, gone. Into my mouth, barely taste, swallow, in, gone.

Try to ignore the screaming in my skull, begging me to stop. Pleading with me. Telling me I'm going to regret it. Regret all of it.

I can feel my stomach filling up, but the hunger is deeper than the fullness of my organs. The hunger is in my cells. It has ravaged my cells.

I stop eating cereal abruptly, rapidly needing salt, so I take the near empty salad bowl and pour almost the entire content of the Ragu sauce into the bowl. I open up 6 slices of plastic wrapped cheese and break the pieces up. Throw them into the bowl. Top with salt, pepper, hot sauce. Top with parmesan. Top with soggy bits of buttered garlic bread.
And then I eat that quickly, too. My stomach is heaving, my heart is pounding violently.

I start to slow down as a rapidly encroaching pain - sharp and ever present - descends upon me.

My stomach feels ready to split. It is grotesquely large now, whereas an hour before it lay concave, with my hip bones protruding. Now, the protruding bones are covered up by swollenness. By disgusting, assaulting bloat.

My hands are shaking, and I take the plastic wrap, the bags of cereal, the Ragu sauce, the carton of milk. I work quickly, chucking out the garbage, and putting the food back onto the shelves, back into the fridge. Everything looks more or less untouched if you didn't look carefully (and John never does), and I fumble around in the cabinets, looking, seeking, needing something else to make this better again.

Because I have an idea.

John has stashed four 2 litre bottles of Sprite and Coke towards the bottom of the shelves, near the flour. Right near the large bags of basmati rice and unopened bags of red lentils. So I take one, and make my way out of the kitchen and into the bathroom.

Had I been smarter, I would have drank the pop as I was eating the food.

Because now everything is about to get a whole lot worse. A whole lot harder.

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I close the door to the bathroom, and turn on the light. I turn on the fan. I take two towels, and block the door with the towels, hopefully blocking out both sound and light in the process.

Then I sit on the ground, and open the bottle of Sprite. I drink from it quickly, counting thirty sips. I then lay on my back and do sit ups. The fizz, the weight of the food, the bubbles of the soft drink - they all mingle together and increase the sensation of nausea. The need to vomit.

I take a few more sips, increase the sit ups. Turn the shower to ice cold, even though I won't be showering until I am done with this next step.

My stomach is revolting from the sudden increase of pressure from food and drink, and I remind myself that I can not eat starches and get them up easily. Milk, ice cream, soup. Liquids, yes. Bread and crisps and food that clumps together in my belly? Much harder to void.

So I struggle with my toothbrush, trying to stimulate my gag reflex.

It takes about three minutes before I can bring anything up. When I do, I see the food I last ate come up first. Bits of mushroom and tomato sauce, chunks of neon-orange plastic cheese.

I sip some more liquid, lay on my back. Do more sit ups.

This time, when I go to vomit, it is much easier, and I am able to get a large volume of tomato sauce and cheese up and out of my stomach.

The soda bottle is more than half way depleted however, so after I take a few more sips I fill up the remainder of the bottle with water, knowing the next bit will be trickier.

And it is. It is extremely hard for me to void bread, but I manage to get the majority up through sheer determination alone.
In total, the process takes over a half hour, and my chest is heaving from the physical exertion when I am done.

I flush everything away multiple times as I go, then check the toilet and surrounding area for sick. I moisten some toilet paper with water from the sink, then wipe down the outside of the toilet, the rim of the lid, and the floor. I spurt a little Lysol into the air, then meander on over to the shower, where I turn the water from ice-cold to warm. My legs and arms are shaking when I finally submerge my entire body under the spray, and I scrub at my teeth aggressively.

Only after I am clean once again do I allow myself to cry. Not loudly. Barely at all.

But I curl up and cry against the spray and I stay that way for...awhile.

Until I hear a knock at the door.

''Sherlock!,'' John calls out, and he sounds stressed. ''Sherlock...please open up!''

I breathe out my anxiety, knowing the incriminating evidence is gone. Knowing the longer I ignore him, the more paranoid he will get.

Knowing that if I do not respond, John will think the worst. With his army training, and his nerves frayed, he might also do something stupid. Like break down the door.

So I turn off the shower and reach for a towel. There is only one left, because the other two are still bunched up under the doorway. Obviously my original intentions were all for naught as I have woken him all the same. And here I thought I was relatively quiet.

''Yes?,'' I ask softly. More softly than I want to ask, yet stepping close enough to the door that I know he can hear me.

''Open the door, Sherlock,'' John says, his tone resolute.

He's coming in, whether I like it or not. That's what he really means to say. That's his tone in a nutshell.

''I'm getting a shower,'' I say, now standing next to the door, shivering away. ''I still need to rinse off.''

Which is a lie, of course.

I've been rinsing off for a solid 15 minutes now.

All I've done is rinse off.

''Wrap a towel around yourself then, but open the door right now,'' John says again, no-nonsense.

''Let me get dried off first, then.''

''Now, Sherlock! I'm not asking you again! You're not the only one who can pick locks!''

I close my eyes, and quickly grab my dressing gown. My pajamas, socks and pants still litter the floor, so I tie the sash to my gown firmly around my belly, which now is (thankfully) resting flat again.
"Sherlock! Open the door!"

I open the door quickly, not meeting John's eyes.

"Yes?," I say primly, attempting to sound put out. "Am I doing something wrong, or am I not even allowed to shower in my own flat any longer?"

John's eyes are searching for anything out of the ordinary and I relax - only modestly - because I am fairly certain I have not left any incriminating evidence in my wake. I cleaned relatively well, and I've brushed my teeth three times over.

There is, of course, the wrappers from the consumed food in the kitchen bin, but I plan to take those out and dispose of the rubbish in the morning. Before John woke up, anyway - that was the initial plan. And to replace the milk, the cereal, the pasta sauce, the cheese. Since it's John's day off, and since he went to bed after midnight, I thought I'd have time to run down to Tesco's when they opened and before John got up for the day.

That was the plan.

And it is still a plan with a reasonable likelihood of success, given that I doubt John closely monitors any of the foodstuffs on a per evening basis, nor is he given to scouring the kitchen at five am in the morning for evidence that I've eaten.

Mainly because he's convinced himself that I never do.

"A little thirsty, I take it?," he asks suspiciously, and my eyes follow his own.

Follow his own and land on a completely empty 2 litre bottle of Sprite.

Damn it.

"Yes," I say simply, not wanting to divulge any more than that. "I didn't have anything to drink at Molly's, after all."

"Sherlock," he begins cautiously, carefully. Confused to my assertions that contradict his earlier experiences. "You had tea."

My mind quickly analyzes his comment, planning for a resolution. Looking for an out.

"I had a few ounces of tea, and nothing else for the entire day. Not until now, I mean."

John's eyes are still studying mine, looking at the empty bottle, squinting, trying to piece everything together.

He's knows he's missing something. But he doesn't know what it is.

"I thought you hated Sprite."

"What is this? The Inquisition?," I grumble, and try to force my way past John's solid form. "I was thirsty! I will replace your bloody Sprite in the morning, John!"

"Sherlock, hold on. Wait a second, please..."

I turn and still my motions, settle my features into something more impassive; something that does not look guilty.
"Yes?" I ask, and my voice is raspy and sore and I wish that John would stop asking me to speak. I don't want to speak. My esophagus is hurting, stinging. I can smell nothing but sick in my throat, and my nostrils still burn with vomit. "What is it?"

John exhales sharply, looking stressed.

"Are you sure that you are okay? You're extremely pale."

I glower at the floor.

"I am always extremely pale."

My stomach hurts.

My stomach hurts a lot.

More than it did before I ate anything.

"No," John breathes heavily. "This doesn't...this doesn't make *sense* Sherlock!"

I push past him angrily.

"I was thirsty, so I drank some Sprite. I was cold, so I took a hot shower! I fail to see how either of those events are capitol offenses! Would you rather I ignore being thirsty and cold too?"

My body moves on auto-pilot. Up and away from John. Floating, high - high on endorphins. High on the knowledge that I got everything up, even the Sprite.

"I don't want to fight with you, Sherlock. Please. Just sit and talk to me. Please," and his voice is tinged with begging and sadness and everything that brings back my sense of self-loathing. Especially knowing I am the reason for his begging and his sadness in the first place.

"There is nothing to talk about!" I say, suddenly perilously close to tears. More than a half hour of vomiting, and I feel no better than before I ate. Actually, I feel worse. Shakier, hungrier, vertiginous. And the knowledge that this is to be my life now, because I can't get away from my cells - not away from the cell-hunger - not when it comes trundling along in the early morning hours, plaguing my dreams and salivating like a black dog for a meaty bone.

I'm hungry.

My body is terribly, terribly hungry.

And if John keeps pressing, I don't know what I will do or say.

Because I am not ready to give up this hunger for expected, mechanized fullness. I will never accept a reality whereby I eat when I am hungry and live in heavy weight - in that cloying stomach-warmth. With food passing through my body every day. Ingestion, evacuation.

How I long for it to stop. To envision the skin of my inner colon as pure and uncontaminated. Pink, and clean, and fresh. Not full of putrescing foods and liquids. Not full of materials indicating weakness. Not full of anything at all.


"I need to get dressed," I say hastily, hating my form. Hating it all. "Please leave."
So John leaves, his brows creased in worry and for a second or two I simply stare at the mirror. Just stare, and imagine what it would feel like to have everything stop. The hunger, the fullness, the guilt, the fear.

But that is a pointless thought.

I can't make anything stop without hurting John.

But just for a second, I can see it so clearly in my mind. A razor blade, a fluorescent light growing dim in the washroom. My hand lacing around my throat, and in one swift motion, the gurgling heat of blood, and everything else coming out. Warmth, salt on the air, a bright staining red, and life. All over my throat and down the front of my pajamas. All over the floor. All down an invisible drain that leads nowhere but to sleep. Sleep, forever.

Everything coming out of me for good. And how it would feel to just be dim and quiet and comfortable and dying.

I close my eyes and push the images back and away, because it is wrong and foul and dastardly. And it could never be a possibility.

Not now.

John pulls back abruptly, mouth clamped down around hard edges of worry.

"Ok, then. Good night," he says gruffly. Almost sourly. Almost - but not quite - angrily.

I almost want to say something - anything - so he won't leave.

But I say nothing, and he leaves.

--------------------------

I don't sleep.

I sit on my bed, my knees pulled up to my chin. The bones are hard and cold and cut under my face.

Removing the blue robe, I pull up my pajama bottoms. They are a new blue silk. Longer than before. Wider, too. But they don't hide my form as well as I had hoped, though they are handsome clothes. Covered in dots. Small, scattered. Like stars in a galaxy. Calming. Not effeminate like Mycroft's goose pajamas, given to me several years ago (and thank goodness those are now good and gone!).

My legs are ashen, brazen with a few fine hairs. Golden hairs edging towards brown, but ugly all the same. I run my fingertips along my shins and feel the ridgeline of bone, the nubbiness of the edge and the delineation of the bone running towards the flesh, free of excess fat and muscle.

Speckling my legs are also a multitude of bruises. Some brown, some violet, some the colour of old pea soup. Most are small - the size of a pencil eraser or smaller - while a few stretch out several inches in diameter. I have no idea how they were obtained. Normal bumps or falls, I suspect, though I cannot recall falling so frequently as to be littered with bruising of such prevalence.

Sighing, I pull my pajamas off and look for a pair of trousers that will - ideally - fit without a belt. Very quickly I realize that none of my trousers are fitted enough to stay up, so I locate a brown leather belt and cord it through a pair of corduroys. I then pull on a long sleeved shirt, and top it with a roan jumper. My coat is in the hallway, as is my wallet and keys.
By the time I walk to Tesco it is just starting to open. I stand out in the cold, as London's early morning sky is still caught up in the ink-blue hues of the night; charcoal clouds lazily make their way across the sky, and I have an itching, pressing need to smoke. A low-grade swell of panic is moving towards my center of consciousness, and I push away the prickling sensation of falling from a great height. The rapid onset of fear, as if injected straight into my veins.

I can do this. It's just one step, and then another. Just get what you need, then go home.

Replace everything. It's easy. It's got to be one of the easiest tasks in the world.

So where does this pressing need to cry come from?

I locate a trolley and deposit the necessary change to free it from its metal chain-linked perimeter. I then scour the aisles with steely intent, locating another carton of milk, two replacement boxes of cereal, bananas, blueberries, single serving cheese, dessert, and extra Sprite. I don't, of course, just purchase what I had consumed. That would be too easy for John to check, too easy for even him to piece together. But if I get an excess of food - far more than I actually ate - I can reasonably let him know that I did a full shop, and it makes me look competent and well intentioned. Doing my flat share duties, but nothing more.

My arms are heavy with the weight of the four double bagged groceries, and I fumble for my keys. Which is rather pointless, as I hear the door lock start to turn on its own. And then suddenly John is there, staring at me with a look of disappointment. He silently takes three of the bags and marches back up the stairs before I can protest.

By the time I make it to the second story landing, he has half the groceries laid out on the table. The Shreddies, the Cheerios. The Kraft cheese. The Sprite.

He also looks ready to cry.

"I couldn't sleep last night, and then I heard you leave. So I came downstairs to make myself some tea. You...you ate almost an entire package of cheese, Sherlock."

I nod, slowly, knowing that I am caught. Knowing that lying will make it worse.

"Yes," I respond sharply, not looking at John's face.

"Why?," he says dismally. "You didn't - wouldn't - eat dinner. But you were up in the middle of the night ransacking the cupboards?"

"So I ate some cheese!," I fume. "I was hungry, I ate some cheese. You should be pleased!"

"And half a box of Shreddies, and the remainder of the Cheerios, and the remainder of the parmesan cheese? A jar of tomato sauce? Half a block of butter? I found the boxes in the recycling. I found the rest in the garbage!"

I blink quickly, trying to determine the best route. Trying to determine what to say to erase that horrible look of dread from John's face.
"I finished the cereal days ago, and-

"Don't lie to me, Sherlock!," John roars, and I drop the remaining bag. The bag full of blueberries, and cheesecake. Extra tins of ravioli.

I stop talking abruptly. John looks dangerously aggressive.

"I was hungry," I whisper. "I couldn't help it."

"You could help it?! Molly made you soup and salad! You could have eaten then!"

"My stomach hurt then!," I proclaim, feeling close to panic. "Everyone was watching, and I couldn't get it."

"Do you think this is easy for me? To wonder what you are going to do next? To worry if you are going to eat enough to keep yourself alive from one week to the next, or if you are going to hurt yourself in some other way? Or if you are going to binge through half a weeks worth of groceries in a single night? That's why you were showering, wasn't it? You were getting rid of it!"

"I was thirsty," I croak, my heart hammering away in my chest. "I was just very thirsty."

It's then that I realize: I am afraid.

What's worse: I am afraid of John - his face red, his words almost hysterical.

"Again with the lies!," John spits, licking his lips quickly. He looks wild. Wild in his exasperation.

And when he steps forward, I step back and away from him quickly, shutting my eyes against the onslaught that I suspect is coming. In fact, without realizing it, I pull my hands up and over my head and flinch into the wall - my body going rigid.

My breath comes in pants, and I mentally count backwards from 100 in chunks of seven.

Just like Mycroft taught me to do when I was small.

100.

93.

86.

79.

"Sherlock?," and now his tone isn't angry at all.

Now John's voice is fearful.

Testing.

Heart-broken.

I open my eyes cautiously now, my mind racing with superstitious, silly, childish thoughts. Thoughts that make no sense. Thoughts I rarely entertained - even when I was a child.

Thoughts about how John can actually see me if I open my eyes and look at him.

(Of course he can see you, you idiot. He can see you now).
Thoughts about how maybe John will stay back if I don't move.

(Opening your eyes won't change what John is going to do. Or change his ability to move closer to you).

Irrational thoughts, especially given what I know about John. The type of man he is, the type of person.

A kind person. Loving, protective. Loyal.

"Sherlock...I would never hurt you," he replies brokenly, his voice barely audible over the thrumming of my blood. "My God, I thought you knew that."

"I do know that," I reply dully. "Of course I know that."

John is wavering in his spot, but he doesn't move closer to where I'm hovering. Instead, he simply drops to his knees.

As if trying to make himself smaller.

Less of a threat.

"I don't think you really do know that, though - do you? Not really?"

Slowly, I open my eyes.

"Don't be silly, John. Don't be utterly ridiculous," and now I am speaking to the groceries, and not to him at all. No, right now I am speaking to the melting vanilla ice-cream. To the bag of blueberries and the almond crescents. "I got you Hobnobs, by the way. The orange-chocolate ones," I add rapidly, wanting to get off the current subject. John's current - and unfounded - fears. "Those are your favourite, right?"

There is no response. Instead John starts to put the cereal away. Tucks the cheese away and stashes the milk on the bottom ledge of the fridge. I hear his breathing - scattered and harsh.

"John?"

"I want you to get help, Sherlock. I can't do this any more."

I blink away an intense and unsettling sense of rejection.

"I see."

"You...you do?," John breathes again, the sound almost a wheeze.

"I understand that you're a liar."

John is rooted to his place in the kitchen, his eyes large and haunted.

"What?," he asks dumbly, looking as if I have slapped him.

"You promised me. You said you wouldn't leave me. You said you wouldn't. Because everyone else did. You made it sound like you actually cared!"

"Sherlock.-"
I ignore the fact that he looks near tears.

"I thought you were different!," I hiss. "But you're just like everyone else, aren't you?"

"I'm not leaving, Sherlock!"

"You just said you can't do this any more!"

"Because I can't!"

I bite my lip and stare him down.

"So leave already! Why drag out the inevitable!? Just go!"

John's eyes are scanning my body, scanning my face. He's desperately trying to meet my eyes. Desperately trying to make eye contact.

He steps forward. Two steps. Four. Six steps. Seven.

Six inches away from my body. His hand comes out, hesitantly hovering over my own. Then he grabs my right arm. I hear him swallow. It sounds granular and hard. Like his throat is full of grit.

"Listen to me, Sherlock. I am not leaving. Ok? Do you...can you believe that? Can you please try to trust me on that?"

I look at the lino. Try to keep my mouth from trembling.

"You just said you couldn't live like this any longer. That means something. And since I am the one putting you through...this...it only could mean one-"

"Sherlock," and John grabs the lapels of my robe. "Sherlock, be quiet. Stop thinking like this. Stop thinking bad things about yourself. About how no one could care enough about you to stay in your life. I'm not leaving."

"You just said-," I gulp down the soreness in my throat. "What else could you have meant?"

"I meant that I won't let you keep hurting yourself. I've stood back long enough and watched you get sicker and sicker, because I thought if I stepped back and just tried to be your friend, that it would be enough. That you'd get through this rough patch, and start to do better again. That it was a low mood, and just an episode of...something. But it's not enough, is it? This isn't going away, is it?"


"No. It's not going away," I whisper.

John exhales.

"Okay," he gets out. "Okay. Thank you for being honest with me."

"I'm sorry," I cough, wanting to go to sleep forever. "I told you I sometimes wouldn't talk for days on end. I told you I didn't eat when I was working on a case-"

"Sherlock, this isn't something you have to apologize for, okay? And you need sleep. We both need sleep. But we can't ignore this any longer. Okay?"
I want to run out of the flat. I want to hide. I don't want John to know what he knows. Nor Molly, nor Mycroft, or even Lestrade.

Hell, even Sally Donovan seems to have figured it all out.

She's stopped calling me freak.

She...pities me.

And that's so much worse than hating me.

"I don't know what to do," I admit, pointing to the groceries. "I can make up for what I take, but-"

"That's not what concerns me. That's the least of my concerns. I want you to talk to someone."

I bite my lip.

"I'm talking to you, John."

He gives me a pained smile. An almost-but-not-quite-amused smile.

"Which I am grateful for...I am. But that's not what I mean, Sherlock. And I think you know that."

I huff at the floor.

"So...what? You want me to find an 'Ella'? A useless high-priced know-it-all who actually knows nothing?"

John gives me a small grin, but this time it's mixed with relief. Because he probably thinks he is getting through to me.

And maybe he is. I don't even know any more.

"Noooo," he draws out, his mouth quirking up at the edges. "I want you to find someone who will actually help you. I want you to try to get better. I don't want this to go on. That's what I meant. That's all that I ever meant when I said that I can't live like this any longer. You understand that - don't you, Sherlock?"

I try to imagine that's what John did, in fact, mean.

That his words were rooted in concern, and not in a yearning to get away from me and all my failures.

I need to believe that he still cares.

And if he does, indeed, want to leave then I need to convince him that I'll get better. That I'll do anything he wants, so long as he stays.

So I say the words I never thought I'd say.

I say:

"I will find someone to talk to, John. I will get help."

I try to ignore the squirming mass of anxiety worming its way through my chest.

The realization that the last time I actually sought out help, I wound up with a feeding tube down my
throat and with my arms and legs in restraints.

But I can't tell that to John.

I can't make this worse for him.

Not after everything else that I've put him through.

So I nod, and tell myself that I will get help.

That somehow I will fix this.

That I have absolutely no choice.

And absolutely no control.
I know he can hear me, but I cannot help it. I need to talk to him and I will stay as close as I can until he lets me in.

So I sit outside Sherlock’s room, my body crouched down by his door. My hands touching the wood of the frame. Wanting to touch his fingertips, and not this coldness, not this barrier between us.

Minutes pass, and nothing. And then I hear a ragged breath. I hear him trying so hard not to cry and I feel lost. I cannot say what needs to be said to heal him. I don't know his fears, his insecurities, his doubts and how his previous experiences now trigger all of those, but it seems that whenever I put something out there, in the space of consciousness and speech, he recoils in self-defense.

"Sherlock," I whisper. "I want to understand. But you need to speak to me. I can't do this alone. You need to talk."

Nothing.

Nothing for a few seconds, but then my throat grows warm and swollen when I hear his hiss of breath and a shudder belying tears that have - as always - been repressed. Because he isn't opening the door, but he is listening.

And that's better than nothing.

"Please. I won't abandon you. I promise. Please trust me," I say this so softly that I can barely be certain that I have spoken aloud at all, and not merely in my head. "Please...I'm not going to leave. I'm not going to tell you that you're wrong. I don't think that. I only think that you feel alone right now. I feel alone too, sometimes."

And yet there is still nothing.

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Or at least there is nothing for a minute, maybe two minutes. And then I hear Sherlock's door unlock.

Gentle light spills into the hallway, and I squint. Sherlock is still wearing his coat and he looks on edge.
He looks strange. Strange and lost: ready to fall, as if from a great height.

"Will you stay with me?" he asks, wiping at his cheeks which I suddenly realize are red and damp.

'So he has been crying.'

I'm not sure if he means tonight, or on a longer timeline as his flatmate. Yet, it makes very little difference, perhaps, as my response to either question would be the same.

"Yes," I whisper. "Of course I will."

"I..." and he points to his head. "Too many thoughts, and-," I see him gulp-swallow air, overwhelmed. "I don't-"

He looks almost deranged in his confusion; I tentatively touch his shoulder, and hear a noise not unlike air leaking from a balloon.

His throat is bobbing up and down with pain.

And again, I am confused as to what triggered these events. This recent shift in the last few months.

Certainly he went from melancholic at times, manic at other times, and irritable often - from the time I first knew him - to confused, withdrawn, less manic, less passionate about cases. And losing weight at a fairly stable rate. But this all started within the last four or five months. He may not have ever been typical with his eating, or even tempered, but he certainly was much better off than he's been recently.

We've established this. He's admitted that his behaviours have been atypical.

I want to know why.

What the trigger was and if I can help.

So that's what I want to ask him now. What brought these demons back to life after such a long time of being suppressed.

But something sick and recoiling in my belly doesn't want to go that route. Not right now. I guess I know that there is another aspect of pain, renewed, that I don't know anything about. Something that's brought Sherlock back to this horrible place to begin with, and I need to be certain I am also in a strong place emotionally when I ask what those triggers were.

I can only hope that he'll tell me on his own.

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"Do you want to take off your jacket?" I supply dumbly, looking for something to say.

His eyes crumple and he squeezes his sides. Shakes his head back and forth.

"No," he pants, completely lost. "I want- I need," and I have never felt so unnerved for a person before. Not just for a person's mind, or future; he looks as if he's splintering apart right now.

"What do you need, Sherlock?" I test, trying to sound strong even though I feel anything but.

"Are you- do you...why did you stop with them?" he moans, sounding miserable and hurt.
"What?"

"Your girlfriends, John!" he spits. "Is it because they did not give you enough sex? It is sex? Is it because of their bodies? What is it?"

The questions throw me, and my heart pounds.

"What...what are you asking me? You're not making sense!"

Sherlock stuffs his hands into his pockets. His eyes are closed, and he moves towards his bed, looking spent.

"Why do you leave them? Some of them...seemed nice. Like Sarah. I didn't really dislike her."

He looks abandoned. A little child, lost in a maze, without water or food. Secluded from humanity for a thousand years. He looks dizzy with his upset.

"You're right, Sherlock. They were...nice. Sarah was very nice, but-"

A sound breaks from his throat.

"What, Sherlock?", and I try to touch his leg, but he flinches away. "What is this? What is all of this? I don't see things like you see them. I know you're feeling rotten inside and I hate - HATE! - this. Please talk to me. Please."

Sherlock's breath comes out of his body like a rocket.

"Are they just bodies to you, John, or are they people? Is it just sex, or is it something else? Why you don't want them in your life anymore?"

He's staring at his pillow as he tears at a loose thread with his fingertips.

"You mean...why they don't last? The relationships themselves?"

He nods morosely at the sheet.

"I don't know what to say to that. It's complicated. Relationships are complicated. No two cases are alike, and-"

His eyes shut. They shut hard. He looks even more distraught now and not less.

"Is it that they don't want to be fucked? But you want to? And you can't? So you keep looking?"

I feel cold. I feel tingly and cold and like I might very well sick up.

"What?" I rasp, barely recognizing my voice. "My God...they are *people* Sherlock...they, I would never-"

I can't think. I only hear a buzz of static in my skull where thoughts and life and images usually dwell.

"I don't like sex," Sherlock responds flatly, as if this statement is explanation enough for the awfulness of his preceding words.

My heart thunders.
"I know. God, I know - and it makes sense, but-

"Most people don't care about THEM. They only seem to care about IT, only sex - and the people...," and I realize very quickly that Sherlock's voice is rising. Exponentially, and with extreme rapidity.

"Sherlock! Please calm down! Mrs. Hudson is home!"

His eyes are red and full and terrified.

"Do you love me?," he queries, his whole body trembling.

He's staring at me, chest rising and falling. He looks close to a panic attack. He looks ready to be ill.

My head roars louder than before. A lion, screaming in my skull.

I ignore the roaring, the fear, the uncertainty.

"Yes," I whisper. "Of course I love you."

Sherlock blinks back hot tears.

"I never will have sex with you, John. I never will. Not if I can help it. You'd have to force me," the words are not fierce like they were before. They are now dull - and almost dissociative. "It wouldn't be easy to make me. Now that I'm bigger."

My legs go weak - not with defeat or disappointment, but with some horror of unnameable pain. Greater than anything that has come before. Worse than this earlier words and admissions, somehow.

Somehow, worse than his past, is his present. Is...all of this. What's he's just said. This fear that I would hurt him at all - in any way - but never mind in such a grotesque manner.

I taste salt on my tongue, and breathe evenly, focused on keeping the contents of my stomach inside my body.

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"Sherlock," I test, moments later. Maybe minutes later, I am not sure. It takes me awhile before I trust myself to speak. "I will always love you. I don't love you for your body - though your body is...it's great." I cough, surprised at my words, confused by my feelings, and I shake my head in self-irritation, "I love you for you. I never would ask you for sex, and I never would expect it. I don't want that with you. Not just because I know bits and pieces of your childhood, but because I wouldn't demand it of anyone even if I loved them. Even if they had the best childhood... it's not about that to me. Love to me doesn't have to equal sex. Okay? It doesn't change...that I love you. It doesn't change that at all."

I'm rambling, but I can't help it.

I want to get help but have no idea who to call, or what to do.

My voice is shaking, and I'm sure I'm white-like-bone, but I say that much. I get it out.

Distantly, a part of my mind cheers me on. A fuller part of my being is proud with my courage.

Because I'm usually rubbish with these sort of talks. Talking about feelings in general.
What's more, it's only the second time in my life that I've actually ever told someone that I love them. In the romantic, non-blood-familial sense, I mean. And the first time was a piteous rejection. A rejection of me that occurred post-announcement.

So I never said it again, but I also never felt it again, ever.

Which may be why I understand his torment, if only slightly.

Because while I may not be asexual - as Sherlock is convinced he is - I understand romantic love as being distinct from sexual attraction. And I understand rejection, and I know that the heart will always come first for me.

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Sherlock stares at me, unblinking.

He looks torn.

"Does that upset you?," I try gently, not knowing how it could. "Because it scares me too," I ramble. "It scares me in a way. It does."

I look down at his duvet, not knowing myself. Feeling freshly born in the glow of the room and the hour of the night.

Not knowing what this means for me, for John Watson. The self proclaimed hitherto heterosexual.

Does it change that title?

I don't even know my own title anymore. My reality. My label. My sexuality.

Because up until recently I never would have thought that I'd be telling a man that I loved him. Not romantically, I mean.

But I'm pretty damn sure that's what I am feeling now.

And all I can think is: 'Fucking Mycroft Holmes. Little poncy know-it-all.'

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So right now I'm just trying to keep myself from hyperventilating. Never mind keep Sherlock calm.

"Do you want to have sex with me?," Sherlock finally grits out, his body rattling like a leaf in the wind. "Is that why you love me? I know you are patient, and I know that if you did, with you - that maybe I could, if."

"No! Dammit, Sherlock," I soften the intensity of my voice when he flinches, "It's possible to love people without wanting to have sex with them. And both parties need to want that to happen. It's not about the needs of one person. Besides you have emotional needs, and I would maintain that those would come before physical desire anyway. Right?"

He looks confused; conflicted and disbelieving.

"But you're not like me. You want it. Generally speaking. I know you do," he mutters to his lap. "Not with me, maybe. But in general. Just in general."

"I-I-," I begin stupidly, a stuttering destroying my voice. "I never thought much about what I was or
how I felt. Sexually or in any other way," and I lick my lips in nervousness and realize my mouth feels dry, "But you've changed me. Made me feel more. Maybe you've made me care more about the heart, and less about the body, I don't know," I whisper. "I'm confused right now, too, Sherlock. Maybe, in a way, I'm even more confused than you. You say you're asexual, but is that anything new to you? Because this is pretty brand new for me. I don't know what I am anymore, and that scares me too."

Sherlock looks at me, his face watching, scanning.

"People say that, John. People lie. Then they cheat and go away and just...it's lies. Look at your girlfriends," he bites out. Yet he looks miserable - not angry. And he still won't take off his damned coat. It shouldn't bug me, but it does. Mainly because the flat is quite warm tonight - almost too warm - yet Sherlock's still shivering away like he has hypothermia. Like he's camped out in the Arctic. Not a slightly-too warm bedroom in London.

"Sherlock...when I date, I don't always love the person I date. I mean it's attraction, and it may start as a physical attraction, but-"

"You have sex with them," he says resignedly. "But you don't love them at all. Isn't that a bit not good?"

He seems upset about this.

It surprises me. Possibly because in the past he's always seemed to mock people whenever they bring up anything relating to romantic attraction. In fact, he seems to mock any discussion of relationships, period.

"Well...it would depend on what both people were expecting going into the relationship, Sherlock," I respond awkwardly. "That doesn't mean I don't care about them, though. Or that I don't like them. Just that - it's rare for me to be in love. But with the other people, like Sarah - it was a mutual understanding that we were testing out a potential relationship. It wasn't a declaration of love when we started. Sarah knew that. They all knew that, Sherlock."

"Yet you've gotten nowhere with me," he jumps up from his bed, arms strangling his sides. "Not physically. So how can you say you love me? You've never had me like that - like you have had with your girlfriends, and you didn't even love them."

His eyes crumple together, and everything in my being is screaming at me to get him help. I can hear the voice of Mycroft (now even louder than before) reverberating around in my skull. Telling me - more than any other night - that tonight is a definite danger night. Which previously was what I thought Mycroft referred to as 'Sherlock is feeling melancholic and might want to use.' Now I'm wondering if the reasons behind a danger night, for Sherlock, include overt and serious self-harm. Not just drug use. Until I remember that according to Mycroft, Sherlock had attempted suicide at the age of 13.

Or at least that's what Mycroft thinks happened. And even though Sherlock says differently, I don't know how much I can trust his self-analysis at present. He also doesn't think he's critically underweight.

What's more - for some reason the enormity of that declaration has stayed towards the back of my mind up until now. In a category of 'things-I-have-yet-to-deal-with.' Because I know I need to deal with them - bring them up - but I also know that they'd be the most complicated of subjects to bring
up with Sherlock. Not just dealing with what someone else did to him as a little child. But also what
he did to himself of a violent nature when he was a child. And what he's doing to himself currently.
Not eating enough, voiding what he eats, using sharp instruments to damage his skin. It's almost like
a free-for-all for him, a means of seeing how many ways he can hurt himself. Or at least that's what it
feels like to me.

Which could sound melodramatic, and seem over the top. If not for the expression on his face that I
can currently see. The sickening resignation splayed across Sherlock's face right now. And it's then -
depth in my bowels - that I know that his situation needs expert care.

Perhaps even medical care, if I am being honest with myself.

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I edge forwards - just a few inches, and see Sherlock lean away from me, overwhelmed. Almost as if
he's afraid of me.

Me!

God, this is insane.

All of this is completely insane.

"Sherlock," I test softly, "I don't want to have you like that. I'm not going to hurt you. Please...stop it.
Stop this."

His breathing is heavy and crushingly loud. I want to hold him, but I know that could end in disaster
unless he instigated the first move.

So I shouldn't reach for him. Not now, not with his rabid angry-hurt eyes imploring me to fix life, to
make people kind, to negate all the predators in the world.

"I can't speak for others, Sherlock," I attempt quietly, "I can only speak for myself. And I know that
if I loved a person, I would never leave them. Sex or no sex, love isn't just about sex. Sex may be
part of a loving relationship, but love - to me - is above sex. Ok? It's the only thing that truly matters
to me. The only thing that I ever was looking for when I dated, too."

"But people leave! Even if you love them, even then!," and he wipes at his eyes furiously. "They
don't really care. They only care about the transport!"

I try to grasp at his logic, while holding our past discussions in my mind.

I need to calm him down right now.

And then I need to call Mycroft.

He can hate me all he wants.

"Did...Victor leave?," I try, wondering what has triggered this meltdown tonight.

Sherlock looks to the floor.

"Of course he left. He wanted sex, and I hated it, and he thought I didn't care for him. I wouldn't 'put
out' as much as he wanted, and-"

I bite my tongue to keep from saying something out of turn. After a few minutes, Sherlock looks up
to me expectantly as if he knows I want to ask a question.

I sigh.

Of course he does.

"Can I sit down next to you?," I attempt, not edging forward until I see Sherlock's body relax first.

It's a strange situation. The lamp towards his bed is casting a soft orange glow over us, like a harvest moon blanketing the earth. The shades are drawn and shroud the room in private night. It's quiet and intimate and gentle in some respects. But it's also full and heavy and heartbroken in others. The air, the breaths and the sadness from Sherlock are hard to listen to. But if I can sit closer to him and let him know that's I'm not going to pull back from him - never going to leave him alone in his pain - maybe that will help.

Sherlock looks so achingly sad that I want to hug him, yet I know I can't. Not now.

Never mind what I've just said.

Never mind that I've told him I love him.

Because I do.

I know I do.

I also know he is terrified of feeling this.

Feeling us.

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Sherlock is holding onto his belly as if it's a blanket. Or an amulet. He's squeezing the flesh like a kitten kneads against its mother - what thinned out flesh it happens to be in his case.

"If someone loved you back...would you leave them? If they didn't want to-, if they-," he starts.

I rest my hand on top of his own.

"No," I stare at his lips, and feel my chest heave in anger for him. "Never for such a reason. Never at all. I wouldn't leave. And...not you. Not ever you. Not ever. You'll always be my best friend."

He lets out a shudder of an exhale and I wonder if what I said was too much all at once.

Bet it probably was, as it's too much for me.

"John?"

I blink back weight and warmth and blurriness.

"What?"

He bites his lip, but says nothing.

So I take a chance.

"I...I'm not going to pressure you to feel or do anything, Sherlock. You don't have to love me, and you certainly don't have to be with me in any way. Although your continued friendship would make
me very happy," I say with a tentative smile.

Sherlock watches me. Tilts his head slightly. Studies my eyes.

"I can't do some stuff," he explains tentatively, almost scared. "Some physical stuff," he whispers, and I realize then that's he's hearing me - but only partially. He knows I am not forceful, and that I do not judge harshly or superficially - which is how we came to be flat mates in the first place. Yet, he's still assuming there has to be an end to my so-called 'patience.' A time when - I too - will abandon him if he doesn't give me something physical. Even if it takes longer than most, that's his fear - that I too will leave. So his voice sounds like a plea when he speaks again. When he tries to assure me he'll try to give me what I know he doesn't want to give anyone.

"But I think maybe, John, maybe if I-

I stroke his hand, but do not speak.

"I thought I'd be alone forever because of how I am. And it was okay. But I-," he frowns.

"What?," I murmur, not wanting to break his train of thought.

"Why did you leave them?," he repeats the question yet again. It seems my previous explanation was too vague for him and I shake my head, needing to dispel my anger that so many people have betrayed him.

"It wasn't always me leaving someone else, Sherlock. Maybe they didn't find what they wanted in me, you know? Love has to be mutual. And I'm still friends with many of my past-

"Conquests?," he rasps, his mouth now almost upturned in a smile. The first of the evening.

"Shut up," I whisper. "It's...tricky. It's not perfect. And I can't speak for all the others out there. I can't speak for other men or women. I can only speak for myself. But as for myself... I know I would never leave someone because of physical issues, like sex. Or lack of sex. Or - you know. It's, for me-," and my face flushes red.

"Nice," Sherlock responds dully. "You like it."

"I guess," I say faintly. "Yes, nice. Sex is nice. Which is probably the least descriptive word to describe what sex feels like. What a silly word...nice. But it's sex, and it feels...I guess - God Sherlock," I hiss, feeling exposed but also, oddly - not. "It's not conflated to love. Not in my mind. Love, to me, is distinct. It always has been. In that physical way, sex can - I don't know - aid? Maybe aid the emotional intensity that makes it a partnership? But without love, Sherlock, it doesn't hold me. I'd just end up feeling lonely, then. Just like you probably do. And then sex actually makes the loneliness worse, in a way. Because you are with someone but not really with them. Not deeply. So I have felt alone, you know - even in a sexual relationship. Sometimes if there is no real bond and it's just...god, I don't know what I am saying. I'm very bad at talking about this kind of stuff."

"Is your transport defective too?," Sherlock says gently, barely teasing.

So I mock glare at him. Because maybe humor can make this easier to get out. And I squeeze his hand again.

"Yes. Well... it is transport. If it's just physical transport, like you say it is - it's not only what I want, is it? It's not enough."

"But don't you need the physical act, too?," Sherlock mutters, his knee jumping in staccato beats
against the lino. "Don't most people? Normal people? Victor said-"

I ignore his self-slam and focus on his ultimate question.

"What did Victor say?," I say mildly, even though I'm fairly certain that if what Victor said was anything less than supportive of Sherlock, I could care less about Victor's appreciation of relationships. Truth be told, I probably could care less about Victor. From the little Sherlock's mentioned, I can read between the lines. Obviously Sherlock was nervous about certain things, and obviously Victor pushed him. He might not have been mean about it. But that doesn't erase my anger over anyone taking advantage of Sherlock at any point in his life.

"He said he'd been patient. For a long time. If I cared about him as much as he cared about me, that I'd be able to put it behind me," Sherlock repeats softly, almost robotic in intonation. As if he's said the words over and over to himself before. "That I didn't care for him, and maybe couldn't care for anyone, and that it was only a reasonable excuse for so long."

I give the wall opposing us a hard look. I imagine giving a fictional Victor a kick to the guts.

"I don't think Victor knows the first thing about how respectful relationships really work then, Sherlock. He certainly doesn't feel close to how I feel," I say crisply, needing to know that Sherlock will realize that I am not angry with him for posing the question. "I would maintain that Victor and I see these things very differently. Never mind how to handle this subject with someone who has already suffered through hell," I grit out, and see Sherlock bite his lip. The action is so unlike Sherlock -that timidity in a man who at first seemed strangely boastful and over-confident when I first met him - that even his timidity is upsetting me now.

I scavenge my brain for anything that can help, and feel my cheeks flush as I say, "I mean transport is...well, I can fulfill my own transport, can't I? So that would be a pretty sad excuse to let go of a bond that is deep and truly based on love, wouldn't it?"

Sherlock bark-laughs, his throat and lungs sounding congested and full. I wince in empathy.

"God this is a mess," I whisper, and he looks to me quickly, startled.

"Not you, Sherlock, but just this whole situation."

Sherlock continues to stare at me, exhaustion evident on his face. But also a challenge.

"Okay, you too. You're a mess too," I add slightly, in a quip-like way.

His mouth curves up, and I give him a smile.

I can also tell he wants to ask a question, but is afraid to vocalize much at all so I squeeze his hand once more.

"Just ask me," I say calmly. As calmly as is possible. "It's fine. It's all fine."

Sherlock smiles back faintly, and it's a relief to see that he's finally coming around. Starting to calm down as he takes off his coat.

He's wearing a red jumper underneath, and I blink back in shock when I see his torso. He looks hollowed out. Concave. But he's staring at his lap, which thankfully means he doesn't see my shock.

"Do you want to sleep here with me?," he says softly, his fingertips still against my palm, his eyes still trained on his lap. "Tonight?"
I stare at him - prickly, uncertain. Our hands are suddenly matching, tremble for tremble, and I close my eyes and try to laugh, but it comes out as a weird, lobbed noise in my throat.

"I haven't been sleeping well," he rushes to say next, lest I get the wrong idea. "I, just - with Mycroft, when I was small, sometimes I'd sleep better if he-"

I run my hands through my hair, and I note that the nape of my neck is damp with sweat.

"I get it," I say quickly, not wanting to put Sherlock in the awkward position of having to explain more when just asking the question was probably hard enough for him. Hard enough to admit that he was feeling so scared in the first place.

"Ok. Yes. I can do that. I just need to go get my pajamas."

"I have some too," he says swiftly, again probably to put to rest any strange notions I'd have about him sleeping in the nude as he's slept in the past. "I obtained a few extra pairs after the ones from Mycroft tore, and-"

He proceeds to show me. Long and expensive-looking silk garments. He pulls out three pairs on lays them on his bed.

"You can borrow a pair, if you'd prefer."

Except I would prefer. Not to, I mean.

This is all so new and strange and heart-poundingly real enough without me also wearing Sherlock's silk clothes.

"I think," I cough out, "I will be more comfortable in my own clothes. But I appreciate the sentiment."

Sherlock stands there holding up a blue pair.

"Sentiment, yes," he begins, putting the pajamas back down on the bed, "I will get changed now," he adds awkwardly.

My cue to leave, I guess.

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When I return a few minutes later, I am wearing burgundy sweat pants and an athletics department sweatshirt.

Sherlock is doing up the shell buttons on his blue silk pinstriped pajamas.

He gives me a quick up and down as I approach, and says, "you look like you're going out for a run."

I smile, awkwardly. Then decide to give it to him straight.

"This felt more like-," and I gesticulate something with my hands.

"Like lounging around. Not like sleeping," he supplies quietly. "Therefore, less unnerving."

"I guess so," I breathe out harshly, "I...do you mind?," I ask carefully, not sure if I've offended him.
"Of course not. Will you be able to sleep in those...things?," he asks skeptically, as if the idea of my sleeping in anything that was not expensive silk is foreign to him. Which may very well be the case. In so many ways, his life has been this strange blend of horror, but also decadent indulgence. He never suffered for lack of materialistic goods. His suffering was primarily emotional.

"I've slept through gunfire, in 45 degree Celsius heat, Sherlock. In army fatigues," I clarify. "And if I was in the position of having to sleep next to anyone...believe me Sherlock, they weren't as fastidious about their hygiene as you were."

Sherlock blinks at that. As if the idea that I may have slept next to another man in a non-sexual way is completely foreign to him.

"Of course," he admits, "So this is okay then?"

I grasp the edge of the duvet and pull it back, smiling. Feeling - even with this brief exchange - more confident.

"You're just psyching yourself out. Come on. Just get in. You by the wall, and me...to the open, right?"

He blinks, placing my words, placing the admission of the time and the subject. I see his mouth shut tight and he nods slightly.

"Thank you," he whispers getting into the bed, before pushing his lithe body as far back as if possible. Until he is, indeed, touching the wall. His legs hunch up slightly and he holds the duvet up for me to crawl underneath. I get in a little more slowly than he had and then take the cover of the blanket, and settle it securely around both of us.

"Light off?," I test, not wanting to offend him with the suggestion that he'd want a light on in the first place.

"Okay," he whispers, and I click the lamp off too.

Then it is dark. Sherlock's frail form is pushed far away from mine, as he is trying to give me most of the space on the bed. I tug lightly with his hand.

"We can share the space better than that," I say, exhaustion quickly descending now that we're in the dark, laying down. "Just-," I touch his forehead gently, my fingers ghosting over his scalp. "Just go to sleep. Everything will be okay."

"Okay," he repeats, and even in this dim space with only the blue moonlight and the fluttering ramble of ghostly tree branches flickering about in shadow, I see his eyes close. Hear his breathing start to regulate.


"You can sleep now," I say softly, closing my eyes. "And it's okay. Everything is fine. All fine."

He seems lulled by the consistency of my words, their echo of past expressions.

"S'all fine?," Sherlock mumbles, and the bone-weary fatigue that he must have been experiencing is readily apparent. He's almost asleep, despite this departure in how we are acting, and living, and interacting with one another.
"It's all going to be fine," I agree, studying his form in the dark. "I will make sure of it."

He's breathing starts to regulate shortly after I speak and I cup his chin with my fingers. Feel the denuded skin - freshly shaven, and looking boyishly young, but sick. Wan and purple-pale. I feel the hardness of bone peeking through his jawline, the ridges that feel more pronounced than they should on a healthy person. Bone normally covered and padded with considerably more flesh and fat.

"It's going to be fine. I will make sure of it, Sherlock," I repeat to the darkness.
Call Back

Chapter Summary

So this chapter is out in a slightly more timely manner, right? :) This probably makes me happier than anyone else reading the fic.

Here's a *toast* to new and excellent writing habits. The habit being...actually writing without weeks passing.

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Sherlock's POV

I wake up to warm light glittering against my face and neck, and for a moment, I feel okay. I feel cloistered in between early morning dawn and John. Two calming realities.

He's still sleeping. John. His regulated breathing is calming and I watch him for a few seconds as his small chest rises up and down, not unlike accordion bellows.

In my still hazy-awareness, I am enraptured by his form, and by his gentle presence. He looks softer right now, and safe, and during sleep his face radiates the kindness that I see from him on a day-to-day basis. Except, he looks placid. Serene.

At that second, it's hard to even think of my problems in their totality, because I can only think of how lucky I am to have him as my friend.

And here I never even thought I'd have a best friend. Never mind a friend like John Watson.

-------------------

I extricate myself from the duvet, and turn lightly against the wall, trying not to tug on the sheets and awaken him. After a few seconds of lightly maneuvering myself around as slowly and carefully as I can, I make it to the edge of the bed, where I slowly slide out and walk carefully to my chest of drawers, collecting clothes for the day. My mobile sits on top of the oak top surface, and I take it quickly, pocketing in my dressing gown pocket before padding away as softly as I can.

John doesn't move or toss and I inch towards the bathroom. Once inside, I look the door, and place a towel under the door by the slit where noise and light would otherwise reach the hallway. Then I pull several reams of toilet paper off from the roll and deposit them into the toilet basin, before I proceed to urinate. The fire in my bladder slowly fades away, and I realize I've been drinking a pretty large amount of fluids lately. More than would be typical. Primarily coffee, which is probably doing my stomach no favours whatsoever. It helps to keep the hunger down to a minimum, and it can provide me with a sense of energy that I am needing so desperately these days. But it also causes my bladder to burn.

When I am done, I debate flushing the toilet, not knowing if the noise will wake John up, and not wanting to do so. I eventually decide to just flush and remain silent for a minute or so afterwards, trying to determine if I can hear him shuffling.
I hear nothing, so I continue on and get changed into a grey-green pair of cords and a roan coloured Merino top. I run a comb through my hair and debate shaving, then dismiss the task, reminding myself that I had shaved the evening before and look more or less clean shaven, still. I splatter some cold water on my face, add a secondary layer of deodorant to my arms, change my socks, and then brush my teeth.

When I am done, I stare back at the mirror and feel an unsettling feeling of unreality. So I reach out and touch the glass.

The man in the mirror doesn’t look like me, but he looks enough like me to make me feel faint and ghostly and to bring up old fears. Fears I have never really expounded upon with anyone, not even in therapy at 13, or 14 years of age. Fears as to how two separate people inhabited my mind. Fears that I would die and think I was still alive, and slowly fade away while everyone chattered on around about me, but never saw me fading away. Never knew I was actually gone.

And of course, there is a reason I never shared these fears with anyone else.

Because they make me sound insane. I know this.

So I touch the glass and look at a man with sunken eyes, whom I do not find anything but ghastly, and I speak to him.

"Hi Sherlock," I whisper.

The man in the mirror does not respond.

"Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock," I mutter, my voice barely a purr in my throat.

I say the name until the name becomes meaningless and then I grasp the sink.

It's an old game, a game I've played before, and it scares me. But I still play it. A game of pulling myself out of my body, leaving only a robot-me behind.

I know there probably is a name for what I am doing in the annals of psychotherapy journals and diagnostic manuals. I have, of course, never read much about it because I suspect I would be unnerved by the content of my actions. By what it really means about my mental health, or lack thereof.

"What have you done to yourself, you stupid man?," I whisper back to my reflection, and watch as his eyes move forward and backwards, tracking my own.

"Are you even real?," I mutter, while the man stares back, looking more like a corpse than a man. I realize then that the man's lips are dry, so I open up the medicine cabinet and root around for some camphor salve. Finding the little red tin, I apply it over my fingertips and rub it over my lips.

I must not look at myself in mirrors anymore. As fascinating as the experiment is, it keeps the unreality strong.

----------------------------------------

When I get to the living room, I move towards my filing cabinets and open them near-soundlessly. I look through four files, and then look through one at the back, pulling the manila towards me and dropping it on the desk. A multitude of little cards fall out and I pick them up quickly, looking for one that is bent and buttercup yellow.
I see it a few seconds later and then return the previous contents and the other materials back to my desk.

Scanning the number, I press 'talk' on my phone and then hurriedly type in the number. My fingers dance along my lap.

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The phone rings three times before a person picks up.

"Dr. Pascal's office. Marnie speaking," a woman says easily, softly. I wonder if there is some sort of school where they train secretaries who want to work in psychiatrists offices. Surely most people off the street don't naturally answer the phone like Marcy or Marnie or whatever her name answers the phone.

"Umm," I start, sounding like a complete idiot. I pause and gather my thoughts. "May I speak to Dr. Pascal, please?"

It's truly the most polite I've probably ever been.

At least, for an introduction.

"Dr. Pascal is in a session. Are you a prospective patient or a current patient?"

Certainly Marnie must know the voices of Yuri Pascal's primary patients by now.

"I do not see how that is any of your business," I say sharply, only mentally kicking myself a second or two after I've spoken.

There is no sound on the other line, and then:

"Would you like for me to capture a message for Dr. Pascal? He could possibly call you back during his lunch hour."

But no.

That wouldn't do.

Not to have my name bandied about over the phone, where anyone can see. Not when my name is regularly in papers. It would be too much of a nightmare to have my private on goings revealed to the papers where everyone can read about them. Where Donovan and Anderson and Lestrade can read about them. And while a doctor or receptionist would likely be in hot water for talking openly about a patient, I don't want to take any chances. Especially since a bothersome patient could just as easily overhear and be the blabber-mouth.

"I will call him back personally. When will he be free?"

Marnie seems to take a moment before she speaks again.

"Dr. Pascal leaves for lunch usually between noon and 12:10, but he sometimes steps out of the office for a brief period of time. I wouldn't want you to miss him. Are you sure you don't want to leave."

"Fine," I hiss, knowing I am being rude. I quickly soften my voice. "Umm, yes, please have him call Sherrinford. I'll give you my mobile."
"Just Sherringford?," Marnie specifies, sounding confused. "Are you-"

"Sherrinford," I correct. "No G. I am fairly confident he will remember me. My mobile number is 44 20 7224 3688. Do you have it?"

Marnie is quickly learning not to take my briskness personally, and responds cleanly. "I think so. Ok. It's Sherrinford. Number is 44 20 7224 3688? Call at earliest convenience?"

"Yes please," I say, taking a breath and trying not to sound frenzied. "Whenever he's able, please."

I'm about to hang up the phone, when I hear Marnie ask, "Just...are you there, Sherrinford?"

"Yes?," I ask snappishly.

"Is this an emergency? You sound a little anxious. Are you in an okay place right now?"

I blink against the question, wondering when anyone who hasn't been John, that is, has asked me such a question. Or even cared what the answer would have been.

Well, maybe Mycroft. I'm sure Mycroft would have cared.

And Mrs. Hudson.

But she's as batty as a loon, that one.

"No," I say in confusion. "Not an emergency. I just need to talk to him."

"Ok," Marnie adds quickly. "Good. I, uh, I will give Dr. Pascal your message. He should be calling you in a little over an hour, okay?"

I nod to the phone, but don't verbalize my acknowledgement.

My throat hurts, so I just hang up.

------------------------

10 minutes later, the TV is on - softly, barely without sound - and I am nursing a mug of English Breakfast tea with stevia and non-fat coffee whitener.

John pads into the living room, hair wild, almost looking mussed and gelled or something. How can that be just sweat?

How can he be as grubby as he is, in those ridiculous clothes and sleep encrusted eyes, and be - somehow - even more adorable than normal?

Part of me distantly acknowledges that thinking about the 'adorableness' of your male flat male (when you, the person doing the acknowledging is also a male) isn't typically acceptable in the heteronormative world.

But it's hard not to think he's cute. I mean, I'm not sexualizing John. And anyway - cute and sexy - are two very different things, aren't they?

So - of course he's cute - with his over-sized athletic sweats and stick-up hair. The fact that he was in the army takes the cake, though. Because if you didn't know John - I mean really not know him - most people probably would peg him as a primary school teacher, or maybe a kindly librarian.
He yawns suddenly, and I find that it makes me want to yawn. Obviously I need more sleep.

"How did you get up before me?" he asks drowsily. "You've been going on empty for weeks now!"

"And changed, no less. I'm a man of stealth abilities," I say dryly, then kick myself for what that sounds like.

John, luckily, just laughs, most likely too tired to make the necessary connections to be concerned about my comments.

"Is there any more tea?" he asks suddenly, a second yawn breaking forward.

I stand up and mute the television.

"I didn't make a pot. Do you want a pot? I can make a pot. Earl Grey, English Breakfast, and we have."

John wanders over to the television, rubbing one hand through his messy hair. Even that is cute.

"You okay? You seem...a little hyper, almost."

I force myself to exhale, and it comes out in shaky expulsion.

"I'm okay. I-," and we watch each other, before I look down at my mug. "A person will be calling me back soon, and I just need to be in a quiet place to talk, okay?"

My hands burn on my tea mug, but I ignore the pain. Or maybe I revel in it. I'm not sure.

I just know that I don't pull my hands back.

"Nothing wrong?" he says, reading between the lines. "I didn't think Lestrade would be."

"No, not Lestrade," I mutter, then clear my throat. "I called a doctor."

John seems confused for a second, and scans me quickly, as if I've physically injured myself in the last few minutes and haven't bothered to inform him.

"You wanted me to speak to someone," I clarify, my voice a low murmur, half caught in my throat. "I thought I'd get that out of the way this morning."

"Oh...Oh!," he says, quickly keying in. "Right. Good," and now he looks awkward. "Did you want me to go out, or I can go read in my room if you wanted?"

I wave away his concerns.

"No. I just will head to my room when he calls, probably. And in the meantime I'm going to watch something mindless first. Might make it easier to actually talk later if I turn off my mind first," I say, trying to lighten the mood. "I'm sure you employed similar tactics when you were dealing with Ella."

John rewards me with a smirk, and then a fuller smile.

"Well, I'll be out of your hair before anyone calls. Promise."

"It'll be after noon," I say dumbly. "In about, umm, 45 minutes or so. If he calls back on schedule."

"Okay, well - did you make yourself some breakfast...or-?"
"I'm not really hungry," I mutter, and try to ignore John's look.

"Sherlock-," he starts, wanting me - I know - to eat something, and not knowing how to address the subject with any force. Especially since I've just done one large thing that he's wanted me to do for days now.

"Not now, maybe later?"

John's eyes close briefly.

"Look Sherlock, a doctor can only do so much, but-

I cut him off.

"Nerves," I say quickly, licking my lips. "I feel...kind of nervous. Not a good feeling to link with eating."

John's expression changes from one of concern to one of greater understanding.

"I see. Well, I'm sure it'll be fine. It's just to see if he is taking new patients, I take it?"

Nodding, I add, "I'm sure you're right. It's just a call. It's not even a session."

I rub my hands against my cords. They are sweating profusely.

John sits down besides me, absently watching a program on "Out of Control Teens!"

He squints at the screen, shakes his head as a heavily tattooed 14 year old graces the stage, then turns back to me.

"You know what? I'm just going to leave right now, and then-"

I grab his hand.

"Actually...will you stay? At least, for awhile?"

John gives me a closed-lipped smile.

"Of course. Of course I will."

"How did these kids get all those piercings? Don't parents have to sign for minors?," John asks, taking a bite of beans on toast.

"I think they did most of them all on their own."

John winces.

"Some of those go straight through cartilage," he mutters, looking sick. "They could have done themselves real harm if they didn't know what they were doing. Which...being that they are only in year 8 or something...I doubt-," and again he trails off. He's trailing off quite a bit lately.

I take another sip of tea. It burns my stomach and makes my body feel even more hollow and strange. I don't know if I like the sensation, or hate it.

"So," he begins in what, I'm sure, he considers to be a laid-back conversational tone. "Is this someone
that Mycroft recommended?"

I snort, and put down my mug.

"As is," I say under my breath. "No. Not at all. I do not trust Mycroft's opinion of doctors. Made that mistake twice, thank you very much. Both times ended badly."

John chews, swallows. Even from a modest distance, I smell maple syrup and tomato sauce.

My stomach pings in craving.

"Any particular reason you chose this doctor, then? Just random-?"

I sigh and fill him in. At least partially.

"The person I am trying to reach is a doctor I met in the clinic."

"When you were a kid?," he asks confused. "In clinic then?"

I glare at my mug. Wish I could topple the entire thing over through the power of my mind alone.

That would stop John's questions.

"No," I say stiffly. "When I was in clinic just a few weeks back. You were there when Dr. Riley pulled that stunt - remember? Well, after you left, another doctor came to speak with me. He was...okay."

"Okay?," John asks, sounding almost disbelieving. "That's high praise coming from you."

"He seemed potentially acceptable, all things considered. He was not excessively concerned about me, which made it easier for me to be in his presence. If there is one thing I cannot stand, it's someone else's maudlin...pity."

John frowns.

Probably because he is excessively concerned about me. Of course, he'd drop the "excessive" and argue that it's a completely understandable level concern. He'd probably say something like, "nothing excessive about it!"

So I shake my head at his open mouthed rebuttal, namely because I do not have the energy to debate this with him right now.

"I won't be able to be...open...with someone who is excessively concerned about me, John. You are an exception, and even then - sometimes - I think certain things would be easier to allude to if you didn't care about me at all."

John's mouth clamps shut.

"I see," he says tightly. The tightness of his voice only confirms the very fact that he doesn't 'see' at all.

I rub my hands back and forth, trying to calm myself in this moment. Before this moment passes and John begins to approach me with not just tight-words, but tight-smiles too, and a look of fake indifference. A reality that would be even worse than his concern.

"I don't want to care about someone else's opinion of me, John. Not if I have to be talking about
things that...," and my throat feels swollen. "It's hard enough to think about some of this stuff on my own. It makes me feel...well, you probably can guess it doesn't make me feel good. And if I get upset, I don't want it to be around someone who has any real respect for me."

John looks upset with my admittance.

"No one worth their salt would lose respect for you, Sherlock. If anything...I think you are even more courageous than I previously thought, and-"

I bite down on my lip hard. Hard enough to draw blood, and he must realize that I'm trying to blot out his words, because he stops talking abruptly.

"Sherlock - I'm not lying! You inspire me, every day. And I've never pitied you. Not once in my entire life."

"John," I beg thickly, "I don't want your kudos just for surviving. It makes me feel...not good, in a way. It makes me feel worse sometimes, okay? I know that doesn't make any sense to you, but it's how I feel. Because I know all this stuff, well, I know it upsets you, and I don't have the energy to try to make you feel better afterwards."

He nods quickly, accepting my words even if he cannot understand them himself. Even if he cannot fathom where those feelings come from, and for his sake - I'm glad that he cannot.

"Okay. I will try to give you your space. I didn't mean to push," and he retrieves his bowl of beans and toast, mostly finished now, and takes off before I can say anything more. "But please eat something afterwards, okay?"

I watch him walk away, and feel even guiltier.

So much for opening my mouth.

Which only highlights my long-held belief that talking often makes things worse, not better.

-------------------

The phone rings at 12:06, and I pick it up on the second ring.

"You're late," I say flatly, still somewhat upset by the fact that my comments seemed to have upset John.

Yuri Pascal laughs lightly, not taking my anger personally at all.

"Sherrinford, is that you?," he says with a hint of amusement.

"You know who this is. I know you do," I say in irritation. "Are you in a safe place to talk?"

I hear another chuckle.

"I wouldn't call you back if I thought I'd be overheard, Sherlock," Pascal says, still sounding obnoxiously amused. "I knew it was you immediately. No forgetting that middle name any time soon, either. What's up?"

Rising from my chair, I begin to pace.

"Are you taking new patients?," I say quickly, not bothering to beat around the bush.
"I take it, you are inquiring for yourself?"

My teeth clench automatically.

"Yes. Of course. For myself."

I can see Pascal nodding as he says, "Right. Well, yes. I have a placement. Only the one, as my
previous patient recently moved to Wales. It's for Mondays and Fridays. 2 o'clock, both days."

I waver for a few seconds, scanning his business card.

"Twice a week? I don't think I will be needing your services twice every week, Doctor."

The man on the other end laughs again. It's a good thing he finds me so amusing.

At least one of us is likely to benefit from therapy that way.

"Sherlock, look. How about you come in on Monday - for 2 o'clock, and we can discuss why you
only want to see me once per week. Okay?"

I blink at the questions, and at Yuri's ease just to pencil me into his little world of appointments. My
heart rate, remarkably, starts to slow.

"So you would be amenable to once per week? If once per week was deemed satisfactory?"

I hear Pascal sigh, lightly.

"Satisfactory? Look Sherlock, you're the patient. You are paying. If you want to meet me for a
tentative appointment or two, I won't even charge you. Consider if my thank you for actually
calling."

My brain feels fuzzy with confusion.

"What?," I say sharply. "What are you talking about?"

I can hear Yuri stand up, walk around. I can hear his footsteps on the wood. Parquet tiles, I'd bet.

"I was actually pretty worried about you, after you left the hospital. I honestly think you'd benefit
from talking to someone. So, if you want to talk once a week, and it's helping, I'm adaptable. If you
change your mind, then you can talk to me more. There's no real pressure. I just would rather know
you can talk to someone, rather than no one."

My face flushes, and I look about the room, trying to determine if I can hear John near the landing.

I don't think he'd listen in, but I'm feeling exposed all the same.

"This is funny. I actually selected you because I was fairly confident you would not have any
excessive concern for me whatsoever. All the same, you seemed interested in the clinical aspects of
your job. With no power complexes to speak of that I could determine, and no expressed traits of
cruelty. Please tell me I was not wrong in my assessment."

"Well, I am fairly confident I don't have a sadistic bone in my body, Sherlock. No," and as annoying
as it is, I can swear Yuri is still smiling.

What sort of psychotherapist smiles that much?
"And what's more, I have a very good friend who more than avails himself to me, whenever I need him. So I'm not looking for a friend. I'm not looking for concern. I am looking for ideas on-," and then I stop, unaware of what I even want to express.

"Sherlock?," Yuri says gently after a few seconds. "You still there?"

"Yes, I am still here. Obviously."

"Ok. Well, can you continue your sentence, then? Ideas about what?"

I swallow heavily.

"I have a person who is an extremely good listener. This person thinks I would benefit by talking to a professional such as yourself. I have promised my friend I would explore this possibility. It's more for his benefit than mine."

"Oh. I see," and now the tapping of his feet has stopped. So he's either stopped pacing, or he's sitting back down again in his chair. "Let me get this straight: you're doing this for your friend? Not for yourself?"

I hesitate for a second, not sure how to proceed. Yuri does not talk like any other counselor or psychiatrist I have ever spoken to in my life. And they usually have a game. I don't know what Yuri's game is, and that makes me feel agitated.

"That's correct," I state succinctly. "I do not want my friend to worry about me any longer."

On the other end of the line I hear a door open and secretary-Marnie mutter something. Yuri seems to muffle the receiver, but I make out: 'no, I will call her back after my lunch, Marnie. Unless it's an emergency, she'll have to wait.'

Then he's back on the line again.

"Ok, well. The way I see it so far is that you're more interested in alleviating your friends concerns about you, rather than actually addressing the cause of those concerns in the first place. Would you say that's an accurate assessment, Sherlock?"

I breathe out heavily.

"I would say you are missing the point. My friend is concerned because my friend is always concerned. Even when he shouldn't be. It's in his nature."

"Mmm," the older man trails off. "Okay, I see. Well, then I mean - I can see you on Monday for a referral, if you'd like-"

"What?," I hiss. "No. I am not looking for a referral. I am looking for a doctor that I can actually get through a session with! Are you being intentionally dense? You just said you had two free session times per week - Mondays and Fridays, at 2 pm."

"Yeah, that's right. I do. For people who actually are looking for a psychotherapist. Not just looking for an alibi so they can get a friend or loved one off their back. I mean, I'm not going to play games with you, Sherlock."

Speaking of playing games.

My vision spots in anger.
"I don't enjoy playing fucking games, either," I grit out. "If you don't want to help me, then don't waste my time. You could have told me immediately if you didn't want me for a patient."

And in my classic impulsive manner, I hang up the phone.

But I don't regret it one bit.

----------------------

When I get up to my room, I feel lost and furious all at once.

John slowly exits his bedroom and has come back down the stairs. He must sense that I am angry because he gives me a wide berth.

"How did it go?," he tests out, looking confused. "You look angry."

"Blasted fucking shrinks," I rage. "The man has two free spaces per week and is denying me access to both."

John's eyebrows tilt together in disbelief.

"What? That doesn't make any sense, Sherlock."

"Well that's the truth! Call him if you don't believe me!"

John is still studying me carefully.

"Well, do you want to discuss what unfolded? I mean, there must be a reason for this. Maybe-"

"There is no reason, John! I was stupid to think anyone other than you would truly want to help me with anything. This is exactly why I never see these types of so-called people! They always play mind games with you!"

John lets out a heavy sigh.

"I can try calling, then. I mean, I can make it seem like I'm trying to set up an appointment for myself. Because this sounds really strange, Sherlock."

I push past him, and make my way to my room.

"Do as you please, John. But don't think for a second that anyone other than you is going to be able to help me. You've helped me the most. We don't need anyone else in our life, in our business."

I slam my door shut and stalk to my bed.

It takes me several minutes to realize that I'm not actually angry.

Not really.

If anything, I just feel hurt.

An unnameable sort of hurt. Disproportionate to what has happened.

I hug my pillow against my face and try to push the rejection out of my mind.
Eventually I fall back into a restless sort of half-sleep.

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I don't awaken until I hear John knocking on my door. Informing me that it is dinner time.

-----------------------

He's set a place for me.

Blue bowl filled with fettuccine. No oil or sauce.

"I didn't know if you wanted butter," he says tentatively. "We also have tomato marina."

"No thank you," I mumble to the bowl, poking the pasta with the tine of my fork.

"I, uh - I called that doctor. I'm betting it's the same one. The card was on the sofa?"

I nod, trying to tell myself that I don't care one way or another what comes out of John's mouth.

Except that I do.

"Dr. Pascal?," John tries again, attempting to engage me in conversation.

My throat feels lumpy and I rip the fettuccine into smaller and smaller pieces, until they are shreds of nothing. Resembling plastic, perhaps, but not pasta.

It makes the assortment easier to look at, really.

Less appetizing.

"Yes," I say sourly.

"Got the tail end of his lunch hour, I think. Although at least I got to eat my beans and toast first."

I smirk, amused that between John and myself, we'd at least ensured that the blasted man went hungry for the rest of his day.

Serves him right.

"I'm sure he loved that," I say, feeling marginally better.

"Yeah, I thought that would amuse you," John says with a grin, and then his grin falters.

"What?"

He hesitates, takes a bite of pasta, and then: "Well, I have an appointment. Not an appointment-appointment. I'm seeing him at his house. Tomorrow. He doesn't usually work it - but I explained a little bit of my situation and he said he'd meet me in the afternoon. So, umm - yeah. That's that."

I frown at the pasta.

"You need a therapist even less than I do, John," I bite out in confusion. "Which of course explains why this crack-pot will see you, and not me."

John sighs.
"You know, Sherlock, doctor-patient confidentiality pretty much assures me that even though Yuri Pascal undoubtedly knows who you are, and knows that I know who you are, and that I know he knows-"

"Get to the point, John," I say in irritation.

John exhales.

"Right. Well, he seemed unduly interested in talking to me. I take it, in some capacity you've mentioned me. Even just my first name?"

I mush the pasta against the bowl now. Tiny bits of plastic turning to squished remnants of nothing edible.

"Like John is a rare name," I gripe.

John doesn't even look irritated with me. He just carries on.

"Well, I explained that I had a flat mate, who'd been in clinic for stomach problems. And also...for not eating nearly enough. I explained that my flat mate was dealing with some things I didn't feel that I could handle on my own any longer," and John's voice drops to its lowest register now. "Self-harm. Nightmares. I told Dr. Pascal that I had romantic feelings for my flat mate, but that I had never had romantic feelings for a man before. And that I was confused about it. Because my flat mate also happens to be my best friend. And I'd rather he remain my best friend forever, than for me to do the wrong thing and screw everything up."

John's eyes drop to the table, avoiding my own, and I feel my breath hitch in my throat.

"You told him all that," I say, feeling dead inside. Not questioning that John has been exactly that honest.

"Well, basically. I gave you the abbreviated format, Sherlock," John admits, still in low tones, still looking at the table.

"And you think that warrants therapy? HE thinks that warrants therapy?"

"I think I need to talk to someone who deals with these sorts of issues, professionally, Sherlock. I think that you're brilliant, and you're going to do what you want to do, ultimately - but if you aren't going to take this seriously - what this means, for us - then I will! And maybe then I will at least feel as if I did everything I could to help you, regardless of what may or may not happen."

"I called!," I rage. "I called and he told me he'd give me a referral!"

"Then call him back! Because I spent thirty minutes speaking with a man who seemed very attentive to what I had to say. Who seemed like he truly wanted to help. I don't believe that he just randomly chooses some people to help, and some people to push away, Sherlock."

"Then call me a liar!," I snarl, taking the bowl of broken apart pasta, and pushing it away from me so quickly that it topples over.

"I'm not calling you a liar," John says after taking a second or two to compose himself. When he speaks again it is calmly, reasonably. "I am saying that if you want to take this seriously, I will help you. And I'm saying that if you call Dr. Pascal back, you'll see that he still has two open sessions for Mondays and Fridays, at 2 pm."
I gape at John, gape at the mess of pasta and salt and pepper, and try to make sense of the almost meaningless words.

The almost meaningless words.

"Without breaking confidentiality agreements, Sherlock - I can say with pretty much utmost assurance that I think Yuri would want you to call him back," and John walks up to the sink, then rinses out his bowl before motioning to my toppled-dinner. "And I'm not cleaning that up. You're going to have to clean some of this stuff up yourself from now on."

And with that, he walks out of the room and down the hall.

He doesn't even look back. Not once.
I am so terribly busy, I could cry. I yearn to write more, and sleep more. I hope life settles down soon. Please hang in there guys...I do want to update! And I will not abandon this story.

As always, reviews are love. If you'd like to receive a definite response from yours truly to your review, then please leave your review over at Archive of Our Own (same author's name, Kourion, and of course same story name). It is *much* easier for me to respond that way! I rarely log into Fanfiction Dot Net any longer (except to add a new chapter, of course). However, if you leave a response here then please know it is well received and appreciated too. :) 

For the record - there is no Sherlock in this chapter (boooo! I know). It's necessary to link what is to come (a conduit-chapter). It's laying the groundwork for future chapters. And it introduces you much more to Yuri, and his style of therapy.

Annnnnd....we are back to JOHN'S POV

I take the Bakerloo line from Baker Street shortly after noon. Given the transit time, I estimate that I will be at least 15 minutes early for my appointment once I make it to Queen's Park. Perhaps closer to a half hour early if I can locate Yuri's address easily. Which I should be able to do, since I spent two hours last night going over the address and memorizing the quickest path to his residence.

We're actually meeting at his house, not his office. I know he works near enough to Piccadilly in a shared complex with other psychiatrists. In an expensive district. that is. In fact, Sherlock himself even mentioned that office space around Piccadilly now beats out Tokyo’s Shibuya complex for rental pricing.

So, I know - going from that factoid alone - that Yuri Pascal is obviously an in-demand psychiatrist. Enough that he's able to see enough patients, at a reasonable cost, so as to help cover his share of the rent.

Yet, and this is far more interesting - for himself he has chosen a more modest section of London to make his home. While Queen's Park isn't rough or poor by any means... it's also not flashy or overtly upscale. It's quiet, subdued, pretty. All things considered - it's pretty therapeutic.

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When I finally get off the tube, I meander around for a few minutes. Then I walk down Harrow Road and past an orange-red library, with white window frames. Quite grand, all things considered, and it's at least three stories tall.

I start walking again until I find myself in the right section for numbers and make my way down the rest of the street, eventually coming across the residences that I need. The buildings are clean and tidy, but not - again - prominent or ostentatious.
I like that.

It makes me feel less overwhelmed.

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The brick building displays in smart grey letters a "559," and I approach the deck gingerly - wanting to take everything in. A lazy, fat cat - pure white, with blue eyes - is studying me from the window to my right. Flicking his or her tail in what appears to be irritation. I give a little wave and see the cat cry in mute agitation from behind the glass.

Then I knock. Hit the buzzer. Drop my hands to my side.

Fight my body's urge to fall into parade rest. A habit that rears its head whenever I am nervous or in unfamiliar territory.

I hear slight padding down the steps and will away my tremulous cascade of nerves.

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The door opens, and a frank face meets mine. Slight smile. Again, not excessive. The smile, I mean.

The man before me is in his 50's I'd bet, and he's wearing a hunter green cardigan. Blue trousers. Grey socks with those white tips and the swipe of red. The woolen kind that people use for those sock monkey puppets that you see on crafters websites.

Of course, had I not lived with Sherlock for two years, I'd likely have been more focused on how I was coming across in these precious first few seconds and less concerned about the sock colour choices of my potential psychotherapist.

"Uh, sorry - I'm John," I start dumbly, while Yuri offers his hand in acceptance and gives a moderate shake. Not a soft grip (not tepid, Sherlock would say) but not forceful either (not in need of controlling everyone or taking control unduly, as Sherlock would then add).

Sherlock - get out of my brain, please.

"Yes, I gathered," Dr. Pascal says with a smile and holds the door to his flat open for me. "Come on in."

I cannot miss the almost laid back vibe, and I can't help wonder, idiotically, if this is how psychotherapists operate in France. The country, Yuri's informed me, of his adoptive parents and the country of his formative years.

"Oh, please pay Gwennie no mind. She's a bit of a sour one. More hissing than clawing, though."

The fat white feline of earlier has now stuck her head out from behind an oak door, and is crying faintly some more.

"Go on, then. We need this space," Yuri says, nudging the animal lightly with his sock, while the cat - Gwennie's - ears lay flat against her head and she cries once more. "Oh no, don't look at me that way. I didn't name you."

I bite back a laugh despite my nervousness, and Yuri opens the door yet again, indicating with his hand where I can sit.

Luckily the space is a little more comfort-oriented compared to what I am used to; there is not a
single, stiff upright chair (as I had with Ella), nor a lounging chaise or laid back couch (as I imagined most psychiatrists would have for clients). There's just a grey, L-shaped sofa. Soft and pliant enough that I sink a little bit into the frame and find myself almost tempted to pull my feet up besides me. It's that roomy. Nothing like the hard, rigid-lined designer piece that Sherlock owns back at Baker Street, either. How he sleeps on that thing is beyond me.

"This is really...cozy," I admit, quickly. Kicking myself a second later.

Yuri chuckles.

"This room was originally supposed to be for film viewings only. That was Patrick's idea. I wanted it to be a library. You can sense the clashing styles, I bet. I'd go more for a classical style, though I'm sure he'd want it to feel like something out of Star Wars. So we compromised."

I look around quickly then, reminding myself that I am actually in someone's living room - and not in a psychotherapists office at all.

My eyes come to rest on a photo - black and white - off on the book shelves behind Yuri. Even from the distance, I can tell it's of Yuri and another man. They are holding hands and sitting on a bench. They look...intimate.

Yuri's eyes catch my line of sight, and he shifts slightly from where he has now taken residence (which is a single person sized mustard yellow sitting chair).

"Ahh, speak of the devil. Yes. That's Patrick."

I blink, then look over abruptly. Without meaning to. Find myself studying the photo and feeling something like...

Relief?

Something like relief, maybe.

"I'm gay, John," Yuri says suddenly, amusement creeping into his voice when I turn back to him a few seconds later.

"I...I, yes. Well," and I press my hands against my lap, feeling more and more like an idiot the longer I am here. "Sherlock didn't say."

Yuri cocks his head to the side. Gives me a slight smile. More of a grin, perhaps.

"Maybe Sherlock didn't think it was something that warranted inclusion in a conversation?"

I clear my throat. Pick at a loose thread on my shirt.

I'm wearing a plaid shirt. I have no memory of picking this shirt out. It's ill-fitting and old.

"Well, I...Sherlock knows I've been confused about some things lately. I mean, maybe relating to that topic," and I make a vague motion with my hand.

"Concerns about your sexuality, you mean."

I take a deep breath.

"I'm not sure," I utter quickly, frowning at my lap. "Maybe."
"And you want me to help you determine if you're gay?"
My head jolts up at that.
"No - no, I'm not gay. I can't be."
My hands clench into fists and I mentally will myself to relax.
"No? Why not?"
I shake my head in insistence.
"I've always been attracted to females. Always."
Yuri seems to muse over this for a bit.
"So bisexual, then. That's your concern?"
My breath is raggedly expelled from my lungs.
"I don't have a problem with anyone else's sexuality," I say, insistent. The last thing I want is for my not-yet therapist to take offense. "My sister is homosexual."
Yuri's mouth purses and he bites his lip momentarily. It's such an open human expression that I find myself a little more at ease for that reason alone.
Which is stupid.
Yet he does seem far more human than most therapists. Most therapists I have known seemed overly controlled. Some even seemed robotic.
"You get along with your sister?" Yuri asks then, taking a sip of water.
Yuri finishes his water. "I've forgotten my manners, John. Would you like something? Tea, water, we have some...orange drinks. San Pellegrino," he says quickly.
"Um - maybe some water?," and it comes out as a question. "Thanks."
Yuri walks to a small bar fridge located to the far right of his partners home movie theatre setup and riffles around, then pads back with a Perrier a few seconds later.
"So. Your sister-," he begins.
"Harry."
"So - Harry. Why don't you two get along?"
I swallow.
"She cheated on her wife. I couldn't...well, it made me angry. Her wife was a really beautiful person, and Harry broke her heart. They tried reconciling, but there were other problems. Again - Harry."
"Yeah?," he asks evenly, seemingly not going to push.
"My sister is an alcoholic," I admit.
"Did the alcoholism factor into your issues with not getting along with Harry?"

My cheeks puff up with air and I hold in the breath. Expel.

How to answer that...

"Yes," I say tersely, ignoring the ripples of pain in my gut.

"Even though alcoholism is an addiction?"

My throat feels tight. Internally swollen.

Like I've been stung by a bee.

"I didn't...abandon Harry. Harry doesn't want to be helped. She's attached to her status. As an alcoholic. She likely will never change."

Yuri leans back in his chair, looking pensive.

"That seems a little bleak though, John."

I feel the grit of upset scour my gut.

"It's...look: I have no problem with her being gay. But everything got messed up. Her sexual identity and her drinking. And sometimes that lead to some pretty bad stuff."

Yuri watches intently. When I don't speak again, he takes another sip of water.

The emptiness of the room makes my skin itch.

"Harry's older. By five years," I say just to void the silence.

I can tell this startles the doctor. He seems a little lost at this offering of information.

"Okay," he says calmly, obviously expecting me to continue now.

"When I was younger, Harry sometimes watched me. My parents also suffered from, well - they were both bad with alcohol too. My mum would drink and she'd be more or less useless. Sometimes depressive. My father became mean."

Yuri's expression has changed to one of tempered empathy.

Which, oddly enough, I don't like.

Perhaps because I have issues with being perceived as weak. Or needing pity.

"So Harry sometimes just...well, she'd take me along to her friends. We often would sleep in the basements of her friends' houses. It was just easier that way."

My throat is suddenly dry, and I take a sip of the Perrier. It fizzes in my mouth. Tastes vaguely like lemon, which makes me feel a little less woozy.

"Sounds like a nomadic childhood, John," Yuri says thoughtfully.

"I guess. In a way. But amidst all that I sometimes saw things that generated, well, maybe issues. For me. Regarding same sex relations. When I was a kid, I mean."
I can tell Yuri is piecing things together quickly, thank God, because he doesn't seem offended.

"Your sister would engage in sexual acts when you were in her presence?" he clarifies.

I hesitate, knowing how bad it sounds.

"My sister had problems - has problems. When she was a teenager she drank, but she also did drugs. Sometimes she was so high, I don't think she'd know if a bomb had gone off, never mind if her 10 year old brother was in the same room with her while she got it on with her girlfriend."

Yuri nods, looking pensive. He makes a gesture with his hands.

"And so her friends were very much into drugs too, I take it."

"Yes," I concede. "They were."

"Do you think you've linked what they were doing - if it was sexual - with the drugs? Do you sense that's what's causing some of your anxiety now?"


Rat-a-tat-tat.

An emotional war is just another type of war. I've been in battle before and I survived.

Certainly, I can survive talking about my youth.

"I don't know. Maybe-," pausing, I take in a breath. Remember that breathing is essential. "I haven't really ever told anyone this stuff before. Any of the stuff about my sister, I mean. Not that."

"About you being in the room. With those things happening."

My throat is stuck. I cannot swallow.

"No. No one ever knew. I haven't even told Sherlock," I say softly, "I knew it wasn't...intended. Harry's actions, I mean. She wasn't doing something to me. Nothing to hurt me but I felt ashamed all the same. It wasn't abuse, as such. Just one messed up adolescent, out of her mind on drugs and alcohol. And I couldn't blame her. I certainly didn't hate her. I don't hate her. But I hated my parents for creating this need for us to escape. For my sister to escape, most of all. And the insane thing is she probably has no memory of any of it. She just knows that there is this rift between us but she probably thinks I'm just judging her for not being able to stop drinking."

Yuri gives me an encouraging smile, but it's quick... to the point.

"John, I have a question. When you were a child did you ever leave the room? When your sister was engaging in sexual activities, or doing drugs?"

I hedge.

"When I could, I did. Sometimes that presented a different set of issues though, because Harry's friends - most of them - came from families that were almost as dysfunctional as our own. They weren't violent - that's why we stayed with them rather than be at home. But I remember that a lot of the people unnerved me. I don't know if I was actually scared of anyone. But I do remember that the house was often populated with many people that I didn't know at all, and that those people also did drugs. Some were well into their twenties, and I was maybe 10 or 11. So sometimes, before everyone was shooting up or doing whatever else they'd do, I'd go outside and walk around. And
sometimes I tried taking a sleeping bag with me to sleep in the shed that the Parsons had. I'd freeze, almost, in the winter. I even developed pneumonia twice and was hospitalized.

"You were often out at night then. So you'd choose this rather than stay indoors, whenever you could."

Not a question.

A concise statement about the on-goings and choices of my pre-adolescent self.

"Yes. I'd go out, and then sneak back inside at maybe 4 or 5 in the morning if I couldn't sleep. I'd keep the lock down with masking tape. The neighbourhoods we were in were usually pretty shoddy, and sometimes that would be its own issue for me because I didn't want to walk around outside, either. I actually developed this near-phobia of the dark when I was about 12. If anything was too dark, I'd get panicky. It lasted for a few years."

"But you'd choose the dark over staying in the house with your sister?"

I suddenly feel guilty.

As if I've painted Harriet as this monster and not a screwed up, scared kid of her own.

"My sister wasn't trying to expose me to anything, Yuri. She wasn't. She was high as a kite back then and I never felt like she was really to blame for any of it. She was basically a kid herself. 15, 16 years old. That's it. But I think maybe I connected her activities in general with what I saw those few times. And I think it probably made me feel some measure of shame. Maybe I linked that shame to her orientation," and I stop abruptly then. Not knowing what else to say. Not even knowing what I feel. All I know is that I feel something, but don't know exactly what it is.

There is anger there but also sadness, and a repressed sense of loss almost edging towards grief. Like an old, loyal dog that's wasted away from mange, that you thought had wandered off. But then, later, you discover that your dog was sick in the basement and you just overlooked the fact that someone you loved was dying mere feet away from you. Because you didn't check properly.

Because you gave up.

Even though they were counting on you to save them.

And to know that you gave up on this loved on, and increased their suffering - is a horrible, horrible feeling. The guilt is awful. The horrendous guilt at seeing the people you love hurting, but hating them as they hurt you, too. Even if they couldn't help it. Even if what they really needed was help and not your condemnation.

But because you were too little to help anyone, even yourself - you just felt bitter towards them all. Bitter, then guilty, then bitter over feeling guilty. Until one day, as an adult, you said "fuck this," and deployed to Afghanistan.

Because you thought becoming a soldier would fix that feeling. The higher ups would outfit you with weapons, and maybe you'd feel safe. And you'd use those weapons sensibly because you were a Good Person. You'd hold onto your sense of duty to never harm anyone who was innocent, and never anyone at all in hatred. But most of all - you'd never be out of control. You - John Watson - the abandoned son of two alcoholic parents, and an alcoholic, fucked up sister. And you had made it.

You had been strong enough to get through it.
And that, somehow, then made the ache even worse. So eventually you tried to separate from your family outright. Because that would be easier than having to see their faces as the decades wore on, with the realization that out of four people - only one really survived.

"And your issues now? Your concerns with being bisexual; why do you think you might be bisexual?"

I come back abruptly from my reverie as I hear Yuri's gravelly voice.

"I don't know if I'm anything other than heterosexual. I don't know. I just know that lately I've been experiencing romantic feelings for my flatmate."

Yuri nods.

"You mentioned that on the phone."

"Yes. And I've never had these sort of feelings for anyone before. Man or woman, I mean. I'm pretty sure they are...romantic. Some type of romantic feeling, but stronger. More intense. And couldn't that indicate something about my sexuality?"

Yuri sighs, looks at me seriously.

"Are you having sexual feelings towards your flatmate?"

I pull back in my chair, my heart jack-hammering away.

"No. I don't think so. But it's complicated by his issues."

Yuri's gaze seems to penetrate my own.

"Your sexual orientation wouldn't change simply because of your flatmate's issues, John. You might not choose to act on your feelings - many people choose this option, for a variety of reasons. But those feelings wouldn't be completely absent. You'd know if you were sexually attracted towards Sherlock."

I resist the urge to squirm in my seat. Shake my limbs. Try to flick off this restlessness in my cells. This agitation.

"What if I were repressing those types of feelings?," I start, uneasily, "Couldn't I just not be aware of it? Because of everything? With Harry? Because I know what feeling like this would do to him?"

Yuri crosses his arms and looks at me intensely.

"What do you think it would do to him? If you felt attraction for him, sexually? What would happen if you told him that?"

I push away my sense of sadness. My powerlessness.

"He'd be terrified," I whisper. "And I'd lose him. He'd probably just leave. I don't think he'd cope well."

Yuri seems to be debating with whether or not he should speak now.

"What?," I prompt, my voice edgy. Tempering down on my anxiety I add, more softly, "What is it?"

"Do you suspect you are repressing sexual feelings for men? Have you felt sexually attracted to
males before?"

I suddenly feel lightheaded. And a touch more than upset.

I'm not discriminatory. I'm not bigoted. I have no issue with homosexuality. I know I don't.

I need to get a grip.

"No," I stress. "I haven't. Hence my confusion. I mean...I am 42 years old. I should know what I am by now."

"What you are," the man opposite me says kindly, "may not be as greatly impacted by sexual fluidity as I think you believe, John. Most people are not entirely one thing or the other - heterosexual or homosexual, I mean. Usually there is a slight range of intensities and interests and some crossover. In most of the population, actually. You're aware of this, aren't you?"

"Yes," I say dizzily.

"Good," he says with a quick smile. "Keep reminding yourself of that. Because I think it's something you need to keep in the forefront of your mind right now. Sexual fluidity isn't rare at all, and a person who identifies as heterosexual can predominantly feel one way for a particular gender but doesn't have to act on feelings for any other gender. The important thing is to proceed with what makes you feel safe. Good. Whole. That's it, John."

My hands jettison across my trouser legs, whisking away sweat from my palms.

"Ok," I state, acknowledging the words. The power of the words. "Thank you."

"It's important to let yourself off the hook. I would bet you don't usually let yourself get away with much. Not when it comes to emotionally connecting with people. With upholding the other person. And that must be tiring for you. To maintain that level of responsibility, all the time."

I lick my lips.

"I just want to be honest with people. And I admit - sometimes I worry that by default I can't connect. Not really with anyone. Sexually, sure. But deeper? No. And then I met Sherlock, and it wasn't - it's not - sexual. And I don't know if I want it to be sexual. I don't think so. But that almost doesn't matter, because with him - it's everything else. All the other emotions, I mean - I feel those for him. And I'm not usually like that with anyone - even people I like a lot, sexually or romantically. But with him those feelings are strong. Just to be with him, to talk to him. To really speak and have him hear. Or maybe it's because he just has to look at someone and he knows basically everything about them - he can see into you, even if you've barely said a word at all, and yet, despite all that...he still wants to be with me, as a friend. As something."

Yuri is studying me carefully.

"You were honestly worried that Sherlock would find you off-putting? As direct as he is?"

Surprisingly, I smile back.

"Honestly? I thought he'd get bored of me within two weeks flat. I'm not like him and I can't think like him; I mean, he's basically prodigious. He knows it, but so much of what he does - how he acts - is a cover. I've seen that lately, and I think that is partly why I feel differently about him now. What started as this friendship now feels changed. Complicated and unfamiliar, the feelings."
Yuri seems to be considering something, then queries, "Can you describe what you feel in greater detail? The way that the feelings are being presented to you?"

"Protective," my voice is speaking of its own volition now, "And sometimes unduly affectionate towards him. Sometimes almost preoccupied with how he's doing - because he's been sick, maybe. But also, well, I'll see his face, the angles of his face in the light and I'll just feel wholly connected. Attached."

I know my face is flushing and I look up to the psychiatrist awkwardly.

"Go on. I've heard it all, John," he tells me patiently.

"Uhh, well - I find him sort of beautiful. Aesthetically. And he's beautiful inside, too, but he'd laugh if I ever insinuated as much. I mean, he used to call himself a sociopath. High functioning, he said - but I mean if that's how he wants to see himself, that already indicates a problem, doesn't it?"

Yuri frowns, exhales.

"Ok. We'll get back to that in a few moments. I just want to clarify: you do, in fact, find him aesthetically attractive?"


Yuri is studying me carefully.

"I'm not explaining this well at all, am I?," I ask abruptly.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You're doing great," and he leans forward, attentively, "Aesthetic appreciation can be distinct from sexual attraction, John. What else have you experienced?"

"Umm, it's recent. Last few weeks mostly, but I just find myself wanting to touch him for the most part. I mean, I'm usually quite haptic when I'm involved with someone sexually. I've always been drawn to hugging people, holding them if they were upset. That sort of thing. But this feels different from normal affection for a friend or a person I'm involved with in any other way."

"In what way do you want to touch him?"

I try to think of a way to describe my interest without sounding like a prepubescent kid.

"Well, sometimes I want to reach out and touch his hand. I know that sounds juvenile. I think maybe - maybe - I might even want to kiss him on the lips, the mouth, forehead. Which is still pretty intimate, and I know that. It's a very intense sort of affection, maybe. Obviously not platonic, though."

Yuri smiles.

"Doesn't sound like it, no."

"So... what do I do?"

The doctor seems to consider my words.

"Is your concern primarily about your sexuality or your romantic feelings for your flatmate, or is what you're really asking for my help with today - well, does it have more to do with Sherlock's own issues?"
Suddenly, I feel awful. Duplicitous.

"Both," I admit. "The latter is making me more agitated about the former."

"Because you are worried about how Sherlock would respond to your advances, you mean."

I almost cringe at the words. How they sound.

Predatory.

"I wouldn't ever...advance. He's not, he's - God, can we even discuss him like this? It feels wrong, but I do feel as if I need to talk to someone. About him, I mean. And I wasn't trying to come here under false pretenses. I wasn't."

My face is burning.

I know it is.

"No," Yuri agrees, "I don't think you were. Look, John, I don't do couples counseling."

"That's not why I'm here," I protest weakly. "And we're not. A couple. We couldn't be, regardless of how I felt."

"I know that's what you fear, partly. I get it. But do you know what I'm sensing is your predominant concern right now? Aside from your confusion - which is normal, by the way - I suspect that you are here because you feel that there is a pressing need for your friend to get help. And you don't know how to get him the type of help that he needs."

My chest is stormy with emotion.

"He said you turned him away," I say tersely. "That you refused to take him on as a patient."

"No," Yuri takes a sip of water. Puts the now-empty bottle on his table. "Not at all. I just don't want to play mind games with Sherlock. He's going to have to want to change. He's going to have to want to be in therapy to get better. Otherwise, I'm wasting his time, and he's wasting mine. And that's what I told him."

My fatigue suddenly feels massive. All encompassing.

I want to sleep for a week, uninterrupted.

"But," I try to phrase my concern in a way that cannot be pushed aside as irrelevant to the whole, "he doesn't see that he needs help. Not really. He's denying what he needs and I don't know what I can do to make him see. To make him want to change! I've tried being patient with him, and I've definitely gotten angry with him. I even threatened to call his brother. He detests talking to his brother about things like this. Nothing's worked."

Yuri's mouth is a tight line.

"You can't do anything, John. Not beyond what you've done already, I suspect. He's going to have to come to that point all on his own."

The words make me feel angry.

All I can see is Harriet. 16 years old. The headmistress of her school talking to my mother in the office; their strident voices streaming under the door, where I could hear, where Harriet could hear.
Words like 'delinquent' and 'problem youth' and 'no place for her here' and 'we've had enough of her.' Harriet's eyes lined in red from her noiseless crying. Scratches across her wrists where she dug in out of anxiety, and didn't let go. Her pain at being dismissed as unworthy of additional support.

Reduced to a lost cause.

My furtive glances. Trying to offer her little smiles that I knew still solved absolutely nothing.

My wish for her to know that I still cared at least.

Her baby brother still loved her.

And now? With Yuri's assertion?

Well, a dam has broken and the bitterness of earlier is seeping back into my skull. Full force.

And it tastes rotten on my tongue.

So when I speak next, it's with a brute impulsiveness that is rare for me. Not rare for Sherlock, maybe - but rare for me.

"And in the meantime - I'm what? - supposed to turn a blind eye on his problems? Let him kill himself? You propose I just let him get sicker? Do nothing?!"

Yuri stills then, caught off-guard at the rapid change in my demeanor. His face breaks from its rigid lines into something even more intense, somehow.

"You think he's suicidal?," he tests, gently.

"I think he's anorexic," I grit out. "And I think he's doing himself severe harm because he's basically stopped eating. But no one will actually *do* anything. So is he actively suicidal? Maybe not. But the end result is going to be pretty much the same at the rate he's going, isn't it?"

Yuri is frowning at the desk.

"John," he hesitates, "discussing Sherlock in this way - it's going to edge towards something ethically grey in my profession. I cannot discuss what I know about him with you."

"That's absolutely fine," I get out, briskly. "I just want to know what I do now to get him help. Because I am not going to quit. And if you want to know the truth - then yes, I am confused about what I feel. And part of me is scared. But that's nothing compared to what I feel when I think about Sherlock. And you can sit there and pretend that avoiding talking about this is preserving your ethical status, but know this - if you send me away and I don't manage to help him, what did you really accomplish?"

My heart is wild and sore, and I know I am being out of line. Beyond rude.

I know I'm being aggressive. Combative.

But I'm fighting for him. Because I can. And because I can, I will.

Until the end.

Yuri presses his fingers to his temples, his face cringing in sympathy.

"Ok. I cannot proceed - not as we are doing. If Sherlock were to become my patient, well - certain
issues would have to be strictly his to discuss. And I realize this is impacting you. I'm not trying to be hard-hearted about this. I'm not. I know it must look that way to you. But I want him to get better, too."


Yuri's twiddling his glasses back and forth between his hands. Suddenly, he sighs.

"What do you propose I do? How do you think I address issues with him - issues it sounds like you've discussed with him, undoubtedly one of his best friends - and get him to see that he needs help?"

"You need to call him back, for starters. It took all his strength to call you initially. And he won't call again. His bloody pride won't allow it!"

Yuri's eyes close for a bare moment, then open to look straight into mine.

"I could do that, yes. I could probably even get him to come here, and I could probably even get him to talk to me. But what do you think is going to happen if he doesn't want to be here? Ultimately, I mean?"

"I read your profile," I exchange coolly, ignoring the question, "and supposedly you specialize in eating disorders in both males and adults. It's why the hospital assigned you to talk to Sherlock in the first place, isn't it? So don't make it out to be the case that you can't help him! I know you can fix him, if anyone can!"

"John, part of the problem with these conditions is that at a certain point extreme malnutrition can make it very, very difficult to rationally analyze situations. It's part of what makes eating disorders so difficult to truly reverse, especially the longer a person has been suffering. If Sherlock is truly not accepting where he's at...then part of the issue might be that he's too physically unwell to proceed with therapy anyway."

My lungs suddenly burn with upset, and I get up quickly.

I feel like I might be sick.

"John-," Yuri starts.

"Then he needs a clinic! Inpatient, right? He needs to go in, stay in, be fed," and my voice is soft. Strangled. "He might hate me, but so what? Is that what you think he needs?"

Another sigh.

"I don't know. He's not my patient. I don't know where he's at. If he's that ill, perhaps. But at his age, John - we're talking sectioning. That's quite an involved process, and it stays on official medical records for all time. We're talking...trying to convince a judge that he's too sick to legally be responsible for his own person. It could do its own damage to his psyche. To your friendship, and damage his trust. In you. It could even generate further issues with him needing control. With craving control."

I rise abruptly, feeling lost, frustrated and beyond all - scared.

"So there is no way to fix him? That's what you're saying? You? The expert in the field?!"

Yuri seems legitimately sympathetic now. I know he is.
And I know I'm being unfair.

"Look, John. I have an idea. We can try it. I will call Sherlock, tonight if you'd like. I will try to convince him to come see me tomorrow, but with the condition that you'll be present during the session."

I startle, confused.

"Why?"

"Because your concern for him is likely the biggest potential motivator he has to get better. If he doesn't want to start the process of getting better for himself, yet, then perhaps he'll start on the basis of relieving your own concerns."

A wash of fresh pain assaults me.

"Did he say that?"

"You know I can't say if he did, John. But, regardless, it's often a way in - so to speak - with conditions like these. He's your friend, you're his. And it sounds like the two of you have an intense bond. Perhaps I can help facilitate what needs to be communicated so that he gets how much this is scaring you. In a clinical setting, it's also harder to dismiss concerns. At home, he can retreat. At the office, he'd be less likely to do so. Also-," and the older man pauses now, looking thoughtful.

"What?"

"I have no idea what his personal history is with regards to psychiatry. But if he's struggled with any similar issues in the past - or anything requiring psychiatric services - the situation could be more complicated for that reason alone. Many individuals hesitant to receive treatment are partly hesitant due to negative previous encounters. If he's been in clinic for eating issues, and those issues were severe, the methods used to treat his physical condition may have also been extreme."

"Extreme?," I question, nervously.

"Potentially. Especially with youth. In severe cases, especially in the past, treatment for advanced eating disorder cases often involved re-feeding that could be rather invasive. In fact, for years, treatment was predominantly based on re-feeding therapies, and not on other psychiatric assistance."

"Which means in essence - what?"

Yuri looks hesitant. When he does, his tone and manner of speaking are careful. Measured.

"It's speculative. I'm not saying any of this even relates to Sherlock. But eating disorders often occur first in adolescence. It is rarer for them to occur in an adult without prior history."

"Okay."

"And the means of treating these conditions in youth, especially if this applies to Sherlock and the time frame we are talking about here, used to often involve removing the patient's control. That's been the emphasis for a long time."

"I don't treat these conditions in my practice. If I suspect them, I refer parents to a specialist, Yuri."

"Again - and you may want to broach this with Sherlock when you get home, but in the past it often meant forced intubation. Sometimes complete restriction of movement. IV's for fluids and additional
nutrients. Many clinics used to have restrictions on whether youth could call or write to family until basic short term goal weights were met. All in all, the history of treating these conditions has often been aggressive. But that was often perceived as the lesser of two evils, if only because the condition is by it's very nature a pernicious disease."

My mind supplies me with a conversation, from a week or so back: Sherlock admitting he was in clinic.

And what did he say precisely?

The specifics seem hazy now in light of the stress and commotion of what has happened in the days that followed. Yet I can distinctly recall him admitting to being in clinic as a teen. 13 or 14.

And being afraid of a physician in charge of his care.

And I knew then that something unsavory had happened. Something that obviously caused him to react aggressively towards the same doctor - decades later.

So why did I not ask questions?

Why did I let that opportunity to discuss his past get away from me?

"Should I ask him...this? If any of this applies to him?"

The doctor before me hesitates.

"I wouldn't. Unless he broaches it on his own to you, I wouldn't ask him that yet. But I will call him, if you can commit to attending a session with us. As unorthodox as that is."

I bite back a choking-laugh. A sob-laugh.

"Everything about Sherlock is unorthodox."

Yuri smiles.

"So maybe we have a chance, then."

I try to smile back.

I don't know if I succeed.
I'll Go

Chapter Summary

Author's notes: I keep telling myself "Just write 500 words every day for a week!" Le sigh. New habits are hard to develop sometimes. I am also so busy lately (actually the last year has been nuts, and it's going to get even worse in a bit). Thanks for holding on, and continue to read and review.

And we are back to Sherlock's POV.

Sorry guys, I thought this chapter would be...Yuri and Sherlock centered. And it's not. That'll be the next chapter, which I will work very hard at getting out to everyone in a week or so. Not a month.

At shortly after 10:30 am I hear John get up. I hear him pad down the stairs and linger in the hallway, positioned half way between the bathroom and my bedroom. From my bed, I glance over and see the solid shadow of his feet and can almost sense his approaching knock, his approaching "Sherlock, you up?"

But he doesn't speak. Not at all.

After a few seconds of obvious deliberation, I hear the soft tapping of his feet against the linoleum, and then hear the bathroom door close.

About a minute later, I hear the shower start up.

I pull my duvet more firmly around my body.

I am absolutely freezing

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I don't awaken until half past four.

John has returned, and I purposefully navigate around him in the kitchen. He's making himself tea.

"Want some?" he asks softly, looking lost in thought.

I shake my head curtly, eyes still trained on the bags of groceries littering the kitchen table. I feel my teeth cut into the inside portion of my cheek. A few seconds later, I taste the tang of blood and salt.

I hope he doesn't expect me to...eat all of this stuff. All of his purchases.

"You must have been quick with the shopping," my voice exits on its own, and I take the coffee pot, filling up to 4 cups based on the red etchings on the side of the pot.

John doesn't say anything for a second, and then, "Got quite a range of stuff. I want you-"

And he stops. I don't look up at him. Just study the purified water as it fills to the 32 ounce cut off.
He comes closer into my space, and I hope I don't look sullen. But I'm not holding out any hope that I don't.

"Sherlock? Why is this so hard for you?," he asks quietly. "Eating?"

My whole body tightens on its own. I don't like discussing this subject with anyone, but perhaps - in a weird way - least of all with him.

"I don't have trouble with anything. It's a preference," I respond stubbornly. "That's all."

John's breath seems to catch in his throat. Just for a second.

"Abstaining from food isn't a preference, Sherlock. It's the opposite."

My eyes flash to his in anger.

I know he's on my side. But it's an intellectual knowing. It's not a feeling. The feelings and my knowing are at odds with one another lately, and part of me - the part that always rises and hisses and wants to lash out when I feel threatened - wants to blame others for making me feel this way.

"And how would you know? There is nothing wrong with your transport!," I hiss.

John bites his lip. It's an indication of nervousness and I don't like that at all.

This man fought in a war. My friend fought in Afghanistan.

I don't like the fact that I am making him nervous. That I ever could.

"I just have stomachaches. All the time," I add less harshly a second later. "It makes things more complicated," I admit.

John seems to linger between moving closer and staying where he is. Again, it's something I sense.

"I, uh," and he clears his throat, "got you some things. From the health food store."

He tosses a bag to me with the words "Freidlin's Pharmacy" on the paper. I take it hesitantly and pull out some packages and bottles.

"That one there is probiotics," John says needlessly, for I can still read. My eating might arguably be defined as 'disordered', but there is nothing wrong with my vision. "The woman working there said it might help a bit with stomach discomfort. Food not digesting properly, nausea, bloating. Those sorts of things."

I pick it up and move it to the fridge quickly.

"It needs to stay refrigerated," I add, at his querying glance.

"Oh. Right," he says primly, "I take it you want to keep them, then? Are you going to take one now? Give it a chance?"

I ignore the question and pull out some additional things from the paper bags. Digestive Tea, with peppermint. Marshmallow root. Betaine. I bite back a smile.

"This all seems rather holistic for a medical doctor," I say with a smile. My silent way of passing on a thanks.
John, I can tell, is almost bristling inside. Perhaps he's taken my words as a insult of his skills or his training.

"Well, you won't take the meds. And these shouldn't have any side effects. I thought...it was better than nothing," he adds gruffly.

I nod at the fridge, "And how was your appointment? With Pascal?"

John hesitates.

"Umm. Good. It was fine. It was good."

My back is turned to him.

But I want to know. I need to know.

"Good isn't terribly descriptive, John."

I hear him pace from the table to stand besides me. If I turned around, he'd likely be mere inches away now.

"It was a productive session," he starts awkwardly.

"Did you figure out what you are, then?," I ask crisply, turning in a flourish to retrieve freshly made coffee.

John side steps away, allowing me passage.

"What I am?," he asks carefully. "What do you mean, 'What I am'?"

I skip sugar today, and add a dash of cinnamon to the mug. Cinnamon is a thermogenic food source. It naturally boosts metabolism and is good for blood sugar regulation. It can also offer a small amount of soluble fiber when regularly consumed.

"Not gay?," I say edgily, not knowing what my problem is - aside from the pounding pain in my skull. Why I want to bait him.

I hear John sigh.

"I didn't see Yuri to discover that I'm not gay, Sherlock. I never thought I was gay. That wasn't the point of the meeting at all."

The hot liquid leaves a trail of spice down my throat. I decide that it is filling. It feels good.

I need to remember to consume more hot liquids. They help to fight off the wearing cold that lately seems to be attacking me from the inside out.

"What was the 'point', again?" I ask tersely.

Suddenly, I feel John's hand at my shoulder, my back.

"You're sick," he says in pain. I ignore the pleading in his voice and take another sip of coffee. "Remember that?"

"And you're repetitive," I say dully. My chest is heavy. "You did not go to see Yuri Pascal because I'm so-called 'sick.'"
I hear the raggedy exhalation of John's breath at that.

"What do you want me to do? Ignore this? Pretend nothing is happening?"

"Nothing is happening! It's my life! I decide if I want to have coffee more often than not, or skip breakfast, or seek therapy!"

John’s touch, moments before almost hesitant - now becomes firm and he turns me around.

"You aren't just skipping breakfast, and you bloody well know it! Stop playing these games. It's not like I don't understand."

My voice doesn't work. My throat moves, but my voice is conspicuously absent. Until it's not. Until it's raging and loud.

"But you don't understand! You don't understand at all what this is like!"

I try to leave, but John has blocked my exit.

"Get the hell out of my way!," I seethe.

"Not a chance," John mumbles. "How long do you want this to keep at you, Sherlock? All of this? Don't you want it to end?"

I run my hands through my hair in exasperation.

"It will never end!," I bellow out, angry and frustrated and ashamed.

"Why not?," he tries. No nonsense.

I blink at the question. Such a silly question. 'Why not?'

"Come on," he says with a swallow. "Come sit down."

My legs and arms feel laden with mortification. Can't he sense that?

But I take a seat at the table. Deposit my half consumed cup of coffee with a clink against the table.

Stare at the rising waves of heat as they escape the cup.

John takes the seat opposing mine.

"Why not?," he repeats. Insistent.

I let my fingers flutter over the soft gloss of the mug.

"It's not food," I say quietly.

John says nothing. Hoping, I sense, that his attentiveness will keep me going.

"It's consumption," I hold out my hands, palms up. Stare at them. Studying the ridges, the lines of creasing. Like a map. Like a highway. If you're on a road you don't like, you could just drive off onto a different road. But not when the road and the map is your body. When all of it is you.

"Consumption?," he asks quickly, tongue meeting lip. Licking. Whisking away dryness.
"It's hard to articulate," I say in resignation.

"Try."

I look up in surprise then. "I have tried, John."

John winces. "I mean - try to explain to me. Because I don't understand. And I'm sorry that I don't get it. I want to understand, Sherlock. I do."

My arms want to come up and wind their way around around my torso. To hold everything in.

But I leave them firmly against the table.

"It's a feeling. And it's physiological too, so there is that. Everything stops or fades or seems less - oh I don't know! - less distinct," I get out, in frustration.

John's squinting in confusion.

"I thought you said it allows you to think better? That's why you didn't eat on cases," and can I really blame him for this confusion?

"No. I mean...I feel better. I feel, I'm not sure - stronger. It's an urge. Right? To eat? And I can turn it off. I think I could turn any of them off. So I do. And then, eventually, it goes away and it's quiet. But that allows me to think. To really use my mind."

John is staring at me in sick realization.

"Sherlock," he starts weakly. "Food isn't...it's not the same thing as sex. You cannot compare the two."

The mug doesn't feel quite as hot any longer against my bare flesh, and I don't like that. I want it to burn.

"There are...similarities," I say awkwardly.

"What similarities?," John asks thickly, like he's coming down with a cold.

I look up at him quickly, feeling my face suffuse with heat.

I can be honest with him, or I can avoid the question. But he asked for me to be honest, so I close my eyes and press against the table with my hands. It feels grounding. Firm. Pressing back.

"Both of them are out of our control," I reply rapidly. "And I hate that. I hate both."

I hear John swallow.

"Sherlock-," and the voice is almost a pant. "I can't understand this."

I don't begrudge his inability to get this; I don't even know how to articulate what I'm feeling, myself.

"Forget it," I say, rising awkwardly. "I want to go back to bed."

The fact that I've just woken up from sleeping not even a mere half hour ago goes unmentioned by both of us.

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At almost 7, I hear a knock of my door. I want to grumble at John to go away, but I don't. Eventually the door to my room cracks open and John simply says, "I've made dinner. Come to the kitchen, please."

I wait until the door closes, enveloping the room again in darkness, as the sun has already begun to set. A thin strip of light glows orange and warm from the hallway, and spills under my door, and for a second - I stare at it and into it and feel unusually safe.

I truly don't want to get up, but I start to rise when I hear John trot back down the hallway. Reopening the door, he comes into my room cradling a bowl of soup and a plate with garlic bread. The scent is enticing me, and I feel my stomach howl to be fed.

He places the items against my bedside table, then asks calmly, "On or off?"

I blink in confusion.

"The light?," John clarifies. "Would you like it on or off? I take it you have a headache?"

I nod curtly, and my voice feels scratchy and dry when I ask for the light to remain off.

"Okay," John says kindly, then brings the cup to my hands. "Take it and have a sip, please."

I exhale quickly, feeling a prickling fear. I've done so well today, and his meddling is going to ruin it. Ruin the feeling.

I pull my hands back.

"I'm not hungry," I plead, anxiety burgeoning up in my throat.

"I don't think that's quite true, Sherlock."

I pull back until my head is flush against the headboard.

"Why are you doing this to me?," I plead. "I don't want it."

John, again, tries to give me the cup. "I know," he admits sadly, "but you need it. And that has to be more important than what you want at this stage. Doesn't it?"

I feel agitated. Keyed up. Like I want to run.

But I'm far too exhausted to run. Even I can see that. Will admit to that much.

"Tomorrow, please," I beg, feeling swarmed. Even if there is only one other person in the room. "Just give me tonight."

"This won't hurt you," John murmurs. "I'll help you until it's gone. Come on."

I gulp down panic.

"I don't want this. I don't want it in me!"

John is sitting on the corner edge of my bed and places the tomato soup to the side.

"It's not the same thing. It doesn't mean the same thing," he says gently.
"John-," and my voice is shrill.

"You're letting him win," he whispers now. "When you hurt yourself like this, it's like he's winning."

There is enough light from the hallway to clarify the objects. It's visible in here, just not bright.

The cup of soup looks dark red, and it's speckled with green. Basil? Oregano? The tomatoes smell fragrant.

Part of me does want to eat it. A very conflicted part.

"Let me help you," John says resolutely, repeating his earlier words as he puts the cup directly into my hands.

Upset is making my hands shake.

John raises the cup to my mouth. "Just take a sip," he repeats. "Just a sip."

I feel like putting my head against my lap, and John comes around the edge of the bed, to stand besides me.

"It's hardest in the beginning. All changes are that way. It'll eventually get less difficult, but you need to start now. Right now."

I tilt the cup against my lips and take a couple sips. The soup is warm and fragrant and John has mixed some white rice into the mix. I take a few more gulps, willing the pressing fear to leave me alone.

"It's just soup," I whisper to myself, trying to keep the edging panic from coming in too close.

"Just soup," John agrees, as I continue to drink it down. By the time I get midway down, I feel perilously close to crying. John must sense this, because he slowly removes the cup away.

"Can you finish the rest?" he asks kindly.

"No," I grit out, trying to keep tears at bay. "I don't want any more."

"Okay," John relents, rubbing my back. "You did well. Do you want some toast?"

I shake my head in upset, "No."

It comes out as a sob.

"Alright. We will try something different in the morning."

I want to curl up in a little ball and block out the world.

"Do you want me to stay with you for a bit?"

I hesitate. Nod. Move over to allow John some room. He seems to pause at this, before understanding what I am offering.

He gently deposits himself on the bed, then lays down. Completely straight. Rim-rod straight.

Then he turns inwards, slightly.

"I'm really proud of you, Sherlock," he expresses in the dark. "You did so well."
I keep my eyes shut and don't say anything. Not for awhile, and then: "I'm really tired, John. I'm going to sleep now."

Neither of us mention the fact that I've slept through the entire day already and am still exhausted.

----------------------------

Sunday morning, and the light is cracking through the window. I deliberate if I should get up and close my blinds.

Lately the light has been hurting my eyes more than it normally does even though I've always been photo-sensitive.

But if I move, I am likely to wake John. He's tired, too. In a way, maybe even more than I am.

I am more or less used to myself. To what I do to myself. He's not yet used to dealing with a person who has problems like I do. So I lay on my side, and take in his sleeping form. The even breaths. The gentle cascade of air as it leaves his mouth and nose. The gentle face.

He's beautiful.

I push the thought away. Because it doesn't matter if I am aesthetically attracted to his form. Or emotionally attracted to his kindness. Attachments always hurt, in the end.

They always do.

As if my thoughts have woken him, I see his eyelids start to lift.

"Good morning," he says tiredly, a yawn soon following.

"Morning," I respond, feeling my cheeks prickle.

And here lies the problem: it doesn't matter what I feel. If I have romantic feelings for John, or if he has romantic feelings for me. I will never be able to reciprocate in a manner that would be healthy for one also interested in a physical relationship. As I know John is, and always will be.

And even if we explored more about how we feel, or how I feel, or about the messiness that is emotion - where would that lead us?

To nowhere good, that's where.

"Feeling better?"

My throat aches.

"I feel better physically," I admit. "Not as shaky."

John touches my hand, and his voice is soft. Like sable. Like a blanket. It's soft and warm and gentle and quiet. And I appreciate all of those things right now.

"It makes sense. Your blood sugar was probably in the toilet. What else?"

I play with his fingers. Touch the ridges on his nails. Don't look him in the eyes.

"I'm confused."
He murmurs in agreement.

"What about?"

"I don't know why I am the way I am."

The stroking of his thumb slows, and almost stops.

"What are you?," he asks gingerly.

"I'm not normal," I concede.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing. Not always," He gives me a sad smile. "And what else?"

"I'm not healthy?" And it should have been a statement, but it comes out as a question.

"No," John agrees. "You are not. Can you tell me why?"

And his question is so layered and so voluminous, I barely know what he means.

I pull my duvet up higher against my torso, and let my gaze fall to my bedroom window. The sky is streaked with a reddish purple. The sky before a storm.

"I don't always eat," I say rigidly, my gaze studying the clouds. Not studying John's eyes.

"No. You don't," he agrees. "Anything else?"

A seagull has seemingly come into the city. Fluttering up amongst the blood red sky and the freshly borne clouds.

"Sometimes I make myself throw up," I inform John with a whisper. Quickly. I say it quickly. Not even pausing for breath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see his face fall into something edging an emotion that most people would call distraught.

Or maybe not shocked, so much as disheartened.

"Okay," he breathes, "thank you for letting me know."

I continue to watch the bird.

For a minute.

Two minutes.

"I don't know if I can stop on my own," I admit. "And I don't know if I want to stop. It doesn't feel bad, usually. It feels okay."

John sits up.

"Has it been happening long? Making yourself sick?"

The seagull has flown around a building. I need to wait for him to come back before I can answer.

I wait.
"Sherlock?"

"It started when I was 11," I state evenly. Sounding strangely calm. Feeling strangely calm, and strangely disconnected.

Especially considering how upset I was last night.

Some part of me is registering that it's not normal to emotionally turn off like I do. To go numb. I know it's a problem. I cannot continue to vacillate between feeling so empty and feeling so upset that I make a scene. I need to pull myself together.

"But it's not-," and John's voice sounds tense and pained. "It wasn't all the time. It's not all the time now, is it?"

He probably is wondering how he could have missed anything like this if it had been a daily occurrence.

"It's...patchy. My eating. On and off. Certainly not constant. Hence Mycroft's concern. He always wants to be in the know. So even when nothing is wrong, he assumes something could be. But he doesn't know, John. Not about that."

John is waiting patiently for me to continue.

"I stopped almost entirely when I was 12. Started again when I was 13. When I was 14, Mycroft put me into The Priory. I was there for almost four months. But I don't think he knew, because even the doctors didn't. Just that I didn't want to eat. But that was all."

John sits up now. His eyes are small, drawn in. Like they've been pickled in brine.

"Sherlock, how could Mycroft not know?"

"When I was a child, it was a game," I state, feeling empty. A voice through the room, but no accompanying body. "Don't wake Mycroft.' And I didn't, John. He'd sleep, and I had this power. And it was a good feeling. It made me feel good. The most observant person I knew, but I could do something like that and he couldn't see, couldn't hear, maybe couldn't even imagine it was a possibility. A blind spot."

John is now staring at me almost as if he's afraid. His voice sounds ancient and pulled back, almost clinical, when he asks, "It felt good?"

The seagull is back now. Moving amongst the highest buildings. Untouchable by all. Free to go where it wants.

"It felt like it was mine. All mine. I knew it wasn't healthy, but I knew I made it exist. This thing that no one wanted me to do. But what did it matter? When they had done whatever they wanted to do to me, for nine years? Who were they to judge me? To take that away?"

John's breaths and voice and body and words are all controlled now. On guard.

"What are we trying to take away from you, Sherlock? What is it that you think you will lose if you stop doing this to yourself?"

I open my mouth to speak, then close it a second later.

Because I'm not sure.
Even I'm not sure.

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About 10 minutes later, I hear his voice like a gentle rumble coming in after a flash of lightening. Not scary. Comforting. Like a duvet.

"Was there anything else?"

I startle from near sleep, my brain fuzzy with his inquiry.

"Like what?"

John's voice sounds dry and warbled.

"Like anything, Sherlock. Anything that I should know."

I exhale sharply against my pillow.

"I don't know if I should have informed you of any of this-"

"Sherlock," John sounds pained. And that's my fault too, isn't it?

My brain continues to hiss at me. Continues to scream at me to not share. To not ever share this.

That caring is not an advantage. Not for me, and probably not for John, either.

The more he cares, the more I am going to hurt him. Perhaps not intentionally, but hurt him all the same.

And I know the reverse is more than true for me.

"I'll share something, then," John starts abruptly. "Something about myself."

My mouth quirks into a smile. It's a kind offer, but inherently worthless, as far as a quid pro quo.

Unless I'm being quick to laud my abilities, and not cautious enough to hold onto modesty. Onto the possibility that I may not know everything there is to know about John Hamish Watson.

"That can hardly be a fair exchange," I say evenly, feeling momentarily distracted from my thoughts. My hissing, buzzing thoughts.

"Why?"

"I can just deduce, and induce for that matter, the bulk of what I'd likely need to know about you."

John's mouth purses into an unsatisfied grimace.

"You can try. But you can never know if you're 100% right? And without a lead in, and without some sort of tell...well, you can't mind-read Sherlock. No one can."

He looks restless at my previous assertion, so I tone down my words now.

"Okay. But it has to be something interesting. Pretend it was a case. Interesting like that."

John gives me a patient look.
"I highly doubt my life has been that interesting. Most of the interesting things I have experienced, well, they happened to me after I met you."

The realization that John thinks that way about himself, about his take on life and the teeming masses surrounding us... makes me feel atypically sad.

"Just do your best," I say carefully, not wanting to give away how I feel. Tonal inflection is going to be the most overt clue I can give now, in the near dark, lying on my side.

"Ok," he says hesitantly. "Um, well - again, my childhood would have been very mundane compared to yours. Just differences in our abilities alone."

I hold in my air, not wanting to release my breath in guilt. That I have - either recently or at some earlier juncture - ever done anything that could have made John feel average, or mundane. Horrible word, that. Mundane.

John is certainly not mundane. Anything but.

"Well," he starts again, and I listen attentively, "should I maybe tell you some of the stuff that I told Yuri today? About my childhood?"

I pause at that, suddenly grasping at a mental nothingness.

Because, in fact, I don't know that much of John's childhood. Oh, to be sure, I could make an educated guess on a great number of points: he would have been in the smaller percentile for height until high school, but solid in his frame. He was relatively even tempered as a child, and a cheery baby. He would have been slow to warm up to others, but never cold. He would have excelled at sport, but likely wasn't the most studious child until he decided on becoming a doctor. He would have been a comfort eater, who only started to focus on a wider array of foods to eat as an adult.

But is that good enough? Is that knowing what makes a person a person?

"If you can. If you are okay with that," I volley back when I realize he's still waiting for me to speak.

John seems to wheeze for a second, steadying himself.

"My parents both drank. To excess."

I turn to listen, my heart pounding loudly in my ears.

"I had gathered as much, though I had assumed primarily your father was the bigger drinker."

Even in the darkness, I see John's face flinch in pain.

"He was just the meaner drunk, Sherlock."

A slight coil of bitterness and a strangulated rush of anger hits me at once. Bitterness for my friend, for what he experienced, but a sickening anger at myself.

Because in the awareness that both of John's parents drank, and drank far too much, my initial feeling wasn't one of sadness. Like it should have been. Like it would have been for any good friend of an exceptional person, as is the case here. No, instead, my first thought was envy. It was this: that dealing with passed out parents would be better than dealing with lucid, cruel ones.

It was: 'I'd take that over what happened to me. I'd take every beating that he had surely gone through if I could never have gone through...that.'
Even though I know that thought is unfair, and very, very wrong.

Because doesn't it imply a trade? An exchange?

And yet, I could never cast the horror of my childhood off onto John. I'd have to be monstrous to even have a fleeting wish for a trade.

As if John's life was attractive, when it was so tinged with pain, too.

What is wrong with me?

"Did your father hit you?" I make my inquiry with a voice that aims for neutrality. Even though I even know the answer.

My emotions no longer are reliable though, and I need to stay away from my inner mind that taunts me with what if's and could-have-beens. That sense of loss that accompanies thinking, even for short periods of time, of what happened. To him. And to me.

That pulsing sadness.

The yearning I often had before the drugs. To go back in time. To erase it all. To have a different father. One that loved me. One that loved me properly. And to know I'd be different today.

That it wouldn't always be there. The impulses I have. The upset with the every day. That inner torment when faced with having to eat or sleep, or even when I looked at my body in the mirror. And it would be gone. Those issues would never have existed, would they?

"Yes," John responds tightly drawing me back to the present. "Yes, he hit us both. My mum and I, mostly. Rarely Harriet."

And I should say that I'm sorry. I should say something sympathetic.

I should not say what I say.

I should not say, "But Harriet was older."

John turns to me suddenly then, shocked.

"Sherlock...I wouldn't have traded positions with Harriet."

I look down abruptly then, fiercely angry with myself. And there is so much that I could say now. But all of it would look pretty awful. Pretty horrible.

I scratch at the inside of my wrist instead.

How I wish I could just gouge them right now.

"Sherlock? You couldn't have wanted Mycroft to have gone through it too," John starts slowly, oddly. Getting half of it, but certainly not getting the gist of it. "I know you wouldn't have."

"Of course not! It's not what I meant!"

John licks his lips. Even though it's dark, I can hear it - the sandpaper sound of dryness. He's been doing it more and more lately. It's starting to become like a tic.

"What did you mean, then?"
My head is burgeoning.

"She was older, but she wasn't hurt. And Mycroft was older, and he wasn't hurt. And I don't understand why your parents cared about Harriet more than you. I don't understand that. It doesn't make sense."

John's chest rises and falls in a huff. I can feel the sensation ripple across the blankets.

"It's not ever going to make sense, Sherlock. People don't hurt kids to make sense. They don't beat kids for some logical reason. It's not about that. Besides, I don't think it's true that Harriet wasn't hurt, or that Mycroft wasn't hurt. There are many different ways to wound people. It's not just about the physical body. Emotional pain goes deeper than all of that, and they didn't escape that. They couldn't have. It must have been awful for my sister to see what happened to our mother, and to me. It must have been horrible for Mycroft to see what was happening to you, Sherlock. And to not know how to stop it. Not when he was a child."

I don't speak for a few moments, as my throat feels swollen, the vocal chords stiff.

"He hated me," I say in a rush. My eyes feel hot in my head. "He must have hated me. Because I was just little then, John, so I don't understand. I don't understand why he hated me so much from the beginning."

And John, thankfully - he gets it. He gets that I am not talking about Mycroft at all right now.

"Sherlock," John breathes, "he was extremely sick. And I don't think it's about hatred. He was mentally ill."

The words have not fully registered, but I am speaking again.

"He used to read to Mycroft, though. Before Mycroft left for school in France. And I'd hear his voice, and he sounded so loving. Everyone thought he was so kind. Just a wonderful man, a wonderful father. I would sometimes open the door and sit in the hallway to listen to the stories. I know he was liked by a lot of people. I wasn't liked by anyone. The common denominator was me. Is me, John. It's me that people don't like. They didn't like me then, and they don't like me now."

The light turns on abruptly then, and I force myself not to close my eyes.

John looks almost angry. He's now sitting up and in the next movement has my shoulders under his hands, angling me towards him.

"Nothing that happened to you was your fault, do you hear me? You didn't want it to happen! You didn't ask for it to happen in any way! You didn't deserve for it to happen! He hurt you because he was incredibly sick. If he didn't hurt Mycroft in that way it still doesn't mean he didn't hurt Mycroft. He couldn't love Mycroft any more than he could have loved you, and I think Mycroft knows that. Because you were a victim, Sherlock. Innocent. You were a toddler - you absolutely were - and he hurt you as cruelly as someone could have hurt anyone, and-"

John's voice has completely terminated now. I freeze in place, not understanding what has happened.

A few seconds later, I hear the hiccups of John's voice coming in again.

"You were just a baby," and he sits up, his limbs trembling, "what sort of monster rapes a baby?"

I don't think he's talking directly to me any longer, and I stay perfectly still, not wanting to worsen John's tirade.
After a few moments, I test out his name carefully.

"John?"

He's still breathing too fast, his fists clenched by his sides. Like he could punch someone.

"Yes, Sherlock?"

It comes out more biting than I know he had intended.

"I'm...sorry," I say tensely, my throat parched. "I'm sorry I've put you through all this stress. I misrepresented myself when we first met, and you made your decision to become my flatmate based on having you think that my primary failings were an impulse to-

John's face drops. He puts a finger against my lips. My voice steels and stops in my throat.

"I never - ever - want to hear you apologize for what that bastard did to you. Are we clear?"

My throat is tight and my heart is banging against my ribcage so intensely that I can hear it blotting out John's voice.

John seems to hesitate now. "And I won't pressure you to get therapy, but you have to eat. I can't negotiate on that."

I feel confused. What is John saying? Really?

That he'll leave if I don't eat exactly as he wants me to?

As if reading my thoughts - sensing my concern - he clarifies. "We have to work on something. Right away. Some sort of schedule. It doesn't have to be a lot, but it has to be enough to stop you from losing any more weight."

I feel my stomach twist into knots.

"What else?," I ask bleakly, not wanting my agitation to show. Not wanting John to know how much his decision is unnerving me. Scaring me.

"If you can, I'd like you to consider seeing Yuri. I can even attend for a period of time, if that helps. First few But I won't force you, Sherlock."

I scratch the inside of my wrist and try to revel in the slight pain.

"Why? Why would you come?," I ask cautiously.

John sighs heavily.

"Because I know you've had bad experiences with psychiatrists in the past. And I don't want you to ever have to go through that again. I don't even want it to be a concern for you - a reason why you may decline now."

I weigh his words in my mind.

"If I don't like it - we can leave?," I clarify, my voice slow and deliberate. "At any time?"

John gives me a very slight smile. Barely noticeable.
But I notice it.

"I want as much of this to be in your hands. But I have cleared it with Yuri. He's amenable to working with you. You set the parameters."

I nod, feeling empty. Not relieved. Not touched by John's kindness.

Just numb.

An increasingly common state for me, and one I seem to have no control over any longer.

"Ok. I'll go," I say weakly. "I'll try. For you."

If John can sense the separation of my emotions from my being, he doesn't let on.
I have very, very sketchy net access right now and I may be in this boat for another 2 or so months. Perhaps longer. I apologize. I have wanted to get some writing done for a long time now, and I hope everyone enjoys the update. It's shorter than a normal chapter, but I hope it's better than nothing. I'm currently having to write in cyber-cafes, which can be costly, so please know I will be finishing in a more timely manner as soon as I am able. Thanks, guys!

This chapter is special as it the first chapter written from a unique character's POV (Yuri's, in this case). More developments in the next chapter, but I just wanted to provide you guys something, rather than nothing. I am envious of those of you that have a relatively sane and stable existence.

Oh, in very small ways, I tried to showcase a slight odd speaking pattern for Yuri. He's near-fluent in English, but I wanted to create a difference in how he uses words and constructs his sentences to highlight his background - Russian born, French raised.

REVIEWS are lovely! As always :)

It's shortly after noon, on Sunday, when John Watson calls me. Soft voice, not quite a whisper - but definitely quiet. Subdued.

I recognize the number and head to my office, wanting to minimize noise and any subsequent discomfort for John.

"Yes, John?"

"Umm, yes. Hi Yuri," he starts out hesitantly.

He sounds distracted, and I decide to cut to the chase.

"Have you discussed seeing me with Sherlock? With Sherlock seeing me, as well?"

A pause. It's slight - almost not a pause at all - but I sense it. Can feel the reservation he has in even replying.

"Ye-es," John parses, the word slightly drawn out. "And he's agreed to see you. So that's good. Unexpected. I mean, he initially was going to, but then seemed to go back on his decision, and sometimes getting him to do anything that could be of his benefit is really tricky, and-"

I sense that it was a tentative agreement at best, though, hence John's hesitancy in answering. The start of his rambling.

"Today?," I interject. "Has he agreed to see me later today?"

"No, not today," he says quickly. "That won't work. I tried, but-"
It's an Issue. Obviously.

But I had guessed as much upon first meeting Sherlock when he had been admitted for his ulcer perforation.

Obviously Sherlock dislikes speaking to doctors as much as most people dislike root canals. Which is to say - a whole lot.

"Okay. Do not worry about that. What is his available time? You are aware of the schedule for availability?"

I hear a sigh.

"Yes. That might be better, anyway. He's...he's sort of psyching himself out a little bit, Yuri. I think. But if it's short - a quick visit, at least initially - he might slowly come out of his shell."

I think of Sherlock, as I first met him, in clinic. His irritability did not completely hide his nervousness. Though I bet that was his intention. Well crafted armor, honed over decades.

I push away a pang of empathy. Over empathizing with Sherlock may be to his detriment. He likely gets enough of that with John, and with John I am also sure he's become a master of manipulation. And of course there are reasons for everything. For his need to feel so reliant on his skills to manipulate others. That is already a very huge sign of dysfunction. But his denial of very serious problems, now, will only prolong his suffering.

And it is not in my nature to prolong considerable suffering that is covered by a gloss of surface discomfort. I'd rather push past immediate hesitancy if it would help someone get back on track.

The issue is even more pressing now, of course. Eating disturbances have a definite pressured need. They cannot go unchecked for too long, because the damage they cause isn't strictly further psychological disturbance.

They can threaten a person's physical existence, and from what I suspect of Sherlock - he's been struggling, acutely, for several months. And in a less acute sense, he's likely been engaged with disordered habits on and off since his childhood.

"Have you discussed a time? Date? Some time this week?," I clarify, hoping John doesn't take my brusqueness for irritation.

"Yes. For the opening you mentioned. On the weekdays."

"Twice a week?," I confirm.

"He'll be okay with that," John says ambiguously. "I'm sure he'll be, eventually."

We chat for a few more minutes, while I pencil Sherlock's name into my roster, and explain to John what NHS information I will need in the future. I can hear the weariness - and, if I am not mistaken - a slight ripple of fear - in John's voice before we disconnect.

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On Monday, I return to the office and take my regular caseload of patients. At ten to 2 pm, I receive a call stating that "Dr. Watson and Mr. Holmes" are in the waiting room. I nod to myself, then relay
that they can come into the office to my secretary.

They do, almost immediately.

John first, Sherlock trailing him - shoulders hunched almost to his chin in tension, his body language defensive. Stiff.

I shake John's hand first, then turn and give Sherlock a short, gut genuine smile offering my hand.

He doesn't take it. Simply stares at my form, glances downward, blinks, and then begins to speak.

"Right, well come in. Lots of space," I say easily, keeping the tone and the dialogue simple. I have worked in this profession for long enough to know that taking anything personally, especially when a person is conflicted about getting better in the first place, would equal utter foolishness.

John smiles broadly, seemingly relieved to just have Sherlock in the office. His smile is eager. He's trying to encourage his friend.

And it's readily apparent by the tension behind the smile, not fake, but strained - that his decision to see me, for himself alone - was also not in error.

Chronic concerns about a friend or loved one takes an emotional toll on those close to the afflicted as well, and can be incredibly draining to those seemingly not afflicted by any disorder. That is part of the pernicious nature of certain problems. They rarely impact one person. They can impact an entire family, even if seemingly indirectly.

I can't help wonder how much they've argued about this issue in the last few weeks, however.

John sits front and center, moving slightly to the side when Sherlock deposits his lanky form next to his friend's a few seconds later. I note, with interest, that he took to sitting on the same sofa as John, rather than selecting his own chair off to the side.

Yet he's not making eye contact with John.

Fascinating cluster of signs.

So he's likely either ashamed, or angry over being here - but not so angry that John's presence fails to provide necessary comfort.

"Can I get either of you a beverage?," I ask, as is my typical way of greeting new clients. John, of course, smiles politely and requests a bottled water. Sherlock remains mute.

"Sherlock?," I clarify. "Would you like something to drink?"

I see his thin face dart around quickly, searching for something. He looks restless, and I wonder how long it will take to put him at ease. Most of my clients seem to find my mannerisms comforting enough. I am not known for being off putting or overly intrusive. I must, at times, press clients. But it's usually in a testing capacity when they resort to going silent for extended periods of time. Or in serious situations involving suicidal ideation or self-harm. Things I cannot let go unchecked.

I have no interest in bulldozing through someone else's emotional past just because I can.

"We have Perrier too. Or canned fruit juice, colas. I can make tea?," I continue, when there is no further response from Sherlock.

Sherlock's jaw clenches for a nanosecond, before: "A Perrier, please," he requests primly, but his
face contorted in sourness.

I pad over to the small fridge and return a few moments later with water for them both, and an Italian Soda for myself.

"Not a good choice for someone whose family history is rife with Type 2 diabetes," Sherlock states silkily as I pop the tab. John winces and gives me a look that showcases his apologetic nature.

"Ahh," I say with a slight grin, "but certainly a little bit of sugar now and then isn't the worst thing if I eat healthfully on the whole. Wouldn't you say?"

Sherlock licks his lips, then glances to his knees. The bones protrude in such a way as to give him a Tim Burton-esque skeletal look. In a clay-mation character, it looks intriguingly spooky. On a human being, it almost looks grotesque.

"It's your pancreas, not mine," he mutters after a moment, while John rolls his eyes.

I smile again, while I pour my beverage into a taller glass and re-settle myself into my chair.

"So? Should we just jump into it, then?"

Sherlock continues to stare directly ahead of himself, while John nods briefly, then turns to his friend - obviously wanting collective assent.

"I think that would be easiest," John says tightly, breaking the silence. His strained grin is back.

I realize he likely has his own issues with therapy, too. But he attends out of duty. A sense of responsibility. Not an actual ease with the process.

"Okay," I agree. "So... how about I just pose a couple basic questions and you both can provide your own take on the situation? Such as - what, ultimately, would either of you like me to help you accomplish if you were to become my patients?"

John rushes to answer, while Sherlock distractedly picks imaginary lint off his blue woolen coat.

"Well, these sessions are not so much for me, but for him," John starts by way of clarification. "I'm here to provide, I guess, support. Sherlock doesn't have the best history with psychotherapists," he adds rapidly.

I fight down the urge to smile. I doubt that Sherlock has the best history with authority figures, period.

"Sherlock, would you say that's accurate? John's statement?"

Sherlock looks up tiredly. I can sense the weariness in his entire being. Partly bodily fatigue from poor self-care, but partly mental turmoil. His mind and body are fighting one another, and he likely doesn't know which one to follow. His eyes are ringed in black, and he looks even thinner than the last time I saw him in the hospital.

Which was already borderline emaciated.

"Of course it's accurate. John wouldn't say such a thing if it were not," he responds in an almost biting tone.

I lean back slightly in my chair and let my hands gloss over the glass table.
"Would you say that John typically is accurate about his assessments of people? In general?"

Sherlock hesitates briefly, then responds with: "For an individual who has not spent much time focused on studying human behaviour, I would say John is exceptionally good at reading people."

John's eyebrows rise to his hairline, and when we catch each others line of sight, I bite back a smile. Mainly as he looks so surprised by the compliment.

"And was it John's suggestion to have you see someone?"

Sherlock crosses his arms over his frame now. A classic defensive maneuver. One I'm sure he's quite aware of normally but which has presently escaped his notice. Belying his anxiety.

"Yes," he barks at me, his voice sounding hoarse.

It sounds as if he has cried recently. The voice is raw.

"What were John's reasons? Why did he want you to talk to someone?"

Sherlock presses both of his palms against his legs. He looks up, seems to freeze, and then repeats the motion.

It's odd. But it reminds me of a stim that I once observed in a young man with high functioning autism. That's not to say that's the case here, but I have the faintest suspicion that Sherlock would be closer to being neuro-atypical than neuro-typical. Of course, the aversion to eye-contact, currently, could simply be due to his own anxiety in the present moment, and not a typical issue for him.

But I visited his website. Saw his intense, unusual interests. His devotion to performing tests on cigarette ash. Over 240 different kinds.

That sort of dedication, to a subject that most would find innately boring, is interesting to me.

Not only that - I have observed his interactions with others. With myself, his nurse, with John. His online comments to suggestions and responses on his own webpages. The style, the dismissive tone, the borderline-anger all the time, and the rapidity with which he does, indeed, become angry - all of that provide little warnings and clues that I am trained not to ignore.

I have the faintest suspicion that there could be another diagnosis under his overt disorder here, but that will have to wait for future exploration.

Then again, he is undeniably brilliant. That itself can generate odd mannerisms and traits, if only due to repeated isolation that can co-occur with unrecognized brilliance - especially when it presents as marked since childhood.

And Sherlock definitely seems to be defensive. Not only dismissive of others, but guarded.

As if he's expecting verbal rebukes.

He's likely been bullied extensively for being different, and now holds his differences close to him. Unwilling to concede to changing, as he's used to being the way he is. And would likely prefer to see others as deficient and stupid, rather than admit that he's not coping as well as he could. Not living as happily as he's entitled to live.

"He thinks I have a poor self-care style," Sherlock states suddenly, his dark voice cutting through the
fog of my own thoughts.

The statement is so intentionally vague that I lean forward and nod - as is my habit when trying to encourage a relatively recalcitrant patient, hoping to get more information.

"Can you flesh that out a bit more for me? In what ways is John concerned? Specifically? Hygiene? Sleeping?"

Sherlock huffs and when he looks up at me again, it's with a faint anger.

I'm starting to become used to his anger, and no longer find it quite as impressive. Not now that I've sensed his deeper, fuller fear.

"Obviously not hygiene," he snarks, "My hygiene is impeccable, on the whole."

It's true, too, of course. But I continue to let him rant, while John's eyes reach to mine in an almost apologetic manner yet again.

I realize the co-dependent lock the two of them are in: John, so used to taking responsibility for everything and everyone I suspect, and Sherlock - quick to dismiss himself from responsibility for very much.

Neither extreme, of course, is healthy.

"Sherlock," he starts, wary. Tempting. A 'play along nicely, please' sort of voice.

"These games are transparent, and therefore - aggravating. If you are going to play me, Doctor, at least be creative about it."

I remain mute, while Sherlock repeats the motion I had observed earlier and then suddenly proclaims, "John is concerned about my eating. Primarily."

I study my pen, pull it close, then glance back up to the tense man before me.

"What concerns John about your eating?" I specify.

Sherlock's face is steely.

"He doesn't feel that I eat regularly enough."

"Anything else?"

Because obviously - that's not the whole of this issue.

Sherlock bites his lip, flinches.

"He doesn't feel I eat enough when I do, indeed, eat."

John's now sitting as rigidly as his friend, and I take another sip of my cola, debate momentarily how to answer.

"What about you, Sherlock?" I ask easily, trying to put both men at ease. "What do you think?"

"What about me...what?," Sherlock responds tightly.

"Do you feel you eat enough? Or regularly?"
Sherlock hedges, not knowing how to answer. And his answer will be interesting, if only because I sense that he's capable of being profoundly honest when he needs to be.

"Not compared to the average," he begins easily enough, but I hear a 'but' coming. "Yet I am not average, so-," he responds after a few seconds, his eyes wary and scanning my own. "It makes it complicated, and others...never understand. Even John. He doesn't...," Sherlock trails off quietly, and I am starting to hear the deep upset in his voice now.

I can sense that he's incredibly conflicted over how he lives and interacts with others. The tug of war within his own mind, especially for someone so intelligent and so typically ruled by logic - must be hard to live with, and frightening.

To know he is soothed by that which is ultimately destructive and the opposite of logical must be disquieting for one so typically guided by rational analysis. Proceeding to facts, not feelings. Yet now he is soothed by habits and allowances that are geared to appeal to his emotions, and not his body. That must be a rather conflicting place to be.

"What do you wish others would understand?," I ask calmly. "How you feel? Why you feel as you do?,"

Sherlock seems reluctant to answer, but he does: "My transport is not composed in such a way as to give me regular cues or typical feedback encouraging excessive intake when I consume, or fail to consume, various foodstuffs."

The wording is odd.

It's removed, almost robotic sounding in usage.

I have no doubt that Sherlock wishes, at times, that he could become more robotic. There is less pain for those without emotional awareness. But Sherlock is not lacking in emotional awareness.

He's likely much more emotionally aware that he wants to admit; more emotionally aware than he is probably given credit for being.

"Your transport is what? How you refer to various bodily or organ systems?"

He nods - looks slightly less tense at my lack of judgment of his terminology.

"That's correct," he states more assuredly now.

I pause momentarily.

"Do you feel that your transport is defective?"

Sherlock studies me, and then states, "No. I do not."

"Oh for God's sake, Sherlock," I hear John mutter, and resist an impulse to hold up a finger. One of the issues in allowing more than the patient himself into a therapy session is the random utterances from concerned family or friends who also attend the session.

This can be revealing and informative, but can also stop a natural form of dialogue between myself and the patient who needs the most solid focus.

Yet, in Sherlock's case, I am betting that John's inclusion in these sessions was vital, even so far as ensuring Sherlock showed up at all. So it's a small price to pay on the whole, I guess.
"John - you seem to think that's not an accurate assessment, is that right?"

I see John's body sit up straighter on the sofa, as he responds with conviction: "You're absolutely right that's not an accurate assessment," and then, "Sherlock - we've been over this repeatedly. You are exceptional in so many ways, but you cannot operate on nothing. No one can."

Sherlock looks away in frustration; I observe the body language between the two of them for a few moments.

"Sherlock?," I ask gingerly a short time later. "You seem to be angry with John. Can you tell me why?"

There is a huff of air.

"I am not angry with John," he gets out in gritty and obvious anger. "I am frustrated that most people are so simple-minded in their understanding of variant bodily compositions that-

"Oh, come off it!," John interrupts, seemingly tired of Sherlock's excuses. "I am more than sensitive to 'variations in bodily compositions', so let's stop with this. All of this. This is about you not taking care of yourself. That's why we are here. And nothing I have said or done seems to make a difference, and I think - if you were honest with everyone right now, in this room - you'd admit that you are doing some very unhealthy things. Things that don't make sense. But rather than own them, you are trying to make it seem like the essentials that all people need - food being a very big one, Sherlock! - don't apply to you. And they do. Of course they do! Just admit that much!," and John's voice is craggy now. "Please just stop trying to deny that!"

Sherlock closes his eyes briefly and when they flutter open a few seconds later, I can see that they are swollen with tears.

"I-I," even his chest is rising and falling faster now, "There is nothing wrong with me."

John puts his head in his hands and groans.

"Do you see this, Yuri? This is it! It in a nutshell. We talk around this issue, and he never admits to anything. Except rarely, and even then, it's an allusion, not a direct admittance, and I just can't...live in the flat and see him do this to himself any longer. I can't."

Sherlock's eyes widen with anxiety now. I see him lick his lips, then meet my gaze with fear.

"Are you trying to express that you'll consider leaving if Sherlock doesn't change some of his habits?," I qualify, since Sherlock seems incredibly still and unwilling to talk, currently.

"No," John exhales, tiredly, "No. I won't leave. I just don't...I don't want to have to see this happen any longer. All my life, it seems, I've had to sit back and see people do things to themselves that eventually ruined their own lives. And it's a horrible feeling," John stops, swallows, his voice thick when he continues, "it's horrible to want to help someone you care about so much, and not have any power to make anything better for them. To plead with them, and not see anything change. Ever. Or even WANT to change. It makes you want to give up. To not care so much. Because it hurts to see all that potential go down the bloody drain, and when it's someone you love, it's even worse and-

John abruptly stops talking and Sherlock blinks rapidly, licks his lips. He's paler now, and looks almost more upset than John.

And vaguely guilty.
I pull out some lined paper from my desk and separate two sheets, giving one to each man.

"I can imagine that it would be an awful thing to witness. John?," I ask carefully, "I want you to write down three things you'd like to see improve. In terms of how Sherlock cares for himself. And then I want you to read them out."

Sherlock shuffles in his seat as I hand him his paper.

"This is so stupid," he huffs, seeming about 14 years old in that moment.

I smile and continue to hold out Sherlock's paper, which he finally takes. "You too, Sherlock. But I want you to write three things down as they relate to John. Things you'd like for John to change, insofar as to how he interacts with you. About his concerns, or in any other way."

Sherlock takes the paper warily, as if the exercise is a trick. His eyes are scanning my face, roaming over the landscape of my features. Trying to catch the deception.

"John doesn't need to change anything about himself. He's-," and the lanky man clears his throat now, "he's fine the way he is."

"Well, fine is a good starting point, sure. But let's try to improve upon 'fine', alright?"

Sherlock gives me a look of irritation.

"I am not effusive with my praise. As far as flatmates go, John is perfect."

John looks startled then, and stops writing. I see his cheeks colour slightly, and distantly recall some of our previous conversations. His own confusion as to his sexual orientation. Potentially, he stated. That was a word he liked to use a lot. Potentially.

And if there is something there - something hedging romantic attraction, at least - then I have an inkling that it's not a one-sided situation. I mentally file the information away for something to bring up in a future session.

Potentially, I mean.

"Are you asserting there is nothing you would change right now, that could help you and John discuss certain issues more openly?"

Sherlock is starting to look even more flustered.

"We discuss things well. John is always available to me, regarding any discussion of which either of us would wish to partake."

The words sound wooden and practiced. My guess is that Sherlock has mentally generated dozens of psychobabble catch phrases that he plans on using on me.

"That sounds a little rehearsed, Sherlock," I say evenly, my tone firm but not cold. "Do you think maybe that's what John could have been referring to, earlier?"

Sherlock blinks as if he doesn't understand the question.

"What?"

"You are extremely talented in navigating away from and out of conversations that you'd rather not
have. That must be taxing to John, especially considering how concerned he is about you."

Sherlock actually glares at me now. His eyes no longer wet. I suspect that he typically controls his emotions so expertly that crying is a rare phenomenon at best, and that anger is easier to fall back on. Easier to use as a shield.

Tears leave a person vulnerable, and I doubt Sherlock lets himself feel vulnerable if he can avoid it.

"Well, psychiatrists are expertly trained in inserting themselves into the middle of conversations that are better left alone," he growls back at me in retaliation and I see John roll his eyes. Actually roll his eyes.

I bite back a laugh: "You agreed to this session, did you not?"

Sherlock continues to glare.

"I have very little control in this entire situation. I simply do not want John to worry as he has been. This was the price to ensure that he stop."

I am starting to sympathize with John Watson. Sherlock is likely tiring at his argumentative best, and I bet that he is trying to be open right now.

"Well, you have a choice all the same," I clarify. "You could have refused to see me at all. John's concerns aside."

Now the black haired man stands up abruptly, and he flounces over to my bookcase, avoiding staring at me.

"That wasn't a choice! I don't - I-"

His hands fall to his sides now, and I sense he feels defeated.

"What?," John asks carefully. His tone is softer.

Sherlock continues to study the bookshelf, his back turned to the both of us.

"I don't have many friends," he responds quietly, tentatively. "I did not want to lose my best one. Maybe my only one."

John suddenly looks so sad that it takes all my willpower to simply observe, and not speak.

"Sherlock...I'm not- You're not going to lose me!"

Thin arms now wrap completely around a thin torso.

Protection.


"You say that now."

Sherlock starts, edgily. "But you've only been dealing with this for awhile. You cannot promise any-," and then he stops talking abruptly and returns to his seat, and picks up his paper and pen, hurriedly scrawling on the sheet of loose-leaf.

In one rapid motion his pushes the paper forward towards me, then stands up and exits the office.

The door latches with a loud shlocking sound and John turns to me in confusion and concern.
I pass him the paper, and watch the other man's features as he reads the words of his friend.

'I want John to know that I will get better. That I've been here before, and worse, and got better on my own. I want him to stop worrying. When he worries, it makes it harder for me to eat. And I don't know why.'
I wait until I see his form race into 221 B, and I watch carefully, my eyes fluttering about for John. But ten minutes later, there is still no...companion.

'Oh, Sherlock.'

Look back down to my mobile messages. From three days back. A string from John. Concerns, roundabout concerns. Wanting to ask without wanting to tell me what was happening. So typical of the soldier. Of Sherlock's loyal and true friend.

Steeling my resolve, I slip from the car easily and nod at my driver.

"I will be getting home on my own tonight, Charles."

Charles looks up and over his shoulder, a faint look of surprise on his tanned features.

"Are you certain, sir?"

Purse my lips. Note that they feel dry. Dessicated.

"Most certain. I thank you for your services."

Click the door of the vehicle soundly. Click my umbrella against my leg. An old habit, warding off danger.

I had many such habits in childhood, but they've dwindled down to just the one now. Easily concealed. One click for the start, and twice upon retreating. To remind myself that it is now complete. My goals, as it may be. That I don't have to worry upon their completion.

Suddenly I want to laugh.

All these peculiar traits. But they are more than traits, aren't they?

They are compulsions, minimally.

Mine just took a more benign backdoor approach. A slight warbling tell in my countenance. A chink in the armor when stressed.
Sherlock’s ‘tells’ are ravaging his body.

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He gave up on trying to prevent my entry into his home about nine months ago. A skeleton key of sorts, and additional ones can be cut with relative ease. With the knowledge that I'd usually knock, of course, so my brother determined that the expenditure of changing the locks was just not worth it. I liked knowing I had emergency access when needed.

On this occasion I do not knock. I enter as soundlessly as possible and move as quietly as I am able, leaving my umbrella at the bottom of the stairs.

Listening attentively I now realize I can hear the faint scratchings of poorly played notes and deem it safe enough to continue.

A knock at the main door is my only courtesy.

The response is immediate. "Go away, Mycroft!," my brother hisses, his voice taught and filled with upset.

There is a clouded, choked quality that also indicates that he's been trying to restrain his need to cry. He rarely cries, but to a keen ear the need to cry can be heard. And I can hear it now.

"I'm afraid that's not going to happen," I whisper through the door. "I will give you five seconds, and then we are talking. Without the partition."

I hear a raggedy breath once more, and almost feel guilty.

Almost.

"Ok," I say softly and prepare myself. "I'm coming in."

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Upon entry I become fixed in place.

I haven't seen my brother in weeks. And while he looked sick then, he now looks…wasted.

My attempts to conceal the sudden intake of my breath do not go unnoticed, and Sherlock looks up quickly, his mouth pulled taut, his eyes showing his wariness.

He looks far sicker than he did last time I had seen him. Which is new.

His previous bouts with this disorder were more consistently regimented, with weight loss that seemed to occur in an almost mathematically precise format.

Now, unless I am very much mistaken about how ill he was only a month ago - he seems to have declined far more rapidly than in times past.

In fact, this is the thinnest I've seen him yet. Even besting his adolescence and his hospitalization at 14.

A tendril of fear licks at my stomach.
I'd put his current weight estimate at around 110 lbs, give or take 2 to 3 lbs on either side.

He is, undoubtedly, emaciated.

"What have you done?," I breathe, swallowing excessively to remind myself that I can. That I can move, and breathe. That this is real life. "My God, Sherlock - what have you done?"

It's a question I've never asked him before. Even prior to his lengthy stays, his intubations. His strung out days with needles and bands around his arms and track marks cording through his veins like acid rot.

Sherlock glances up to me, seems to freeze, and then glances back down.

"I'm...well. I have a condition," he murmurs hesitantly, his eyes at half mast.

I swallow again. Unsure of how forceful to be with him, and I take a step forward. In doing so, I can see the slight pallor that's covering his face, and the shakiness of his hands. His shirt - typically tailored - now clings to his form and I can see a slight pulsation quiver through his shirt. Right in his core.

His heart.

Good lord - he's lost all the reserve muscle around his torso. I can see the beating of his heart like an exposed organ in the air. The thought is sickening.

Part of me wants to run towards him, and part of me wants to flee this awful apartment, with its scent of chemicals and science projects.

"You need a clinic," I say louder now. Resolute. My eyes burn into his. "You have lost your precious control again, brother mine."

It's a testament to his exhaustion that he doesn't begin tantruming at my assertion.

"You don't know what you are talking about, Mycroft. I am just fine and I am seeing someone. With John. A therapist, without your contamination. Now please leave me alone."

Speaking of John - how is it that John Watson - Doctor John Watson - has let my brother do this to himself?

"Well, Sherlock. It seems that your...flatmate," I sneer, "has left you to devolve to such a state without calling for reinforcements. One can only wonder why?"

It's purposefully nasty. To get a reveal. To get Sherlock to expose the inner workings of his mind. And he has only ever done that in anger.

But it doesn't work, and he gives me a rictus-smile. More bone than anything else, and it looks obscene.

"Quit with the melodramatics. You make my life sound like a war zone."

I wish I had my umbrella. To tap. To hold onto. A presence that granted comfort, even if inanimate.

Or perhaps because it simply was inanimate. Incapable of being hurt, and in most derivations - incapable of hurting.
"You are in a war zone, Sherlock. Your mind is a war zone."

My brother rolls his eyes. Actually rolls his eyes at me in derision, and something inside tears apart. Like a loose filling in my tooth. Pulled or extracted or suddenly lost.

So I reach across the short distance of separation and grab hold of Sherlock's limbs and pull him to his feet.

"Come here," I seethe. And he stares at me with contempt, and something else that I cannot name right now. "Get over here!" and suddenly he is pliable, moveable, like a rag doll in my arms. And then my grip increases, and in his state I know I'll likely bruise his forearms, but it cannot be helped.

And then we are at the partition between kitchen and living room, and the antique mirror of our mother mocks us with it's bronzed splendor. It's decadence. It's richness.

"Open your shirt," I say grimly, not letting go of Sherlock's arms.

He looks at me in shock then, his voice sounding clear and much more awake now.

"What?," he asks quietly, a note of fear underscoring his attempt at dismissal.

"OPEN YOUR SHIRT!"

His face twists away from the mirror, and he finally starts to back up, his legs straining against mine. He's simply too weak, however. He is completely ineffectual.

"Stop it and show me! Right now!"

"Go to hell, Mycroft!," Sherlock seethes, his face contorting into that age-old expression that I've seen only once before. Age 12. Psychiatrist. Talking to Sherlock. Talking to Sherlock about what was normal. What was destined to be in my brother's biological future.

And Sherlock's face contorting into anger, into fear, into anguish - into rage. A look I have never seen since. Not in this intensity.

"You are going to listen to me for once," I say more calmly now. An order. A command. Deadly calm. "And you are going to do what I say. Show me."

"It's none of your business!," he pants, his face red with exertion from trying to free from my grasp.

"Fine," I huff, terror hurting my bones. Radiating out from my whole body. "If that's the way you wish to play it."

And I wrap my left arm around his torso. With my right I unclasp the clips on his shirt. It opens easily. Readily. And I try to dismiss the aspect of forcefulness here, knowing it is the lesser of two evils.

Sherlock turns against me, his face tilted away from the mirror and into my neck.

"Stop it!," he howls. "You're hurting me!"

"Then stop hurting yourself!," and I have never been like this with him. Never like this. I know I must be scaring him, because I am scaring myself, and so I release my hold from him entirely now. "Show me what you've done so I can fix this mess!"
Sherlock jolts. Turns around in a semi-arc. His eyes burn with hatred.

"You think you can fix me?!," he exclaims, his voice splitting and cracking and dying. "What are you going to do, Mycroft? What are you going to do to fix this?!"

And now it's not just his torso that I can see. Not just the quivering mass of his heart and his emaciated abdomen and the protruding ribcage and the dark grooves of black from his skin that have bruised from malnutrition. Now he has disrobed his entire shirt and is bare from the waist up and my eyes zero in on the mirror. On his counter image, his back - not his torso.

And somehow that's even worse. Because I can see his spine. I can see the bruising around the vertebrae. As if he's done thousands upon thousands of crunches, and the skin has worn off, bled, crusted over, scarred, worn off again. The area around the scarring is pink. If he had flogged himself, he couldn't have caused much more scarring.

I step back, nauseated, and retrieve my mobile. My whole body feels alight with adrenaline.

"What are you doing??," Sherlock queries, his voice sounding distant. I don't know at this point if he's numbed out to the reality of the situation or if somehow I have.

"I am calling John, and we are having a discussion about which hospital you should be admitted to tonight."

Sherlock is retrieving his shirt, nimbly clipping back the buttons, concealing the evidence of his mental disturbance.

"You have no say in my life any longer," he says quickly. Assuredly.

He still doesn't get it. Miraculously he still doesn't get it.

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The message reads:

'Baker St. Now. Need to discuss hospitalization for S.'

On shaky limbs I make it to the sofa, and deposit myself onto it's frame.

Sherlock is putting away his Stradivarius. And now he's reaching for his belstaff.

"Where the hell do you think you're going??," I growl.

He turns to me, cocky little grin in place. And part of me wants to smack that look off his face.

But part of me knows that everything I have seen is a measure of pain, and the thought makes me feel hollow with hopelessness.

Because he is right.

How can I fix this?

A resounding message on my mobile chirrups back. John, answering:

'What? What happened?'

I almost cut my cheek on my teeth in anger and hastily respond:
'My brother is skeletal and needs medical attention.'

Part of me wants to write more. Something more sarcastic.

But I don't have the energy to snark at Captain, Doctor, flatmate John Hamish Watson. I sense what awaits us all, and I know I need to bide my energy, so I put my mobile phone into my front pocket and ignore the counter-chirrups. Faster and more insistent.

Sherlock snorts from 'John's chair,' as he calls it. He's now slumped down into it, his legs haphazard, his body deformed.

"He's not going to side with you, Mycroft. He's my friend, and he's going to side with me. Especially since you're being a prick to him, as of current."

"I am on your side, damn it! If I wasn't on your side, I'd let you kill yourself via your preferred method of starvation!"

Sherlock flicks his fingers off in my direction, as if he's dispelling water.

"Oh please. As if that's what's happening, anyway." His head lolls to the side in fatigue. "I just have a stomach problem," he says more sedately, incorrectly believing his troubles with me have now passed. "I've even been in clinic for it. And the stress you are causing isn't helping."

My jaw clenches in reserve. I've already exposed too much of my emotional state.

"And what stomach problem would that be, Sherlock?" I grit out.

"Bleeding ulcer," he says solemnly. "I've even had a partial gastrectomy. Something that possibly could be of equal benefit to yourself as it was for my own person. Varying reasons for it's necessity, of course."

He is speaking in a mock solemnity. Testing me, goading me, flinging his pain in my face. Showing his contempt.

Like a child possessed by the devil. Speaking the truth, and speaking lies. Hoping to wound more severely with the truth embedded in the core, and using the lies to cut.

And I know why. But the why's will have to come later.

"You don't say," I drawl, in equal-mock interest. Because I cannot relate to him as a brother any longer. Notably, because he's never actually seen me as his brother. He's always pushed me away on principle.

I know this. I have always known this. I have ignored this fact, but it still singes my core.

Perhaps it is because while he is haunted by what happened to him, I was haunted by connection. By my seeming role as spared one, loved one, protected one.

But I was never any of those things.

I did not suffer in the same way as he, and for that reason alone the guilt has not ever ceased.

However, just because I was not assaulted in the manner that he was...does not mean that I was not in pain alongside him.

It does not mean that I did not suffer.
Because I did suffer. I suffered at seven, when he was born, and he'd cry for hours in his crib, and our mother would hold him in bitterest contempt. And even at 7, I knew he wasn't like me. I knew he wasn't a product of our mother's genes merged with our father's. Or, technically, my father's.

I knew this. But I didn't care. Because I had a baby brother, whom I loved more than anything.

So I'd sneak into his room at night. His nursery - previously my nursery. Unpainted, no toys, no nothing. All stripped. Bare.

A crib, and clothes, but the other elements removed.

As if to punish him. For simply existing.

And later, at 1 year of age. Sherlock - walking. His hair curled now, his teeth new and stubby.

His small face, and wide blue eyes, and the lack of connection with all but me. And of course, as often as I tried to be there for him...so often was I limited.

So even as an infant I knew he wasn't normal. Because while as a newborn he had cried... as a toddler he rarely did.

His eyes were large and round and aware, but he wouldn't cry. Even at 12 months, he knew it was useless. But he'd sit and he's stare and he'd watch. Blinking long, charcoal lashes slowly - as if drugged. As if in a stupor. And in the afternoon, after classes - I'd race home, and open my knapsack, and take out my school assignments and he'd toddle about oddly. Not in a fast paced race towards toys or light or music or people. He'd move, stop, stare into the distance.

His language did not develop properly. I remember that clearly.

Shortly after he turned two, and I was nine, I came home one day and sneaked to his nursery.

He was in a play-suit, dirty. Unkempt.

He smelled.

And this time - so oddly - his face had tear track lines. Salt water that had dried against his cheeks. Caught in his lashes.

He had cried, and at two years of age - Sherlock never cried.

So I knew something bad had happened.

I didn't know what. But I knew it had to have been awful.

So I had picked him up - far too light, even for a toddler - and put him in my lap.

"Caring doesn't help. Caring isn't an advantage, Sherlock," I had whispered gently, staring at him.

Hoping he'd understand me.

He blinked in that dozy way, and continued to stare past me.
"Myco," he said. "Myco care me?"

His speech, so strange. Distorted.

Simply because no one really talked to him. Except for me.

In stolen moments and periods when I could interact with him alone. When father was out of the house, and when mother was resting.


His small chin tucked in against his throat, and his eyes were swollen with fear.

"No more pain," he whispered back to me, his gummy mouth round with baby fat. "No more pain Lockie."

"It doesn't exist, Sherlock," I insisted. "Pain's not real. You go away in your head and it's okay inside."

I tapped my skull.

"You make it beautiful in your mind, okay? You make it a palace, and you are a prince. In your head. And nothing comes in or goes out unless you want it to."

"How prince?," he asked, his voice a warbled, toddler mess. "Lockie prince?"

I tapped my head again.

"You close your eyes and ignore the open world. The world you see with your eyes open. That's the open world. That world is not for you. It's not real. So you tell yourself it does no good to care about it. Because it's not real. Because you can make your own palace in your head. Do you see?"

Sherlock, of course, was too little to understand.

But he nodded in that oddball way of his. That sage way.

As if he were a monk, and not a baby.

"Palace in Lockie head," and a small smile. Secretive. One chubby finger brought to his lips. "Shhsh, Myco?"

I nodded.

"Shhsh, Lockie," I agreed, in his baby language.

"Myco come palace?," he asked then, his voice unnaturally loud for a whisper. The attempt, however, was well noted.

"If you'd like, Sherlock," I said. Touched his skull. Baby down hair. Black raven curls.

"You be in head with Lockie," he said, and touched his fingers to his lip again. "Shhsh."

I gave him a terse smile. Truncated. Forced.

"Okay."
"Bye bye to here, Myco? Say bye bye?"

I bit my lip and gazed at my brother with steely intent.

"Yes. Say goodbye to here, Lockie. Say goodbye, and never come back."

Sherlock smiled back at me, then.

As if I had given him a gift.

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35 years later, and that smile still haunts me.
A Place to Start

Chapter Summary

Zonked-out crazy tired lately. So this is what it is, and hopefully - it works. Trying to write in bursts while I'll develop a better rhythm (and my work stabilizes a bit. My eyes are fluttering closed as I type!) I also am so mad. I wrote thousands of words more and they were erased due to my inability to regularly save anything. Ahhh! When will I ever learn? :\ O.o

Oh, for the record - this chapter was the hardest for me to write. But it ends much more hopefully than possibly any other previous chapter.

Finally - this is a long chapter. Longer than any of the others. I hope the invested time makes up for the delay in posting.

Be well, everyone.

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JOHN'S POV

Yuri listens patiently to me once Sherlock departs, and so I just let it all out.

My concerns, my frustrations with Sherlock's behaviours, my too-near-to-the-surface worries (I'm worried he's going to have a heart attack because his weight is too low, Yuri' and 'He has a history of drug use. Cocaine is deadly enough for a person of a normal weight - his body cannot cope with even one slip up and I worry he could go back to using so easily right now' and 'I don't know what triggered this, and I know it sounds crazy, but part of me is worried that maybe I contributed. Somehow. My affections. For him. He's so perceptive and I'm not, and sometimes I feel that-'...)

And Yuri just listens. He takes it all in and I never get the feeling - even for a nanosecond - that he's doing so out of professional obligation. His compassion is raw and I even catch the barest of flinches at times. He's pained, in a sense, by what I'm telling him about Sherlock, too.

"We are going to have to get him back in here to talk with me soon, John. We have to convince him to let one of us take his vitals - especially weight, but also blood work. We need a baseline. And I think that monitoring his potassium from now on would be a good idea."

My breath catches in my throat.

"He would have told me if he had been purging. I really think he would have."

Yuri gives me a sympathetic smile. It's weak - the smile - washed out due to his own concern for his patient, but it's an attempt at assurance and that's more than I normally get when I've relayed my upset about an issue to a psychiatrist.

"He might not have, John. He might think that would have made things worse."

"Worse?," I sputter. "How can confiding in me make anything worse? I've been...no, I am there for
him. He knows it. He knows I won't abandon him."

Yuri frowns quickly, then schools his face into something more placid.

"It might not be about a concern of abandonment, really. If he is engaging in something like that, he might not want to stop. And he knows that you'd do your best to make sure that he does."

My brain does a static hiss. Like when you turn on the telly and there is no reception for the channel, so it comes in as white noise. Not readable. Not anything.

"What?" I sputter a few seconds later. "Why wouldn't he want to stop?"

"We can't assume anything about what he's doing right now. And we can't assume he'd be emotionally...okay...with suddenly losing a coping mechanism if this is a practice he's relying on. But I do think that there is a strong possibility that he's purging. You told me about that time with the food, at night. All that food, that he then replaced. And he was sick after. I don't think that was entirely an accident or a nauseated response. There is a rather good chance he worked at making that happen. Same thing with his vomiting in the toilets at the hospital. You mentioned he said that you didn't understand, and that he did not want you to understand, John."

"A coping mechanism?" I say numbly. "No - Yuri - no..."

"It's how he likely sees much of this," Yuri interrupts quietly and then seems to still.

"What?" I bark. My fear is making me rude.

The Russian doctor glances over, his features stern.

"Have you ever encountered a condition such as what Sherlock suffers from? In one of your patients?"

I hesitate.

"I'm not a specialist...I wouldn't make that determination," I confess finally. "But perhaps."

Yuri motions with his hands that I should, however, continue to talk.

"But as a medically trained individual who is aware of enough of the signs, haven't you ever encountered a case where you've suspected such an occurrence? No details needed of the patient, of course."

Of course.

"There was a girl. She was a month shy of her 14th birthday. Her father brought her into the surgery - stated that she had been complaining of pain in her abdomen. He feared appendicitis, and said she was generally sickly, anyway. Always had been. And the first thing I really noticed was she was sickly, of course, but in a pronounced way. It was obvious. And when I asked her to remove her jumper to press lightly on her stomach I just became more concerned. She was ribs and spine and coldness everywhere. Just...coldness radiating out of her - the complete reverse of a healthy body. Her throat had been swollen and I asked if it hurt to swallow. She suddenly looked terrified, and I asked to check her throat with my light - you know - wondering about an infection. Did all the proper tasks, but just knew something was off. Enamel gone off her teeth, petechiae under her eyes. And I knew - or the evidence was so suggestive of something darker, I remember just standing there for a few seconds - not knowing what I should say. Knowing I couldn't let it go, but following her eyes moving back and forth, and her eyes - it was as if she was pleading with me to keep her secret."
The pieces just came together, and it was awful Yuri - because she knew that I had figured it out. And here is this little girl - still so little, really - sitting like cold stone in my office with her oblivious and authoritarian father, and how do I even raise the question? How do I voice my concerns to a scared teenager with her dad right there?"

Yuri watches me with rapt attention.

"And what did you do?," he asks gently, but with interest.

I sigh. "I asked if I could just talk to this kid alone for a few moments. In retrospect, it probably made it worse. The father got incredibly antsy and so I did my best to backpedal. Took blood, sent it off with the swabs, and told them both I wanted this young girl to see a specialist for stomach issues. Then I contacted a pal that worked over at...," I suddenly feel a fresh wave of pain. "At The Priory."

"John?," and his eyes are so intensely piercing. Sherlockian eyes, almost. Almost. Not quite.

Only Sherlock will ever have eyes that can see so much - at least, in my opinion.

Except Sherlock only sees deepness in everything else around him. He hasn't begun to look deeply at himself. He hasn't even scratched the surface of who he is and what he deserves. He can't even sense what he needs.

"The Priory," I clear my throat. "I had a pal at The Priory - he was my mentor when I was first starting out as a doctor - and it just...he, well, I called him up and explained the referral and said as much as I could to let him know what my suspicions were. He is a specialist. Works with children and adolescents primarily."

And with that realization I suddenly feel off. Strange.

Emery is 62 and he works at The Priory. He's worked there since his residency days, back in 1984.

Sherlock was at The Priory in 1989. That's what he told me, anyway, and I have no reason to assume that his statement was anything but the truth. It was freely offered.

I suddenly feel a little lightheaded.

"What significance does The Priory hold for you?," Yuri asks now, eyebrows furrowed. "Obviously something."

His face really is much too expressive for a psychiatrist. Which is probably what I like about him.

"Awhile ago - couple weeks back, now - Sherlock told me he been at The Priory. As a child. Well, when he was 13."

"Really?"

"Yes. Ward 6, or something. He had known a doctor there. Dr. Barrett, I think. Said he was brutish. Almost got pulled off a recent case due to an altercation with him. Over the little guy on our last case. The little boy I told you about? God what a mess. How can there be this many traumatized children? Everywhere we go, Yuri? It's not rare anymore. It's everywhere I look now. This little kid raped, or this little girl beaten, or this little kid abandoned at a shopping mall..."

Yuri doesn't say anything for a few minutes, but when he does it's with a certain slow reluctance.

"Ward 6? Are you sure about that?"
"Uh...pretty sure. Why?"

Yuri rubs quickly at his temples.

"Ward 6 is for severely disturbed kids, John."

I nod slowly.

"He was extremely depressed, Yuri, and-"

Yuri's shaking his head back and forth now.

"No. I mean - it's not just for kids with depression. Or eating problems. Not eating problems alone, anyway."

I pull back against my chair. Feel the leather ridges. The little nubs of buttons digging into my legs. Funny how I couldn't perceive them before.

And suddenly I can.

"Okay," I say tentatively. "I'll bite. What is ward 6, then?"

My voice warbles even though I was going for strong. Contained. Solid.

"Primarily? You are looking at children on suicide watch or those being considered for long term hospitalization. It's a restraint ward."

"Restraint ward?" and I feel weirdly weak. Sherlock with his oddly weird 'Why?' questions. His qualifiers to things most children get intuitively, never mind most adults. And to be so brilliant and to miss some of the most commonplace things? Or his patterns of what should be done totally contrasting with reality, with propriety. The odd comment here and there over the last two years now flickers about in my mind like a torn-winged butterfly trying to escape.

"Either under 24-7 watch, or being considered for various psychotic disorders. Sometimes sectioned."

"Psychotic disorders," and a shrill giggle suddenly erupts. I look up then, horrified by my reaction. "You think Sherlock was psychotic?"

I can't believe I just laughed.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

"Usually childhood schizophrenia, John. Or some variant. Active self-harm in the presence of psychotic features is also pretty standard for ward 6."

My heart is trilling away like a bloody Kookaburra.

"Sherlock isn't schizophrenic."

I see Yuri's adam apple bob in his throat. Disconnected. A little swell of flesh, disjointed in my brain. The static fuzz is back now, the white noise, and still a trill in my core. Like an electric current racing through me, torso to sternum.

"I never said he was," he says carefully.
"You...implied it."

"No," he quickly corrects. "I'm implying that at one time, Sherlock may have been considered for that diagnosis. Or for another condition manifesting with psychotic features. People can experience psychosis without being schizophrenic."

I blink back tears.

"Meaning what? God - just tell me. I've been through the bloody ringer with him and I have no idea how any of this started - why any of this started! - what triggered it, if I triggered it. We do not need to add psychosis to the mix!"

"Has he displayed signs of psychosis - at all - while you've been living with him?" he questions now, eyes zeroing in on mine.

"Like hearing voices, you mean? Of course not! I'd know if he was-"

"It doesn't have to be that stereotypically obvious. There is a range. Symptoms can encroach gradually, and worsen under stress. It could easily include or cover aspects of his behaviour that people have written off as Sherlock being merely eccentric. But he may be sicker than we previously suspected."

I lick my lips.

"Give me...just give me a run down."

The man opposite me gets up slowly and pads to a nearby bookshelf. When he returns it's with a thick tome, ear marked. He hands it to me.

"This looks odd, Yuri. This looks like you've already done research on Sherlock for-," and I battle down my anger and open the book to the page indicated.

My eyes gloss over words. Swims with words and terms, some old and memorized for final exams, rarely to come up in my general practice and others far less utilized.

'Jumbled thoughts with or without tenseness and irritability.'

'The person afflicted may believe they have special abilities shared by few others.'

'A belief that certain patterns contain secret messages or 'codes' intended just for them is common.'

'Thoughts do not connect in ways that are readily understood by others. Appears at times illogical.'

'Paranoia may be a feature.'

'Mood swings are prevalent.'

'Irrational fears.'

'Disorganized speech and behaviour.'

'Talking about subjects unrelated to the established conversation.'

'Failing to respond to cues in the environment. Not hearing people talking or asking posed questions.'

'Not answering posed questions - 'zoning out' for minutes, or hours at a time.'
'Becoming upset for no apparent reason.'

'Experiencing unusual physical sensations.'

'Disrupted sleeping and eating patterns.'

'Increased anxiety that has no apparent cause.'

'Depressive, or even suicidal thoughts.'

I've always focused on physical issues. I left the conditions that impacted minds and moods to other people. People who didn't come from a family of alcoholics and depressives.

I feel so lost now, because I ran away from this stuff.

Because it broke my heart as a kid. And now I wish I had studied more about it. Learned more.

"This sounds like him," I whisper. "This sounds like him a lot. Not everything, really. But a lot. The...the zoning out thing. He sometimes seems to not realize I've even left the room. I came back to the flat once - hours later. He hadn't known I had even left."

Yuri sighs. I think it might be the first time I've actually heard him sigh.

"I know," he states sadly. "He seemed to slip out of awareness when he was in the clinic, too. Of course the depressive features alone worry me, John. But in conjunction with something else?"

And how did this happen?

Was he always struggling just to trundle on in his day-to-day life and I wrote it off as a quirk?

Was everyone around him always so dull? Or am I taking his peculiarities and assuming that everything that made Sherlock different was a sickness, a weakness, something that needed or now needs to be 'fixed'?

And who would I even have if I could change those things that now cause Yuri such concern? If Sherlock never rambled, never spoke with his quick speech and excitement over minutiae that the rest of the world deemed irrelevant? If he lost his interest in codes that he feels only he alone, usually, can solve? Even this dissociation. I assumed it was just Sherlock being...Sherlock.

I never thought Sherlock was disordered.

I have always wanted to believe that people come in a huge range of packages. Not just physically, but emotionally, mentally - dare I say spiritually? And what sort of damage could I do if I regarded those who seemed markedly different as disordered? How unfair was it to judge the intrinsic differences that made a person unique as a flaw?

I always accepted differences in others. I did not wish to only have compassion for people who were the outliers of society, but to regard such discrepancies as good, even potentially beneficial. To see those differences as needed.

But did I miss the basics here?

My phone chirrups and I battle down my overwhelm.

"One second," I mutter and retrieve the mobile from my pocket.
The words read ominously, in a fear-inducing way:

'Baker St. Now. Need to discuss hospitalization for S.'

That very, very - extremely wrong impulse to giggle is back again.

"Oh, how is this my life?," I whisper. "How is this anyone's life?"

Yuri seems to pull back, giving me space.

"Something going on?," he queries after a few seconds.


And perhaps I should tone it down.

Especially in the presence of a mental health professional.

But sod this. Sod everything. Sod appropriate-John doing appropriate things and having a stiff fucking upper lip.

My best friend - who for years has held some sort of previously farrowed portion of my heart and turned it into something real, and beating and happy - is in agony. And why?

Why?

I type back with tremulous fingers, 'What? What happened?'

Because - truthfully - how much more can one man fall down the rabbit hole?

It's not even the case that I'll go against Mycroft any longer, either.

If he wants to strong-arm his little brother into some shark-black car and whisk him away to a care facility, or whatever the hell it is that Mycroft has in mind for Sherlock - I'm not going to step in.

Not any more.

The chirruped response even sounds snarky. Snarky, impertinent, yet falsely okay. Falsely normal.

Like Mycroft Holmes himself.

'My brother is skeletal and needs medical attention.'

Oh, this is just great.

I can only imagine the showdown of the two of them, battling it out verbally at Baker Street.

When I rise from my chair, I try to convince myself that I really don't feel exhausted at all.

That this fatigue is all in my mind. Just like my psychosomatic leg pain.

"I have to get back to the flat," I reveal. And if I just want to close my eyes and sleep for a thousand years, then what must Sherlock feel like?

"You going to be alright on your own?"
The comment brings a weird smile to my face and I try to stop the impulse to respond so oddly. As I've been doing all morning.

"Of course," I say, with shut eyes and a breath held in my lungs far longer than should be held. "It's just...him. Sherlock being Sherlock. I can deal with him. He might be sick, but he's still my best friend."

It's just Sherlock being Sherlock.

A mantra for assurance.

"Ok, John. But I want you to call me or text - something - once you are there. Let me know everyone is okay. That you're okay, that Sherlock is okay. Or anyone else involved."

And bizarrely enough, those words scare me even more than Yuri's previous talk about suspected childhood psychosis.

I retrieve my black snipers coat and jog back to the underground.

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When I emerge from the darkness of the city tunnels, the light suddenly seems too intense for England. The cars are loud, the air smells smoky. And I realize my brain is trying to process everything. It's overreacting to sensory data now, much as it did when I was abroad.

I rub my hands against my jeans. They feel damp.

'Calm the fuck down, John,' I whisper to myself.

I have no idea what sort of situation will be presented to me.

What would a showdown look like between Mycroft and Sherlock, anyway?

And no doubt - things are going to be tense in there.

I retrieve my flat key and scale the stairs three at a time.

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"You sure took your time," Mycroft condemns lazily from our sofa. An old copy of The Mirror is sprawled over his lap.

I try to blink away my disbelief.

"What?," I spit out, then look around. "Where is Sherlock?"

Mycroft makes a dismissive waving hand gesture over to the landing. It's an identical movement to Sherlock's own irritable display of restless boredom.

"Oh, he was feeling rather weak. I cannot possibly fathom why, of course. I suggested that he rest in his room until your arrival. Everyone agreed it was for the best."

'Everyone' my ass. Mycroft can be such a pompous blowhard.

I bite my cheek. Hard.
"You 'suggested'? What does that even mean?"

Mycroft's eyes still study the paper but I catch the hardening of his gaze. The taut lines at the corners.

"I felt it better for all concerned if Sherlock-"

"Oh stop it with the 'all concerned,' Mycroft. I wasn't even here! Now what happened?"

The elder Holmes looks up at me coldly now.

"Why did you fail to inform me that my brother had become emaciated, Doctor Watson?"

"As if you didn't know that there was something very, very wrong was unfolding! You-"

I don't get to finish my exclamation. His face is red.

With anger, rather than shame, I suspect.

"Despite what Sherlock may have you believe - I do not bug his clothing, or this flat. I do not trail him around-"

The word psychosis trills in my mind. Incessant now.

"Oh come off it! Of course you do! You trail me around! Study my bloody book purchases, Mycroft! You want to know what trailing somewhat about like that might do to their sense of reality? Of course you spy on him!"

A wince at that.

I realize - very suddenly - that I've hurt him.

"I don't spy on him, John! If I suspect he is unwell then I inquire, occasionally. I look for patterns, but-"

"You sound *exactly* like him in that regard, if that's the case. So why is he considered sick for doing something you do out of concern?"

"Because I am not sick! Because the motivations for the activity are completely different! Intention is more important here!"

"But you know he's prone to something very dark and very ugly and you never, ever told me until it was upon us all! Don't you see how those actions could trigger him?," I exclaim. "How what you are doing could have set him off?!"

Mycroft stands up now, in fury.

"This is NOT my fault! I only care about my brother! All I have ever wanted for him is to be...," and his throat suddenly convulses and he makes a sound like one being choked, "happy and it's not my fault that others have tried to hurt him so badly!"


He has also not been sleeping well.
I feel a weird wash of shame at my willingness to pass the blame to the only person that has really been there for Sherlock since the beginning.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Mycroft. I thought you knew enough and were...I do not know, really. I always assume you know more than me when it comes to him. Well, more than everybody, honestly."

Mycroft sniffs in what I see now is a mock-haughtiness, not a genuine sense of superiority. "That's because I usually do."

I sit down on the sofa and try not to roll my eyes. I have no doubt that Sherlock has actually fashioned a great deal of his mannerisms based on those of his older brother.

"So what do we do now?" I say quickly, changing the subject.

The elder man now brushes an invisible dust particle from his jacket and taps his umbrella against the lino.

"I think it would be wisest if you explain the plan to Sherlock alone."

Right.

Of course he sees that as the wisest way of proceeding. How silly of me to assume the two would actually talk about this.

"So you want to put this all on me?"

A glower at that comment is sent my way.

"Of course not, John. I'm thinking strategically. I will never be able to heal Sherlock. I'm too entangled, in his mind, to the cause of his pain. He both loves me and hates me - I suspect - in equal measure. But he's also always valued logic. He holds onto the ideal of the rational man, coolly and logically existing and freeing himself from the pain of emotions - because that's what he'd like to be. That's not all he is, and my presence reminds him of a history he can never fully expunge. Can never truly delete from his mind palace, as it is. But you are different, John. You are not here out of familial obligation - which is what Sherlock has always convinced himself is the cause of my support. He feels his life is not unlike an albatross to me, I suspect. That my concern for him is an obligation. He will never admit to the truth of it, of course, but I am fairly confident I am correct in my assessment."

Mycroft is now gazing at his umbrella. His eyes glow like hot coals in his face - features nipped into something sour, something hurt.

Profoundly hurt.

And I feel the pounding sense that many lives, all wounded, need to be fixed.

But I don't know where to even start.

So I converse. I engage with him. Because I have no idea what comes next.

"What truth would that be then, Mycroft?"

A glance in my direction - full of confusion. And then a desolate breath, as if exhausted that he even needs to explain.

"He's my brother, John. I love him. I've always loved him. I loved the very idea of him, before he
was born - when he still nothing more than this phantom playmate in my mind. I was six years old when I was told I'd be having a brother, which is a rather interesting time in the development of the child-mind. Did you know that I was the one to name him? Of course, it's not something I would wish to admit to now. I would never deliberately name a child anything so cruel now. But I did not see it as cruel when I was little."

I blink in surprise.

"What?"

Mycroft gives a smile, full of regret.

"Odd name, I know. A family name, from the Holmes'. Very old - hundreds of years old, and it had fallen into disuse. I thought it was equally rare to my own, but more than that - I knew it was a name from the family which had once held pride. Sigur, my father, was unaware of the connection and in retrospect, I am glad that he was. Not so attached to the history of his so-called noble bloodline as he wanted to be, I realized later. After the fact. I played it off as something made up, of course. I was fantastically playful when I was small, John. I tried to be given the constraints of how we were raised, anyway."

My heart pulses so loudly and I feel a keening need to cry.

Mycroft - playful? It seems almost ludicrous, the idea.

"You wanted him to be a Holmes."

The answering voice is soft.

"I didn't care one whit if he were a Holmes. Because I did not care about lineage. But I did not want him to be cast aside, John. And, even as a child - even before he was born - I knew that was to be his fate. I thought, stupidly, that if I gave him a name that brought pride to the Holmes family, that one day the weight of the name would raise their estimation of Sherlock. I thought - in that way small children sometimes do - that I could make something better because I wished so hard for it to be better. I might as well have believed in faeries."

I lick my lips.

"You should tell him this. He needs to know what he means to you, Mycroft."

Mycroft gives a reserved smile.

"Oh, I'm sure he-"

It's rude, but I don't care. I cut him off.

"I'm sure he doesn't! We expect too much from him, Mycroft! He's not all-seeing, all-knowing and neither are you! Just tell him!"

Slanted eyes, tucked in. Watchful and something else.

Guarded. Like girders falling away behind those eyes. The emotion has shifted.

I realize he's taken my words as a threat. Somehow.

"So you will - what John? - you will tell Sherlock? This is an ultimatum?"
I feel like screaming. This family is so lost.

"Of course not! I'm appealing to your common sense! I know you think I am a better choice to go up and talk to him, but you're considering sectioning him and if you think I will be the better choice to-"

Mycro stands, bristling.

"I am not eager to section my little brother, John. I'm not pleased about this."

"But that's what we are talking about, isn't it Mycroft?! About how Sherlock is too sick to continue on like this, and how therapy might just take a bit too long given his current physical state - and if he can't improve - pronto - you'll make sure he will. You'll take the chance that he won't out of his hands, even if he hates you for it."

"He already hates me, John. I will take his continued derision if it means preserving his life."

And then the voice startles us both. Tired and scared and angry - but somehow not really angry at all.

"I don't hate you."

The voice sounds small and exhausted.

Mycro turns towards the sound a fraction after I do myself.

"You need your rest, Sherlock," he says somberly, eyes cast to the ground.

Sherlock gets up from his spot on the landing and paces into the living room, where he curls up in the armchair opposing the fireplace. Wraps my afghan around his skinny frame. He is operating on fumes and I think we all realize it.

"I won't let you put me in a clinic again, Mycroft. So take that off the table right now. It's not something I will ever entertain, and if that's what you are here to 'talk about' - then I want you to get out of my home right now."

Mycro glances over to his brother in pain.

All this time, I had primarily focused on Sherlock's pain. I had given so little thought to Mycroft, being too overwhelmed with what was unfolding around me.

"Sectioning - the very reason behind it - bypasses your need to even entertain this subject. That's the point. A serious situation, which a patient cannot cope with, is taken over by one with proper emotional or psychological reserves - so that the patient can recover."

Sherlock swallows, and the fear is amplified in the room with that sound.

"I will go down fighting. And you know that if I have to I will lie through my teeth if I need to do so. I will convince any individual with the authority to sign off on such an injunction to consider my perspective as an adult who is: doing his best - with medical problems! I will never give in, and you won't win. All you'll do is dredge your name through the muck. Make yourself a bigger target politically than you already are - and even if I don't want that to happen - I will make that happen if you try to do this to me!"

Mycro gives a haunted smile. So strange in form and expression that it is arguably - in truth - the complete opposite of a smile.

"That's all I needed to hear you say, really. That's all I needed to hear you say, Sherlock."
Sherlock's face flickers in confusion, his guard down for the moment.

Mycroft stands, and when he does - he seems brittle somehow.

"I am ready to go forward with proceedings that will take the choice, as it may be - of eating or not eating out of my brother's hands, John. But, for obvious reasons I'd rather pursue an avenue less potentially overwhelming for everyone concerned. Not because of my reputation - as Sherlock mistakenly thinks - but because a sectioning request, even rushed, could take longer than I feel would be adequate to address Sherlock's rapid decline in physical and mental health."

Sherlock is radiating such anger right now that I can see his body pulse with the force of his breathing.

"You're so fucking melodramatic," he seethes, his body corpse-white in the setting sun.

Mycroft taps the umbrella once, lightly, then grounds the metal tip into the lino.

"Says the man who has done so many crunches recently that his back is scarred pink from his exertions."

I blink in surprise, and Mycroft turns to me with a grisly frown, head tilted in fatigue.

"Ahh, yes, John. His entire body is bruised. Back, torso, belly. One really wonders what sort of physical activity could cause such extensive damage, Sherlock. Perhaps you could alleviate some of my...as you phrased it, melodramatic traits...by confiding in either John or myself - what precisely you've been up to recently."

I feel a slow-churning anxiety bloom up in my chest.

"Wait - how do you know this, Mycroft? Is this a supposition, or-?"

"He tried to remove my shirt," Sherlock grouses petulantly from the couch, and I turn to him in frustration. "He tried to take it off!"

It's said with such little-boy defiance, sans fear, that I suddenly understand a little bit better what Mycroft is trying to achieve.

"And you're trying to derail his attempts at helping you by... what, Sherlock? Making his concern out as something perverse?"

Sherlock winces and Mycroft's umbrella twisting stops. Both look up at me in surprise.

"You are seriously sick, Sherlock, and while I do not think sectioning is going to ultimately help you, your brother cares about you. He's always cared about you. And you can push away his attempts at aid, but don't speak as if he's doing something morally questionable or sexually perverse. Don't you dare insinuate something like that about the first person who ever tried to help you and the only one whose ever stuck around for your entire life!"

My flatmate looks down suddenly, his eyebrows suddenly creased with a horrible, haunting look of grief.

I could feel guilty, but I'm not going to let myself feel guilty. Not now.

Not when he needs to hear this.

"I wasn't insinuating anything like that," he whispers, choked. "I wasn't."
Mycroft has pulled back a bit and has come to take the far end of the sofa that I now occupy. He's not looking at either myself, nor Sherlock, and he's equidistant to both myself and his brother.

He's trying to remain as neutral as he can without simply walking away from this horror show of a mess.

I continue on - weeks and months of fear and frustration and growing anxiety quieting down as my words take shape.

"What were you trying to imply then? Truthfully? That he scared you? That you thought he might hurt you?!"

"No!," Sherlock hisses, eyes swelling with tears. I see a flash of white from his teeth cutting into his lip. "Not anything like that!," he gets out in a rush, dropping his head down to his kneecaps, and encircling his head with his arms. "I know Mycroft will never hurt me," he now mumbles from beneath the folds of his pajamas, his voice thick and heavy.

"Then what? And don't think for a second that the fact you are upset is going to stop this conversation from unfolding! You left the hospital against the advice of the doctors, and you left therapy before the session was even over! You repeatedly terminate every single attempt made to truly help you! So stop playing us! Stop playing both of us! Because I'm sick of it - and if I am sick of it, well..."

A firm hard line of a jaw and Mycroft whispers, "Stop. Stop it, John."

So I do - and as I do I can hear the rapid breaths of my best friend.

I try to ignore the burning in my chest.

But I can't stop. Not really. Not if in an hour, or two, Sherlock is just going to reset, and firmly march back to his previous way of being.

"Do you think anyone else in the world would have stuck by you like your brother has, Sherlock? Has anyone else put themselves through this stress of dealing with all this stuff for so many years? When you seem so hell-bent on destroying yourself!?"

Sherlock lets out a hiccupped sob and presses against his eyes.

Then shakes his head.

Mycroft is now looking up at me with a perplexed look on his face, as if he's never truly seen me before.

His look, of course, is not one of appreciation. It's one of alarm.

"Do you think for one second that Mycroft is to blame for your problems?" I probe further, exhausted with everything, and especially exhausted with Sherlock hurting himself.

Sherlock wipes his eyes.

"No," he whispers. "Not really."

"Not really - or not at all?!"

And Sherlock still hasn't answered, and this too makes me angry. Angrier than it would have if I hadn't grown up in a family of addicts who basically lost their lives to dependencies, and then
nurtured those same dependencies with such seeming care over their own children.

"Well, Sherlock?! Which one is it?"

"Not at all," he murmurs, his voice - usually so deep and strong - now the lightest note on air. "He's not to blame for...why I'm like this."

"That's correct. Your brother is not to blame for the fact that someone hurt you as a child! Your brother is not to blame for the reason you find eating confusing or scary or abhorrent or disgusting or anything else that makes you feel badly!"

Sherlock's fingers now squeeze along his sides of his arms. Digging deeper, deeper, and more firmly. He's going to leave bruises, I realize, and so before either of us can say another word I'm off the couch and at his side. And then I'm holding his hands in my hands, and keeping his hands from clamping and nipping his flesh.

"Stop it. Stop this! Stop all of this! Stop hurting yourself!" I rasp as Sherlock's hands clench down around my hands.

"Or what?!," Sherlock almost screams, his eyes now open and red. "You already said it, JOHN! That no one else ever stayed to make sure I WAS OKAY, AND YOU'RE RIGHT! No one else cared - no one at all, NOT EVER. So why SHOULD I?"

His face is wild with anguish and I grab his wasted body towards mine.

"No one cares about me! No one ever will!," he sobs against my shoulder. "No one at all-," and his voice trips over itself, as if he's falling down a long flight of stairs. When I open my eyes again I look across the room to get my bearings. Mycroft looks about as pale as a ghost. Paler, possibly, than Sherlock. His throat is working in rapid successions as if he's going to be sick. He gets up quickly and pads away from us - towards the kitchenette - and opens the sliding partition. A few seconds later I hear the running of water, the clinking about of cups and china.

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While Mycroft busies himself doing God-knows-what, I hold Sherlock to my chest and let his words ooze out of his throat, as if he's piercing a pustule. He rambles, almost incoherently, for a few minutes. Softly, too. Whisper-soft - all too aware that Mycroft is still in the flat, and so I only catch a few snippets of words, high pitched and frantic.

I do not let him out of my grasp. I just hold him.

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After a few more minutes, I feel him sag against me, shuddering.

"People care about you, Sherlock," I whisper. "I care about you more than I have ever cared about anyone. I will never love someone as much as I love you. And I know right now you are struggling to feel that because everything is hurting you so much, but it's true."

His head comes to rest against the crux of my neck, hot, sickening breaths as if he's struggling for air. But he's listening. And that's something.

"And Mycroft loves you. He loves you so much, Sherlock."
The grip against my arms has lessened somewhat, but he still hasn't pulled away. I rub his back.

"Mrs. Hudson, and Lestrade and Mike and Molly and many, many others deeply care for you and respect you, and you don't even know it, do you?"

He's not making a sound now.

"Hmm?," I nudge him gently.

His voice is raw when he responds.

"Why'd you say that Mycroft was the only one that cared about me?," he asks thickly, and the nervousness in that tone almost breaks my heart. "Were you trying to hurt me?"

The question jolts me. A live-wire question.

A question from a child, not an adult, and I feel woozy with the weight of understanding.

I pushed him. Far too much, and far too quickly.

I may not have pushed him with threats of sectioning. I wasn't threatening him with anything as logical as that.

What I did was probably a lot more overwhelming, however. It was not a tactic he was familiar with at all.

I was pushing him emotionally. I did so because I wanted to take him to the precipice. I needed to make him feel the fear that I've felt since I realized how sick he was and how much sicker he seemed to be making himself with every passing day.

I wanted him to feel the fear that I've felt since I realized how sick he was and how much sicker he seemed to be making himself with every passing day.

I wanted him to fear the possibility of loss. Not the loss of my love, but the loss of us. As friends or...anything at all.

I wanted him to know that he could lose me, just as I could lose him. Not because I would ever leave him. But because his actions could take him from me. Actions he hasn't even admitted to being harmful, never mind potentially fatal.

And was that cruel?


I feel Sherlock's throat bulge against my shoulder.

"You said that," he says plaintively. "Why did you say it?"

His voice almost bleats out like an animal's and I pull back to look into his eyes.

But they are shut.

"Hey, come on. Look at me," I beg, jostling his shoulder. "Please just look at me."

Sherlock swallows, pulls back, opens his eyes as if groggy.

He looks at his lap, not at me, but at least it's a start.

"You are...amazing," I test, the words strange in my throat because of the feeling of romantic
attraction I know, deep down, is currently mingled with the longstanding platonic affection, if not love, that I've always had for him.

"You are amazing to me, Sherlock. You've always been. From the moment I met you. I just think of what you can do with your mind, and it blows me away. It always has. Your ability to piece things together, your intelligence - your logical faculties. From the start, I found you amazing. Before I even admitted I loved you to myself, I found you amazing."

His eyes are scanning back and forth and back and forth, as if trying to read the checkered gloss of his pajamas as if they held a story.

"Of course I noticed patterns in your moods. I could see how sometimes you were clutched up in this...darkness. And I figured it was the steep price for your brilliance. But more than that, I knew that my observance of it was nothing to the experience you were undergoing, and I admired you even more for getting through it. Every single time getting through it, and then going back to work and always carrying on. I could see how it almost seemed to ravage you, those moods, and I felt so helpless. But I didn't feel hopeless because I knew you would make it through."

Sherlock has glanced up now, hesitancy in his features.

I can feel my mouth drawing down in remembrance of what came next.

"And then you got sick. It was more than a dark mood. This...disorder came into your life. Came into our lives, and I was convinced that you could fight it off, just as you had before with everything else. But that didn't happen, Sherlock. You got sicker and sicker, and I just I don't know what to do to make you well again. I know that these conditions do kill. They claim people all the time, and they can take someone out of the game in the prime of their lives! Your intelligence is no match for it. It's an equal opportunity killer, Sherlock, and it has you in its clutches, and you sometimes act like you want to be prey to this demon. That you want to get worse, not better. And I do not know how to get you to see reason. Because it is the very opposite of reasonable. The very opposite of logical. And we have never talked about that," I finish gently.

"I have talked," he relays back quickly, intensely. Almost hurt. "More to you than anyone!"

The surge of hurt and affection, one mishmash-ed ball of confusion is back, and I stroke his hand. Feel the protruding veins under the paper skin.

"I know you have," I reply, "And I'm banking on your strength to hear me now. Because emotions are important, but they are secondary to your life. Your continued existence. And you've talked really well about a lot of what you feel - I know you have - but my fear isn't that you're not communicating with me, it's..."

My hands clench in anxiety.

"What?," Sherlock whispers.

"I feel like you're stalling. You are talking, I'm not saying you're not - but you do not seem to be actively getting better. The talking is needed. I know it is, and I know you need to get it all out. But your physical health has to be stabilized first - before anything else, really. Mycroft's not exactly mistaken about that point, and I know you don't want to hear this: I am not being melodramatic, either, but the thought of anything happening to you terrifies me."

Sherlock looks down at his hands, face awash in the infusion of redness that comes from being mortified.
"This is not something to be ashamed about, love," I rush to assure him, the endearment reasserting itself unplanned once more. Released automatically. I do not fail to notice that the word almost seems to cause a greater increase in Sherlock’s fidgeting. Oddly, rather than putting him at greater ease - it's increasing his apparent anxiety. Yet since I don't know why this could be, I carry on. "Anymore than having diabetes, or appendicitis or any other-"

He interrupts me then, "You know that's not exactly true."

"It's true enough. Especially if you allow yourself to be helped."

His shoulders push back and he seems to be lost.

"I don't-," he clears his throat, "I don't understand what you mean."

I give him a small smile.

"If you can get treatment Sherlock - voluntarily, I mean - then what are you showing everyone? You are showing us that *you* are still logical. That you are in control. Not a disorder. Not only have you controlled so much, for the betterment of others, but it would show that you took control of a disorder that very few can ever reign in. A particularly hard disorder to recover from..."

He looks about quickly then, blinks repeatedly, seemingly torn. Finally, he looks back up at me with bright eyes. Insistent eyes.

"I don't want to go back to the hospital," he admits, voice wavering as if afraid. "Not ever."

But of course - he is afraid - and that awareness is awful to consider. The why's of it are awful to consider.

I suddenly realize that I do not care if I ever hear Dr. Barrette's side of things. I hate him on principle. I hate him for scaring Sherlock so profoundly - and as a child, no less.

"Okay," I try to soothe him, "Okay. Something else. We will think of something else."

He takes a gulp of air. Voluminous.

"I'm never going back to the hospital," he repeats.

My hand wavers against his cheek, trying to ground him. Trying to quell the maelstrom of fear.

"Okay, Sherlock. We won't talk about a hospital as a necessity yet. But we need to talk about steps we will have to take to keep that off the table."

He burrows back against me, but I catch him ask, "What steps?"

I feel heady with the realization that he's discussing some sort of treatment. Physical treatment. Seriously considering it.

I know he is; I recognize the look plastered on his face. The reserved acceptance when you are presented with two options, neither very attractive, so you are trying to convince yourself to just get the least disruptive task completed.

"Something like out-patient, perhaps," I say cautiously. "Nothing you can't do at home. Nothing that Yuri or I couldn't monitor, barring complications."
He's quiet for a few more seconds, and then: "Like what? What are the specifics, John? I am not agreeing to anything until I know the specifics."

I try to contain the swell of emotion. The hope.

"Umm," I mutter at last, having giving the specifics, as such, relatively little thought until this precise moment. "A baseline for you, minimally. We need to get and track your vitals. Weight, obviously, but some blood work too, which I could do myself. Yuri is worries about potassium and-"

I feel Sherlock stiffen up.

"Well," I rush on, not wanting to lose this opportunity, "I'd be looking at more than potassium depletion. The stomach complications would likely be worsening everything, and I want to track B12, iron, potassium - all those things. You will undoubtedly require various supplements. And a nutritionist. You don't have to go to a clinic, but you have to see a doctor who specializes in helping people with these problems, who can help devise a meal plan to bring your weight up a bit-"

Sherlock glances over and away from me, jaw clenched.

"My weight's fine."

"No it's not! And we're not debating it. It's not fine."

Sherlock is glancing about anxiously.

"What else?," he says, voice full of dread and I pause for a few seconds, confused.

It seems like he's taking my request seriously. And for a few seconds, that almost seems somewhat unnatural.

"A gastroenterologist to monitor the stomach problems, in addition to a nutritionist."

My flatmate swallows, and the sound comes out as a rattle.

"That's...that's everything?" The crease-line along his forehead hasn't softened.

I squint up at him, wondering what his lingering concerns are and why he still seems so anxious.

"That's all I can really think of for now. We are going to have to present this to Mycroft. And you need to be 100% on board, Sherlock. No going back after the fact. Or I might just-," I stop, and try to fashion my sentiment in a way that doesn't sound like a threat. "I might consider Mycroft's route the better alternative here - unless I have your cooperation."

Sherlock crosses his arms across his chest, and clenches them.

"Do I have your support in this? Are you going to work with me? So we can get you better?"

Sherlock's grey eyes bob about the room as if trying to select an item for study, but not finding anything engaging enough to hold his attention.

"I will try," he relents at last.

"Try?"

I see his throat bob again in anxiety.
"I can't have you - I can't have you monitoring every-"

"No," I say in a low voice, a growl from the core of my being. "I will be monitoring this. I am not letting you slide back. You need to make some basic progress and it's not negotiable."

Sherlock's eyes flash up to mine. Round, large, scared.

I cannot comprehend such fear. It seems so foreign to me.

I am asking him to eat.

Reasonably. A reasonable amount of food.

The fear throws me. The fear is beyond my ability to fully *get.*

I see one pale, skeletal hand reach out to me then pull back abruptly before making contact, coming to rest sharply against his side.

The motion stirs something in my guts.

He is trying. I know he is.

And he's likely as confused as I am. I doubt his own draw to this way of being makes any sort of logical sense to him, either.

Because it's outside of the realm of logic. And Sherlock has always prided himself on being logical.

I let my hand come up to his, and touch the cool flesh. His eyes decrease in size. Squint. Lemon eyes.

He's mortified and his breath is a wheeze.

"What is it, Sherlock?" I test quietly, knowing Mycroft is in the kitchen, trying to give us space. Also knowing that despite the tinkering sound of him busying about in the other room, making tea or taking sugar out of the sugar-bowl (again, likely for tea), he still has almost preternatural hearing. And while he can surmise all he wants about our relationship, I am not going out of my way to divulge information that Sherlock himself is still trying to process.

Knowing we really don't have much in the way of privacy all the same.

His mouth is working and no sound is coming out and his blue eyes glance up at mine, the mouth still working. A dummy mouth, a ventriloquist puppet mouth.

"I don't-," and he holds up his hands, clenches the fists, and then let's them fall to his sides again.

"You are confused?" I offer. Because he must be.

Sherlock's fists clench tighter and he takes in a gasp of air. Doesn't let any out.

His eyes haven't lost their look of torment.

"I want - part of me wants, I mean-," and his voice is now quiet, measured, the tears restrained. "I want to do this and I don't want any intervention."

I lack comprehension now as to what he's actually talking about.
"Sherlock?" I clarify. "I'm sorry - I don't understand."

He closes his eyes abruptly, voice dropping. Sotto.

"It's what I have, John, when everything else is absent," he whispers, insistent. "You are asking me to give up what I have. It makes me feel like I can breathe," he says in a rush, an edge of something dark and dangerous and full of fight lining his words. "It doesn't just make things feel ok. It's how I can breathe."

This time I move a tad closer to him, and I take his hand.

"What do you have?," I qualify, my chest sore and red and ulcerated. "What helps you breathe?"

"THIS," he repeats, not saying anything in words, but imparting a meaning that transcends a verbal term. I can sense his meaning in the equal grasp of my own hand. The piercing hold of his fingers against my own.

I try to make eye contact, in vain.

"This is hurting you, Sherlock," I whisper, regretfully, not wanting to take away any coping mechanism he's come to rely on. Not knowing what sort of option I really have when he shakes his head in dismissal.

"It doesn't feel like that," he answers, garbled, voice thick. "It helps when nothing else does, and you're asking me to give it up, and I don't want to do that. I don't want to lie to you, or Mycroft, or anyone. But I don't want to give it up."

"I know, sweetheart," I respond quickly. Too quickly, voice perhaps too raw in affection for his current taste. "But you see that you have to, don't you? This has a limit, Sherlock. No one can do this to themselves without an end. This has to stop."

His head wavers slightly in fatigue. He's so fucking tired. I can see his weariness in his shoulders, in the pallor of his skin, the darkness under his eyes, the anemic lips, the starved form.

I tentatively put my arm around his back, not wanting to spook him.

"Let me take over, okay? Let me do this. You can close your eyes, and I can get everything in place. You follow my lead, knowing I will do nothing to hurt you. I will just do my best to help you. Nothing too fast, nothing too hard. Just little steps, Sherlock."

He's so tired.

"I want to-," and suddenly his voice breaks, peals apart. Shakes. "Sometimes...I want to go to sleep and never wake up. Just sometimes," he hisses.

"That makes sense," I whisper against his neck. "That's not strange or bad or anything else-"

He cuts me off, softly, but stridently.

"I'm a freak!," he barks, his voice catching in his mouth and sounding warbled. "Just like they always said!"

I close my eyes and repress the anger. Anger at Donovan, or Anderson, or anyone who ever made him feel unworthy at some level.

"No, you're not," I respond with assuredness. Because this is one argument he can't win. "You are
many things. Things that are wonderful and rare and supremely talented. But you are not that. You are not a freak, and you have never been a freak."

His hand lightly raps against my back insistently.

"It's what I have," he reiterates, tone more anxious than before and I lead him back towards the sofa.

He sits down at my insinuation, and I watch him closely, troubled.

"Do you think maybe Mycroft might-"

"I'm not going to a clinic!," my flatmate rasps, eyes scanning the wool carpet at his feet. "I just want-"

I wait for a few seconds. Then five. Ten seconds. Realize no additional information is forthcoming.

"Look, Sherlock, I can guess you feel completely torn. You want to be happy, inside, to feel good. Everyone does. That's normal, and it's healthy. But you've attached some measure of accomplishment to a mode of being that hurts your own body, and this isn't new for you. It's natural to feel completely, completely torn if you are used to feeling 'good' while being harsh to yourself. You have flipped around the criteria of what is good and what is harmful, and you started doing so as a child. This resistance to health is coming from that, I think. From something you established a long time ago, and it's not going to change easily. Those feelings are not going to just vanish. It's going to take some work. Changing thought processes, heck - just changing habits - can take a lot of work!"

His breathing starts to regulate, and I push my chair across the carpeting, closer to his own position. I don't want to crowd him, but I also don't want him to feel alone - or worse - as if I want to distance myself from him.

"It's probably very, very difficult now to separate decades of self-punishment - that you consider 'proper' behaviour - with self-compassion, which I think you feel is a form of indulgence and therefore wrong. I would guess a lot of this turmoil is stemming from that, Sherlock. Do you think I could be correct?"

He's listening still, and I wait for a response. After a second he looks up, eyes glassy and fatigued and small.

"Maybe," he whispers.

And I know he means 'yes.' I see the wince in his jaw, held in with the realization that I've accurately named part of the problem.

I give him an encouraging smile.

"Well that's a foundation. Something to work with - and that's important. It would explain the confusion you feel. You probably feel very, very torn about a lot of what you do and a lot of what you are encouraged to do by people who care about you, too."

He hesitates, closes his eyes as if embarrassed. Nods.

A blossom of pain in my chest, then; I quickly repress my upset. I can go through these emotions later, in my own time.

"Your body can only take so much, and that's my concern now, Sherlock. That's Mycroft's concern. I promise we are not trying to take away your choices or your plans or the control you've earned and
created for yourself. We just love you. You understand that, right?"

Sherlock looks about rapidly, eyes not fixing on any point now. He looks completely overwhelmed. I try to lend my hand in support, once more, as I had only mere moments before. He pulls his hand back quickly, as if burnt.

"Sherlock."

His eyes scrunch up.

"Don't say it like that!," he says in agony, now crossing his arms over his torso. "Don't say...don't say that."

I blink against the retort. Tell myself that he's overwhelmed, but not actually rejecting me. That I have to be strong for him. That's what matters most of all right now.

"Don't say what? That we love you? That I do?"

Sherlock's eyes close completely and I see his knuckles go white, as if physically pained.

My greater confusion stems from the fact that I have essentially admitted this much to him previously. This isn't a new admission. His upset with the word, and the fact that I do love him - that's what is seemingly new.

"What's making this hard to hear right now?," I test carefully. Tailoring my voice to sound reasonable, normal.

He shakes his head back and forth, gulps, tries to speak. It comes out in stutter. Unintelligible.

I lean forward in the chair.

"Try again," I request tentatively. Gingerly. "I don't know what-

"This all feels...I don't-," he stammers, arms holding his torso in a self protective hug. Then suddenly: "I feel sick, John."

His body is swaying and his forehead is dotted with sweat, and I'm assailed with deja vu. To a night very much like this one - four weeks ago.

"Do you think you are going to actually be sick?"

And I am sure I have asked him this before.

I am almost positive I have.

He bites his lip, but otherwise doesn't respond.

"I'm going to take your pulse, okay?," I test, concerned.

He lets his left arm dangle down and I manage to feel around until I feel the surging blood.

"Okay," I try to soothe him, "It's okay. I promise it's going to be okay. You feel scared, and that's not wrong. Although I am sorry that you are feeling like this."

"I don't know what's wrong with me," he pants. His whole body is trembling now.
I try to give him an encouraging smile.

"You are malnourished, for starters. That alone can trigger panic attacks. Remember last time this happened? Horlicks for dinner? And anxiety begets anxiety. You need sleep and-"

He whispers something, eyes rooted to the floor.

"What?"

His mouth is a firm line, clenched, darkened with torment.

"I can't love you back. I can't even feel, inside, like-," and he pats his chest. I can sense his frustration and his urge to express feelings that are incredibly convoluted and potentially distorted by years of growing insecurity and breeding self-hatred.

"You've always done just fine, there," I mutter to him carefully, wanting him to sense that nothing really has to change. Not between us. "I don't want you to change who you are. I just want you to be the healthiest you can possibly be. I'm not asking for anything more than your best effort to get healthier, okay?"

The fear has not departed from his features and he glances up at me oddly.

"We can work on this together, alright? And we can present a plan of action to Mycroft, who I think might give us some leeway provided he sees some positive changes in the next while. I won't let you do this alone; you're not by yourself, Sherlock."

Sherlock doesn't say anything. His eyes scan mine with rapidity, like wipers on an automobile. Then before I can process what is happening, his lips are against my lips. This time he doesn't press his lips to mine and then pull back abruptly, as if stung - like he had done weeks previously. This time the kiss is much more insistent, and he's not pulling back at all. There is power in this kiss, and a sort of deeply troubling urgency. His lips are very hot, only mildly moist, and he tastes of anise. Something like cinnamon, too. His previous words - his very last words to me, in fact - assail my mind and induce a series of prickling fears and doubts that I need to address. That I need to address right now.

I pull back slowly, not wanting to seem as if I am rejecting him, but also wanting to establish certain issues first.

"Sherlock, stop. Please," I say between strong swells of lips and teeth.

He stops immediately and pulls back without any further request, then glances up to me in nervousness. His cheeks are tinted pink.

"You don't have to do this to prove yourself to me," I test carefully, not knowing how to fully articulate my trouble with his quick offering of something so romantic to me in the wake of such terrible fear.

I see his throat contort.

"Is that what you think I'm doing?," he rushes quickly, his eyes dampened down with what I know realize is a dose of hurt.

Uh oh.

"This isn't a rejection, please know that," I say forcefully. "I just want us to be on the same page about certain things. I don't want you to feel obligated to-"
"That's not why I...," he trails off, lost. "You think I'd do this out of obligation?"

I need to be honest with him, and yet I know honesty right now may also hurt him.

"I think it's possible that you could kiss someone out of affection, and not attraction," I say carefully. "We've discussed that before, actually. And I want to make sure - really, really sure - that if we are even considering going down this road, it's something that we are both ready for and something we both have similar ideas about."

He swallows again, and it sounds sore in the relative quietude of the room.

"Ideas about?"

"Expectations," and I motion between our two bodies, "what our feelings are for each other, exactly - which we haven't discussed. Not much, really. And whether this is even a good idea to even entertain right now."

Sherlock seems to shrink in direct response to my words.

"I highly doubt you have these talks with your other prospective partners," he says - voice clipped, shamed, and yet hesitant. As if he hadn't meant to vocalize this idea at all.

I grab for his hand.

"Sherlock you're not some mere 'prospective' partner to me! You are my best friend in and - don't shoot me! - but I think we are both a little confused about some things right now. We are both tired and it's normal to gravitate towards any offering of comfort when feeling low."

He blinks as if confused.

"And if that's part of the need here, I am ready to hear what you have to say. It doesn't have to be dark or an admission of something that troubles you, either. We can always talk, or watch a show, or do something fun. It doesn't have to venture into anything that could be a little too overwhelming for either of us right now. It could even be a hug. But I'd like to keep anything too intense, even kissing, off limits right now. Okay?"

Sherlock looks confused now and I give him what I hope is a warm smile. Wait for him to speak yet again.

He does.

"This overwhelms you too?," and I try not to hug him with his admission.

It takes effort on my part not to do so.

"Yes. Of course it does. You're remarkably special to me. I don't ever want to do something that could alienate you or just make you feel uncomfortable around me."

He seems to be processing my words; the optimist in me realizes that his shoulders seem more relaxed, and his bearing less timid than it had only a few minutes previously, even as he swallows again.

"I'm confused about what I feel for you, John. The totality of what I feel."

I give him an encouraging nod.
"That's why we shouldn't be rushing anything."

Sherlock's hands are open, taut - as if in supplication.

"Then how do I figure this out?" he queries, looking lost and burdened.

I give him a slight, hesitant smile.

"It probably will just have to be something we navigate together. But later - not now. Right now I just want you focused on getting healthier."

He rubs his hands up and down forearms, as if wired. The image strikes me as so representative of the classic image I have of a junkie looking for a fix that I almost want to look away. Instead, I move a bit closer to him.

"What do you say? How about we go talk to Mycroft about our plan and hear his recommendations?"

Sherlock looks across me - almost through me - but nods. I nod back, mirroring his actions, relief flooding my cells at his decision as he trots away in search of his aforementioned brother. As he departs I turn around and study the photographs, and the shadowboxes of bats atop the fireplace and the somewhat-yellowing wallpaper until my gaze comes to rest on the off-white rictus grin of the skull on the mantle-place. I don't know exactly how long I stare at the thing, since it seems to transfix me.

It's meditative in the most morbid way, and I suddenly have the urge to smash the damn thing.

I even start to make motion towards the macabre set of smiling bone when I hear the measured, if not calibrated voice of Mycroft swell back into the room. Sherlock once described his brother's voice as being 'marmalade and black smoke,' and at the time I had no idea what that even meant, but now that I consider it, I think I do. Mycroft is polite, almost old-fashioned in his precision and focus on manners, and yet put him a tough position where his stress is high and you won't see anger or fear or stress always play out on his face.

But you'll hear the grit in his voice.

You'll sense his resolution.

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Which is what I can hear now.

Behind him, Sherlock stands - stick-like body looking even more stick-like next to the appropriately weighted form of his brother. Sherlock's arms are rigid at his side.

"Did Sherlock tell you about our discussion?" I test carefully, knowing Mycroft's reservations as it pertains to letting Sherlock choose his own treatment. In fact, his reservations are likely much more complex and fear-laden than even my own.

After all, he was with Sherlock on countless other occasions where his brother was hospitalized. He was there for a suicide attempt. He was present when his then 13-year old brother sliced up his legs with a razor. He was present, as a child, in the house that generated so much fear, and rage, and heartbreak for my best friend. And maybe, one day - maybe - I'll be in a position to encourage Mycroft to seek his own help, so that he can purge his own experiences. Because I have no doubt in my mind that he's suffered, and probably far more perniciously than the world around him would
have ever expected.

He has suffered, too.

What's more: he's seen more and done more to help Sherlock at the lowest ebbs than anyone else, and he likely is wary of putting off treatment for a man whose just confessed confusion over even wanting to get better.

So I cannot be angry with Mycroft regarding what looks like, to the world, over-protectiveness. I cannot find it in my heart to criticize a man whose actions may have deviated from my own, but whose concern aligned precisely with my own goals. If anything, I have developed - in a rather short period of time - a much greater fondness for Mycroft. For what he represents, and how he has done his best to always protect and show love to Sherlock. If he ever seemed removed, or aloof in his demonstrations of that love, I certainly cannot judge him for that.

I can only have empathy for the two of them, and the very distinct and yet interwoven horror that has connected them since childhood.

Mycroft, it could be said, is currently unreadable. Face neither cold, nor warm, nor distant.

But he does appear studious.

He suddenly makes a motion as if to rub his temples, then stops and reevaluates, and turns to his little brother. His only sibling. Perhaps the only family he has left, for all I know.

"Alright," he starts with some measure of grit in his voice, "I simply want to know one thing, Sherlock. Is this an aligned goal? Are you committed to working with John and trusting his guidance? I need complete assurance and honesty that you will work with him consistently and confide in him when you feel weak. No lies, no obfuscations of the truth. You work with him, or you can work it out at a clinic that specializes in the types of issues of which you suffer."

Sherlock's throat convulses, and his eyes see-saw to the left, then to the right. I can sense the almost-panic clouding closer to the periphery of his mind, vying for attention, vying to keep him sick.

Mycroft, in turn, moves closer and looks so intensely at his brother that I almost feel that I should leave the room.

"I-," Sherlock gets out in fatigue. Just the single word. Just an "I." Nothing follows. It is the start of a sentence that could lead to a rivulet of emotion, and then a stream, and then to a torrential downpour of anxiety and shame and conflicting views. Paradoxical views.

Because I cannot conceive of a reality where Sherlock, in totality, wants to be sick. No one would truly want to feel so cold all the time, to have such abhorrent stomach pain, to pinch and measure and agonize over the growing or receding flesh of their body. That would not be a comfort. That would be a relentless agony. A burden for which, I have recently learned, is partially responsible for the relatively high degree of suicide amongst those suffering from long term eating disorders.

Yet there is such immobility and rigidity and a seeming inability to give up their disorder. The relentless tendency towards self-abuse, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation seems to be coveted, even as it damages.

And I find that mindset - of wanting to cultivate illness - hard to entertain. Perhaps impossible to fully comprehend, and yet no one can tell me that Sherlock wants to be like this.

He might feel that an aspect of what he is doing - the ritual, the control - is soothing. He may link
what he is doing to something else - some emotion or conception about his own humanity that I am
not even fully aware of as present. But no one can convince me that this is happiness for him,
because I can see the turmoil playing out over his features - the complete confusion and trepidation
that he has towards knowing which path to take and which to abandon, even when the solution to his
greatest issues seem so clear and monumentally obvious to the rest of the world.

So I can't ever abandon him. Not now and certainly not if he gets worse. I need to transmit complete
faith in his mind, and his spirit, and the integrity of his being. For all his talk of being a sociopath, he
is neither a sociopath nor a psychopath. He might be dealing with other conditions I have not fully
considered, but he has a conscience, and his conscience is being battered about like a cat with a mouse
right now.

Ultimately, I want him to choose health for his own sake - and not for my own peace or mind. In
fact, I am convinced that he will not achieve lasting healing until he comes to realize that he's worth
saving. Not for his mind, and certainly not for the preservation of his transport alone.

But because he is suffering, and he never should have had to undergo any of this suffering in the first
place. The fact that he's now perpetuating his own horror, as if taking over for his abuser, makes me
feel an intense sense of hopelessness and sadness for him. For what was done to him. Because he is
kind, and decent and yes - a little different, a little eccentric - but a wholly good person. Never
perfect, as no one is - but extremely good.

"Sherlock," I say softly, sensing that Mycroft will wait minutes until Sherlock formulates his sentence
and gives his final answer on this issue. "You don't deserve to feel like this. No one does. But
certainly not you. You know that, don't you?"

At any other time in my life, I'd perhaps have been too timid or anxious or plain shy to broach such a
serious topic in the presence of others. But I know that Mycroft loves Sherlock more than I
previously considered. I know that nothing I can say is going to make this situation worse, simply for
the fact that Mycroft is present.

Sherlock glances over at his brother, then back to me - eyes wide and seeming to question why I am
asking him these questions in the presence of his older brother, when at last he gives a very formal
and rigid nod.

"But do you... feel that too? Do you feel that you deserve to be healthy?"

Sherlock goes to nod, as if automated, then stops and seems to clench up. Finally he raises his
shoulders, as if shrugging.

"No?," I test carefully, as Mycroft seems to take a step back, eyes suddenly on the carpet.

Sherlock is now staring at me - his eyes darting between his brother and myself, as if overwhelmed.
He likely is.

"Do you just not know? If feeling good or being healthy is wrong, or bad?"

Sherlock takes a breath. And then - finally - nods.

My heart stings with the admittance.

But at least it's a place to start.
One of what?

Chapter Summary

Life? Stop being so hectic now, okay? Life? Okay? Okay?

In other news - I found that I had a terrible time expressing the emotion that I wanted to express in this chapter. So I am simply hoping that I haven't gone and made a mess of things. Or maybe, this chapter will work out fine. (I have been quite tired as of late, and I find it harder to judge anything I write when fatigued).

I am also quite sorry that this has been so delayed. No - I am not abandoning this story. And thank you, everyone, for your exceptional patience.

--oh, this is in YURI'S POV

Five days after John rushes from my home with a look of sickening anxiety on his face, I get a call.

Not from John Watson, it should be noted.

But from Sherlock.

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Asking me if I still have an available spot in my weekly calendar.

'Just to review some basic topics.'

Topics that should take, he states, "very little time to cover. This is mostly for John's benefit. So he doesn't worry so much, mostly about nothing."

Very little time, indeed.

Don't get me wrong.

I have visited Sherlock's website.

I have read his essays on various chemicals, various experiments. I can see what he's passionate about, and I can sense how atypical he is as a person. How quickly his mind works and processes both the external world but also the internal world, too. The blunt, almost socially awkward way he writes about wanting to take on "only interesting cases," and the brusque manner that seems to be infused with his genuine perplexity as to social norms and expectations.

In our (admittedly) truncated therapy session together, I even got to witness the rapidity of his speech; his jumbled, frenzied way of speaking when upset. So, too, can I sense the pressure behind his writing as he races about with words and posts on his webpage - expounding about this substance or that substance, this assay or that titration.

And it's not just his knowledge, or his passion, but the innovative way he fuses science with something that seems to me (and which I believe he'd be loath to admit) strikingly intuitive.
However, he is ultimately drawn to the structured composition of science being undertaken. Science being lived out, if only just because he can test for something, test for a variable. Make an alteration to a condition, and see the changes in the situation.

That control over a dynamic - a testable hypothesis being worked out and then generating facts and data - seems to delight him. Seems to soothe him.

And while some of that interest is tied to his gifted intellect and his need to know what changes in the whole when even one small variable changes in part - I suspect that his created profession as a "consulting detective" also speaks largely as to his need to be in control of his whole life, and not just a scientific mindedness.

For example, he did not take a position as investigator under a well established and respected organization, even though he works with Scotland Yard. He still maintained that distance, and holds onto the comfort in being his own boss.

He even seems to have the capacity to work well with others when he sets his mind to the task. Yet, Sherlock has fashioned a life around his controls, and his ability to reject or allow the continued procession of a routine.

The closest thing he could have to someone who could order him about, or at least make him feel pressured to change his ways, would be a family member (though I am uncertain how close he is to anyone in his family) or a friend. Which he seems to be sorely lacking, John Watson aside. The legitimate concerns from people who care about him purely out of love and for no ulterior motive. Not because they are interested in what his mind can offer, nor ultimately wanting to yield something from his talents for their own benefit.

So now I wonder, in part, if perhaps Sherlock hasn't also sought out positions and work where he is the ultimate boss of his own initiatives (unconsciously, perhaps) as a way for him to test the worth of an association or a friendship. To determine the authenticity of any given relationship.

Because if he is caustic and blunt in his comments, and a person still sticks around and treats him with respect...aren't they proving their mettle? The depth of true feeling and friendship?

Does he seem to alienate others so readily to actually protect himself from growing attached to an individual, but then facing a betrayal?

The thought seized me upon my first meeting with him; I could sense his conflicted need for someone to aid him and even soothe him, yet his own seething anger at his vulnerability. And a not-too-buried shame.

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So we are currently at the following position: an emaciated man in his mid 30's is denying he needs assistance, even if - by all outward appearances - he is falling apart. Prohibited from working until his physical health improves, and self-admittedly engaging in behaviours that are self-harming by their very nature. Yet angrily pushing away offers of assistance.

And truly, without legally removing the standing of competence - without sectioning him and removing his legal status as someone competent enough to make his own decisions - how does anyone (a friend or a therapist, or anyone else) proceed?

This is, to me, the issue that generally disrupts healing and overcoming past pain the very most. The inner war of the patient. The sense of sickness - the acknowledgment that they are, indeed, not
healthy. And not just a little bit 'under the weather,' or a little bit 'blue.' But completely depressed in mood, self-hateful in their activities, engaging in activities which express a rage against their own ability to be healthy or whole.

It is terribly hard to get that admittance that they actually need help and to do that - need to change.

Because it means giving up all the customary and habitual (and soothing) routines that they have developed for themselves. Even if the routines are harmful.

In fact, for a good number of my patients the act of physical self-harm is psychologically soothing to them. They feel so completely conflicted as to their own worth as beings, that their worth is assigned to the acknowledgment or applause of others. Then, when that is withheld for whatever reason - the festering, damaged part of their self comes to the fore and convinces them that they can at least punish themselves (through bodily abuse) for their lack of success. For their lack of meaning, or "worth."

It's an entwined, horribly conflicting set of behaviours that usually starts its development quite young and tragically seems to become firmly attached to extremely intelligent and sensitive people with attachment issues.

So while I cannot be convinced that this is the case with Sherlock, I have a strong intuition that he is struggling with his own identify issues, terrified at what he might find, and running from project to project to allay those fears. And, as his medical records seem to indicate - when he's not able to outrun his anxiety - he cuts his skin, and he starves, or he takes massive doses of illegal narcotics and/or stimulants to void his mind of those concerns.

In all my time as a practicing psychiatrist, I have learned to trust my instincts about patients. And right now my instinct is telling me that not only that Sherlock needs help - both physical and psychological help - but that the greatest challenge I am going to have is not in convincing him of the facts of his sickness. But convincing him that he is a person worthy of health. That he doesn't have to earn a special status, or spot, or be seen as brilliant. But that he matters, period.

Most people - if they did not have true compassion or respect for Sherlock - would have undoubtedly left the flat by now. Looked for a place to live elsewhere. Because, obviously, Sherlock is going through hell. But equally obvious is the fact that John is sticking by him and isn't about to walk away any time soon.

It can't be easy.

In fact, I know firsthand that it isn't easy.

I know first hand that it's damned hard.

And I know that Sherlock is aware of John's efforts. (His expression of needing to see me was mostly to get John to "stop worrying," after all).

He didn't want to see me out of concern for himself. But he was considering doing so for John.

And that tells me quite a bit about him, actually.

It tells me that a clinically emaciated man, with an undoubtedly gifted IQ, would only seek psychiatric help to allay the fears of his friend. Additionally, based on John's own discussions with me...I have been made aware that Sherlock is conflicted about his feelings for John.
Whether that is part of the reason behind his recent loss of weight and self-abuse needs to be covered in therapy, but I can't help feeling that if these feelings are new for him - that if he's, indeed, feeling anything skirting the romantic - that the self-abuse may have developed yet again out of confusion of those feelings or revulsion of what those feelings indicate.

And if that's the case, there is likely something much darker and fuller and caustic ravaging Sherlock's mind.

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He wanted to see me out of concern that if he didn't ''he would hurt John in greater ways and more deeply'' than he already had.

So we spent about ten minutes talking around his issues, and at one point I actually got pretty damn close to getting him to admit that he is hurting himself.

Of course, because he's likely been in therapy before - he spotted my attempts to get him to confess to his issues a mile off, and then retracted. So I ended up with a lot of loaded language, and a lot of stressing of words, and a pressured, rapid pace of speech. And the whole conversation was rather hard to experience, because it was not unlike listening to someone in pain - someone whose been terribly physically hurt and is trying to hiss back against their anguish - but who refuses to simply let go and cry.

I know that for many of my patients, part of their identity and sense of self is twined to being sick. To sometimes being deathly sick. Even if the sickness is rather well hidden - as it is for many sufferers of eating disorders - there is often an intractable need to hold onto the sickness. In the sickness, there is a bizarre sense of comfort.

And it probably doesn't make any sense to anyone who has not personally suffered from an eating disorder, or a disorder that interweaves with the aspect of self harm, but I feel that there is something rooted in the harming aspect that these patients see as self-validating.

Typically, self-harm is linked to a multitude of conditions: everything from psychosis, to extreme depression and suicidal ideation to dissociation - but in cases of otherwise functional adults who are self-harming in secret, self-harm is invariably more revealing. They get a measure of comfort from the activity, in some form. It's not generally a physical comfort, but it is sometimes addressed as being "emotionally comforting."

What's more, I have never had a case of severe self-harm that did not occur in a patient that had suffered - at some stage of his or her life - severe abuse. Whether the abuse was even present in the mind of the sufferer (or repressed) was variable. But it is something that I almost always became aware of as therapy progressed.

So now, when I look at Sherlock's files, and then speak to John, and then - in agonizingly roundabout fashion speak to Sherlock yet again - I get the prickling sense of horrid sadness. The sadness of a person who is dealing with a host of issues, and not just one or two.

It's never just the case that someone doesn't eat enough because they have a stomachache, or because they feel unwell. That does happen, of course. Physical reasons aside are legitimate, but readily addressed. Help is readily addressed. And a degree of fear is shown as to their weakening state when someone is otherwise psychologically healthy.

In Sherlock's case I am presented with the opposite: a need to hide the worsening physical state and a burgeoning anxiety about if and how and why he should seek help. A back and forth,
tremulous exposition of his symptoms - of strictly the physical variety - and then a heated anger that he "doesn't need help."

And that vacillating pattern of behaviour (and of statements ushered and thoughts expressed) is actually extremely revealing.

Which takes us to today:

"I do think I could work you into my schedule, Sherlock. But I also would like for us to have a sit down meeting first. Just you and me, I mean."

Sherlock goes quiet now. The mobile seems to buzz with static from the outside world, the busy London street below his flat. I can hear the slight rattling sound of light breath against the phone in the absence of his otherwise polished speech.

"Are you there?," I clarify, knowing full well that he is there and yet wanting to prompt him to act and say something.

"Sherlock?"

I hear a shadowy breath, and then I hear another swallow - as if his throat is sore - and I will away a spike of empathy. Of empathy and knowing, and memories of my own.

Because I know that going easy on Sherlock isn't likely to help him right now. Not when he will use that empathy to delay having to see me properly. Not when he will use that empathy to prolong being sick.

"Why?," he asks at last, sounding authentically confused. "You said that you wouldn't mind seeing John and me together, since our dynamic is complicated."

One thing I can definitely give Sherlock credit for is stringing together a sentence that hints at a dark truth without actually admitting to anything directly. He reminds me of a fisherman throwing out a line, angling in a fish, but sensing that the water that could grant him his sustenance is turbulent then pulls back in fear.

Possibly, I think, he's afraid of being healthy. Perhaps because he's never been completely healthy. His greatest enemy, of which I have no doubt, is his own mind.

His voice is so maddeningly suave in tone that if I hadn't recently seen Sherlock Holmes in the flesh, I would have had no inkling as to the horrid disorder ravaging his body.

I might have even considered it a call from a well balanced but concerned friend.

A relation to a patient.

So the questions posed now seem all the more strange in their formality and their no-doubt false 'calmness.'
Still...

I know his questions are not born of a need to be disingenuous.

They are linked to a very real, very pressing need to have life be controllable and to be in that control.

To be on the track of his choosing, even if the track is careening off into dangerous territory and is hurting him deeply.

Because perhaps to him, the sense of being hurt is familiar, and thus welcomed. And despite how it looks to anyone else, it is that with which we are comfortable with that often determines what we accept. If we are familiar with compassion, we more readily accept it. If we have known nothing but abuse, we generally feel more comfortable with various forms of abuse.

To many people, even in the midst of relative suffering - they will perpetuate suffering because it is something that is known. As strange as it sounds to people who have never lived in such a world, that abuse then becomes emotionally safe. A variable they are familiar with when everything else around them is crumbling.

The disorders I studied extensively, and eventually specialized in, were related in variant forms of what are termed "self-harm" disorders.

The reasons behind why people abuse their own bodies or torment themselves in other ways is actually quite voluminous.

For some conditions, such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, self-harming was part and parcel of self-soothing because of an otherwise created 'construct' of self-assurance. A bartering, of sorts. ("If I run five miles, and tap the big, red tree three times - then my family will be safe.") It was often an exchange between something that was considered mildly irksome but ultimately redemptive, and something much more powerful and frightening. Mildly irksome always wins out. Little evil always wins out against big evil.

So OCD is one cause behind why an otherwise highly logical child or adult engages in self-harming features.

The tyranny of a mind besieged by thoughts that were ugly, if not even cruel.

In fact, one of my first patients - a skinny adolescent named Devon - forever changed my views about apparent self-harm. Devon, more than anyone else, taught me to not be too hasty in my judgments of others.

He has started running at the age of 11, and the amount of time he devoted to this activity had grown from a modest twenty minutes in the morning before school, to over 30 kilometers a day... every day of the week.

He came to see me shortly after his 14th birthday. In retrospect, I am shocked that he lasted that long before his parents sought out clinical care.

He had collapsed on his school track. The doctors at the clinic he had been taken to determined that he had micro-fractures in both legs and yet, he had continued to jog on broken legs. Eventually, he
had to stop running due to severe pain and bone shard fragments that had lead to sudden swelling and immobilization in his legs.

At the time of his admittance to Evelina, four of his toenails had previously darkened and fallen off due to compression of his shoes and swelling of his feet. This actually happens in any runner without the respite of normal and proper breaks. Additionally, Devon's nipples were bleeding from the constant rubbing of his skin against his running shirt (over many hundreds of kilometers in less than a weeks time). His gums were recessed from a combination of malnutrition and vomiting. His hair had fallen out in patches.

His electrolytes were badly disrupted, and his back was unnaturally bony. The vertebrae jutted from his skin like a knobbly snake of tethered stone, trying to rip through his body.

Whenever he attempted to eat, he vomited out of fear that he would be 'punished' or that his family would 'suffer' and possibly die. From that conviction, he developed an extreme fear of eating - most notably a phobia of consuming solid foods. The fear of food was tied to a seemingly irrational fear of dying if he partook in certain activities.

He eventually comprised a list of fourteen 'safe' foods that he would allow himself following his daily running regime. These items included: lemon water; sugar-free mints; broth; jello; fat-free chocolate popsicles; herbal tea; black coffee; miso soup; gum; allergy medication; daily supplements; sorbital sweetened gummy bears; sugar-free jams and jellies and finally tapioca pudding made without milk or sugar.

Understandably, his weight plummeted as his disorder worsened. And it worsened quickly and without much of an attempt to hide the ravishing effects of over-exercising and under-eating.

But what I always found astounding was that as his OCD worsened in severity, so too did his appreciation of how far he was physically suffering.

He would run until his sneakers were coated in blood, but he didn't seem to care about these bruises or blood.

He only craved the momentary feeling of safety and peace that the compulsion offered.

Because, as he insisted, it was better than the "alternative."

When I took on his case, he had been admitted to the adolescent eating disorders treatment wing at Evelina and had been in treatment two other times, relapsing both times.

I quickly learned that simple re-feeding wasn't going to be effective in the long term for Devon.

I was able to sense that the development of his symptoms were not linked to a dysmorphic appreciation of his body - as is often the case with individuals that are truly suffering from eating disorders - but a regimented obsession with numbers for the distraction that his compulsion offered him. In other words, I had the task of convincing three other primary psychiatrists devoted to his care that he was not, indeed, a sufferer of anorexia or exercise bulimia - but perhaps of something equally insidious but not yet addressed in his case file.
In medicine, and indeed in psychiatry - the issue is not simply in writing down symptoms and then proclaiming a diagnosis that reasonably can fit the symptoms. You always have to dig a little bit deeper than that, as caloric restriction related to anorexia usually is rooted to a different need and motivation than starvation that is worsened by Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. What's more: there is often overlap between the two, with aspects of eating disorders presenting similarly to OCD. In fact, a good number of sufferers of eating disorders also suffer from eating disorders, and therein lies our task. To differentiate between the different diagnoses and to not give up on a future of health for our patients, no matter how bleak the present seems to be.

So for now - with Sherlock - the primary issue I need to identify has to do with one primary issue alone.

Does he want to suffer? Does he want to hurt himself?

And if so, is it because he feels that he deserves punishment or because he deems himself unworthy of being healthy or whole?

"What can I get out of an appointment with you alone that I can't get alongside John's company?," he asks me suddenly.

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

It's one of those questions I hate getting as the rationale for my suggestion isn't off the cuff. It's based on the assessment of hundreds of individuals with disorders similar to the ones he possesses. And yet I have a strong suspicion that if I give name to any of those disorders, that I will be met with either mockery or heated denial.

I take a moment to comprise me thoughts, and then think to myself: "fuck it."

Tact hasn't worked well thus far, so I should be open to a different tactic.

"Do you feel that your eating is disordered?," I ask plainly.

No accusation, but also no timidity.

"Are you asking me if I consider my eating bad?," Sherlock clarifies with a tone of something odd, something hard to peg.

I hesitate, because it's never a word that I want to link to eating.

'Bad.'

While behaviours related to self-care can obviously be considered healthy or unhealthy, the word 'bad' is generally tied to something skirting the moral sphere. Bad gets linked to guilt or innocence. It gets linked to the very notion that they, the patient, is somehow inferior in a particular area. Either incompetent, or even unworthy of continued efforts.

"Can eating be bad?," I qualify.

Sherlock sighs.

"It's not a trick, Sherlock," I say evenly. "It's a valid question."
"Well obviously John thinks my eating is bad, or he wouldn't be pressing me on this at all," he replies quickly a moment later, his voice an octave higher. "He wouldn't be wanting me to see anyone. To see you, I mean."

I digest his words, and test: "Has John told you that he considers your eating 'bad'?

The tone is clipped when he answers.

"It was implied. It was very obviously implied, Yuri."

"How was it implied?"

"He gets upset when I eat."

I jot down a few questions in my journal.

That sounds a little distorted, if I can go off anything John has told me about himself or the situation at hand.

"Does he gets upset when you eat, or does he get upset when you don't eat what he considers to be an adequate amount?"

Sherlock sounds irritated with me now.

"The latter."

"Ok. Do you think his concerns for you are valid?"

His breath comes out in a huff. But at least I'm getting him to talk.

"I think he's overreacting."

I blink back shock at his assessment.

"You think he's overreacting."

It's not a question. It's a statement of bewildered fact.

"You think I am being ridiculous too, don't you? You and he are on the same team, so what difference does it make what I even-

I can sense that he's gearing for a fight. That he wants to vent but also doesn't want to talk about This Issue (and yes, it's capitalized), and he's upset with himself for not knowing how he wants to proceed.

"I don't think you're being ridiculous. I only am trying to clarify. I don't live with John. I don't know him like you do. But from the little I have spoken with him, he seems to be fairly logical. Reasonable."

"He's not at all reasonable. He chooses to live with me!"

There is no denying the self-recrimination now. His voice is laden with it.

"Why do you think that means he's unreasonable?"

Another huff.
Louder than before.

"Not unreasonable so much as illogical."

I will let him be precise to a degree normally reserved for pedants if it keeps him talking.

"Alright. Why would his interest in being or remaining your flatmate make him an illogical person?"

"I am not easy," Sherlock replies softly. Uncertainty pains his voice.

"You are not easy to live with?"

"Yes, but that's not even it. That's not even what I meant! I am not easy to like. He should have left a long time ago. But he hasn't. I don't understand why he's still here."

It comes out as a spat, a rush of hot, angry sounds.

"Sherlock," I try gingerly, "John obviously likes you as a person. He seems to respect you very much. He also told me, and gave me permission to tell you this - but he mentioned that he was confused about his own feelings for you. He told me that he spoke to you about that subject and that this is why he also is considering therapy for himself right now. Because he has feelings for you, and cares about you very strongly."

My words are not calming him down, unfortunately.

"I don't need a reiteration of his own words! And again... illogical. And it's not true, anyway. What you're even saying."

I frown.

"What's not true? That he likes you, or that he respects you? Or that he could have feelings for you?"

"Oh what does it even matter?," he hisses, "What does my assessment of John Watson's extreme idealism have to do with anything?"

I take a few seconds, determining if I should continue the conversation or let Sherlock decompress. I decide to compromise on both.

"Why do you consider John an idealist, Sherlock?"

"He thinks if he's just kind enough and loving enough and patient enough, I will be the type of person he suspects he wants. Maybe romantically, maybe because he's confused, and maybe because he just wants to fix everything and everyone. Maybe because he has some kind of doctor-complex where he doesn't feel good enough unless he fixes everyone that he thinks is damaged. If someone is hurting, he wants to fix them. Under everything about me that drives everyone else on the planet away, he thinks there is something in me - something worth..." his breath is ragged now, and I realize how quickly he's breathing. "He thinks there is something in me that he might love, but it's just...it's...he could love anything! That doesn't say anything about me, Yuri. Just him. He wants to make people healthy again, and I know he thinks I'm sick and-"

Sherlock stops talking as if suddenly jolted into awareness as to what he's admitting.

I close my eyes and will myself to say the right thing.

"Do you think you're sick?," I query. I try to keep the tone even, unwavering, lacking in force but
also lacking in hesitancy.

I hear the convulsions of his throat reverberate against the phone.

"No. I'm not sick. I'm not sick," he grits out in upset. "I'm not mentally ill, if that's what you are implying. I know what mental illness looks like, and I'm not that! I'm nothing like that."

There is something here. Right under the surface of an admission.

Something that likely could help Sherlock just as assuredly as it could rip a hole the size of a shotgun blast through his heart.

My body feels like a live wire of nerves. If the sickness in Sherlock's mind was likened to a bomb that needed to be deactivated, and there was a dozen wires to cut - many the same colour with only slight variation - and I had to determine the slightest shade that set the necessary wire apart from the rest, the damage I could do would be immense if my actions brought about a failure.

"Ok. Let's just address that last point, then. Have you known someone who was mentally ill?"

"Mmm," he hums, his voice less raging and intense now. Calmer.

"You have?," I prompt.

"Yes, I have," he admits.

Words have huge power in the world of therapy and treatment. More often than not it is the specific arrangement of words - the specific relation of words from one person (the therapist) to the next (the patient) in an order that is most receptive and impacting for the individual that is the impetus for some of the biggest changes in behaviour.

Or in wanting to change. In actually wanting to get better.

It's not drugs that heal someone. Medications, at best, are stabilizers.

Usually it takes a shift in some mental preconception that is skewed and full of self-revulsion for healing to actually begin.

"Okay. You have known someone who was mentally ill. Can I ask if John said or implied that you were mentally ill?"

Sherlock's breath makes a hiss against the receiver.

"He said I was sick! And that I was playing him! Playing everyone. I'm not trying to play him, but he thinks I am. And I don't understand why he'd-"

Damn it.

"What?"

"If he thinks I'm really one of those, how could he really love me? In any way? I-I don't understand, and I can't ask him in case he thinks-," his whisper dies off into nothing.

I suddenly know that THIS is why he's called me.
It's not to simply put John's mind at ease about Sherlock tackling his problems or facing his issues.

It's about Sherlock needing help in determining something about himself in relation to John.

More specifically: about how John perceives him as a person.

As a person not simply worthy of support, but one who is even possible to help in the first place.

But I'm missing something huge here. Huge and vital to understanding Sherlock's fear.

"One of what, Sherlock?," I inquire firmly. "One of what?"

"I've looked it up, and some things fit, and I think I used to believe that maybe if people really thought that I was..."

I stand up from my chair, and press my hands firmly against the wall, needing the pressure. The conversation seems to becoming more anxiety-filled and ungrounded as it proceeds.

I need to focus.

"What is your concern right now, Sherlock? I can't do anything to help if you don't tell me."

"I am telling you," he whispers. "I'm trying."

This man has been in the clinic for a perforated stomach ulcer, and he seemed almost flippant about his physical problems at certain points in our conversation. (Obviously nervous that he had been assigned to talk to a professional, but otherwise disinterested in communicating with me.)

So I am having difficulty understanding what could be causing him so much fear now. What could have prompted the change in such a relatively small period.

"I don't really think I am," he whispers again, and something about the insistent repetition is unnerving me.

"Would it help if I came over there?," I test, glancing at my watch. "My last patient booked off at the last moment. Caught that flu that's been going around. I have no further appointments this afternoon, and I feel as if Sherlock's words are ominous. Generally, that's never a good sign with patients that show the sort of symptoms and mood issues that he has already displayed.

"You don't have to do that," Sherlock murmurs. "Forget I said anything."

"No. I don't want to forget you said anything. Not when it's upsetting you, and not when I suspect I could help you."

He doesn't say anything for several beats, and then: "I am wor- I am wondering if I have a personality disorder."

I sit up straight in my chair, shocked.

"Why would you think that?"

"I can be manipulative," and his voice cracks. "Many people have said I am manipulative."
"Manipulative? Sherlock - anyone can be manipulative at various times in life. That in itself doesn't tell me enough. That's one trait."

"There are others, too. I am not typical. Sometimes I think that I don't really understand the social niceties. I can lie, and not feel guilty about it, and John says I am often impulsive, and prone to irritability and:"

I push my notebook away, concerned.

"Hold on. What personality disorder do you think you may have?"

He sighs, harshly. Swallows again.

"I used to tell people I was a sociopath."

My heart buzzes with adrenaline.

"Why would you do that?"

No answer.

"Sherlock, why did you tell people that?"

"Because it fits."

He says it emphatically, as if he can not possibly understand my confusion.

"And what about the criterion that is most important to diagnosis, are you overlooking?"

His words are crisp when he responds. Careful. As if he doesn't trust himself to speak.

"I don't know what you mean."

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"John told me about your last case. With the little boy."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"John mentioned that you initially didn't want to take the case, because you generally never take cases that have to do with children."

"Mmm. Yes. That's true."

His voice sounds odd. Something seems off. My radar is on high alert, and as I speak to him, I pull out my mobile and pull up John Watson's work number.

"Why?" I ask as lightly as I can. My 'nothing-is-the-matter' voice.

"Because I find them distasteful."

"Children?" I say carefully, not thinking that this is what he means at all - but wanting to prove a point.

"Don't be daft, Yuri," Sherlock hisses.

"So you find such cases more emotionally distressing, is what you really mean."
Sherlock says nothing.

"Is that right, Sherlock?"

There is a pause.

"Sherlock?"

"I don't want to talk about this any more."

But it comes out slurred. Not unlike "I doan wanna talk 'bout this any more."

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A few seconds later, Sherlock asks me crisply: "Do you know of a non-defective nutritionist?"

"Do I know of a non-defective nutritionist?," I repeat, slowly, if only to qualify that he wasn't trying to insult an entire profession. Which I suspect he actually was, if only to drive my attention away from the proceeding topic.

Or maybe it has nothing to do with the profession. Maybe I'm not thinking about this logically enough.

Most likely, Sherlock considers the majority of people on this planet - regardless of their profession or accomplishments - to be idiots.

"Yes," he responds quickly - without reservation - and I feel another surge of amusement at his tone. The interplay between his word choices and his question arguably insulting (to some) yet still (legitimately) asking for help.

"Your view of non-defective is not necessarily my view," I start with a cautionary tone to my voice. "I would like something more specific. What are you looking for, precisely? What do you want in a nutritionist?"

A long suffering sigh, then. As if I am trying to test his patience, and not save him further aggravation.

"Are you trying to be difficult on purpose?," and now - another sigh. "Okay, here it is - in simple language. I am looking for a competent individual who can create a dietary plan that will be well rounded enough to put John at ease, while not aggravating my constitution."

I wait for a few seconds, trying to digest what he's saying.

"Your...constitution?"

"Yes, my constitution!," he exclaims, "I have a bleeding ulcer, Yuri. I can't just eat anything."

What he really is saying, I suspect, is that he's actually having difficulty putting anything into his mouth. Period. The 'just' could easily be removed from his wording, and the statement would suddenly be a lot more revealing about what is truly creating many of his problems.

"Okay. Well...can you give me a rundown of what you can eat, currently?"

Sherlock snorts.

"How does that help anything? You're not going to be my nutritionist," he says sullenly.
I'm quickly starting to realize that the combativeness I had observed from Sherlock when he was in the clinic is nothing unusual.

Also, I realize now that John Watson must have the patience of a saint.

"Perhaps not, but you can test out what you will say to a nutritionist on me first."

Another sigh then, and then a pause.

I hear his light breath over the phone. I sense his anxiety.

"Sherlock?," I qualify.

"Okay," he says so softly that I can't be sure the word is even intended for me at all. A little louder, then: "I eat...soup. Most days, umm, I have soup."

I lightly tap my Bic pen against a yellow pad of paper. 'Soup' is rather meaningless.

That could mean almost anything, really.

"What types?," I say evenly, feeling a welling up of foreknowledge. Awareness of what is to come next, in variant form.

"Miso. With green curry," he says rapidly. "Sometimes yellow curry."

I write it down.

I am plenty familiar with miso soup, and it's use by the Evelina adolescent ED ward, unfortunately.

"What about pea? Clam Chowder? Chicken noodle? Other varieties?"

There is a delay - a tide going out with his words - and coming back with darker water than I would have expected.

"Not usually," he responds in a restrained voice. "Sometimes I add marmite to it. To the miso, I mean."

I swallow away a swollen burn in my throat.

Miso is essentially broth. While healthy enough as part of a balanced meal structure, on its own it's not enough to sustain a mouse.

"For the vitamins," he adds with a false brightness, as if trying to gloss over his earlier words. "The marmite is high in B vitamins. It's healthy."

"Right," I say primly. "And what else?"

"I used to eat a lot of fruit - most fruits - a lot of vegetables. Rice cakes, hot sauce on them."

"You used to?," my question comes out colder than I had intended and I strive to soften my tone. "What do you mean you 'used to'?"

"Before my stomach got bad," Sherlock explains in a rush. "Now I can't...I can't eat like that," he tries, and I can feel his nervousness.

'I can't eat like that.'
I press my fingertips into my temples.

"What else do you eat besides miso soup with marmite, Sherlock?"

A shudder like a sound of air rustling papers, and: "Dandelion tea, most herbal teas, sometimes black tea. Coffee. Seltzer water, tap water, sometimes sugar free jello. So I can take vitamins. Otherwise I'd get sick if I took them on an empty stomach."

He sounds apologetic, and all I can hear is 14 year old Devon talking to me in his wheezy rasp. Itemizing his list of 14 foods. All low caloric, and all sugar free, and all essentially nutrition-less.

I hear Devon, and then I hear Sherlock - in his apologetic tone. And it feels like the same damn patient, only aged 22 years.

But still apologetic.

For the fact that he sometimes eats sugar-free jello.

I close my eyes and let the sense of desperate yearning to FIX THIS! wash over me.

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I have worked as a therapist for almost 20 years, and yet I still find that certain subjects make my throat ache with sadness. Certain admissions are harder to hear than others, and always will be, but one of the more jolting admissions is when I hear people approach the subject of food with actual fear, and sometimes with disgust.

The long-term reluctance that they've built up towards taking a bite of something that most of us take for granted is hard to witness. The slow erosion of their physical health is the tip of the iceberg.

These disorders are particularly pernicious, and once they have developed over many years - and well into adulthood - they are notoriously difficult to treat.

Generally, even a slight alteration towards health and slight improvement in BMI is considered a rousing success for the treatment team, but is often actively detested by the individual receiving care. Still, I can't help but feel a sorrow at the loss. The horrible loss of energy and focus and passion and determination. Some of the brightest minds so turned towards their own self-destruction...

In some ways, it seems even more painstakingly drawn out than other forms of suicide.

"Yuri?," Sherlock asks carefully now.

"So no solids?" I test gently, knowing the answer already - and hating that I have to ask. "Is it only liquids right now?"


"Then why do you need to see a nutritionist? It sounds like you know what vitamins to take. Everything is in order, right?"

A pause then, and a clipped sound.

"Right," Sherlock says with mock conviction, a waver in his words. "Everything is in order. Everything is fine. It is. I mostly don't want John to be so concerned."
His voice is faint, lost, and I metaphorically bite my tongue.

"You're right, Sherlock," I admit softly.

"I know I am," he says tiredly, in agreement - all fight suddenly lost.

It's time to stop this charade.

"There is nothing wrong with you, Sherlock. I mean that."

"Mmm?," he murmurs, "Okay."

I can sense the note of confusion, as if he's unsure if I am done or not.

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I'm not done.

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"You are not wrong, Sherlock. And your feelings are not wrong. Any fears you have - those are not wrong, either."

He makes a weird sound - a chuckle tied to a choking sound - and then says, "I know feelings are not wrong."

"Ulcers, by themselves, are not psychological issues that need or warrant my assistance. So I agree with you. John's wrong. Obviously, he must be. You've outlined why he's wrong, and why your approach to your health is logical. I will tell him that when I see him at his next appointment. Does that allay your fears?"

"Okay," Sherlock says softly, a voice like silt lightly settling. The lack of weight in his tone - the lack of joyous vindication - tells me more than I needed to hear.

"Okay. Good. Then we are in agreement. We just need to get this ulcer treated, then you'll be back to your old self, and everything will be fine."

He doesn't respond, and I close my eyes.

"Sherlock? There is nothing else wrong, am I right?"

"N-no," Sherlock says hesitantly in response to my bluntness. "There is nothing. Nothing else, really."

And in that momentary hesitation, my mind pulls up old words and old images. Sherlock in the clinic, pale to the extreme. His bare arms shifting about as he tried to hide faint, but still present, puncture scars from his younger days. The hard words of his file: parasuicidal ideation; mood disturbance; self-harm.

"Okay. Well, I will get around to talking to John. But I want to thank you for calling me."

There is nothing but the rapid breath against the phone for a few seconds. No acknowledgement.

Of course, I have no intentions of hanging up.

I hold on a few more moments, waiting for the eager agreement that he doesn't need my help. That
he's fine. That he needs to heal his stomach ulcers and other physical disorders. That he is happy I am aware that John is overreacting - and so on.

Then a wheeze. A high, streaky wheeze. A shuttery breath.

"Sherlock?," I test more gingerly.

"I don't know what to do," he whispers.

"What?," I ask more out of shock than anything else.

"I. don't. know. what. to. do," he grits, the words deepening in emotion. "I don't know what's wrong with me," he hiccoughs, obviously trying to keep his fear at bay; in that moment, I feel a well of pity for him.

"Do you think you might be sick?," I question delicately, aware of the power of certain words. Of certain suggestions. "Psychologically unwell?," I clarify in the moment, to preserve this conversation, this admission.

So he cannot go back on this later.

"Ma-maybe. I doan know," he mumbles, miserable. "I doan know what to do anymore."

I look at my mobile screen, and at John Watson's number, and I then type in a message. Within 15 seconds, I have received confirmation of my message and an acceptance of my suggestion.

"Alright, Sherlock. I understand," I test carefully. "And I know you are probably feeling pretty overwhelmed right now. So I want you to text John and ask him to come back to the flat as soon as possible, alright? Is that okay with you?"

"I doan wantto disturb him," he mumbles, his stress much more apparent now. He's likely been skirting his ability to cope with his issues for a long time now.

"Would you like me to text him?," I offer carefully, willing to accept responsibility for the action that seems to be causing him his present anxiety - and also wanting to maintain the illusion that he has some choice in what comes next. When ultimately, from an emergency standpoint, he really doesn't.

Because I have already texted John.

"I doan know," he mutters. "I doan know what to do!"

"Alright. Well, I think that I might know what to do right now, okay Sherlock? I think it's a good idea if John comes back to the flat. I know he'd want to help you right now, and if you can just admit to John - even just to John, and no one else - that you need his help - then you will start to feel better."

Nothing. Static. Hiss.

Nothing.

Please.

A pause, and then a tiny, barely audible. "Okay."

"Okay," I repeat, mirroring his sentiment. "Good. You did really well, Sherlock. It's going to be okay."
Okay,” he whispers again, sounding torn. Sounding as if he has betrayed himself.

If only I could convince him of his strength. That he's done nothing wrong in calling me, or wanting me to call John.

That he's not a sociopath. Nor is he damaged in any way.

Wounded, perhaps.

But not damaged.

Damaged, to me, means destroyed.

And Sherlock is obviously not destroyed.

But he's in pain.
Chapter Summary

I want to make note that I will be putting SI tags or abuse-discussion tags in front of specific chapters from now on. Generally, while the descriptions of SI are not detailed - the feelings surrounding SI can be - so I have been encouraged by a reader to put warnings in place.

That said, there is a slight SI warning for this chapter. It's discussion is milder compared to the discussion of the last chapter, but it's present all the same. I have mixed feelings about this chapter, mainly because sometimes I have an idea or two that I want to put into the story - but given my life, at late - it's sometimes difficult for me to get everything worked into the story in a timely manner. So it leaves me adding bits and pieces in a more haphazard fashion.

Still, I am trying my best to juggle a pretty hefty new workload, a recent move and other changes with my online writing projects.

At any rate, I hope this chapter still advances the story appropriately.

((Thanks for the diligent reading and the supportive comments, you guys. I have some amazing readers, and I don't take your reviews or feedback for granted - please know that)).

Aaand...we are back to John's POV.

When I get to Baker Street, I trot up the steps two at a time.

Yuri's texts didn't sound alarming, but they did hold a note of insistence that I get back to the flat and back to Sherlock. 'Right now' was the feeling conveyed. And I've never received a text from Yuri like that before. I've never sensed such urgency from him before.

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When I get to the top of the stairs, I knock a little bit in anticipation of what I might find (most likely nothing, most likely nothing at all, Sherlock's doing better - he's seeing a therapist now, and he knows that I'm on board, and that I'm not going to just up and leave, and so he must be getting better) and then open the door.

Unsurprisingly, it's been left open for me.

I try to keep my voice evenly paced when I speak. Calm. Nothing indicating worry. As I scan the room, and catch his form, I can tell just by looking at Sherlock that he's feeling guilty. Which makes me feel, in turn, as if I am not doing my job as his best friend. He shouldn't be feeling guilty because other people are concerned for him.

"Hey there," I say softly, resisting an impulse to go over there, pull him to my side, and plant a kiss on the corner of his skull. It's been a feeling - almost a drive - that has been increasing in need over these last few weeks. And yet (not a week back) I was the one who told him that we should pace
ourselves and hold off on anything that could be seen as 'physical.'

Of course, by physical I meant sexual. Not careful touches meant to show concern or tenderness.

If anything, Sherlock needs more of that sort of contact because I have no doubt that he's touch-starved, in the sense of safe, gentle, reassuring physical presence. The presence of a friend, or maybe even a person more complicated in feeling than friend - but a safe interaction all the same. One he can feel good about, and one he knows is safe.

Because Sherlock is understandably confused about what he feels for me (and vice versa). Yet, I know I am not confused about my feelings in this moment to hold him.

I just don't know how well any touch - even something I would deem incredibly safe, would go over right now.

Generally, touch doesn't go over very well at the best of times with him. I know that he needs it, but he's likewise conflicted about needing it - and sharing that need. Even acknowledging that need, really.

Sherlock has never seemed one to ease into an embrace, even if it's a simple, platonic hug. As to my own feelings, I can't help but think that it's actually been somewhat present - but hushed - for awhile now. (Likely, it's what Mycroft picked up on weeks ago, even though I had no awareness of my feelings at a conscious level).

However, now he's sick, and scared. Arguing that he's neither. Still trying to hold onto his Sherlockian edge and cutting commentary of life and people as if that ornery need to say something snarky for the sake of being snarky actually protects him.

I guess, in an odd way - I understand his logic.

If people are either dangerous, or let-downs, it makes sense to pull back and avoid long term exposure to both.

So in a very real way, Sherlock treats people as if they are caustic chemicals.

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The amazing thing, from my perspective, is that he attempts to deal with people at all.

With Mycroft's financial reserves and his own trust fund (which I have recently come to realize he does have access to in full, now) he could have become much more of a hermit than he is at present. He's downright chummy considering how much he could have isolated himself. Which seems to indicate that he doesn't really want to be isolated from others at all.

Not really.

My eyes glance back down at my mobile, at the last text sent.

'Are you free right now? Can you meet up with Sherlock at home? I think he needs someone to sit with him for a bit.'

As I re-read the words, I can hear Yuri's crisp voice in my mind - in his hybrid accent of French and British.

"Did my psychiatrist actually text you? For heaven's sake! This is completely unnecessary," I hear
Sherlock mutter, his voice pitched a little on the high side. He also has a flushed look about him. As if he's been screaming at someone, or else is coming down with a fever.

And while it's totally possible that he HAS shouted at Yuri ((very little seems to set him off these days)) this redness looks well suffused.

I pull my chair a little closer to where he is parked on the sofa, and then reach over to gauge the situation. I can feel the tension in his facial muscles and his butterfly-soft eyebrows quirking up in questioning. Then his eyes flutter shut, and he seems to lean slightly more into my touch. I doubt he's aware of this action, but I feel a suffusion of warmth and empathy bloom in my chest.

"Not feeling well, are you?" I murmur against his skull.

"Not really," he admits, his voice matching mine. "But I'm not contagious, I don't think."

I bark out a bit of a laugh and move in incrementally slower, and - surprisingly - he leans slightly against me.

"That wasn't my concern," I say kindly, really restraining myself from adding 'love' to the end of the sentence.

I wonder if we will ever have the type of relationship that advances to a stage where I can readily refer to him as "Love." Where there are no restrictions on the usage of the word. And if so - what would that sort of relationship look like? What would it entail?

In all honesty, while I can now admit to myself that what I feel for Sherlock is something different to platonic in feeling, I don't truly believe I have ever felt sexually attracted to him. What I feel for him is an intense emotional connection, with romantic highlights that come out at - unfortunately it seems - the worst possible times.

But I don't think it's a sexual interest.

My self-proclaimed status as a robust heterosexual aside, I have tried to ask myself the tough questions about my possible feelings for Sherlock, and have tried to ask myself if an interest in engaging him in sexual activities is something that I would ever want. So far the idea has never seemed to rouse me sexually, which is something I must admit surprises me. Especially since I have had the impulse to kiss Sherlock, and to hold him close to me. To hold his hand, definitely, and maybe even stroke his back, or his arms. An odd impulse to engage with him sensorally, and maybe even a yearning to comfort him through physical touch (especially since I've always been inclined to be more hands-on with partners and those I had romantic feelings for).

All the same, I am starting to sense that there must be a distinct difference between romantic attraction and sexual attraction, since the latter is conspicuously absent here, while the former seems to be very strong - and continuing to grow in intensity.

Which in some ways is a bit of a relief. Not because I have anything against those who do not identify as heterosexual, but because the issues I am tackling with Sherlock are voluminous; the most complicated issues for him, I suspect - and the ones we haven't really even started to discuss in great detail yet - likely have to do with sex.

In some ways, therefore, I feel slightly relieved that at least my feelings for him - in this one area alone - seem to be unchanging. Because if the subject is one that scares him (as I assume it does), then I don't want to be tied to that fear.

Or, at least I feel relieved until I consider the fact that I have no idea of knowing what he feels for
others. What he might even feel for me.

Is it romantic? Is it sexual and romantic? Is it neither?

And, perhaps most importantly...how will he cope if I don't feel the same sorts of feelings for him in return?

Sure, he has termed himself asexual. But he also spent weeks trying to convince me he wasn't ill.

He also seems rather insistent that he's at a perfectly acceptable weight for his height, even now. Even once we've established that he's not. Even though we have already talked about this issue quite a bit already.

So I am not entirely sure if Sherlock's statements about who he is or what he feels in a certain area are always right on the mark.

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His light weight leans against my shoulder, and I can feel the slight heat of a feverish body warming the side of my torso.

I am coming to learn that Sherlock is much more pliable, if not at times almost 'cuddly' - when unwell. It's almost as if the heat ravaging his cells is, likewise, incapacitating his logical mind. His tendency to overthink.

He responds in a more childlike fashion when sick. Especially when drowsy, as he is right now.

My hand, cool and dry, ghosts over his forehead yet again. I really should take his temperature.

"You called Yuri, huh?"

I keep my voice light and easy.

Sherlock - eyes still closed, hair matted with sweat against his head - nods lazily.

"You wanted me to make an effort," he says in a stupor of sleepiness. "I promised you that I would try."

"You did," my voice is matching his body for warmth. "But that doesn't mean I'm not surprised. I'm proud of you, Sherlock."

Sherlock seems to pause for a few microseconds, then tentatively snuggles closer against me. There is no other word for Sherlock's movements now, other than 'snuggling.'

"How are you feeling now?"

"Mmmtired," he mumbles, "And I don't want to think about it all. I just want to pause it. Pause life. Just not deal with it any more tonight. I'm sick of thinking about it and talking about it. You must be even more sick of it than I am," he whispers. "I bet you're half sick to death of me by now."

I freeze for a couple of sections, not knowing what to say. When I finally realize that doing nothing - saying nothing, but also not communicating something through body language - is going to make his anxiety worse, I wrap my hand around his midsection and stroke his hair.

"I'm sick of this disorder in your life, and I guess - by extension - in my life. Because it is a source of pain for you, even if you don't seem to always acknowledge that fact. But I'll never be sick of you. I
"want you healthy, is all."

He shakes his head, fever-damp hair tickling my palm. His locks are now raven-black with sweat.

"It's part of me," he exhales. "I mean," and he licks his lips now, "the predilection. I don't think it's about just gaining a bunch of weight - like that would be a cure-all, a fix. I don't know why everything about how I do things has to change!"

Tension lines have formed above his eyebrows, and his hands are shaking.

I let out of gush of air, and straighten my hands, my knuckles. Wish I knew the magic combination of words that would make him well. Make him see that he deserves so much more than this sort of life, and make him feel that truth throughout his whole body. Not just hear my words and understand the meaning, but know my words with his whole being.

I wish I knew how to undo the damage that has been done to him.

"Not everything about you has to change. I don't want that, I doubt Yuri wants that, and if that's what is making-"

"You both want me to eat like everyone else, and sleep and talk and act like everyone else and-"

I take his hands, wildly flapping about, and still them.

"Not true. I don't want you to be like everyone else at all. Come here," I mumble, stroking his fingers.

He leans his head down against his crossed legs, miserable, instead.

"No, come here," I repeat, finally maneuvering Sherlock about with my body until he settles into me. It's almost a hug.

A few seconds later I feel a whoosh of breath spill from his chest. Like a punctured balloon.

"You seem to becoming more agitated as the days go on, and not less. Do you know why?," I ask him carefully. "We are talking more, but you seem more agitated the more we talk about these subjects. I know these are tough things to discuss - I'm not downplaying that for a second - but I want to know if there is something I could do that would make you feel better. Better able to talk to me, talk about what you're dealing with, or talk about how you feel."

"No," he barks out, cheeks fuchsia and his voice conveying frustration and shame.

"You know," I am trying something, and I have no idea if it will work, but it's worth a shot. "When I was a child - about 7 - I got this subsidized camp placement. I got to go to Brighton, and I camped with Cubs and Scouts in a little cabin by the beach. Anyway, it was the first time I had ever been away from home for any length of time, and I was just terrifiedly homesick the entire time. I can still recall how my stomach felt all tight and wound up, and at night I had a horrible time falling asleep. A few nights I even woke up with a sob in my throat. After about three or four nights of this - and mind you, camp was only for just over a week for us, at that age - one of the counselors talked to me. Told me that he knew how I was feeling, and that it was called homesickness, and it was mostly because it was all so new. He told me that if I could keep in mind that I'd be home in just a few more nights and just try to accept being at camp as something new but otherwise fun, well - some of that upset would maybe go away a little bit."
Sherlock is listening intently.

I wonder if he ever attended a summer camp.

If so, I know it would never have been a subsidized placement. Really, there are only two possibilities here: he either went to the poshest camp known to humankind with a bunch of snooty kids, or else he never went to camp, period.

Sadly, I suspect the latter. At least, for his early childhood. After his care was absorbed by Mycroft, everything might have been different. At the same time, by the sound of it, Sherlock's health went downhill around that period, too, and I doubt Mycroft - still in his teens, I must remind myself - could have managed much more than barely to hold on and try to survive himself.

"Did it work?", he asks tentatively. "Did speaking to the counselor make you feel better?"

I startle, give a little self-deprecating laugh.

"The truth of it?"

Sherlock nods against my shoulder.

"Truth is, well, that the counselor was so patient and so warm and kind...I think the tension rolling around in my belly had to be let out. So...it came out. Luckily, I didn't throw up or anything like that, but I basically burst into tears. It was like...his kindness made me cry. But if no one had asked me how I was doing, or if no one had been kind like that...I don't think I would have cried at all. I would have steeled my resolve to show nothing but little-kid strength, and I wouldn't have cried. I know I wouldn't have. I think I cried then because some part of me realized...that I was allowed to cry, if that makes sense. That everything wouldn't all fall apart, and that the counselor wouldn't laugh at me or mock me for feeling out of sorts. That ultimately, it was safe for me to show how sad I was really feeling. I think the emotion came to the fore, because I knew I could let it."

Sherlock pulls back. Frowns.

"But he was kind to you. I don't...I don't understand that, John. Why did his kindness make you cry?"

I give Sherlock a look: a patient look, an expectant look.

"What?", he asks sharply, knowing I want him to make a connection here, and not knowing what connection there is to be made.

Which must infuriate someone like him. A person who generally knows what everyone is thinking and feeling before that person, themselves, is aware of those thoughts or feelings.

"What?!"

"Let me ask you this, first: why have you been feeling worse these last few days?"

Sherlock rubs his hands against his lap.

"I don't know what you mean," he says quickly.

"No? You're sure? So you've been feeling better? Less anxious?"

He continues to look at his legs. At his nubby protruding knee bones.
"It's okay to admit to not feeling happy. To maybe feeling scared, or uncertain. It's okay to admit that you're in pain, Sherlock," I say evenly, even though my own heart is jack hammering away in my chest.

"I should be happier. I...," he pauses, looks at me, "and you. I mean, you know more now - and I told you," and his voice drops down to the lowest octave. "Enough. About it, before - what happened when I was little, and about all," and he points to his legs, as if they sum up the whole of his issues, "this, and Yuri said that's supposed to help. To confide in someone. Which I've done. You said that's supposed to help, too. Everyone says that, but it doesn't feel like that. It feels like the reverse. I don't understand why...because it didn't feel this badly when I kept it all to myself, and I hate that that's the case. I know that's not how it's supposed to work at all."

His confusion is breaking my heart.

"I don't think there is one right way to feel about this, and I don't think your feelings are wrong or atypical, either. But maybe, it's like...how I felt when I was a kid. When I was homesick. Maybe you always felt that pain, but you kept the emotions and thoughts to yourself, Sherlock. I think we all have this incredible way of surviving through pain, but we get through a lot of hard stuff on our own. Sometimes, it's about repressing certain thoughts, and certain feelings. Sublimating them with other things. Work - your work, the puzzles and riddles that keep your mind busy. That relentless feeling, of always having to do more, and everything about how you've lived for so long. Very little sleep, lots of mental stimulation - that's been your life for so long. Running from place to place with little time to process anything but the immediacy of a case."

He bites his lip.

"But that works for me, John! I got through Oxford doing that! I had top honours!"

I lightly hold his wrists, trying to keep him sitting down. I can tell if I don't, he's likely to be up and pacing within a few minutes, and mentally constructing walls as to why my arguments are invalid. Why I just simply don't 'get him.'

"You got top honours because you have a gifted mind, Sherlock. That's the truth of it. But that could have been achieved without drugs, or sleep deprivation, or these sorts of problems. So let's not cloud the waters, eh? You know that your behaviour is more than just quirky right now - don't you? Your quirks - my God, Sherlock - I love your quirks...I don't want to ever see those be lost! If you want to get Chinese at 2 in the morning, while discussing a locked room mystery? I'm game. You want to completely rewrite the rules of Cluedo, or do science experiments in the microwave or riddle the fridge with things that really shouldn't be there? - and I can't believe I am saying this, really - but I LOVE that about you. Therapy isn't about taking those interests away, or those peculiarities or differences away. I never want to see you be just like everyone else. I love what makes you different...don't you know that?"

He rubs at his legs again. At this rate, I am surprised he hasn't taken the skin off portions of his body.

"Why is this so hard? For me?," and Sherlock glances up at then, nervous distress clear in his eyes. They are grey-blue round moons, imploring me to make sense of it. Some sort of emotional sense, even though - of course - I can't show him logic in the illogic of his actions any better than he can.

Hell, I probably can not even articulate why he feels as he does as well as he could explain it, given that I've never suffered from an eating disorder. Never had the inclination towards that sort of behaviour. Cannot see or appreciate how the withholding of something so vital is so fiercely protected and almost beloved. A beloved, if knowingly twisted, secret. Akin to slowly poisoning yourself, but admiring the bottle of cyanide pills as you do so, while keeping them close to you with
a surge of irrational fondness.

And perhaps, deep down, it could make sense. But only from the perspective of one who considers someone in the trap of such behaviour to be subconsciously flirting with death. To be, perhaps, prone to suicidal ideation.

If someone was keeping the very fateful aspect of degenerating health on the table as a means of playing some protracted and bizarre game of Russian roulette - then I could see some strange purpose or 'reason' behind that form of self-harm. But self-harm for the very sake of it - not to end a tortured life, but merely to add more pain to a life that has already suffered too much?

How can I make sense of his behaviour for him when I cannot conceive of something more illogical? When I cannot conceive of why he, in a million years, would be doing what he's doing?

But he is, and he knows he is, and I think that a part of him must want to stop.

Must be raw-tired by now.

The real healing, for him, will occur when he feels that insistent tug towards self-care and self-compassion.

"I don't know, Sherlock. What you've been doing to yourself is something that I can't conceive of doing to myself."

He winces then, eyes suddenly downcast. And I feel like a heel. I feel like I've slapped him in a moment or relatively rare vulnerability and trust.

"You think it's disgusting," he spits out, eyes suddenly looking red.

"No! I don't. I find it bewildering and, yes, at times I find it scary. But I find it...all of it...outside of my comprehension. I find it pernicious, too, which it is. I see how it has you caught up in it's claws. It's like a monster, Sherlock. One that has grasped you, and has twisted you into it's shape. I know you think you are the one in control, and I know why control is such a big deal for you, but this disorder has taken any control you had away."

"It's not about that," he says rapidly, cheeks suddenly red in shame.

"Why not? It would fit. It would be textbook for this type of disorder, and it would also make sense given your history."

He seems to be wavering in acceptance of my analysis, and for some reason that irritates me. Perhaps because it seems as if he's trying to understand the connection when the connection is so in-your-face blatant. When anyone can understand that how he was "treated" as a child (his term. I readily insist on calling it abuse, and would use even more appropriate terms if not for the look of discomfort that passes over his features when I try to use such terms in relation to the subject at hand) may have just some little, tiny connection to the problems he is currently facing and the feelings he can't seem to make sense of more than thirty years later.

"For God's sake, you had all control over your own body taken away as a child! I know you want to feel like you have control now. It's not difficult to see the relationship here between what you are doing and what was done to you, Sherlock!"

He seems to be listening now with an odd look on his face, and I can't help but hope that I've made a
dent. Positively changed some part of his analysis, or broadened his awareness of what he is doing and just how damaging what he is doing actually is - and not just to his body. But how it impacts his entire life - emotionally, mentally, inter-personally?

"I know it's not logical, John. I mean, I really do understand that much. At the same time, when I do certain things - things you say scare you - I feel like I've lanced something. Something full of toxins, something full of garbage. And I can't really explain it much better than that, because if I could - if I had this figured out, then I wouldn't have gotten this bad again. But it's necessary when I feel like this - because it...it's like lancing out the pus."

I shake my head sternly.

"I don't want this in your life in any form, Sherlock. The hope I have for you is not that you'll merely be borderline healthy for the rest of your life. I'm not concerned about rounding off rough edges, making you 'presentable.' I care about you, wholly you! To me, and yes I'm speaking plainly now - but you have a disorder, Sherlock. You have a serious disorder that is known to have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness! So, in part - you're right. I don't want you to just put on weight, or just look better. It's not about looks to me! It's about YOU! How you feel! How you feel about yourself, when no one is around, and when no cases are present for you to solve or obsess about. When it's just you, and those memories - and how those memories invariably make you feel, and what those memories make you want to do!"

He's fixed his eyes above and behind me, and is now breathing in a regimented fashion.

"I want you to be healthy, Sherlock. I want to help you get to a place where - when you are alone with those memories - your first impulse is to be kind to yourself. Show yourself love. Not make yourself sicker. Not add to the litany of cruelties your body has already been forced to endure since you were practically a baby."

His jaw muscles have now tightened up in emotion, and the change in his features almost takes me breath away; it further draws out his face in cords and lines and haunting thinness, so I brush the rippled lines of muscles, no fat, with my thumbs - as if trying to erase the horrid emaciation with my hands.

"Okay?," I croak, my voice sore and tired. Now I feel like crying, for all this talk of needing to vent. He still doesn't respond, though. Just continues to breathe that harsh, wheezing breath with that painfully confused look on his face.

"Sherlock?," I test again, coughing a bit, rising to meet him. Trying to capture his line of sight.

When that still doesn't work, I lightly touch his elbow, and he jolts back as if poked with a live current.

"I don't want you to take this away from me, because it's mine! It was my way of keeping it all...from falling apart in my mind. It was my ritual, and I never said I was open to being changed! And I do love myself! This was my sanity when there was NOTHING and no one and you have no right to take that away, John! Not when you cannot even "conceive" of why it helps me! Not when it bewilders you at best and terrifies you!"

I pull back, stunned at his vehemence. The anguished taint to his voice, to his insistence that he needs this beast in his life.

Not only that, but now his eyes are flickering about, unable to focus on anything for very long. I can
only imagine the thoughts rampaging through his mind. The haunting lies from cruel adults, telling him I "don't really care" perhaps, or that I'm going too give up on him, too, perhaps - and then, without his debilitating ritual - which may, in some odd way kept him going - does he worry where he'll be? Stripped of his ritual, and everything else?

Is he unable to focus on my words now because he's listening to decades-old lies, whispering perversions to him as a child? Going about and about in his mind, just beyond the reach of my voice?

And what did they say to make him feel as if this self-imposed torture was the highest ideal that he could cultivate for himself? That this was lofty?

That this was the best way to cope?

What switch did they flip in his magnificent brain and gifted mind to get him - Sherlock Holmes, as big a lover of logic as he is a lover of music - to disregard all logic for the pursuit of sporadic self-ruin?

I have no idea how to help him through this.

The only thing I know for certain - for absolute certain - is that I love him.

So the only hope, now, is that this love will be sufficient.

When I am feeling slightly calmer, I decide to talk.

"That's not how I choose to think about it, Sherlock. Anymore than if you had - say - brain cancer. I wouldn't think the cancer was part of you. I know, I know that you can make an argument for cancer thus being part of your cells, part of your body - but it is a disease! Just like this is a disease and it kills, dammit! This disorder isn't part of you. Not to me. It's impacting you. But I don't see that as the same thing at all!"

He's quiet for an impossibly long moment and when he begins to speak again, his voice is rough and low and husky, as if his lungs are congested.

They possibly are.

"In the French language they say, essentially, that someone "has hunger." They do not say that they are hungry, as we do in English. Even though hunger is a sensation and what we are is, essentially, sensating beings. That always made me a little antsy. I didn't want to be hunger or be fullness. I wanted none of it. I wanted it gone. I wanted all of those sensations to go away, and I still want them to go away. Do you see?"

I recognize the change in tenses, and feel a burgeoning awareness.

"But you can't make them go away, and you never will be able to, Sherlock. So, you had to choose between fullness and hunger, and you chose hunger. Not once, but repeatedly."

Sherlock tenses, stares at his beloved skull ("a friend. Well, I say friend") on the mantle.

"It seems more removed," he says with a noticeable shake in his voice. "The only option out of an
array of options that I could live with, really."

I give his comment a few moments of silence. I have far more questions now than I did before, but I also realize that too many questions all at once will feel like I'm rushing him. Moving in too fast, from all directions. I want to keep the pace of things reasonable. A conversation.

Not a pressured inquisition, as he might otherwise feel if I give voice to all my concerns.

"Removed from what?," I test a few pauses later.

"From the body. From giving in to all it's demands."

I recall Mycroft's advisement now, strong and ringing in my head.

That Sherlock would not be ready for anything skirting the romantic for some time, even if he was seemingly interested. That, above all, Sherlock would likely never be ready for a sexual relationship. At least, that was Mycroft's belief, which at the time sounded typically stifling.

Now I realize what prompted the commentary in the first place.

The unspoken 'but' was there, of course - latent in his words. But so too was Mycroft's assessment that Sherlock wouldn't be ready for such a relationship without making a lot of emotional progress first.

I want to ask - and I feel that it is necessary to know - when Sherlock first stopped eating. When he first started skipping snacks, then meals, then the whole of it for favour of hunger and not "fullness."

Except, I kind of have an idea about that, too. Distantly, I can recall Mycroft's explanation of how it began. With Sherlock, teetering on the edge of puberty. Then suddenly engaging in self-starvation.

So eating, as necessary as it is was likely linked to development into a more adult form - at least in Sherlock's mind.

And with those changes, the expectation of more adult activities.

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Perhaps what I've looked at as self-abuse is really tied to a greater and much fuller, but not yet articulated fear: the fear of being put into a position whereby Sherlock is expected to engage with other adults, not only as as an intellectual adult, but as a sexual being.

But how do I even launch that as a possibility? Voice that concern?

And even if I could - should I? Or would it be something best left to Yuri? In a different setting entirely?

Because certainly the very notion is going to cause some stress for my best friend. He's deftly skirted around discussing his sexuality with even greater skill than he has avoided the subject of his declining health.

He now blinks up at me owlishly - afraid, I can sense, that he's said too much.

"So you're worried that - what? You have difficulty understanding who you are? Without those experiences? Without the feeling of hunger?"

"You could argue that this is what we are, ultimately. A series of sense events. A series of sense
impressions, stored and analyzed. Your sense impressions differ from my sense impressions, and you create a framework from which to judge and analyze the world that differs from my own."

I give a sad smile at that - at his insistence that his self-denial and his behaviours as of late are nothing more than the tireless workings of a scientific mind drawn to understanding the differences in personality formation.

"It's not funny," he hisses. "Not if you think about it. Not if you break it down into base components. Who we are - what we are - is comprised of the entirety of what we have lived through. You change a major past event - a sense event - and you don't have the same person anymore. Not really."

I give the side of his forehead a gentle stroke.

"I don't think it's funny, Sherlock. I just think that there may be another reason why you were - and are - drawn to a state of denial as opposed to one where you are bodily fed. Full."

He looks up at me with reservation, and crosses his malnourished arms across his chest. His 'shield' maneuver.

"What? What reasons?," he asks hollowly.

I resist an impulse to bite my lip, and try to summon my resolution to do what I need to do. Say what I need to say.

'Ultimately this is for him. To help him.'

"A couple weeks back, Mycroft told me a little bit about how this first started. This...restriction."

Now Sherlock unwittingly gives in to my impulse - and bites his own lip. Hard.

I see his chest rise and fall with greater rapidity.

"What of it?"

The fact that he's so scared could break my heart, so I push that thought aside. It would be all too easy to go soft on him. To give in to the disorder, and to give in out of a misguided sense of wanting to protect him.

But I can't protect him from himself.

"Your brother mentioned that, from his perspective, he thought perhaps you stopped eating because you were trying to stave off puberty."

Sherlock swallows, looks away, then rubs his hand over a pink-infused forehead.

"Well - even so," he rambles nervously, "I think it's a little late to discuss staving off puberty now. But I still find it hard to eat. So Mycroft obviously doesn't know what he's talking about and likely never did."

I frown at the easy dismissal, and remind myself that Sherlock is a master at redirecting conversations. He's done it with amazing finesse since I first met him.

"Of course. Puberty is puberty, over and done with now. You could even say it's dead, now - so to speak. But what if, what Mycroft meant was that it was less about the process and more about, I think, what the process is supposed to mark? The changes it is supposed to mark?"
Sherlock has now lost his easy smile, and is testing out his next words carefully.

"I think I am aware of the changes I underwent. And I think - after more than two decades - I have learned to accept them. I am taller, my voice is deeper. I can live with that," he says dryly, with a fake ease.

"But don't you think that some of this...restriction...could be linked to a deeper fear, as it relates."

He cuts me off. Cuts the very suggestion off at the base of culmination.

"No! I don't! I'm not some mewling, pathetic little child, John! I am a scientist. I can both discuss and conceptualize sexual matters far better than the average person, and you bloody well know it!"

I frown, unsure how to voice the semi-formed ideas in my mind without having them shot down before I finish the first sentence.

"But I'm not talking about sex," I say carefully, and he stops his tirade, watching me with sudden apprehension. I shut my eyes, and finish my assertion. "I'm talking about rape. Those two events are very different things, even though society often treats them as one activity. They are not the same event. Not at all, Sherlock."

Sherlock blanches, and stands abruptly. His hands are trembling, and I hide my wince.

This time, I do not look away. I do not shut my eyes.

"You wouldn't be the first survivor of this form of child abuse to conflate sex with rape. And it's not a crazy concern to wonder if maybe part of you - even if emotionally - wants to be sick because of the obviousness of what sickness means to everyone around you," I say briskly, needing to advance this challenge. Needing him to tell me that I'm wrong. That I'm way off the mark. "Sickness of this form changes you in an overtly physical way, Sherlock. It visually and immediately communicates the fact that you are in pain, but also that you are not emotionally ready to relate to anyone in very certain ways. It tells everyone - everyone, Sherlock - that you are not to be looked at in a sexual way because it erases and distorts those sexual."

"Shut up!" Sherlock suddenly yells in anguish, eyes wild and whole body taut like a bow that's been pulled back just a little too much.

So I stop talking, and realize that my chest is heaving - as if I have just run a very long distance at a very fast pace.

Sherlock continues to stare at me: dead-eyed, face screwed up - mouth screwed up most of all - ears violet, shoulders hunched to his chin in discomfort.

Yet I just want him to SEE. To see that it can't go on.

"You are ill, and you are preoccupied with being ill, and generally no one of any sense or concern would engage with anyone else who has anorexia, sexually. And deep down, I think you know that."

He shakes his head, his mouth agape. Then closes his eyes and bites back a yelping sound.

"Can you tell me that is wrong? That anything I've said just now is incorrect?"
When he opens his eyes, I notice that - for a few seconds - they remain unfocused.

But then they turn to meet mine - these grey-flecked eyes, so terribly *angry.*

"Fuck you, John," he says in contempt, before racing from the room.
Author's notes: Life has been hard lately. And that's all I am going to write about it, but I want to thank everyone for their patience.

I mean it.

Thank you. ///

JOHN's POV

At 10 pm, I send Sherlock a text as a peace offering of sorts.

'I was out of line. I am sorry. Please write me back.'

At 10:03, 10:27, and 10:59 pm, I send more texts of increasing desperation.

'Be angry with me. I get it. I will leave it alone.'

'I stuck my foot in my mouth, and I am sorry. I just wanted to help. I just want to see you get better.'

'Answer me, Sherlock. Or I WILL contact Mycroft. I am not joking around.'

At midnight - on the minute - I get ready to send another text. My brain spirals oddly around sending 'fuck you, too' for the merest semi-second before I recoil in shame.

Sure, I want nothing more than to 'fix' Sherlock. But badgering him to talk about subjects that haunt him this greatly isn't helping and I need to step back. Try a different tactic.

Just as I am contemplating my own anger and the fact that none of it is really caused by Sherlock - that what I want is to lash out at the people who have hurt him, hurt him so fucking horribly...

...this text comes in.

No SH following the text, for some reason, but it's his number all the same. And then, once I read it and read the brief little blurb - a fear like I have never known leaps into my throat. A fear so rabid and hot that my hands are pounding on the keys, trying to get to Lestrade, Mycroft, Molly. Anyone who can help me. Help me help him.

His message is this:

'I am sorry.'

That's the message.

Just those three fucking awful words.
Just that; so loaded and also so vague as to send me into a panic.

I immediately send a response:

'Sherlock - where are you?!

Nothing.

His message stands alone - cold and alone. Three little words at midnight.

At 12:02 am I pull up Mycroft's contact profile in my phone and within seconds he's on the line while I ramble off my concerns. Within two minutes of that he is off the phone; apparently he has promised to 'trace' Sherlock, and I am under very precise instructions to stay off the phone, he says, in case of an 'emergency.' Unless, of course, Sherlock's number comes in. In which case I will answer the phone, Mycroft's instructions be damned.

The real emergency tonight might be that, at this rate, I'm going to have a heart attack. My vision spots and swirls and I sit down quickly in 'my' chair, chucking the Union Jack pillow across the room as I do so. I proceed to glare at Sherlock's violin, hands fidgeting by my sides. Restive.

He doesn't even play it any longer. Hasn't in weeks.

'Fat fucking lot of good you are, you overpriced piece of bark...,' and then I am up again, turning on all the lights in the suite. Checking the windows of the flat and peering out into the street, as if he'll magically just be there. Lingering about on the street, black-gloved hands twisting against his belstaff in anxiety. Knowing he's gone and made a mess of the night, but otherwise okay...

Okay. Okay.

Otherwise okay.

Because he has to be.

I can see him so clearly, so clearly being alright - but not as he is now.

No, the Sherlock of my brain (of my 'mind palace' if such a thing exists) is the Sherlock of yester-year. When I first met him, really.

Face lean, but not hollow.

Skin pale but not ashen.

Eyes intense but not haunted.

Raven-black hair in posh ringlets - not the tattered, sweaty mess that plasters his concave face at present.

'He needs a hair trim', my brain idiotically supplies before I slam the window down and latch it.

I can't sit still, so even though I am shaky I teeter to the kitchenette and make myself tea. The bone china set we use as an abode for the sugar cubes and cream rattles in my hand, and I spill an incredible amount of it into my cup. Then I wander back to the living room, check my phone, check that the volume is on, double check my texts.

Check. Check again.
Still nothing - from either Sherlock or Mycroft.

Just as I am about to call Mycroft back, a text comes in.

'I have located him.'

'Where is he?!” I text back.

'He is being taken to Maudsley. I will call when I have more information, John.'

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Maudsley?

Maudsley is a hospital in South London.

I have no idea why he'd even be in that area of the city.

I have no idea what Mycroft's words really mean, so I text back:

'Is he OKAY Mycroft?'

No response comes in for almost ten minutes.

'No, he's not.'

And then, a nanosecond later my phone chirrups:

'But he will be.'

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Of course, without prompting, I chucked a bunch of random things into my overnight bag and am currently careening through the bowels of the city in a black Taxi cab.

Suddenly, I have the strong sense to contact Mycroft if only to let him know that I am on my way. After all, I don't know if Sherlock has even been admitted under his legal name, or under that of an alias, or which ward he's been taken to...or anything else, really.

'On my way. I'll be there in about 15,' I sent off to Mycroft, finally.

When no response comes in for some time, I start to wonder what's going on until a response volleys back.

'Best not tonight. S is under 72 hour compulsory hold. No visitors.'

Compulsory hold?

The words stop me from responding in irritation, and as I look up I see the red brick vaulted arches of the Maudsley hospital.

"We're here, mate," the cabbie informs me gently before checking the meter.

"Yeah," I respond dully, pocketing my mobile and handing over an assortment of bills and coins.

I sling my overnight bag over my shoulder and then go off in search of answers.
"H-O-L-M-E-S," I say for the fourth time, briskly, to a harried looking receptionist. "Holmes with an E. Did you get the E?"

The woman gives me a stern look, but goes back to her computer, looking for answers to my questions.

"I am sorry, sir," she says somewhat more gingerly a second later, "but even if you are a doctor-"

"I am a doctor!," I explode, "My name is Dr. John Hamish Watson. I have my identification on me here, somewhere," and I go to pad my pockets looking for identification.

"That really doesn't change the nature of this admission, sir. At this time, I cannot provide visitor access to this patient."

"He's not any patient! He's my patient, okay? Just count him as my patient!"

"Sir," the woman tries again - this time with an edge to her voice - "Mr. Holmes is not allowed visitor access for the next three-"

I look swiftly at her name tag.

"Louise?," I say, trying not to overtly plead, "this man is my best friend. In the entire world. I may not technically be family, but-"

Another voice cuts in now, calmer than my own, but tired. As Sherlock referred to it once as a voice of butterscotch and smoke.

"He's with me, Miss Jenkins," Mycroft says smoothly, although when I turn to look up I can see the corners of pain edging along his eyes and a slight haggard look about his face. His movements lack their typical crispness as he turns and moves towards me.

"There is a small office down the hall, John. Please follow me. Let's have a talk."

I want to rip out my hair, but I settle for glowering at Mycroft.

"Or you could take me to him right now!"

"John," Mycroft says rapidly, glancing about, keeping his voice even. "I will do my best to answer your questions but you must remain calm. Please. For Sherlock," he says with a hint of steel in his timber.

"Okay," I exhale shakily, rubbing my hands against my jeans. My hands are sweating now, I realize. I also know that I am feeling raw and overly emotional.

Mycroft leads me down a corridor that smells like antiseptic and clean laundry, and opens an oak door before proceeding to flick on some lights. The light is relatively soft here - not the same blinding light as out in the hallway. I notice immediately the box of Kleenex in the center of the glass table and then spot some black-iron chairs. There is a small coffee maker perched off to the side, and some generic paintings of trees and water. An artificial red plant that does nothing whatsoever for the place.

"Is this the room where the doctors dole out the bad news?," my voice rushes forward, all high notes
and barely restrained terror.

"Normally, yes. I thought I would be a better person for you to talk to right now. I might have more answers for you."

I realize I feel gritty, sour. My teeth feel fuzzy. I may not be as badly off as Sherlock, but these last few months have been getting progressively worse for me, too.

"Alright," I wheeze, "so he's under emergency sectioning?"

I don't even bother to look at Mycroft. If I do, I'm going to burst into bloody tears.

"Yes," Mycroft whispers.

A giant lump swells up in my throat. I cough to clear my throat.

"And we both know the limited number of ways a patient acquires that very particular accomplishment," I say gruffly.

Mycroft waits a moment before responding.

"Sherlock was not deemed a danger to anyone else."

I close my eyes, tightly.

"What did he do?"

Mycroft gives a wrecked exhale.

"He took what would have been a lethal dose of morphine. If he hadn't been taken to A&E, of course."

And just like that, my vision spots again. I feel a sickening, pounding sense of guilt.

'You did this, John. You pushed him.'

"Oh my god," my voice clenches around my tongue. I feel like I'm going to vomit. "Oh god. Oh god."

Mycroft does not speak, merely glances back towards the table. A moment later, I feel his hand against my own. He gives my hand a slight squeeze. It's hard to grasp the enormity of what that means. Mycroft is even less physical in his method of comforting others than Sherlock.

"You didn't trigger this, John. He's been at the edge for a very long time."

"Yes I did! I must have! I know I must."

"No," he interrupts firmly, brooking no argument. "This is NOT your fault. You have been there for him since the beginning of your partnership, for lack of a better descriptor. You are attending therapy with him, John. Do you think anyone else would ever have had the courage to face the sort of things he has discussed with you? No one else has ever stood by him, but you have. Your loyalty has never gone unnoticed by me. You are most definitely not the cause of this. If anything, you are the sole reason he sought help tonight."

"You don't understand," I stammer, my voice betraying the countenance I want to project. I want to seem strong and solid. Someone Sherlock can rely on now that he's at his most exhausted. But I'm
only coming across as weak myself. "I was talking to him about stuff, Mycroft. Stuff I knew he didn't want to face, and."

That auburn head is shaking at me. He holds up a finger and his eyes scrunch up in just a very vulnerable and imploring way; I stop my tirade mid-sentence.

"Do you think I don't know what this feels like, John? To be with him, in a clinic, after an attempt? This is his third attempt, for the record. And this is the closest he has come to - well, not making it. Yet, I feel deep down that despite the depression he's currently doing battle against, that he also terrified himself tonight. Because he doesn't want to actually die. He just wants to stop feeling as he is feeling. Blaming yourself for his mood disturbances won't help him, and it won't help you. It helps no one."

My heart is rioting about in my rib-cage. I want to believe Mycroft, and it's likely that he's speaking truth. But I still feel complicit.

"Can I see him?," I ask miserably, bringing fists up to my eyes to wipe away errant moisture.

Mycroft shakes his head, curtly. "The doctors do not deem it a good idea at present; although, that has nothing to do with the quality of your company. He's in a lot of pain. Physical pain, I should specify."

"Pain?"

"The morphine, even with treatment, is causing intense abdominal pain. They have dealt with the overdose as well as they are able: activated charcoal, a laxative, and Naloxone - but beyond what they have already done, they just need to wait this out. He has an IV in, too - a glucose mixture with saline. They want to ensure he stays hydrated, obviously - be he's in severe physical pain. I don't think he wants anyone around him right now, truth be told."

I feel the stirrings of grief trundle through my chest. My lungs feel full and heavy and wasted.

"But is he talking? Is he alert? Does he understand what he's done?"

Mycroft nods, giving me a fleeting glance. It seems that he's finding it hard to maintain eye contact although I don't sense that he's angry at me or disturbed by my presence.

He's ashamed for some reason. But I cannot ascertain what reason he would have to be ashamed.

'And yet what reason does Sherlock have for his shame?'

'His doctor told me that upon admittance he was mumbling, "Tell John I'm sorry." So, yes - it's fairly clear that he knows what he's done. At least in some basic capacity, as it stands. That he regrets doing what he's done tonight? I have no doubt that his self-loathing has just increased due to his impetuous actions."

I want to cradle my skull against my palms and weep. But not with Mycroft sitting less than two feet away from me.

"Can I talk to him? Please?," I request again and my voice cracks. "Even just for a minute?"

"No, John. I am sorry, but he is being kept in as low stress an environment as possible at the moment."

"I don't want to stress him, or lecture him, or even necessarily speak to him! I just want to see him,
Mycroft.

Mycroft glances up to me, then gives a slightly pained look to my request before shaking his head once more.

"That's not possible, John," he says, voice barely above a whisper. "I know that's not want you to hear right now. Sherlock's doctors feel it is best for him to focus on getting through this overdose, and-

"Did you get to see him?," I hiss, hot tears flooding my eyes.

Damn it.

I know I screwed it all up.

I know I pushed him, tonight.

But I didn't mean to hurt him.

It wasn't even about intimacy, it wasn't about the subject I suspect he hates beyond all else. I needed to shock him out of his hazy world of lingering about, poking about for a glass of water here, an aimless walk there - all while he's starving and living off ketones and using up his own bloody heart muscle as a fuel reserve.

"I wanted to get him to see, Mycroft. Into the core of his being and to feel the weight of this. Not pain, but awareness. To really see and feel and GET it. Get what he's doing to himself!"

Because if Yuri can't reach him, and if Mycroft can't reach him...then that leaves me.

No one else will have a shot in hell of getting him to want to change, to want to improve, to want to move towards health and to make the decision to run back from edge of the cliff, as Mycroft refers to it.

Not when this disorder has been with him for the vast majority of his life with only superficial patches of physical health concealing the deeper issues.

No.

It has to end.

And I had to make it end. I had to try.

So I tried.

"I have been in your position countless times, John," Mycroft states knowingly. "So I understand the frustration. Do you think throughout the years I haven't had to restrain myself from just reaching over and shaking him? None of that works, however; I promise you that much."

I push at the box of tissues on the table. Move it out of my line of sight.

"Then what works?," I ask hollowly. "What can I possibly do?"

Mycroft merely gives me a sad smile, taps my hand awkwardly.

"You should go back to Baker Street, even if it's the last thing you want to do. Please get some sleep, John. You need rest almost as much as Sherlock at this point."
I know some things now.

I know that daily tasks that are easy for me, and seemingly nothing to the rest of the world, are huge obstacles to those with eating disorders.

I know that gentle prodding, such as 'Please take these vitamins, Sherlock' or 'Can't you have just a little bit more soup?' will feel laden with meaning and fear for him, and will lead to a sort of begrudging sense of guilt for myself. As if the relative and short lived peace that their disorder offers them, even at their worst, really shouldn't be yours to take away.

And it's not like I gave him something to hold onto, something that offered that same degree of comfort or security.

I merely saw someone very sick, and thought that gentle nudges and encouragement and patience would fix him.

But I overlooked his anxiety, and his dread.

He's filled with horror. And he's trying to sublimate the worst of those feelings because he's never lost sight of the deeper reality: that even when he's in the presence of those who are healthy and care about him, he's still alone with the isolation that comes with his sickness.

I don't think I really even considered that. Not really.

I just looked at him and saw weakness pervading his body and obsessiveness pervading his mind. I saw his withering form and associated it with a withering of sanity, too, but at some level he is all-too sane.

But I didn't understand the enormity of his rituals. The comfort they offered him.

And that was my failure which drove him away from me, and which drove him towards - if only for a nanosecond - embracing self-annihilation.

Mycroft, I realize, is talking to me again; I haven't heard the last bit of his words.

"-in a day or so, they say, he might be able to talk to a resident psychiatrist. After the compulsory sectioning ends, they will want to talk to me about a longer term sectioning possibility."

compulsory

sectioning

compulsory sectioning

"What?," I interrupt, alarmed.

Mycroft frowns at the glass partition of the table.

"I do have the power, at this present time, to progress in a manner which would strip Sherlock of his right to refuse treatment. He'd be committed regardless of his wishes. It would be completely out of his hands at that point. Despite what I know you are going to say to me, I must admit that I am seriously considering that option right now, John."

"Mycroft," I say thickly, "you can't force him into treatment! You know how much-"
"How much his previous hospitalizations have traumatized him?"

I bite my lip, nod sickly.

"I know, John. Which is why I am talking about this with you. Because I have two basic options here, and neither looks very appealing to me. The safer alternative, at least where his life is concerned, is to proceed with the sectioning. If I go that route, Sherlock will be assessed and committed long-term to a treatment facility within the next three days. Of course, let's be clear, here: he wouldn't be able to avoid sectioning if I decide this is the better course."

"Or?," I query numbly.

"Or I can work something out with you, and with his current psychiatrist. It would be stricter than what he currently has had to deal with, but it would still leave him some basic liberties that he would not have if he were to be hospitalized."

My eyes travel and land on my overnight bag, filled with toothbrush and comb, Sherlock's favourite soap and pajama bottoms. Snacks. What was I even thinking? Throwing crackers into my bag?

Did I think Sherlock was willingly going to eat them?

Did I think he would just swallow them?

"What needs to be in place for you to consider the second option as feasible?," I ask uneasily.

The manicured nails turn up the cream cuffs of his shirt, as if buying time. Formulating a response.

"In essence, I would want to duplicate - as cleanly as possible - the same conditions of an enforced treatment scenario. But keep it situated within 221 B Baker Street. It would mean that Sherlock would need to be monitored. All the time. Until such time that I did not feel the slightest concern that he'd impulsively try to do something like this again. The overall treatment plan would likely not differ much to that of a sectioning, or a formal hospital setting. But he'd be at home. And he'd have you, if you feel up to the task of partially caring for him over the next few months."

"Impulsively?," I ask in a fog, my brain barely registering the rest of what Mycroft is offering.

"He called the ambulance for himself, John. I do not believe that it was his wish to actually die. The actual moment of overdose was probably linked, in part, to extreme duress. Beyond that, he's classically impulsive when upset. But it wasn't premeditated."

"He called the ambulance?," I query, feeling dumb, foggy. "He called the ambulance for himself?"

"Yes," Mycroft enunciates clearly, a sharp hiss of the S cutting through my haze.

"He called for himself? To get to the A&E?"

"Yes."

I lay my hands flat out against the glass.

"If he's to come home, what do you want me to do? What are your conditions to make the, uh, the second option possible?"

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80 Hours Later

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I've shaved, pressed my clothes, and slept (thanks to a hefty dose of melatonin, which amazingly enough did knock me out) a solid 10 hours.

In other words, I am feeling relatively composed. As composed as I am ever going to feel at this stage, really.

I won't feel absolutely composed no matter what I do, but relatively composed is a massive improvement over how I have felt these last few days.

I carry a light satchel bag, and double check the contents, then look around the flat.

After returning home from Maudsley three nights ago, I went on an all-out cleaning binge. If Sherlock thought I was being over the top before, he's going to be a little shocked to see just how restrictive I can be of his freedoms when it ensures he cannot hurt himself.

I started with taking his scale to storage, and locking it up. Everything - and I do mean everything - that he could use in some way to harm himself - I packed up in moving boxes. In his room, I brought in a few non-toxic plants, a plastic water tumbler and non-breakable cups, and a hefty assortment of books on anatomy, entomology, true crime and even a few classics. Pencils, pens, rulers, staplers, laces, belts - everything else was removed.

His bedroom, as it stands, looks almost barren now by comparison. To make the transition easier for myself, I keep reminding myself that I have Mycroft and Yuri's full support in my decisions. Along with their support in securing a lock to the outside of Sherlock's bedroom door and additional support structures alongside the windows. I doubt things will devolve to such a state that I'll actually have to use said lock but it was something that was discussed as being potentially useful if Sherlock were to have a possible 'danger night.'

The rest of the flat, too, has been completely cleared of most things that one could use to inflict harm upon themselves.

The fridge and freezer, while not cleared of Sherlock's experiments, have been cleared of old food, diet sodas, and nutrition-less substances. Instead, the entire kitchenette has been filled with various soups, canned fruits and veg, cereals, milk and cream, protein shakes, almond and nut butters, and an assortment of treats.

My concern, of course, is not only to ensure Sherlock gains some weight in the next few days - which, at this time, is becoming increasingly critical - but also to focus on getting him to eat foods that are highly nutritious. Not merely fat filled, or calorific, but also well rounded. I am hoping that this approach will also be less unnerving to Sherlock and will allow him to adapt to a newer dietary plan with less fear than the one outlined for weight restoration at Maudsley.

Just as I am giving the flat one last look-about, a text pings in.

'S decided to take the Ativan.'

I sigh into the darkness of the living room, blinds closed.

Mycroft had let me know that Sherlock was concerned about coming back to Baker Street. Something to do with worries that I'd be 'enraged.' Seeing that written down - knowing he was actually afraid of my response to his homecoming - made me wince.

So I have also decided that, evidently, I need to work on my temper.
I pad lightly towards the hallway and amble down the steps, feeling a tad deflated. I mean, with everything that has happened recently it would be hard to call this day 'happy.' I am relieved beyond all measure that he's been cleared to come home, and that he hasn't done considerably more damage to himself. But I feel a gnawing upset over his worry that somehow I would be 'enraged.'

Because does he really fear me? Does he worry that if I became angry enough...I would possibly hurt him?

I have witnessed him flinch before, too. When my voice rose, or on occasions when I seemed especially aggravated with him.

So I know that this is another topic we are eventually going to need to address. Obviously with Yuri, as I seem to muck everything all to shit when I try to deal with it myself.

When I get to the bottom of the stairs, I feel about my pockets for a couple of other things. I can feel the letter I have written to him. Which I wanted him to read before returning home. If only to allay any anxieties he might have had.

Of course, now, he is likely to be in a stupor - so that's going to have to wait.

Next to the letter, I can feel the furled edge of an old photograph and I tug it loosely with my fingers, bringing it out into the daylight.

I read the lettering on the bottom. The old calligraphic writing.

September 28th, 1979 is the date of the photo, or at very least - the date when the photo was developed. The back of the print is yellowed and the edges are soft and almost sandy in texture. I flip the photo around and bite my lip.

A heart-breakingly small Sherlock glances off to the side. His eyes are looking perhaps towards a photographic assistant, standing out of line of the shot. Maybe one of those assistants in children's portrait studios who wear puppets on their hands and try to get diminutive clients to laugh. Or at the very least to smile.

But there is no smile here.

Neither is there a glower, a look of condescension, or even boredom. Just an intense little gaze, so completely turned inwards in expression that the tiny boy of this landscape seems lost in his own world. My fingertips gloss over the milky-face, and I feel something ache deep inside, for I can see how tiny he is here and yet how impossibly afraid.

In his child-hands, Sherlock is holding onto a bright red ball, the colour of blood. A parody of a toy, really, because there is no play in his expression. No whimsical cheeky grin. No enjoyment in holding the ball. He has likely been commanded to do so, as the pinched fingers holding the ball are whiter than even the rest of his pallid-self.

'I'm sorry, little one,' my mind supplies to the ghosted image. 'I am sorry you had to go through so much pain.'

I brush at the image, reminding myself that I can come back to the photograph later; that to focus too intently on it right now might be counter-productive to actually getting through the upcoming
meeting with my emotions in check. So I give one last look at the image - and trace the peter-pan collars which edge the neck of his child-form - before gingerly putting the photograph back into my pocket.

'September 28th, 1979,' I think to myself, as I hail a cab.

He would have been a little over three and a half years old at the time of the photo's capture.

The abuse would have already started.

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A vehicle swerves towards the pavement and comes to idle outside of 221 B.

"Maudsley Clinic, please," I request gruffly as the cabbie opens the door for me, before giving me a faint smile, tentative. Compassionate.

"It looks like you are bringing someone home?" he inquires, a small nervous smile playing upon his face. Trying to be polite. Then I see him sort of glance back to the road.

I can tell he's beating himself up for the inquiry.

So I do my best to allay his anxiety.

"Yes. It's...I am bringing someone home. I'm picking up my best..."

I stop.

'Friend' is so inadequate a descriptor for what Sherlock means to me.

Sarah is a friend to me. Harry - for all my sister's issues with alcohol and the havoc she's brought to my life at times - is still my friend. Lestrade is a friend. Mike and Molly and Mrs. Hudson. All friends.

And all are precious and dear to me.

But Sherlock is unlike anyone else in the world. What I feel for him is a different thing in intensity.

I know I love him.

Have known for a long while, deep down.

Perhaps others would argue that I am, indeed, in love with him - as if that distinction somehow made the love itself truer or more 'real.'

I don't care anymore about the label, though. Or the fear in my gut at how I identify, or what my parents would think, or about romantic issues or anything else.

I will face them in my own mind, and maybe with Yuri, too. Because I will have some work of my own to do; I know I have my own issues here. About my self-proclaimed label of heterosexual, for example.

But I am sick of thinking that I can't love Sherlock as deeply as he needs to heal, just because society doesn't accept what love really is. The variations and manifestations that are equally valid to, say, a heterosexual partnership, or anything else cleanly defined. And the idea, now, that I would ever back away from him just to protect my labels?
No. I can't do that. I can never do that again.

My fear has to take a backseat to my friendship.

And if I am going to use any word to describe Sherlock's role in my life, I need to choose a word that's a good deal fairer than 'friend.'

"Yes," I start anew. "I am picking up my partner."

The cabbie looks relieved. Happy that all is seemingly well.

"Aww," he says sincerely. "That's really-," and he swallows, clears his throat. "I am glad for you. Sometimes hospital trips are so... there is a lot of sadness there, you know?"

I give him a sincere smile and try to focus on the fact that for all the ugliness in the world, there are still really beautiful people who keep on trying even when things are bleak.

Because they are bleak, really. That's why these people are trying so damn hard.

It's because they know that the other person needs that smile, or that kind word. That little shred of human kindness.

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I get to the clinic with a few minutes to spare.

The cabbie gives me a quick look as I reach for the door handle.

"I could wait for you and your partner. If that would help?"

The offer is tempting, but I also know I will likely need to discuss release information with both Sherlock's doctors and Mycroft himself. I'm not just picking up fish and chips.

This might take awhile.

"Um, I am not really sure how long this will take. But thank you, um-"

"Peter," he supplies.

"Thank you, Peter."

The cabbie gives me a pert smile, and then seems to hesitate for a second.

"Look, it's none of my business. I get it. But I know your partner is going to be okay."

I feel my eyes crinkle in surprised warmth.

"Thank you," I say, fighting an urge to scratch the side of my face. It's one of my 'tells' for when I am feeling overwhelmed.

"Take care, the both of you," the cabbie says one last time, before starting his engine and driving off.

"You too, Peter," I mumble to the passing dust, and then turn to take in the roan brick building. It looks somehow more imposing than it did on the first night I came to visit Sherlock.

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"I am here for, um, Sherlock Holmes," I say quickly, licking my lips. They are very dry. Gritty, almost.

My mind always focuses on the most inane things when I am nervous.

The receptionist gives me a glance, nods, and then goes to enter something into the computer. I do my damnedest to resist tapping my foot against the lino.

"Umm, or if you have any information on if a Mr. Mycroft Holmes is in with the patient-," my rambling voice dies when the young woman holds up a finger, indicating I should pause.

"Yes, there is a note on the file here. If you go to the third floor. Room 20 A - there will be time to go over basic release information."

Right.

Of course Mycroft and Sherlock are already waiting for me.

I'm early, but evidently they both still want to wait for me.

'Stop it Watson. You are being ridiculous. It's probably for Sherlock's benefit.'

Taking the lift to the third floor, I get off feeling a little woozy. Start to walk to the right, and watch the numbers fall away. Stop, turn and walk to my left.

20 A glistens in an odd pea green. The room has a glass window, but the glass itself looks 'rainy' and unclear. I can see bits and flashes of colour and form, but nothing definite.

With a deep inhale, I rap against the frame.

"Ah, yes. Please come in, John."

Mycroft's voice.

I bite back a gulp, and remind myself that everything will be okay.

Enter as softly as I can. I feel like a naughty child whose tardy to class and has been called in to speak with the headmaster.

"I am sorry. I thought I had the correct time-"

Mycroft waves away my concern.

"You are precisely on time."

Finally, I let myself look about the room.

Sherlock is off to the corner, bundled up in a hunter green dressing gown and several blankets. His dark tresses look slightly greasy and fall over his eyes in weighted form.

He's the colour of milk. And oddly enough, his lower throat looks slightly bruised. I can see blue-purple tinges about his clavicle.

I have no idea what to say.
But I know that to not say anything is just going to increase anxiety for all involved.

"Sherlock. Hey," I whisper, taking a seat beside him. I feel an impulse to hug him, and then reevaluate that decision.

He looks so small. It's hard to believe he's over 6 feet under those contorted angles pulled in and covered up in blankets.

Clearing my throat, I query: "Is your doctor coming?"

Sherlock's breath comes out in a rattle, and he bats at his eyes. Mycroft checks his fob watch and lets out an almost imperceptible sigh.

"Likely late," and the ginger haired man rises, gives me a slight nod. "I am going to get one of those vending machine atrocities, as I feel at this time that some caffeine would be better than none. John, can I get you anything?"

I shake my head, mutely.

"Sherlock? Would you like a tea? Or would you prefer something that arguably contains fruit juice? Even if it's just from concentrate?"

Sherlock mimics my actions and entwines his fingers, then splays them across his knees.

Then shakes his head.

"Right. I guess it's herbal tea for you, then," Mycroft says with a protracted drawl, and in some weird way I feel an enormous gratitude for his manner.

He's not denying the obvious but he's also refusing to treat Sherlock as weak.

Perhaps, in the past, I would have thought some of his behaviours were out of place. Now I see them for what they are: brotherly concern, only hidden with an impassive air, a stately way of talking and moving.

But it's assuring. It works at normalizing everything.

"Well, if Dr. Rouse arrives in the next few moments, please just let him know that I will only be but a minute."

And then Mycroft is gone with a scant padding shuffle and a soft turn of the door lock.

I ease back to Sherlock. Words are still hard to choose right now. It would be too easy to speak and say anything.

But I don't just want to say anything.

Turns out I don't need to worry about that.

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"Do you hate me?," Sherlock asks suddenly. "I won't blame you for doing so."

I feel sucker punched, and watch him for a few seconds as his fingertips ghost over the tabletop,
leaving sweat marks.

He's incredibly anxious.

I stand up, walk three paces and then crouch down on my haunches.

"Come here, please," I whisper, and he leans forward. When he does, I pull him into a gentle hug and cup my left hand around the nape of his neck.

"You must never, never think that. Not even for a second. I love you. I bloody," and I stop, swallow the spittle gumming up my mouth, "I love you more than I have ever loved anyone. Okay?"

Sherlock's arms hang limp at his side.

"I'm sorry," he keens, voice cracking. But he doesn't cry. He just comes close to it. I can feel the effort he is putting into staying composed, and I don't want to derail him just before Mycroft and his doctor return.

So I just rub his back a little bit.

"Yeah. I know it. I know you are, love," I breathe against his cheek. Then before I have fully processed what is happening, I give him a firm kiss against his temple. "So let's just focus on what we need to do to get us back on track. Okay? Any worry you have about you and me, or what I am thinking, or what comes next...try not to concentrate on too much right now, yeah? Just trust me, and take some deep breaths, and know it's going to get better. Okay?"

Sherlock rubs his forehead, averting his gaze from my line of sight.

Eventually, he looks over my shoulder - still not meeting my eyes. I see his hand flutter up to his mouth and gently touch it in a tense way. Which only draws my attention anew to his bruised throat and neck.

"What happened to your throat?," I ask with as even a voice as I can manage. It doesn't come out as even at all, but warbled and upset.

"Nothing," Sherlock says much too quickly, looking back down to the table. His brow is suddenly furrowed.

"No, not 'nothing.' Something happened, Sherlock, and-"

Sherlock holds up his hands in fear and shakes his head.

"Please let it go, John," he asks, swallowing loudly in the otherwise quiet space.

A strange disconnected feeling is building in my head. As if I am falling from a very high platform.

"Did someone here hurt your throat?," I ask without thinking, feeling something sour steam up behind my eyes. A rage. "Someone at this clinic?"

Sherlock breathes short puffs of air, his shoulders clenched up in stress.

"No," but he licks his lips quickly. Anxiously. "No, John. No one-"

"Sherlock," I rasp.

He tenses, closes his eyes. I can see his hands are shaking, and when he opens his eyes again he
looks somehow even more disconnected than he did a few seconds prior.

"Not now, John," he pleads. "Please."

It's the pleading tone that causes me to relent. For now.

I give his hand a ginger squeeze, and a curt nod.

His head is now fixated entirely on our entwined fingers.

And then his lips start to tremble, his eyes pooling with tears. I disconnect our hands, and move a bit closer. Tower over his hunched form. Whisper to him, but with an intensity that I hope conveys the protectiveness that I feel.

"If someone here hurt you, they are not going to get away with it. Do you understand?," I ask with steel in my voice. "I am here now, and no one is going to hu-"

Sherlock suddenly closes his eyes and pulls his hand away from my general vicinity, bringing it up to his face and hiding himself from my line of sight. He then barks out a wrecked sob, his entire form quavering in pain.

I feel dizzy.

"Fucking hell," I whisper against his ear, before he bursts into tears. He buries his head against my neck, and within seconds I can feel the clothing dampen.

"Oh God," I get out, as his hands seem to grasp for something to hold onto. "It's over, love. It's over now. Just a few more minutes, and then we are going back home. You and me, and no one is getting in my way. You are almost out of here, Sherlock. I just need you to be strong for a little longer now, okay?"

Rather than causing him to calm, however, my words seem to make his upset greater and the sound he makes becomes even harder to hear.

My throat aches, and I lower him gently to the ground.

"I want to go home, John," he manages to get out after a few minutes, now wiping at his eyes. "Right now. Please."

The words are tinged with such insistent anxiety, that I feel he is close to panicking.

I brush his curls out of his eyes. His hair is greasy - as if he hasn't been allowed to shower - and he looks as if he's ready to collapse.

"I know. I want us to go home, too. So we have to be strong for a bit, and then they will let us leave. You just need to calm down a little bit more, okay? I didn't mean to get you so upset. I should have realized that I-," but I let my words die out.

He knows what I mean. He knows enough, I suspect, about how I feel. About my confusion, and my own pain.

Sherlock gulps in a breath of air, then holds it. Trying, obviously, to regulate his breathing.

"Yeah. Just like that. Good job," I murmur to him, helping him back to his seat. "It's going to be okay, love. You just keep that going in your head, alright?"
"It's going to be okay'," he says with his sore voice, repeating the statement as if it's a mantra.

"That's right," I agree, pulling back in time to hear the door handle shift in its slot.

A moment later a doctor in his late 50's enters the room, holding a file. He gives Sherlock - who is now looking once more off towards the edge of the room, and not at any one person - a clinical look of assessment.

"Has your brother stepped out, Mr. Holmes?," the doctor - Roarke? No, Rouse - asks briskly, and I feel a wave of irritation swell up in my heart.

"Yes, he has," I interrupt, speaking now for Sherlock. Because I know my anger is going to sustain me, while Sherlock is close to crashing. "Mycroft went to get some coffee. He should be back any moment now."

The doctors lets out a long-suffering sigh, and then opens what is - presumably - Sherlock's medical file.

Sherlock, I can see, is clenching up. He looks even smaller than he did thirty seconds ago, which I wouldn't have thought possible.

I sit back down in my chair, and drag it closer to the table.

"Is this a recap for my benefit?," I inquire. "Necessary for discharge?"

Dr. Rouse adjusts his glasses and looks at me impassively.

"Yes, actually, it is...Mr?"

My smile is likely not very cheerful.

"Dr. Watson."

I don't normally drive home my professional title. Yet something about Rouse is rubbing me the wrong way.

"Yes, it is, Dr. Watson. I am under the impression that you have been appointed as the sole provider of medical support for Mr. Holmes after his release today?"

Clearing my throat, I sit up a little straighter in my chair almost instinctively.

"Yes, that is correct."

Rouse looks ill-amused.

"May I ask what sort of hours your practice is offering you? Sherlock will need extensive treatment. Hospitalization really would likely be better for him at this time."

Sherlock's breath suddenly hitches, and I sense he is trying very hard to remain as immobile as possible.

"I understand why you would think that," I attempt cautiously, not wanting to get into a pissing contest with Sherlock's doctor. "And I will definitely be taking any recommendations that you have regarding Sherlock's continued care into consideration. But his three days of involuntary hospitalization are at a close and his family has decided to not press for extended sectioning."
Dr. Rouse stares at me in derision and I do my best to not just give it right back when the door to the
room opens yet again, and Mycroft enters easily, eyes moving about with startling awareness and
examination.

Part of me cannot help but wonder if his entrance wasn't precisely timed.

He now takes a seat to Sherlock's left, depositing his well-tailored form between Sherlock and Dr. Rouse.

"I do apologize for my apparent tardiness. We were unsure I might add of when to expect you, sir. Hence my departure. Although I think it's time we get down to matters now. I am certain you'd like to return to your other patients."

Mycroft's parsing seem to throw the doctor for a loop, and the confused look only increases when the elder Holmes deposits what - from scent alone - smells like a French Vanilla and places it in front of me, while placing a mint tea in front of Sherlock.

The doctor's lips form a hard line of irritation at the display and he moves the folder containing Sherlock's intake information towards my side of the table.

"This is for your purview, Dr. Watson", he says gruffly. After a few seconds, I open the file. My eyes glance over the contents of the file, quickly studying the numbers on the pages.

Sherlock's blood work is extensive. A number of tests not only dealing with his opiate overdose, but tests to monitor other conditions - have been performed.

"As you can see, his results in many areas are dismal," the doctor speaks briskly. "Heart rate, blood pressure, potassium levels. All abnormally low," and the doctor now turns to Sherlock, trying to meet his eyes.

"You are anemic, Sherlock," Dr. Rouse begins tersely, "Severely anemic. Not simply in terms of being iron anemic. You also have pernicious anemia, in addition. You were also severely hypoglycemic upon your admittance. Your weight is at a level that qualified as moderately emaciated based on your height."

I scan Sherlock's medical file in detail as Dr. Rouse continues to speak.

I knew he was underweight.

I did not know he was so severely underweight.

The last readout - gleaned from the scale he had hid away in his room - had put his weight at substantially higher than what I am seeing as recorded from three days previous.

Height: 186 cm

Weight: 50.4 kg

BMI: 14.7

Hypokalemic state. Last blood test: 2.1 mmol/L

Patient is considered moderately emaciated at this date of admittance, with blood work that is disconcerting. Weight restoration of minimally 15 kg with biweekly blood work monitoring is recommended to reduce the possibilities of complications from nutrient deficiencies occurring.
Patient is severely hypokalemic, with testing showing early heart related abnormalities related to the-

I put down the report, trying to keep my hands from clenching in either anxiety or anger. Or both, I'm not really sure.

It's just a hard thing to grasp. To truly accept.

Because it's not just how he looks or how he acts or his blood work, now. It's so much more than that.

It's the fact that since he's been a child...he's been engaging in these behaviours. Various and sundry forms of self-harm.

So if I look at this disorder as being one of his cultivation, I have to accept that I am not witnessing a singular event, or a one-time breakdown. What I am really looking at is several decades worth of self-abuse.

And I've read the literature. I know how dismal the prognosis is for long term sufferers of anorexia.

"These levels," and the spittle in my mouth is dry. There isn't enough moisture to wet my tongue. "Your potassium levels are frighteningly low, Sherlock."

Dr. Rouse looks, for a very brief moment, taken aback. Because he was obviously gearing for a confrontation.

Sherlock, on the other hand, looks strange.

His skinny body is sagging with fatigue.

I try to wet my mouth again. Mycroft - discerning my issue - nudges the paper cup of vending machine coffee towards me, which I accept numbly.

Sip, swallow.

Try to compose something that will make today better. Try to live up to my title of doctor, but more than that - of friend.

Of best friend.

Because Sherlock is my best friend, and as such it falls to me to do something more than I have done.

I pushed him to talk, and that I fear was the wrong way to go about things.

At the same time, there are issues here that I need to clarify and discuss with him. Not later this afternoon, or tomorrow, or next week.

Sherlock could go into cardiac arrest before then.

"Mycroft? Dr. Rouse?," I test out gingerly, as if the pronunciations are incorrect. "May I please have a few moments alone with Sherlock?"

Dr. Rouse looks somewhat confused by the proceedings, but nods in thinly-veiled impatience.

"I can spare a few minutes while I check in on another patient. But after that, we will need to get some basic discharge information out of the way," the older man adds unnecessarily.
Mycroft just stands up stiffly, looking back and forth between me and his younger brother.

"I will wait outside. Please let me know if or when I am needed," he adds, before taking leave with Sherlock's doctor.

This time, when the door closes, the silence feels prickly and hot and suffocating.

I push Sherlock's test results towards him and he looks away quickly.

"No. You can't look away from this. Look at this report, Sherlock."

"I don't need to look at the-," he murmurs.

"You do need to look!," I exclaim, "Absolutely you do! I won't make you talk about anything, or even force you back into therapy, but for God's sake, please, look!"

Sherlock glances over at the off-white forms as if they are venomous.

"I hardly see how this is going to fix anything," he breathes, his voice about the same timber and loudness as the heating vent. "I know I screwed up."

A compulsion to pinch the bridge of my nose and stave off my headache is increasing.

"This isn't why I want you to look at your file. You didn't 'screw up'."

"Of course I screwed up! I know I did!," and then Sherlock stands up too quickly, dislodging his green house coat.

For several seconds I am shocked into dumb silence.

His body - always, always pale - looks now tinged with blue. The veins of his arms are more prominent and bulge out past his elbows. His left elbow is bruised a horrible purple as if he has jammed himself with a grotesquely large hypodermic.

Catching my line of sight, he winces, then scrambles for the housecoat.

"I'm sorry," he rushes, painfully fast. "I know I look awful. I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to look at me like this, and-"

I let out a bark of bitter laughter and his blue eyes quirk up in hurt.

"I don't care how you look," I test to his confusion, and his brow spasms with fear of dejection. "No, you misunderstand. I don't care if you look any way - skinny or not - provided you are healthy. And right now? Right now I care a heck of a lot more about how you feel. Maybe how you feel about how you look, even though I doubt that this," and I make a wide arc with my fist, "is about looking good or looking any one way in particular. I think it has a lot more to do with feelings."

Sherlock backs up, alarmed.

"John, don't," he hisses.

"Or not feeling," I add.

"This doesn't have anything at all-"

"Then why are you doing this? Because I ask you to look at your medical files, and you won't. And I
have asked you to go to your therapy sessions with Yuri. But you don't most of the time. Or you leave after 10 minutes, or else you refuse to speak to him."

"So you think this is easy? You can just sit there and judge me, and you have no idea!"

"I am not judging you, Sherlock, but I don't know what to do anymore! I can't watch you get sicker and sicker through your own behaviours and ignore it! Every day I feel like I should be doing more, except I don't know what that 'more' is! So please feel free to fill me in on what I should be doing. Because I don't know what I can say or do that will make you want to stop this, and then I feel horrible for pressing you at all! I know what it's like to cling to anything - anything! - if it seems safe! And I hate that this feels like safety to you, when I know it's really death!"

Sherlock turns away from me, face to the wall. I can hear him breathing harshly.

"Even if you think this is just hurting you, it's not. There is no 'just you' here. It's hurting you in awful ways - maybe undefinable ways - but it's hurting me, too. It's definitely hurting Mycroft, and I'm not saying this to make the pain worse for you. I just don't know what to do anymore. I'm terrified, Sherlock. Fucking terrified."

Sherlock turns slowly around, eyes refusing to meet mine.

"It's not that bad, John. I just had a low night, and-"

"It's not just one low night. I've seen people with conditions like yours... felled like trees. It can happen to anyone. Even someone as spectacular as you!"

He stalls, wraps the gown more tightly around himself.

I give him his space and do my best study his face, not his body. Not the body he doesn't want me to see.

"I know," he says after a few minutes. "I do understand it. Intellectually, I mean," he admits a moment later.

"Okay. Okay, good. I can work with that for now," and I lick my lips. "Your doctor will be back any second, I'm sure of it. I just - God Sherlock - I need to know you will work with me. I know it's not an easy thing, but you have to trust me as far as the medical aspects of this go, alright?"

He nods his head faintly.

"I just don't want to stay here. I will do my best. But I can't stay in here," he pleads. "I won't get better here."

My fingers worm into my jacket pockets and glide over the old photograph with the torn edges. The photo of Sherlock as a toddler.

I pull it out, hesitantly. Lay it on the table.

"I found this when I was cleaning things up at home," I say thickly, as his eyes turn from mine and land on the image. A look passes over his face, raw and unsettled. "Three years old, apparently. Practically a baby. And all I see is fear, here. Now how wrong is that?"

Sherlock swallows harshly.

"John-," he says, eyes closing. "Don't."
"Every adult let this little kid down when he was going through hell. Maybe most didn't know what was happening to him. I don't know, and right now I don't care about the excuses of others. I just know that I am not giving up on him. And I need to know that you will help me...fight for him. That we will work as a team to help him. So he can finally feel safe."

Sherlock remains silent and his hand ghosts out and presses against the image.

He opens his mouth as if to speak, then closes it a second later.

At a loss for words.

Looks back up at me with a look of confusion.

"I don't even know who that is anymore," he murmurs, as I lean in and grab his hand.

"You don't need to know who he is to you right now, Sherlock," I reply, evenly. "I just need to know if you are willing to fight for him. So his misery ends once and for all."

Sherlock finally picks the photo up, turns it over, fingertips traversing the writing.

"1979," he mumbles in an odd tone. "This was in 1979."

Sherlock then flips the photo right side up, eyes studying the haunting image as if it's a complex math equation. One he can't quite understand. After a few seconds, his features settle into something hesitant. Nervous.

I see his Adam's apple bulge and swallow, and then he wipes at his matted hair. Tugs it gently. A nervous habit that always seemed to me to be somewhat self-soothing for him. Grounding. Not harming; and so I don't still his hands. I let him try to process this.

Even though it's pretty horrible to contemplate.

"It had already started," he whispers, shocked. Looks up at me - as if imploring me to make sense of that which is so wrong that no sense can ever be gleaned.

I can tell he's not quite willing to make the connection between the tiny child that was so badly hurt then and the emaciated adult still hurting, now.

"I was only three, John. Three," he pants out, stricken. "I never had a chance. He never gave me a chance!"

I close my eyes, will my temper into place. Focus on what I need to say, and what I need to get him to commit to if this is going to work.

"That little boy didn't have much of a chance then, no. He has a chance now. He has so much more than a chance. He has me, and he has his brother, and he has friends who love him. But he needs you in his corner the very most, alright? So you just can't give up on him too, because that's what almost everyone he ever knew did to him. They didn't fight for him. They didn't help him. I need you to promise me that you will do your best to help him. That's all I need from you, Sherlock. That's it."

Sherlock takes a large breath, holds it, and then releases it shakily before pushing the photo back over towards my direction.

"I think you need to hold onto him, John. I think you know what he needs more than I do right now."
I don't say anything at all.

I just nod at his hands, unclench his grasp, and take the photograph back into my possession.
Good

Chapter Summary

So, it has been a pretty intense last few months. Sickness, in my case (not Sherlock’s sickness right now, but of the auto-immune variety). So many amazing PMs have come my way (and I need to respond; I know I do. I will do so! :)).

Warnings: psychological musings on EDs. References and discussions of said ED. Please proceed with caution.

And please be kind to yourself.

Move forward and be happy with the small gains. It's not an easy thing to understand.

It's so incredibly layered.

But it's not a useless pursuit, health. Health is truly worth it. It's worth the effort.

And I do believe you can pull yourself out of the mire.

Take care, guys. Each and everyone of you. No matter what ails you.

Something ails all of us, after all.

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SHERLOCK'S POV

My hands are cold, but no longer shake.

I regulate everything.

My breathing. How many breaths in a minute. How many breaths in 10 minutes.

I like the numbers.

I like the fact that I am thinking in numbers; in so doing, I am ignoring that bothersome need to cry.

Because it won't make me feel better, only worse.

People like to pretend that crying is 'healing.'

Or, perhaps it is for others.

But not for me; it just leaves me feeling raw and exposed and out of sorts. If I let the transport succumb to such a state whilst in the presence of others, I always pay for it deeply later on.

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I am ashamed and I am numb and I am so terribly angry at myself, and angry at John, and angry at Mycroft. I know that I shouldn't be angry with John, nor Mycroft. And maybe, in a way, I'm not. But there is a rage inside of me, and most of the time it's akin to a low kindling fire.

However, the rage can be stoked into something fierce. Certain things can trigger the rage.

When it abates, and I come back into myself, calmer and thinking with greater clarity - I do realize how badly I have overreacted. How intensely the anger grew and lapped at my core and burst out into smoke and fire. In the wake of the rage, it is like the dross of loathing towards everything else has subsided. For a time.

But it comes back. It always comes back.

Then, I have the task of dealing with my insanity during the period that preceded the calm, which is rarely good. Rarely pretty.

And then when I realize what I have done or how I have acted or what I have possibly revealed through speech - it is then that I want to hit something, or want to cut, or want to feel pain.

Sometimes, confusingly, I realize that I also want to be hugged, and for someone I trust to hold me or keep me calm or get that anger to go away without everything becoming a blinding fire-ball of aggression.

The confusion is nonsensical: I do and I do not want any kindness at all.

The kindness is something I feel I want, in quiet moments, when I am alone and feeling awful.

The kindness is something that I feel shamed by when it is provided in real time, in real flesh-and-blood interactions.

And that is a debilitating need, and a debilitating fear.

I think of kindness - to receive kindness, or comfort - in a way I imagine some who are more puritanical might think about sex.

It is a secret yearning - to be held - but one I am doubtful I will ever let myself receive fully or openly.

Because I am afraid of it, and I don't know why.

Because whenever I have received it, the thoughts come and attack me.

Mock me for being weak, for being stupid, and then my form feels large and wasted all at the same time.

It's then - when someone is being comforting - it is then that I feel the most intense self-loathing imaginable. I have no idea why, and part of me wishes those feelings could depart.

But they never do.

"Sherlock?," John asks carefully.

He has been studying me 'surreptitiously' for 10 minutes now; I am trying to pretend that I am not aware of this fact.
I glance down at my hands. Pale, nail-chewed tufts with blooming blood that have hardened into red lines a centimeter away from white-moon beds. They are ugly nails and ugly hands. Veiny and thin and taunting. I hate my hands for being me, and love my hands for being starved and cold, because that took work.

A lot of work.

Because I want this and I don't want this and I don't know which direction I even want to go, anymore.

I don't know.

It hurts. And it shouldn't. It hurts, and I don't know if that's even good anymore.

It is backward in my mind, and has been for a long time. Possibly since my earliest imaginings. But it's still my construct, still my order.

So how do I explain that to John? How do I even explain that to Mycroft - who lived through a childhood of unease and stolen glances in my direction? Lurking and traipsing to my room to help me fall asleep? He knows more than anyone else, and still he knows nothing of feeling like this.

How do I explain those feelings to my own brother...when I know the effort he invested merely to see me get well?

How do I explain this tearing in my innards? To want two realities at the same time and both with intensity, both simultaneously? To abstain, but then to eat and enjoy a meal? The yearning to delight in a full stomach, but the fear of what such an attempt would stir up inside of me?

How do I explain that I am well aware of how ridiculous I look but too frightened to change how I have always lived?

How do I explain that I am well aware of the fact that I am a freak?

But that I hate being a freak?

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I am wrong because I want to hurt.

And that's unnatural.

No one normal or sane wants to hurt. But I want to hurt...and...I don't want to hurt. I straddle both states of want and need simultaneously, and cannot find the words to express the complexity of living in my mind or of living with those thoughts. Additionally, I don't know how to tie that part down long enough so I can study it.

Or quiet it. Or tame it.

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I don't know what to do to get better. To be healthy.

And it makes it hard to think.

"Sherlock? Hey?"

My eyes slowly pull up to his own. I try to become absorbed into the colour of his irises.

John could own me, as a being, as a creature. I would let him, if the process was immediate and if I knew I'd never come back into my mind, and back into these thoughts.

John would keep me warm and happy and safe and loved. I know this.

If I could, and if it did not scare me so much - I'd let him absorb me completely. To make more of him, and make no-more of me.

More insanity.

You are insane.

"We are almost home, okay?," he tests tentatively. And he's been amazing. But I feel full of pressure.

I want to lance it, and I can't, so I bring my fingertips to my bruised throat. Press in, lightly. Feel the jagged heat of pain as the digits hit already discoloured skin.

"Stop that," John says sternly, and a moment later I feel warm fingertips encircle my numb ones and pull against my digits. Pull my hands away from my throat and back towards my lap.

"Stop it," John repeats, less sternly now.

I am white and numb and cold and unreal, and John is red and pink and alive. John is pulsing and real. More so than anyone else I have ever known.

I am splinters and static. He is movement and light.

My hands want to climb back to my throat.

So badly.

"Stop it," he says again, calmer than before. "Your throat is already bruised. Please stop, Sherlock."

I look up and feel my vision swirl.

Last night: an IV.

This morning: a fortisip, so I shouldn't be so woozy. But I am.

My lips open, feel tacky, and I want to speak and I want to feel better and I want to be okay and I want to make everything right.

But it's never been right.

I don't know what right is. Maybe I never knew what right was.

"We are almost home now," John says quickly. I can hear the sound of his tongue as it runs along his lips. The slight smacking sound of dry flesh being moistened by wet tissue.
I can envision John perfectly in my mind.

Slightly rounded, swollen eyes. Puffy, almost-allergenic eyes. But kind. Sea-green eyes, intense and both old and young and gentle and firm, all at once.

Those are John's eyes.

"John. I- I," I say, in swaying tones, trying to hold onto noise or sound or something.

I need to hold onto something.

I need to.

I want to cry and I don't want to cry. I want him to hug me and I don't want to feel his skin against mine at all. I want to talk, and I want to be me. I want to be me.

But I don't know who I am anymore.

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Cracked.

Division.

My mind feels spliced into two. Or three. Or multitudes.

I cannot make a solid, assured choice. Everything is wrong and confusing. Everything I feel is a contradiction, and I want - no, I need, I need - something honest and unchanging and true. Not a disorder masquerading as a savior, and not pain masquerading as comfort.

Something safe.

I don't know what that is; I don't know how to even ask for it. How to ask John for it, or ask Yuri for it. Or ask Mycroft for it.

I don't know how to ask for help.

I don't know what help looks like, or what help even feels like.

I am totally lost, and I know I am lost.

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Yet I am terrified of saying the words: 'I am lost.'

"When we get home, I want to run some quick tests. For myself, really, so it won't take more than a few minutes. Then a little late brunch for us both. Maybe some rest afterwards?," John tests, and his voice reverberates in my skull like music heard beneath water. Unreal, dream-like - but louder somehow for the distinction. "Are you for a nap?"

John's voice: far away and tremulous.

My voice is unreal in my own head: cold and distant.

"Yes. Alright."
But everything is not alright.

Everything is a pastel of reality. Whited out images and ghost-feelings that flit about my consciousness, trapping me in limbo.

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And everything hurts, and I don't know if I want it to hurt, or if I want it to stop. If I could decide on if I wanted his kindness, or if I wanted pain then maybe I would be okay. Not conventionally okay, so much as okay with myself.

Maybe insanity isn't even in finding yourself wanting pain, but in not knowing what you want.

When everything is awful and gorgeous and scary and beautiful and alive and dead...all at the same time.

I bend forward, press my fingertips under my knees and dig into the nub of bone. The protuberance of bone. I want to scream and I want to smile. Because I did that.

Me.

Sherlock Holmes.

Me. Me. Me.

I did that. I did that, and they couldn't stop me.

Couldn't stop me. Couldn't. Couldn't.

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I see the Speedy's sign in the distance. Images flood into my mind. Mrs. Hudson and scones and butter and jams and me, shooting the walls. And 'this is coming out of your rent, young man,' and me, feeling okay with her anger, because it was an indulgent sort of anger. Feeling almost happy with her grim, crisp voice.

'Young man.'


She wasn't angry. Not really. Not really.

Then it turned. It came back; I couldn't breathe.

Back from when I was 11, and 14, and 22.

An old friend. Or an old enemy.

More contradiction.

I let it back inside, back inside my mind.

It was clawing at my cranium, and I knew it, and I knew it made everything slow down and grow dim and fuzzy and somehow hurt less in the physical activity of hurting more. I knew what is was,
and even so - I let it back inside.

But emotionally, I knew I would become numb again.

Numbness was better than pain.

Numbness is always better than pain.

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John is giving the cabbie some money. Then he opens my door and offers me his hand, which I do not take.

I am not an invalid.

I am Sherlock Holmes.

I am not so useless as to need aid upon exiting a taxi cab.

John shoulders my bags and his own satchel and we make our way to the edge of 221 B.

I see him lick his lips apprehensively but I do not say anything, even though my thoughts are racing.

Maybe I should sleep. Maybe John is right.

Maybe I need sleep.

"Ok," he says gruffly, slightly distracted as he unlocks the door and makes move to carry the bags inside. "Some things might look a tad different. But I promise you Sherlock, nothing is gone. Maybe packed up, but not gone. I didn't chuck anything out. Not a thing."

I help him by taking my own bags inside, and by not saying anything. Not complaining.

The hallway smells like Pine-sol, but only slightly. There is a plant in a pot off to one side that I've never seen before.

"Mrs. Hudson," John supplies easily, slight smile upon his lips. "She thought some added oxygen would do you good."

I stare at it while a tousling emotion skips about inside of me, and I don't know why.

"I don't need anymore oxygen," I say in response, just to say something. Just to break through the awkwardness which my stupidity has caused everyone.

John grunts, re-shoulders his bag and stubbornly makes me give up my own before ascending the stairs.

"Well, she doesn't know that Sherlock. She's helping the best she knows how with the limited information she's gleaned from the situation. Besides, you like plants - you read about them all the time."

"Poisonous plants. I like poisonous plants. Reading about them helps me with cases," I mutter, as I follow behind. "And that is a Ming Aralia. It is probably the dullest, least poisonous plant around."

John, of course, says nothing as we ascend the stairs. Then we are at the entrance of 221B and so John gives me a tidy, furtive glance.
"Like I said-

"Yes, I know. I understand," I respond dismissively. "You promised me: nothing is gone. I am not mentally incompetent."

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The place is both very, very different to how I last remember it, yet at the same time - oddly enough - superficially identical to how it was before.

I try to ignore the tightening in my chest that is alerting me to the fact that my behaviour is the reason for any changes. Little objects gone here and there, like missing teeth. No more pens or pencils, nor anything sharp. No glass, nothing with a slicing edge.

It's a sanitized room. Sanitized, John feels, out of a particular need for my safety. Sanitized for my consumption.

Because I did this.

And so I have no right to complain about the changes for which I alone am responsible for generating.

But it doesn't mean I am happy about those changes, either.

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John busies himself in the kitchenette, aware of my melancholy.

"You must have had breakfast at the hospital, yeah?"

I nod to the wall; I realize that this doesn't count as a proper response.

When he sticks his head back around, I nod again.

"I had a Toffee Fortisip at the hospital this morning. It tasted nothing like toffee."

John ignores my critique, and goes straight to the marrow of the issue: "That's a drink, right?"

Yes, John. That's a drink.

One that has more calories, gram for gram, than just about anything else I could put into my mouth.

Which is why they gave it to me, those doctors.

"It's a nutritionally complete meal supplement," I say smoothly. I must sound like I am reading off the box. "I don't need anything else for breakfast," I add hurriedly. In one can, I have consumed about the same number of calories that I normally allot for two days.

John frowns at me, then looks up at the clock.

"Right, well - it's almost noon, so I think it would be a good time to prepare lunch at the very least. What would you like?"

I wince and put my head down against the side table.

"I'm not very hungry," I whisper.
And it's true. I am decidedly not hungry. In fact, I feel a little bit sick to my stomach.

John lets out a deep breath, closes the fridge door, and comes to sit aside me on the sofa.

"Sherlock, you have to eat something for lunch. I know you are used to skipping meals here and there, but we - no, I - I can't let you do that any longer. Mycroft must have spoken to you, must have-"

John doesn't want to be the bad guy here. Not that Mycroft is, of course.

"He did," I concede. "Mycroft did. Speak to me, I mean."

"So you know that it is vitally important that not only we create a plan for you, but that you be involved in that plan. Not only that: you also have to stick to the plan, or you are not going to get better."

'Get better.'

I know what they have in store for me. I know what they consider 'getting better' to be. I know what 'getting better' means to them both.

Plus, it sounds so easy when you say that something has a plan. Just follow the plan. Because, really, how hard could that be?

"But I feel like I might be sick," I pant at last. "I don't see the point of eating something if I won't help but get sick afterwards."

John gives me a studious appraisal, his brows flexed into something neither angry nor blithely accepting of my words.

"Would that be a deliberate getting sick?"

I bite back a moan and keep my head down on the side table.

"Sherlock?"

Now I close my eyes.

John was right.

I want to sleep. I want to sleep more than I want to eat.

I know this now.

"Maybe I should go to bed," I mumble. "You were right. I should have a nap."

"Nooo," John drawls, as is his manner. "I think maybe you should talk to me."

But I am so, so tired.

"I-," my voice doesn't know what to say, or in what order. "I am still full from the Fortisip. I don't think that it has even digested yet."

"Which is possible. It's more than you are used to at one time, I think."

Good.
He understands.

He understands the logic in not overfilling my stomach right now.

"Yes, so I don't want anything else right now. Nothing at all. I can try again at dinner."

John suppresses a sigh, but not well enough for me to miss.

"Sherlock, it doesn't work that way. If it worked that way, I fear you'd find a reason to ignore your hunger or to feel full through means that would not serve you. Ways that would not get you healthy. You may feel full at the moment - and I understand you probably do - but it's lunchtime now. It's time to have something else."

So he doesn't get it.

He doesn't get the fact that the thought of eating anything else right now makes me want to scream. Makes me want to gag.

"Any thoughts? Any suggestions as to what I should prepare?," John tries again, forced levity infusing his tone.

I wave John away.

"I don't care. It's all equally-"

repulsive.

"Okay," he sighs. "I am going to make us some grilled cheese sandwiches and minestrone soup, then. It's what I used to eat when I was little...if I was getting over a flu or fever."

Except I am not getting over a flu or fever.

And it's cheese.

I have a love-loathe relationship with cheese at the best of times.

He asked what you wanted to eat, genius.

Maybe you should have offered up some suggestions.

Too late to add my contributions now, I guess.

"I am going to go lie down if my concerns are not deemed valid."

John looks up at me with hesitation, and I know the reason why: he's afraid to leave me alone.

"I'm just going to sleep for a bit, John," I murmur, my face heating up in shame. "That's it."

He nods, finds his voice.

"Okay. I'll come and get you when the food is ready."

He departs from the room, and I go to my own.

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I ignore the hammering of my heart telling me that he's gone through my things.
My things.

All of it.

He's seen...stuff. I don't even know if I can recall everything he's likely seen. The scale is gone, undoubtedly. John's likely picked up everything, opened up boxes, looked inside. I try to tell myself that it's okay. Okay, because it's John and he's proven his loyalty to me.

I realize I am still wearing my hospital bracelet. I will need John to cut it off for me since he's confiscated the scissors.

I just don't want to stare at it any longer.

The red band - denoting my penicillin allergy? That's fine. It's just a penicillin allergy. It's the rest of it that I hate. It's the black on white text.

HOLMES, SHERLOCK.

Psychiatry.

Right there, in bold lettering. Telling the entire world of my problems.

That's I am mentally unwell. Or at least that I am mentally unwell in their estimation.

It's hateful.

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I head over to my cupboards and peer at my reflection in the mirror.

My skin is oddly grey, and brown stubble dots my pale jaw while my hair tangles together in greasy clumps.

I am a mess; I look strung out and dirty.

Maybe I should get a shower instead of taking a nap - although I'm fairly certain my razor will be confiscated along with the scissors, the pencils, the pens, my lab equipment, glass cups, forks, knives and everything else that John thinks would be a threat to me. Which honestly, is probably more of my belongings than not.

I will raise the issue later, after lunch - after I eat lunch and do so without a fuss. Once I convince John that I can be safely left alone with my own tools.

Because I am not so far gone as to dismantle a safety razor and slash at my face.

I am not really insane.

I'm not.


That's it. That's all it is. That's all it must be.

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Inhaling deeply I realize that I can smell a light, fresh lemon fragrance - and so realize that the person
on the cleaning binge was likely John himself and not Mrs. Hudson. (Mrs. Hudson has never entered my bedroom, merely the living room and the kitchenette).

My eyes settle and catch on new objects, too: a plastic water pitcher with an assortment of sea-foam green plastic tumblers. A stack of books - some obviously from the library, some which look newly purchased - all science or crime based from what I can see at quick glance. The room is tidier - and cleaner - and my bed has been made over with fresh sheets and a preponderance of blankets, for which I am actually grateful.

I am very cold, and I realize that now as I stare at the sheets and the padding and the pillows. I slip off my socks - sweat-laden and foul - and ball them up, toss them into a corner of my room. Then I push my bed flush against the wall to create a nook and pull the blinds down to cut out the light, before coiling up under a mound of fleece and cotton.

''Sherlock,'' and he's nudging me. Not shaking, but almost. Restive little motions against my shoulder. "Sherlock, the food is ready."

And it is ready. It's there, on a tray that he's holding.

"I thought you might want to eat up here. I didn't know, really. You seemed so tired, and I barely had the heart to wake you as it was."

My eyes burn with fatigue and John brings over the chair from my desk, then deposits the tray of food on top.

There it stands: a floral-print bowl filled to the brim with minestrone soup. Beside it, a diagonally cut grilled cheese sandwich on rye. He's even sliced a deli pickle and offset it slightly.

My stomach growls, betraying me, and I fight the urge to lick my lips.

The food smells good - and it even looks good - and both of those points are causing me a slight, crazy measure of fear that I am trying in vain to ignore.

"I can bring mine up here too, if you'd like. Or would you prefer to eat alone?" John trails off awkwardly.

Everything these days feels spliced between two opposing needs. I want to be alone but I don't want to feel lonely, and I know the moment that John leaves I will feel worse than I already do.

"You can eat here, too, if you'd like," my voice carries, unbidden, and seemingly of its own volition.

"Right," John says with a smile smile, "Good. I will go get my own meal then. Be back in a tick."

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His plate looks almost the same as mine in terms of the size of the food offerings, the types of foods and my estimation of their calorie content. His sandwich actually looks slightly larger. Slightly, only slightly. But still...

I realize he's used potato bread for his own meal, not rye. That's likely the cause of the discrepancy. The fact that I am calmed by this fact is confusing, but then another wild and grotesque thought
comes to me.
And the thought is something like this:
'He doesn't really think you are thin at all.
It's just that he's concerned because your blood work is all wrong.
You are not remotely in need of weight gain, but you have to get your potassium levels up.
That's why his meal is larger.
That's why.
He'd rather you not gain any weight at all.'
The slight comfort of not feeling overloaded with food has shifted, and a new anxiety is burrowing into the crevices of my brain.
"Sherlock?," John tests suddenly. He must have sensed something. He must have seen my face fall.
"It's nothing," I whisper, upset at myself. Angry with my tormenting mind.
"It's not nothing. Tell me what's making you agitated. Something new, I can sense it."
I glance up and see his eyes, imploring me to confide in him.
"It's just that your plate has more food. I don't understand."
How do I explain this?
Without sounding completely insane?
John bites his lip, then studies his own tray of food.
"Marginally, perhaps. I tried to keep them more or less the same. Are you upset by that? I thought you preferred rye bread to potato."
I shake my head, frustrated.
"I do. I do prefer rye. I just... No. Never mind. It was just a thought - it was just a crazy thought. Please forget it."
John puts his sandwich back down against his plate.
"Can you explain it any better than that? I want to understand, Sherlock."
I nudge the grilled cheese away from me, feeling irrationally angry, and close my eyes.
"Everyone says that I need to gain weight, yet our meals are equal in size. So my meal is not an amount that is different to what people would eat normally, who are considered to be at a healthy weight. Yet - if I am underweight - then I feel that you'd have made mine larger. But it's not larger. So it causes me to think that perhaps you have no problem with my weight. Maybe I am not underweight at all. Maybe not."
John takes a bit of a breath, fast and catching. His eyes race back and forth in his skull, frantically fast. He closes them, takes a breath. Looks up at me. Looks straight into my eyes.
"I don't want to start you off with too much, Sherlock. Your stomach has undoubtedly shrunken, and I
know you might not even be able to finish what I've made. I thought if the amounts were similar,
that would be the most normal. Would feel the most natural and maybe, because of that, be easier for
you."

'Most normal."

He just wants to normalize things for you, you overreacting freak.

"I thought, I thought maybe...," but I don't know how to finish the idea. I don't know if it's wise to do
so, even if I could.

"You thought what?," John queries carefully. "What did you think?"

I push against my legs. Needing to feel the pressure of something firm and solid.

"Maybe I thought that you don't consider me in need of weight gain at all. That everyone is lying to
me. Maybe even you," I whisper with hesitation, scared of John's response. "But that doesn't seem to
make too much sense, either, because of the effort others are putting in to get me to eat. So then I
thought it must just be the blood work, and if that's the case I can just take potassium pills. I don't
need to eat this at all. That's what I thought, and it made me...not want to eat the sandwich at all."

John mirrors my form and closes his eyes, before rising and pacing to the edge of the bed where I've
huddled up in a ball. He sinks down against the foam, against my side, but not before taking my tray
and placing it on the night stand.

"Sherlock," he implores, taking my hand and giving it a light jostle. "Do you know how paranoid
that sounds?"

My shoulders bunch up in apprehension.

"I know how it sounds. You asked me to explain," I admit. "When the thoughts come that's what
they are like."

John is silent for a moment, before asking: "the 'thoughts'?"

Press again. Firmer. My long bones ache with the force.

I feel sick to my stomach, I really do.

I shouldn't have to eat the sandwich at all.

"They are just thoughts that are always sort of there and sometimes...," I swallow, stop talking - then
resume talking, "I feel calmer when I listen to them. That's it. That's why."

John is studying me with a look of disconcert and it causes my pulse to double.

"You listen to thoughts?," he asks uncomfortably. "Do you mean like voices? Inside your head?"

My throat suddenly feels parched, my esophagus tight. Stricture.

No, not voices.

"I am not psychotic, John. I am not suffering from psychosis. I am aware of how it sounds; I'm just
sharing what I feel."
Our sandwiches are going cold, and that's all my fault too.

All of this is my fault.

I should push John away; get him to leave.

Not just for today, or tomorrow.

But for always.

Get him to seek a better life with healthy people.

Get him to seek a better life with a normal flatmate.

Get him to seek a happier existence; one far, far away from me.

"I never said you were psychotic, Sherlock. But I don't understand what you mean by listening to thoughts - because I don't know what's happening to you. All I know is that I want to help."

He holds up his hands in either frustration or appeasement, I'm not really sure.

"I can't explain it, really; it's me and it's not me. It's just always sort of there in the back of my mind. Especially with, well-," and I point to the sandwich, the soup.

"With eating," John determines and I nod. Lick my lips.

"Yes. With eating. Yes."

John takes a deeper breath, before running his hands through his hair.

"Can you ignore the thoughts? Can you just tell yourself it's part of this disorder?"

My throat is parched and burns. It feels split.

He makes it sound so easy.

Follow step 1, step 2, step 3, then eat, then ignore the thoughts, then eat some more, step 4, then ignore the looks, then repeat everything. But don't feel the creeping sense of disgust. Don't focus on the feelings as you chew, don't focus on the feelings as the food slides down your throat and into your belly.

Don't feel it. Don't feel it.

And how does that work, really?

"I can try. Though I know what's going to happen when I'm done with it all. I know what it's going to be like. What it's going to feel like. For me."

John's whole face pinches and I look down at my legs. At the tray of food still nestled against my body, waiting for admission into my throat, into my belly.

"What's it going to be like?," he asks tentatively. "What's it going to feel like? How are you going to feel if you, say, eat this sandwich?"

I pick up the tray and put it besides me on the bed.

I ignore the fact that my hands are shaking.
"I'm going to hate myself," I get out, my voice hoarse. "I'm going to feel awful inside. I'm going to want to sick up, just to get the feelings to go away, and then I am going to hate myself for getting sick. For making you worry, for betraying your trust, for all of it. I know how it looks to you, and I know it's disgusting. I know when I make myself vomit...I am being disgusting. I know how it sounds, and I know it's not rational, but I can't just separate myself from it. It's always there. When you are not around, when no one else is there...it's there. It's there, when no one else is there. You'd be the exact same as me, if you felt it. If you heard it inside your head. There would be no difference. Don't think for one second that you'd be immune!"

John now mirrors my actions; pushes his own tray off and to the side.

"Sherlock," he starts uneasily, "Would it help if I made something different? A different meal, maybe?"

Bite my tongue now. Not hard enough to draw blood, but almost.

Yet I want to; I want to bite. I want to taste blood.

I want to feel the peal of red in my mouth...and know that I made it come into existence. Made it well up.

That I accomplished that much, when everyone was taking everything else away from me.

But I don't do that. I don't bite myself.

Not now. Not with John watching me so carefully. Trying so hard to understand. Trying so hard to fix me. Maybe because I know, deep down, that John would be upset if he were to hear these thoughts. If he were to ever learn what sort of imaginings course through my mind. He'd be shocked, and he'd very likely be sickened.

Worse than that: he'd be disappointed in me.

"I don't think it will matter what you replace it with, really. I think I will feel the same," I say, at long last. "With almost anything you make me. If it nourishes me at all - I will feel that way. If it's nutritious, if it helps me, if it makes me better physically- I will want to be sick. I will want to be sick. And I don't know why. I don't understand why."

John frowns at the floor, and suddenly looks pale. Suddenly seems distraught.

"Let's just take a bite then, okay? Just for starters?," he asks, and his voice wobbles and sounds far off. Then he picks up his own sandwich and does exactly that. He takes a bite. A big bite. Chews. Swallows. Turns to me, and speaks: "The beginning of something new is always the hardest step. It gets easier after you start. Sometimes, half the battle is just in starting."

Then he takes a second bite, and when he's finished chewing he puts his sandwich back down on his plate.

"Come on - it's your turn now, Sherlock."

I stare at the bread. The cheese, now cooling - now congealing, almost - and I realize I feel both terribly hungry and terribly sick at the same time. I close my eyes and I take a bite, and I chew the food back and forth 10, 20, 30 times before I swallow.

My throat is dry, but I get it down. Suddenly, I feel the need to cover my mouth with my hands.
I can't bring it up. I won't bring it up.

"Do you need some water?" John asks quietly. "Would that help?"

I shake my head, and drop the rest of the sandwich back against the plate.

"What's wrong with me?" I whisper.

John doesn't say anything for a long while, although I hear his slight movement as he reorients himself on the bed.

"What's wrong with me, John?" I repeat the question with greater insistence. My throat burns with the sandwich, with the cheese.

This has to be physical. A disease. Maybe a cancer.

Maybe I even have stomach cancer.

It's not just in my head.

It can't be.

It's too physical to be a mental illness.

"John?," I plead.

And again - nothing; the air is tense with the energy of his unspoken intensity.

Finally, when I am about to get up and leave - my face hot and burning - he says:

"You are sick. It's a disorder. With eating. Can you admit to that much?"

I stare at my sandwich. Nearly whole, minus the one bite now. It's perfect, in a sense, because I ate for him. It's imperfect because I ate from it.

More paradox.

And yet, my hands are trembling for the effort that even one bite of one sandwich from one mealtime has cost me.

"I don't know," and my voice is thick. Unnatural in it's congestion.

"You don't know?," my friend queries, sounding lost. "You don't know if you have an eating disorder? Do you think it's typical to feel this way? Giving yourself what you need to be healthy? Do you think most people feel like this when they eat their lunch?"

Part of me - the part that is angry at being alive, perhaps - wants to chuck the sandwich across the room. To show what, I am not really certain.

"Maybe."

John sighs. "Maybe? Maybe what, Sherlock? Maybe you understand? That this is not normal?"

I nod, tiredly.

I am exhausted. I can admit to that much.
John picks up my tray - which has been pushed off to the side - and places it once more on my lap.

"I need you to eat some more now. Some more of the sandwich, ideally, and some of the soup, minimally. Come on. You can do it. I know you can, Sherlock."

Suddenly, the sandwich is back in my hands and I am taking another bite. And fat, salty tears are making their way into my mouth even though I am completely silent and not really crying at all. I don't even feel sad, so I cannot be crying.

My mouth chews, my throat stings, but I swallow some more of the sandwich.

I do this six more time, and eat approximately 1/3 of the sandwich before I look up at John and lick my lips. Try to form a sentence.

"I want to stop now, please," I get out at last. I am - in this moment - here and not here. I am 8, and I am 36, and I feel everything and I feel nothing.

John gives me a terse smile but removes the sandwich from my hands and places it back on the plate.


My head is a thousand kilograms and it falls forward against my chest, but I still manage to nod.

"Okay," I say, and more tears drain into my throat.

John, this time, serves me the soup in small mouthfuls. I don't even touch the spoon.

He feeds me, and I let him.

When I've taken our agreed upon six mouthfuls of soup, I turn away and collide into the mattress, face down.

I can hear John get up. I can hear the rustling sound of his body as it shifts about and as he removes the objects from my bed. Finally, I can feel him working a duvet over my body.

"Do you want to sleep for a bit now?" he asks softly. "You must be very tired. You are fighting yourself on being healthy, and I can't imagine how exhausting that must be."

My head moves up and down, but I do not speak.

Yes. I want to sleep.

I want to fall into a deep, deep sleep.

"Do you want me to stay with you while you fall asleep?"

The question throws me and I realize that I do not know how to feel about anything, anymore.

Do I want John to stay with me?

When I've already made myself look so foolish?

"Don't think about what I'm thinking. Just let yourself answer honestly. Would you - Sherlock - like me to stay?"
My head moves up and down before the question can fully be pondered.

'Yes.'

Please stay, John.

Yes, I would like you to stay.

John settles in, and a ghost hand - light, barely there - descends against my scalp, gently and carefully. The presence - if I could feel nothing of emotion and only of sensation - is very pleasant. For this reason alone I try to relax into the susurrus of movement and sound.

"Can you call it by name, now?," John asks a moment later, his hand never quite stilling. Just slowing as he speaks.

My eyes move up to look up at him, questioning. Confusion must play across my features.

"Can you admit to having a disorder? Now? Because you've already done so well? You are already doing so well."

I stare through John; through his kind eyes and his sandy hair and his solid form. Until he's nothing but buzzing energy. Nothing but particulate. Nothing but electrons and protons and neutrons.

Not someone hearing an admission, or making a judgment.

Not a person.

Just another voice in my head.

Except this voice is asking me a question and not giving me a command.

"I have," and my voice is dry, so I stop. Gather enough moisture to swallow. "a problem with eating. I don't want to eat. I don't want it inside me. Any of it."

The hand stills, temporarily.

"Anything else? What is it called, do you think? What is the problem called? What is its name?"

My eyes have closed again, and I listen to the sound.

There is no John, and there is no Sherlock.

Just voices.

One asking and one answering.

That's easier.

"Anorexia nervosa, I think. I think maybe I have that. I think maybe I am anorexic."

The voice stops asking questions then, for a minute. Maybe two minutes. Maybe five minutes.

I'm not really sure.

Then the hand is stroking my hair again, and I let out a breath I didn't even know I was holding inside.
"Yes," it breathes, again. "You are, love. I'm sorry."

I close my eyes more firmly, and let myself succumb to the weariness.

Because I must be nearly asleep.

Almost asleep.

"I'm sorry, too," I say, enjoying the sensation of the hand against my hair, the coolness of the pillow against my skin, and maybe even the diminished pain in my stomach from six bites of sandwich and six mouthfuls of soup.

"Don't be sorry," the voice says calmly. "You are going to get better. I just need you to let me help you. Can you try to do that? Can you trust me?"

I don't even nod; I move closer to his hand, and hope he keeps stroking my head.

"I don't want to feel like this any more," I breathe. "I want it to stop."

John continues on: his hand, gliding over my head.

"Okay. Then we are going to get it to stop. Alright, Sherlock? Do you get that? Do you trust me?"

I do, so I nod.

"Good," the voice says.

And it sounds relieved.
Hi guys!

Just a quick little ramble:

While the first half of this story dealt with decline, this chapter starts in on actual ways John and Sherlock are going to move forward, and going to try to get Sherlock healthier - in mind, body, and spirit. Because of that, it's going to get more focused on discussions between the two of them (and also with Yuri, and Mycroft to lesser degrees) and revelations.

The story will now be more about choosing to trust in loved ones. Not so much about confinement, nor hiding. As always: a warning for noncon topics (which will be discussed in greater detail in later topics and not so much here) and references to self-harm.

Finally, given the format of fanfic dot net, it's trickier for me to respond personally to all your wonderful reviews. I do have an Archive of Our Own profile - same name, and story posted under the same title - and I generally respond to all posts/ reviews/ questions much more often on AO3 than here. Just saying. ;)

To those who inquired: no, the story is not ending at Chapter 31 (obviously. We have a ways to go, yet).

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We are back to John's POV, btw.

I sit by Sherlock for about fifteen minutes before he falls asleep. His hands grasp my sweater, and he pulls it towards his face as if it is a blanket and not an item of my clothing.

My fingers continue to glide over his skull; as his breathing regulates and his eyes flicker about indicating the start of REM sleep - I let my hands move to touch his temples, the ridges of his face, his cheekbones.

The delineations of bone under the skin feel prominent, and a surge of sadness stings my eyes.

While he's always been thin, this is still all so new. New for me to see, anyway.

It scares me. It scares me more than Afghanistan.

It scares me more than the weight of my previous depression.

The bones look like they are attacking him from all angles. His eyes are sunken and when he moves about or swallows, his cheeks sink in, which makes my bowels tense up in anxiety.

Because he looks so sick, yes - but also because I can see the decline now, daily. He's lost so much
weight, and so with the loss of every new pound brings renewed horror. His decline is starting to look obscenely magnified with even small passing periods, and I feel the weight of the burden in getting him well.

I hope you know what you are doing, Mycroft.

Trusting him to me. Trusting in me to get him well.

Because I am terrified.

"I love you, Sherlock," I whisper to his sleeping form. "I love you, and we are going to get you better again. We are going to send this disorder off packing. It's not going to get you. I won't let it."

Of course, I don't know HOW I can stop it.

I just know that I will do anything to save him. I also know, that if it comes down to it - I will put him in a hospital.

I am ready to take that step. And I understand, now, looking at him in his pallid, ashy tones with sweat across his brow - why Mycroft was ready to take that step, too.

Suddenly, I have a much greater respect for Mycroft Holmes. While at one point I may have thought of the elder Holmes as being annoyingly meddling - now I see a conflicted sibling, and a staunch advocate. One who, since childhood, has done the best in his own way to save a brother no one else tried to save.

Yes, Mycroft has grown hugely in my estimation.

Since he's devoted much of his life and energies to caring and protecting one of the people I care the most about in the entire world - I also can't help but consider Mycroft my friend, now, too.

And it's strange, really - because it's not like I've spoken to him often. Mostly when he's spirited me away by sending around his cars and aides. Perhaps I should have a talk with him about that; it's not necessary, his whisking me off. He doesn't have to twist my arm to get my help or to get me to confide in him about my concerns for Sherlock.

We are, after all, on the same team.

"Sleep, love. Rest up. Get better, okay?," I say in low tones, not wanting to rouse Sherlock.

As if listening from the realm of sleep, Sherlock nestles himself closer to my form.

"I should probably be telling you all this when you are awake, but I sometimes think you'd laugh at half the things my mind comes up with... You'd think I was overly sentimental, probably. What did you call it before? Maudlin?"

His hair feels damp, and I realize he needs a shower.

"You're a bit mucky right now, and I know how fastidious you normally are," I continue on, the volume of my voice so low that even if he were awake he'd likely have to strain to hear me. "When you awaken, if it's before dinner, you'll probably want to get a shower. I got you some new soaps," I ramble. "They are pear. I think you like pear. I noticed that your ridiculously expensive shampoo is scented to smell like pears."

Sherlock continues to sleep; my voice is seemingly a type of white-noise.
"Maybe in a few days, if you are a bit steadier, we can visit the Yard? Would you like that? See Lestrade? See if he has any cold cases that you can read about from home?"

Sherlock's throat bulges, and he swallows, and I realize he's coming down with a cold. His nose is stopped up, so he's breathing through his mouth.

I'll have to get some decongestant on my next run to Tesco.

"And I know you won't want to, really, but I hope you'll tell me what happened to your throat. If someone hurt you, they are not going to get away with it. But I won't force it out of you. I promise you that; I will try to pay more attention to how you feel. I'm sorry I didn't hear you well enough before. I am so sorry if I contributed to your pain, or your anxiety. If I made you feel worse in any way."

Realizing that I'm craning my neck - and it's beginning to stiffen - I sit upright, and roll it back and forth. Then I pull a second blanket over Sherlock, but not before brushing the hair out of his eyes.

"I'm going to go and get some sleep too, but I'm just going down the hallway. I'll be here in a flash if you need me," I mutter, before slowing retreating and shutting his door half way closed.

While, emotionally, I would like nothing more than to sit with him until he wakes up, I know Sherlock. I know he's likely been under nothing but non-stop surveillance since he entered the hospital, and I know he's likely to wake and be overwhelmed from our last discussion. If I am there, awake (or, potentially, asleep) - he's going to feel surrounded, overloaded.

And he won't want to talk me just yet, either.

He'll be concerned about my feelings, and not his own.

Besides, sick or not, struggling or not: he needs his own space. I just have to ensure that the space is safe for him. That he can come to no harm while he decompresses and finds his equilibrium once more.

But he needs to be able to process his emotions, on his own time, and if and when he needs it - in privacy.

----------------------------------------------------------------

I cat-nap on the sofa. But not before I head back to the kitchenette, meander around, look at the food, decide in advance what to prepare for dinner.

Hopefully, Sherlock will wake up long before I have to prepare anything so I can get his input.

Soup and sandwiches did not seem to go over very well last time.

Possibly I could order in, say, Chinese. Or something from Angelo's. Like old times.

Perhaps the memory of those past experiences will be enough to console him. Enough to remind him of moments when he was healthier, and seemingly happier, than he is currently.

Even so - I do a quick inventory, and realize that I have to be careful as to how I portion the sizes in the future. My meal cannot be bigger, it seems, and yet I also know that if his meal is bigger than my own, he's likely to become even more overwhelmed.

The easiest thing may be to have him serve himself, and I will serve my own meal separately.
afterwards. Additionally, if he doesn't select enough items to meet the caloric goals I have outlined for him (after going over a plan with Mycroft, too) I guess at that point we will have to add a meal supplement to his plan. Just as was the case in the clinic. He's not going to like it but it will be obviously something for him and him alone.

It might also make more sense to get him to focus on consuming more liquids at present.

It was idiotic for me to think that I could start him off on a cheese sandwich.

After about ten minutes of deliberating, I decide that the dinner offering will consist of smoked salmon (sans bones), a salad with nuts, beans and tomatoes, mashed potatoes, and tapioca pudding. Plus, an Ensure for Sherlock.

I spend a few minutes looking up gram and calorie amounts, per food, and I work out a reasonable way for him to hit 600 calories in his next meal with a modest amount of food - provided he eats enough nuts and drinks a meal supplement. I also look at various figures for protein, fiber, and weigh everything in my mind while I consider the bulk and weight of the food on his stomach.

He's still healing from the gastrectomy, and I must not forget that. Many people do lose weight naturally after such a surgery and most feel nauseated.

No matter what other issues Sherlock is dealing with right now he's likely to be feeling sick to his stomach for that reason alone.

I finally decide to grab my laptop and put it on the kitchen counter. From there, I pull up a website about an 'anti-dumping' diet for individuals healing from gastrectomies and come across some information.

For starters, I learn that many patients healing from such an operation are prone to intense nausea, and often present with dizziness, bloating, weakness, sweating and a rapid heart beat.

Some pertinent advice is provided, however, such as the benefit of providing very small meals throughout the day.

Which could help with the physical symptoms, but which might take more out of Sherlock emotionally. It'll likely be difficult enough to get him to eat three times a day. If I were to encourage him to eat six or more times a day, I think he'd be knots every moment of his waking life. There would be no cessation to the emotional demands that this would place on him.

What would benefit him physically could hinder him emotionally...

But it's something I can talk to him about, at least. His caloric goal wouldn't change; it might even be less difficult for him to face, on the whole. I don't really know.

We've talked around this issue; we haven't confronted it head on. So, really, I am operating in the dark.

I can visit websites about eating disorders (and I have. A multitude of them). I can read journal articles, things in JAMA and The Lancet and books by psychotherapists. Perhaps it's even helping me to formulate my plan for him.
Yet the most vital information is the input from him alone.

Sherlock is unlike anyone else I have ever met.

It would be foolish of me to assume he'd proceed in a typical way to typical therapies.

I will need to tailor the best of therapies for him (with the best professionals) for this to work.

I continue to read and learn that pairing an Ensure with a solid meal is likely not a good idea (the site discourages the consumption of liquids and solids at the same time, and recommends waiting 1/2 hour after finishing a solid meal before drinking anything, even water).

Pureed foods are recommended and seem to be tolerated best by most patients still in the recovery phase of surgery.

Which applies to Sherlock...as insane as that feels. So much has happened in such a short duration that the surgery feels like it was ages ago, but his body is still healing from that alone.

And there was so little fanfare to that episode, too. He went in, spoke to doctors, spoke to Yuri, came home, and degraded further.

But the days past that time seem like a blur to me now. Mostly long days of working at the surgery, and nights of reading and trying to talk to him while dealing and processing my own stress and the intensity of our confrontations.

No down time for either of us, really, and that is also a problem.

Because if I want to help Sherlock, I also have to take care of myself. Which means that I, too, need to sleep enough, need to eat enough, need to do what I need to do so that I stay healthy.

I can't help anyone from a position of exhaustion.

I have decide that mashed potatoes might be the closest thing that I can make that doesn't look distantly like baby food. Additionally, it might provide a way to get some extra butter or olive oil into Sherlock's food without having the extra calories be so stunningly obvious.

Without the meal being...

so intimidating for him.

Grabbing a pen from the 'junk' drawer, I start to jot notes for ideas that might help him feel physically less ill. Once I have filled out several pages of notes I affix the entire thing to the fridge with magnets, before removing my coat.

As I do so, I feel the photo bunch up against the pocket of my jacket and open the zipper to retrieve it.

There he is, again: toddler Sherlock, holding the red ball. I give a faint smile to the little boy - sightless of his future and of mine, caught forever in the eternity of 1979. Trapped with his own fear.

"I'm proud of you," I whisper to the image. "Thank you for having the courage to grow up so that I could get to meet you. Thank you for living."

Then I walk back to the fridge and find more magnets so that I can put the photo up in plain sight.
I doubt any adult has ever put a photo of Sherlock up in full view. On a fridge, or on a mantle, or up overlooking a fireplace.

But I will.

I will proudly show that I accept everything in his life: his past and his present and his issues. All of it.

Because I am proud of him for having the courage to face any of this, never mind all of it. For continuing on through times that must have been so bleak.

And what he perceives as his weaknesses?

I only see him as inordinately strong.

He doesn't know how strong he seems him.

I will need to rectify that...

--------------------------------------------

When I find the extra magnets, I gloss over the image one more time with my thumb.

"It's going to stop now, love. It's going to get a lot better. You wait and see."

Then I tell myself that the photo needs a proper frame. Sherlock likely doesn't have many photographs from his childhood and I don't want this particular one getting any more worn.

--------------------------------------------

Eventually I fall into a sort of disrupted sleep on the sofa. My mind is whirling. Going and going and racing, and I doubt that I actually fall asleep at all.

--------------------------------------------

It's quarter to five when I fully awaken.

The house is still quiet.

I remove the afghan that I've pulled over my body and toss it back over the love-seat, then open the blinds.

The sun is already setting.

--------------------------------------------

It's strange: you live in a place for almost three years, but never fully grasp how loud the floors creak or how much noise the cars of the main road make...until you want, very intensely, for everything to be quiet.

Since I had moved in with Sherlock, quietude was not something which I ever really thought about. Sherlock wasn't exceptionally loud, but he was always bustling. Always playing his violin, or working on an experiment, or clacking away on his - or more likely my own - laptop. He lived a completely unapologetic life, neither subdued nor even seemingly aware of my own sleep rituals, my own propensity towards introversion. He'd get up, trundle down the stairs, make noise, even yell at the telly.
He never would sleep for eight hours straight, and the issue of noise and the concern about reducing it was never before an issue I had to think about.

Now, as I ascend the stairs and wander back to Sherlock's bedroom, I am aware of everything. How my knees pop when I move after having been completely immobile for hours. How the wood groans under my body as I move. How the door hinges most definitely need more WD-40.

So I file that information away, and make my way softly towards Sherlock's door.

Rap once, then twice more against the frame.

"Sherlock?" I begin in low tones. "Are you awake?"

But there is no response so I move hesitantly back into the room, now darker than before if only for the setting sun.

The contrast of Sherlock's skin in the dark is even paler than earlier, and hence ghostly for the difference.

My hand moves up towards his chest and is calmed by the slight fluttering of his heart.

It's too faint, of course, and that concerns me.

Yet, I know I am going to fix that too.

I am going to get him well.

I must.

No other reality is acceptable.

"Sherlock." I try again, a little louder this time; I am rewarded by his slight stirring. His mouth works, back and forth, and he opens his eyes in confusion.

"John?," he grits out, and I pour him a glass of water. Help him sit up and rest against the headboard.

"Take some small sips," my voice instructs.

Sherlock does so, cupping white fingers around the container and taking tiny bits in rapid succession.

"My throat hurts," he responds a moment later, still whispering - and my hand comes up, presses against his forehead. "Hard to swallow. M'sick maybe?"

I nod absently, agreeing with his assessment.

"You feel a little hot, and you didn't feel this warm earlier. I noticed you seemed a bit congested as you were falling asleep. Does your throat hurt as it would if you were getting a cold or a flu?," I inquire gently, to which he nods.

"Mmm, anhead hurts," he mutters offering me back the glass, which I take and deposit on the bedside table.

Then he frowns at his lap. "My stomach hurts too. And it feels tight. I feel tight."

He makes an odd, panicked motion.
"Tight'?," I aim to clarify. "What do you mean by that?"

Sherlock bites his lips, closes his eyes. Gesticulates with his hands.

"Like, umm, too much for my skin. Pressure and too much, and I can't," and he stops them. Blinks at his hands. "I can't feel like this. It's awful feeling like this," he whispers. "That's why I had plans."

I look at him. Realize I am probably frowning.

"What was your 'plan'?," I aim to clarify. I don't want to assume anything, anymore. "You mean...not eating?"

Assumptions created a whole lot of pain for us both.

Sherlock brings his hands to his temples, his eyes. Presses lightly.

But doesn't *hurt* himself; he just is seeking something physical. Pressure of a physical kind against pressure of emotions, perhaps.

"You know what my plan was. With everything, and the food, and even with the work," he says hurriedly. Wanting me to know the details but not wanting to have to extrapolate.

I sigh, achy in mind and body.

"Your plan was hurting you. It wasn't a sustainable plan. It needs to be revised. We need to come up with a way that helps quell the darker feelings without hurting the rest of your body. You know that, right?"

Sherlock holds his palms sight-side up, as if offering them up to me.

Supplication.

"It wasn't as bad as this, though - what this feels likes. I-," and he stops, looks me straight in the eye. Warily.

"What?," I encourage. "What is it?"

I see his throat convulse.

"I hate myself right now, John. I can't do this for weeks, for months. I can't do this."

Finally, I nudge him towards me and into a makeshift hug.

He's accepting those more lately, too. Talking more, accepting forms of physical affection, telling the truth and expressing his fears.

So on the whole, he's already started to heal.

Which is why he's in so much pain.

He wanted to be numb, but now he's being asked to leave the things that numb him behind.

"I hate this," he stutters against my ear, repeating his earlier words. "I hate what I feel. Please, I just need-," but he stops, because even he seems to know that the words speak of disorder.

It's why he's afraid of therapy.
It's why he's clinging so hard to pathology.

He doesn't want to face the reality or the difficulty that lies ahead.

And who could blame him for that?

"Alright," I begin a few minutes later after he seems to calm down slightly, "I am going to get you an acetaminophen for your stomach. But you'll have to eat something small first. No one should take painkillers on an empty stomach, and that's doubly the case for a person getting over a bleeding ulcer."

Sherlock nods again, eyes still downcast.

"I know you feel wretched. I know it. But is anything else the matter, other than what you've expressed just now?"

He shrugs awkwardly. Rubs against his legs.

He's done that so much lately.

There is so much anxiety inside of him.

"Okay - so something is wrong, I think. Do you want to tell me what that could be?"

Sherlock now looks up at me and for a second I see it.

Regret.

His brows furrow inwards and he closes his eyes.

"I didn't mean to say everything I said. Before. Before I fell asleep. It just came out," he whispers. "I don't like what came out. I don't feel good about what I said. Or what I didn't mean to say but spoke about anyway."

I take the glass from his hands, and put it back on his night stand.

"What didn't you mean to say?"

Sherlock bites his lip, scratches his cheek.

"Most of it? All of it? I don't know! I just have never," he starts, stops. "I feel strange. Saying it aloud. I feel exposed," he breathes. "Saying those words, even to you. I know I can trust you - that's not it. But I hate myself for telling you that, even though you know what it's called. Know the name. Maybe because I hadn't really accepted it, myself. Not really."

I nod my head, then crouch down to sit on the floor.

"Being honest about this takes a whole boatload of strength, Sherlock. Talking to me or anyone else who wants to help you isn't a sign of weakness. It's a sign of strength. At least it is to me. Do you believe me when I say this?"

Grey-blue ices traverse the cotton bedspread that I last threw over him; he now seems to study the fibers, the cloth.
"Yes," he mumbles. "I believe you, but I am still confused."

I see him lick his lips, nervously.

"What are you confused about?"

In agitation he rolls the blanket about in his hands.

"That for a moment I was almost relieved that I could tell you but now I feel like I screwed up, John. I feel like I made it real in a way that wasn't real before."

I give him his space. I don't go to hold his hand. I can sense the overwhelm in his entire body.

"You didn't screw up, Sherlock. On the contrary. You talked to me, yes, but I am your friend; no harm will come of that. And while I don't understand this particular battle - I do get aspects of what you are feeling. Not with eating, no. But perhaps with feeling certain ways and being embarrassed because of those feelings and wanting to keep the thoughts to yourself. I mean, why do you think it was recommended that I speak to my psychiatrist? Back before I even knew you?"

Sherlock stills; he seems to be listening more intently now.

He needs to listen to this.

He needs to know that he's not alone.

That other people want to hide their disorders, or their pain, too.

That society teaches us that we should. That we are weak to talk about it, to let it bring us down or impact us.

But we are not weak for that.

We're only human.

"I really didn't want to go to see anyone and certainly not a shrink, so I understand that much. I definitely didn't want to talk to her about how I was feeling. I almost would rather have a root canal for the stress I felt when I first entered Ella's office."

He nods again, and I feel a bit of the fight leave him. A good sign; it means he's connecting to the story. Connecting to my experiences and not feeling so bizarre or strange or wrong in the process.

If talking to him about how I felt at my lowest helps him at his lowest, I will gladly reveal every secret and every dark moment of my past.

"Listen to me, Sherlock: you have nothing to feel ashamed about. You haven't done anything wrong. If you broke your leg...would you be doing something wrong in admitting that it was broken? Or to even expressing that it hurt you?"

Sherlock's fingertips glide over his knees. Over his bones. I have noticed that he seems to touch the ridges of his skin much more often these days. It's almost as if - consciously or not - he's soothed by his thinness.

I can't help but feel as if he's trying to confirm his emaciation.

That he's doing his own sort of 'bone check', which was a term I read about on one of the recovery forums.
Yet, it seems to ring true here.

So my goal is to distract him. To give him a more soothing reality than anything he takes away from his disorder.

That's my job now.

"I al-almost killed myself," he stammers, at long last. "I should feel ashamed. I hurt you, and I hurt Mycroft. How can you even stand to look at me right now?"

Damn it.

My throat is too sore for this. So I stop speaking, gather some spit in my mouth, swallow.

Try to order what I should say and how I should say it, before starting in on this conversation.

"You also called the ambulance, didn't you?"

He looks up at me rapidly now, before tentatively nodding.

"Yes, I know about that. Mycroft told that me you called to get yourself the help you needed. You did something very impulsive - yes. I know. What you did was beyond serious, Sherlock. Of course it was...and it's the only reason the why I have packed up so many of your things," I test, a faint smile edging along my mouth, trying to offer him the assurance of everything being okay when we both know that there is still so much ahead, "but you didn't do anything wrong - not morally. Not any more than if you were holding onto monkey bars, and you slipped from them because your arms were burning and you couldn't hold on any longer. Just like that. Would that be wrong? For your body to give out in a moment of exhaustion?"

"That's not the same thing," he volleys back, timidly. Unsure if he should even contest the point.

"In many ways...the situation is similar. You were and still are exhausted, and what you did was impulsive. You didn't do it to hurt me, or to hurt Mycroft. I know you didn't. I also don't even think you did it to hurt yourself, really. It looks like self-harm, and maybe we can loosely call it that. But I think there is a much deeper motivation here for you; I think you want the pain to stop."

Sherlock swallows and I can see his jaw clench exposing the dentition under his emaciated cheeks.

"You're not bad, Sherlock," I whisper. "Hurting yourself also doesn't make you bad, either; it shows how badly you are feeling. Please trust me on that. Okay?"

He doesn't respond. Just stares at his lap, with a look of confusion playing across his face.

"Sherlock? Okay?"

"Okay," he gulps, his voice high and strange.

I let him sit for a few seconds - before asking: "Do you feel any better since you got some sleep?"

He nods, then brings his hand over to his belly. Looks up at me.

"What?," I ask calmly. "Hey, what is it? You can tell me."

His eyes dart back and forth in anxiety, but otherwise remaining centered on me.

"I want to throw up," he says in rushed tones, his face contorting into something painful to witness. "I
feel so...I feel-

I don't want to rush him, so I give him time to formulate his sentence even though it appears he doesn't know how to continue.

Suddenly he grabs me and pulls me forward, burying his head into the stolid weight of my shoulder.

"I want, John, I want-"

Sherlock licks his lips, and I suddenly realize that his lips are incredibly dry, accompanied by grooves of dried blood.

I need to fix this.

"Take a deep breath, and hold it. Can you do that?," I interrupt, sensing that he's working himself up.

He does. Then the breath breaks free after only a couple seconds.

"Try again," I say gently. "Just take a breath and then hold it right now."

He completes the action yet again, and holds the next breath for slightly longer.

"Okay. Right now, do this: name something that is scaring you. Right this second. Don't even think about what it sounds like, just tell me."

"I don't want dinner," he spits out angrily at the bed, eyes looking anywhere - everywhere else. Not wanting to look at me. "I know it sounds," and he swallows loudly, "weird and disordered, and it probably is, but I have eaten more in the last four days than I normally would in weeks, John. I can't stand the feeling of my own skin right now!"

His voice is tainted with such anxiety that the timber is high, the pace rushed.

"But I can't lie to you any longer, either," he rambles on, the anxiety building to a fever pitch. "I told myself I wouldn't. I just can't do it tonight, though, please. No more of it. It's too much."

He looks up at me intensely, imploring me to understand.

Or to cave.

To let him have his 'out.'

His missed meal.

His skipped dinner.

He's bartering honest dialogue for caloric restriction.

This disorder has become just another drug for him.

A swap for cocaine.

And morphine.

But the same underlying psychology and pain are probably driving all three of these cravings.

"Please," he repeats. "Don't make me. Not tonight. Just give me one more night."
And really, I knew that's how he was feeling even before he opened his mouth.

Didn't I?

"Sherlock," I get out, "How can I help you if I indulge this?"

He shuts his eyes. His eyelashes are damp and they are creating a ridge of black against his eyelids.

I reach out and tentatively touch his shoulder.

"I know you are scared, but this is the disorder in a nutshell. It's creating all this fear and we need to fight it. You need to fight it, Sherlock, because I cannot do this all by myself. I need your help to do this."

I give his shoulder the lightest squeeze in encouragement.

His breath comes out in one long, rattly mess.

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I give him some time to get his bath, with the compromise that he will leave the bathroom door open slightly and will respond immediately if I asked him a question.

And despite my attempts to give him his privacy, I find that I still traipse back down the hall and listen silently to the sound of his splashing, the sounds he makes as he brushes his teeth, and the sound of swirling water as it runs down the drain.

I tap lightly against the door, and hear the curtain pull back in a rush against the tub.

It's an odd, almost aggrieved sense of modesty for a man who used to walk about the flat in little more than a sheet.

"I am not coming in. Just letting you know that everything is ready. You can serve yourself though, alright? And I've put the tellie on, too."

Sherlock says nothing, but I hear the sound of him reach around and grab his towel, so I pad softly away and wait for him to join me in the living room.

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His curls have been lightly brushed at best and are now drying in small ringlets about his face. He still looks a little petulant, however, as he shuffles down the hallway and flops against our black sofa in over-sized pajamas.

"I thought you wanted to get a bath," I offer easily, taking a bite of boiled potato before dabbing the rest of it in cream sauce.

"I'm still all...grainy," Sherlock mumbles from his spot, tucking his face against his folded arms. "I feel repugnant."

Arguing with him isn't going to improve his mood, so I aim for clarification instead.

"Grainy?"

Sherlock nods, eyes closed, exhaustion suffusing his entire being.
"I need to shave. Desperately."

I give a faint smile to my plate, then take another bite of my potatoes.

"Could have fooled me. You don't look 'grainy' at all. I don't think I have ever seen you with facial hair."

Sherlock huffs, and I see his fingertips scratch across his face. He looks sour and vexed.

"Fine," I say, placing my fork against my plate. "I will help you with that later."

Sherlock glowers from across the room, tucking his porcelain coloured feet up and under his lap.

"I don't need 'help' shaving," he says with irritation. "I have been shaving for 20 years."

I give him a look, and then take a bite of baked beans.

"We will do it together," I insist. "Or you can shave, and I can watch you shave. But it's not something I am debating with you about," I add a second later while Sherlock glares at our glass coffee table. "Not right now, anyway. Call me overprotective, I don't care."

"It's not overprotective," Sherlock mutters. "It's insane."

I let my fork drop to my plate, and Sherlock suddenly stiffens into place.

"Excuse me?" I say, in measured form.

He closes his eyes, tightly. I can feel his sudden fear.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he hisses, upset and embarrassed. "I just - I just don't need you to watch me-"

I push my plate away.

"You DO need someone to watch you! Do you think your behaviour is even close to being healthy? Has it EVER been healthy? Do you have any conception of what it means to take care of yourself? I just got you from the hospital following a suicide attempt, and you are wondering why I don't want you to be left around sharp objects? A razor blade? Are you bloody serious?!"

Sherlock turns inwards, pulling his feet closer to his core, tugging on his bathrobe until I can no longer see his wrists.

"You said it was 'impulsive'," Sherlock whispers, and I will my temper into place. "It was impulsive; I am not going to hurt myself with my razor," he says tentatively.

And I hate that he sounds so scared to speak. I don't want to scare him. All the same, he is used to getting his own way. That has to change. His bullheadedness is what has driven so many away, when he was at his lowest.

His stubbornness could very well cost him his life.

"I can't be assured of that, though, now can I?," I say in crisp tones, picking up my fork and stabbing a few cherry tomatoes.

"I promise you, John! I wouldn't hurt myself with a-"

"You've been cutting yourself, Sherlock!," I exclaim at last, beyond frustrated.
This is something I have never discussed with him.

Not as an activity in the present time, because it was too hard for me to conceptualize. So I put it towards the back of my mind, and focused on the greater issues.

His lack of eating, and the stomach problems.

His nightmares, and the horror of what I learned about with regard to his childhood.

I ignored this issue, however, and I shouldn't have. Sherlock wraps his arms around his torso, but stands up and begins to walk away.

"Where do you think you're going?!," I say, feeling my anger well up. "Sit down!"

I have felt nothing but sadness for months now, but the anger is new. A new variant, at any rate.

Probably exhaustion, but still.

He turns around, runs his hands through his hair. Closes his eyes.

"You said you didn't hate me! You said you didn't HATE ME!," he shouts, broken with rage, and I take a step back. "You PROMISED ME YOU DIDN'T!"

I freeze in place, shocked, as he wildly gesticulates.

Then a few seconds later, I reach forward and try to still his hands.

"Don't touch me!," Sherlock screams. "Leave me alone!"

"I can't do that!," I pant, grabbing his arms and pulling him towards my torso. "Just stop. Stop it, Sherlock. Please."

I am so tired of this. Of making momentary contact, a dent, some sort of progress. Only then to have him retreat, pull in, get worse. "I can't leave you alone right now, and you know why. So just stop fighting me every step of the way."

Sherlock's face contorts, and he pants against my shoulder, "I will fight all of you! All of you! Never-"

Something in that statement chills me, and causes my mind to race.

I am seeing more puzzle pieces now.

Something dark is here in this room with us.

I loosen my grip, scared of holding him down, but also scared to release him when he seems so out of control, lest he runs away.

Mostly I am scared of the words spilling forth from his mouth.

"What are you talking about?," I whisper.

"I don't know why you don't just leave! JUST LEAVE! Go!," Sherlock exclaims imperiously, his face screwed up.

"No," I say calmly, the anger I felt at his earlier behaviour quickly departing in the wake of my ever
growing concern for his psychological health.

"Please let me go," he pleads. "I want to sit down," he says, voice suddenly trembling like he's fallen into very cold water. "Don't hold me!"

"Okay," I breathe, "but we are staying in this room. Together. You are not going to be alone right now, do you understand?"

He doesn't respond, but I know he's heard me and he turns slowly around as I release him from my grasp and makes his way back to the sofa. From there, he turns towards the inner portion of the furniture, completely hiding his face.

His body, I can see, is also trembling - not just his voice.

"Are you cold?" I test, my throat swollen.

Sherlock nods, slightly. It's barely perceptible.

I keep my eyes trained on his form, but go and retrieve the afghan from the other side of the room, and then slowly deposit it over his body.

"Wrap it around you. You'll feel better soon."

He shakes his head back and forth in stubborn dismissal of my statement.

"You'll feel warmer soon, and isn't that better?" I formulate, trying to be reasonable.

He's quiet, but he lets me sidle in alongside him. When I am positioned perpendicular to his form, I nudge his form.

"What did you mean, earlier? That you'd fight 'all' of us? I need to understand, and I don't."

Sherlock exhales heavily, his whole body shaking with the force.

I try a different angle.

"Am I scaring you?" I say quickly, licking my lips. "Are you afraid of me?"

He turns automatically, and I see him blink furiously fast.

Trying to process my words.

"Sherlock?" I state with as much equanimity as I can muster. "Am I doing something that frightens you? If I am, you absolutely have to tell me. You cannot continue to handle all this by yourself. It's not working."

His mouth opens and closes and opens again. His eyes shut and I can feel his body tense.

"You're not sure?" I attempt for clarification, knowing I am getting at the heart of the matter, but having no idea what I am doing. "Am I doing something that is making you feel badly? Badly about yourself?"

Sherlock is nothing but outspoken, but if I am doing something that is unnerving him - he's never shared this with me.

Nor has Mycroft ever said anything, either.
"It's not you," Sherlock pleads, not knowing how to broach the issue. "I'm not afraid of you."

Perhaps he's afraid I'll be hurt by his words, or become frustrated in a manner similar to how I did before.

My mind races; I know I can't lose this thread, this 'in.'

I need to peg something down. Hold onto an issue, and look at it cleanly.

"Why have you been cutting yourself?"

He shakes his head back and forth.

"I know you have, so please don't deny it. We are beyond that. I need to know what triggered this."

Sherlock is breathing too quickly.

"Did I trigger this?"

Finally, after an agonizing few seconds, he whispers: "I don't know."

I feel my heart revolt in my chest. I feel a deep, deep pain and hurt.

I told him he could tell me anything. I begged him to talk to me.

But I still feel like crying.

"Why?," I get out heavily, my eyes suddenly burning. "What did I do wrong?"

Because I am tired, too.

Because I feel as if I have always tried so hard to be there for him. To be a good friend.

So this admission hurts in a very strange, shocking way.

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Sherlock turns his blue eyes onto my face, studying me closely.

"Perhaps it would be better if you stayed with Mycroft," I attempt with strict control over my voice.
"I don't think he triggers you, correct?"

Sherlock suddenly pulls himself up, agitated.

"I can't explain properly!," he races. "It's not you, and it is you, or rather it's us and it's everything, but it's not you as an individual! Do you see?"

He sounds manic.

"I have no idea how to make any sense out of what you've just said," I reply in measured beats. "But no. I do not understand."

Sherlock wrings his hands together.

"What do you want from me?," he hisses. "What do you really want?"

I pull back further away from him.
"What are you talking about?"

"What am I to you?," he gesticulates wildly.

"You're my friend!"

Sherlock shakes his head wildly, alarmed.

"No! I can't just be your 'friend.' You've...given too much, and I can't-"

"You're my best friend! My best friend! And right now I am beyond confused, because I know you are scared of something really huge, but I don't know what the hell that is! So just tell me, Sherlock! Please just tell me!"

Sherlock suddenly tugs at his hair, pulling it taught.

I don't try to stop him. I don't even attempt to quell his actions.

"What is it that you want from me?," he repeats, pleads.

"I don't know what you mean! I don't!"

"You said you love me!"

I squeeze my hands tight, totally thrown. Totally exhausted.

Because he's at the end of his rope.

I know this.

But that doesn't mean that I am not overwhelmed, myself.

"I do- I do love you, and-"

"What is your motive?!"

"Motive?," I ask, sitting up rim-rod straight, heart pounding violently.

Sherlock lets out a yelping, howling noise.

Like terror and anger and frustration, all in one.

"Do you want to have sex with me?"

I freeze, feeling a worming sickness eat across my bowels.

"What?"

He's up, and he's pacing.

"You give me too much time, too much, and at first I was entranced because I thought-"

"Entranced? Sherlock, stop it! I'm your friend! I consider you my best friend! I am not doing anything to manipulate..."

"That's not what I mean!," he exclaims. "But I can't have you in any," he pauses, gulps, breathing too fast. "You will want things, with someone, and I can't give-"
"I don't want anything you can't give, and despite what Mycroft thinks or what you think, I'm not gay! Nor bisexual!"

His eyes are shut and he's white and gaunt and...

"I'm in love with you!," he spits, wiping at his eyes furiously. "I can't be, I can't- and I can't do any- you're not even like that!- and I'm scared."

Franticness turns into a sudden, all-absorbing shock as he realizes what he's said.

He squeezes his eyes together, tightly. Unwilling to look.

I try to process what he's on about; I realize I feel numb.

"You are in love with me?," I frown, feeling odd and disjointed. "What do you mean you're in love with me?"

Sherlock's breaths are fast and thready.

"Sherlock, what do you mean?!"

My stomach is pulsing with adrenaline.

"I don't know!," he barks out wetly, "I don't know! You're confusing me! You move in, and you are too kind and put up with everything, and you shouldn't do that! And you haven't left, but I know-"

He's not pausing for breath. His words are racing together, tangling together.

"Take a breath. It's okay. Take a breath and tell me what you can, as calmly-"

"You can't stay here! I'm not good for anyone. Mycroft is right - caring is not an advantage! I know you are going to leave, one day, and I can't-"

I don't touch him even though I want to grab his hands, and I want to slow his breathing and his words and soothe his anxiety.

"What are you on about?," I bite out, frustrated and scared and hurting, for him. "I am not leaving! I told you-"

"Not today! I don't mean today! But someday! Maybe even soon! You are going to find someone, and you will want to get married and have children, and probably a dog with a stupid name and do all those expected, boring, mediocre, normal-"

I bring my fingers to my temples, and press in, releasing the muscle tension.

I try my best to pretend that this is a run-of-the-mill Sherlockian rant.

It's not, of course. But if I keep myself calm, perhaps I can help Sherlock calm down.

Even though I feel the opposite of calm right now.

Even though my hands are shaking.

Because I am not dreaming, am I?

Sherlock didn't just say he loved me.
He said that he was IN love with me.

And I have no idea how to respond to something like that.

How do I begin to make sense of it? Break it down, and have it feel real?

And if his words suddenly do feel real, would it become better - or worse?

Because I am not attracted to him. Not in that way.

My fear now is that such an admission is going to completely destroy him, when he's basically just given me his heart.

Oh god.

What do I do now?
You too

Chapter Summary

Author's Notes:

I apologize for the terribly long delay between chapters. I've been quite sick, so thanks for simply holding on, and for continuing to read.

Additionally, this is an experimental chapter (insofar as it is aiming to capture a very fractured mindset).

Warnings: this chapter deals with discussion of alexithymia, RAD (reactive attachment disorder) and abuse. Please heed the warnings.

And...back to SHERLOCK'S POV

John is staring up at me with a look of intense concentration and concern.

It's positively hateful.

There is no way I can stay in this room with him any longer. Not for another second, never mind throughout dinner and the rest of the evening.

And I know this isn't his fault. This is my fault.

All my fault.

Why did I have to be so impulsive with my words?

Why do I feel compelled to discuss THIS with him when I don't even want to think of it?

Because I know he'd never hurt me. Not in any way, but especially not sexually.

So I cannot conceive of why just looking in his direction lately is making my heart race with anxiety.

John hasn't done anything to me; he's only ever done everything for me that could indicate concern and friendship and loyalty.

So why do I feel so frightened of being in his presence lately?

If what I am feeling is even fear?

----------------------------------------

Or is it not a fear of him, but a fear of myself?

Of having him see me?

Is that what this is?
Am I afraid of having him truly see me?
(yes. oh god, yes, i am.
physically. emotionally. deeper than that.
expectations. what are his? and why is he still here?
and he'd be gentle with me, if he wanted a physical relationship.
two words combining into one term so loaded
with meaning, hateful meaning.
but i do love him. i do.
so should I just tune it out and accept it?
let him proceed as he thinks is best for us both?
because he's healthy and i am not.
and if he wanted something good
that everyone thinks is good.
that only i feel confused about
or terrified to even consider
in relation to my own self, especially.
then why should i even fight that advancement?
if that's what is to happen?
when i've already shown such discrepancy in feeling
and understanding from the established norms?
from what everyone, from what professionals,
therapists
call healthy behaviour? healthy thoughts?
when i am their very definition of unwell.
their very definition of sick?
but i don't want even john that way. i cannot express how much
i want him in every way with the exception of the very
way most people feel indicates greatest display
between two people in love.
and i told him that i am in love with him.
foolishness! utter idiocy on my part!
why did i say that?
in love with him!
but i can't do that. or i could, physically.
i can do anything anyone else can do physically.
but that's not the issue.
the issue is that i don't want to do so.
though i have. i have before.
even as an adult.
but i don't want to do so again.
not ever again.
and the realization that this is it?
alone with these thoughts and not even
john, who always appreciated the differences within me...
not even he can comprehend this, he says.
that's the word he used, too.
comprehend.
he couldn't "comprehend" this.
and - fuck! - that makes it harder.
it makes the loneliness worse.
the sense of complete and total isolation.
no one to really talk to who understands.
that's not to say that they don't care.
they all seem to care.
maybe too much, for someone like myself.
but they don't understand.
and i want someone who understands.
not about being hurt.
i could go the rest of my life
and would never want someone to understand
me based on such a similar hurting.
instead, i want to find a person
who understands because that is their nature
just as i believe this is my own.
despite everything that came before
everything brutal
or scary or repugnant.
because even then, nature is nature.
mine is an atypical nature, to be sure.

------------------------------------------
i worry that he believes that i am using this label
-asexual-
as a cover.

------------------------------------------
everyone. even those that are by their own nature
accepting people.
molly.
mrs. hudson.
they never understand.
even mycroft doesn't really understand.
and i am sure he's had his flings.
possibly.
probably, anyway.
he's hard to truly take in, given his own complexities and shields.
if not, he's busy. with his own version of The Work.
but he used to insinuate. he used to make queries.
little words, raised eyebrows. mycroft, and his steady inquiries.

his hateful 'brotherly concern.'

me and victor. my pacing, shuffling,

and rambling words

the day after our first time. and i didn't tell mycroft. i never informed him with words that we had done anything expected, anything 'adult.'

and that too burns me, the word.

adult.

ha!

as if adults by their very chronological age are relegated only to a sexual existence. and that by not engaging in such matters indicates juvenility.

stagnancy, immaturity.

when what i am trying to convey is the opposite.

a setpoint, my setpoint, and revealing myself out of honesty despite fear my fears.

and is that not a mature thing to do?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------

to be honest with someone else, even when afraid to do so? when terrified of their response?

-------------------------------------------------------------------------

but mycroft's steady, tracking, hawkish sight peered in my direction, that morning after.

his words the only ones spoken - almost exclusively! - as i didn't want to speak.

'you haven't done anything wrong

sherlock. you love victor, don't you?'

my vision grew heated and sour and angry.

'that's none of your business!'
and mycroft sighing, long suffering.

i am sure as anything that i loved victor.
not as intensely as i love john.
and yet-
i wanted to be close to him. i wanted to even have that label, in a sense, that he granted us both. boyfriend.
we were suddenly boyfriends.
it granted me some slight measure of comfort.
when people would inquire, flirt, move in too readily, and victor would come near, place his hand against my own.
and give me a look, not stifling, not possessive, but knowing.
my need to have the others retreat, to stop the gazes and the predatory ways of young men and women, both, looking for a new mate.
"allow me to introduce you to victor," i would say. "my partner."
and victor would laugh, always warm, gregarious.
"boyfriend," he would correct, giving his cool, aloof wave of admission to whomever had come in too close. whomever was niggling me and making me tense and freeze and act like more of a dick than i already tended to be.
people who made me freeze and mumble and sometimes even stutter.
"you're in sherlock's organic chem class, aren't you?," victor would inquire, politely. always so polite without my reputed formality
whereas i could speak in measured beats
but spew forth the rudest sentences, if pressed, if overwhelmed.
so for awhile, it was - on the whole - easier to manage the short bouts of sexual activity that victor established as our norm.
if only to have the protection of those labels
words such as 'partner', 'boyfriend' -
when i went out into the world.

_____________________________________________________

still, i was always disgusted with myself
it felt like i lying.
but what else could i do?
when i cared for victor?

_____________________________________________________

but everyone has their limits.
even john.)

_____________________________________________________

"Sherlock? Sherlock - whatever is happening to you right now, we are going-
(god it's such a horrible fetid, pulsing mess.
john would be gentle with his expression of needs,
if that's what he wants,
which he has shown - with others - he does indeed want.
i feel sick. i am afraid. i can't keep the thoughts
straight in my mind. the logic to show his errors
in not seeing what i am.)
I am filled with utter dread.
"Sherlock, I don't think that-"
I am filled with self disgust.

A crazy need to bring something black out of my marrow and brain and flush it down the toilet.
Yet, no matter how often I gag and spit bile into the toilet, the only remains that come out are remnants from my stomach.

Nothing else.

But how I wish I could make that blackness swirl away down the drain, alongside the food.
Numbness doesn't work, but neither do feelings.
It's racing and loud and hounding me and I don't know what it's called.
How to bring forth the words that will articulate, sanely, what this feels like.
And if I did, John would see just how deranged I truly am. He'd see how hopeless I am, in my innermost being.

And he'd depart even sooner.

"Sherlock!," John's eyes are wider now, fuller now. Twin moons (my old description for John's eyes); right now they are bright and hurting.

I get up to move. My stomach is constricted and I feel antsy, filled with adrenaline.

I can't meet his eyes any longer, and if he tries to get me to talk right now, I don't know how I am going to respond.

All I feel with any certainty is that my throat is sore.

Part of me, I think, wants to cry. But I can't do that in his presence.

I can't.

I've painted myself as pathetic and weak and ugly and stupid and impulsive and egotistical. Especially as of late.

I don't want to be seen that way any longer. By anyone.

Least of all by John.

I tighten my robe around my waist, and let my vision fixate on the mantle, and the skull. Take in the outline of its form. Internally recite its fused bones and plates. Stare into the forever hollow orbs where eyes - bright and quick and alert - would have once resided. Then I rapidly attempt my exit. I can see it in my mind: race to the stairs, race to my room, close the door, place my dresser in front of the door, for the lock has been dismantled.

Keep him out!

Don't let him in!

Don't let him see.

"Where are you going, Sherlock?," John asks gingerly, his voice as delicate as spun glass.

My throat is aching and thick, and I stare at my socked feet. I stare at the veins of my wrists and hands. The way the bones move like chords under the skin.

I pause at his question, while looking anywhere but at him, then continue to pad away more softly.

"Sherlock - please don't leave," he says a bit more loudly, standing up. I hear him rub his hands on his knees.

And this is an old conversation, an eternal conversation. I feel as if we've had a conversation like this so many times in the last few months.
I'm bored with this conversation, and my issues, and the hounding thoughts and the inability to name the wrongness in my gut.

I am utterly bored with myself, under all my anxiety and dread.

Of course John's anxious, too. But his anxiety is anxiety I drove into him.

If it wasn't for me, he'd not be feeling as he's currently feeling.

I just bring ruin wherever I go; I can't help it.

It's what I do. It's in me.

Ruiner.

I bite my lip, my chest rising and falling too quickly. Close my eyes.

Can hear the remnant memory of John's voice encouraging me to breathe more slowly, less shallowly. I attempt to do so again, to stave off an attack.

"I want to go to my room," I croak at last, sensing John's immobile nature. His steadfastness. "I'm sorry," I add quickly, knowing I've fucked up. Yet again.

John exhales softly, but I hear the catch in his breath. If I were actually studying his features right now, I'm sure I'd see his face fall into something saddened.

Piteous, probably. Because that's what I am.

Piteous creature...

"You don't have to be sorry. I've told you so many times that you haven't done anything wrong," he whispers. Somehow the whisper is louder than his previous words - assured in his classic soft manner. Strength of conviction under gentleness. "What can I do to make you believe me?"

And I don't understand his conviction.

I've done so many things terribly, horrifically wrong for so long. I cannot grasp why he'd lie to me about my failures.

Or maybe not lie. Not exactly.

John's not the liar.

I am the liar.

I lie by omission.

"Please don't-," I hiss, wanting to wring my hands through my hair and tug. Wanting to pinch my skin until it bruises, maybe even bleeds.

I feel so chokingly self-hostile, and I don't know where I can go - where can I run? - or what I can do to get rid of these feelings.

I hate how I am, who I am, what I am. More so as of late, but the echoes of past hatred are pure and vindictive and ever at the fore.
They've come back with such strength that I feel as if I am going mad. Not simply restless or bored.

But completely insane.

"I wasn't rejecting you," John says stiffly, almost out of the blue. Bringing me back to the present. "I just need a little bit of time to process what you're saying, because I didn't expect that sentiment. Not that level of intensity, maybe," he whispers, voice just a hair away from trembling. "But that's my issue, Sherlock. Not yours. My reaction wasn't a rejection of you, or your words."

I look up, meet his eyes, look away quickly. Force myself to look away quickly.

"I don't have an issue with what you said, Sherlock. What you said you felt. I-I am glad you told me."

My heart is constricting and expanding simultaneously. It's an odd feeling, but consistent in the paradoxical way I interpret everything lately.

Because everything feels too intensely while simultaneously feeling unreal.

I feel like I could cry, until I stop and ask myself if I even feel sad - only to feel confused.

Because then I realize there is nothing under the surface but a droning sort of emptiness. A slate grey hum of noise where something colourful, even if painful, should be.

And old words, too. Something someone told me, once:

'you go away. someplace else. and this becomes unreal.

you make it unreal. and then it stops hurting.'

The voice of a child, and not my voice.

Not the voice in my head that sings little songs as I am falling asleep.

Not my little voice, in my nightmares, that shouts out small clamorous cries for someone.

But I cannot recall whom I was asking for or remember what I needed.

----------------------------------------------------

And what had Yuri called that problem?

Alexithymia.

The inability to identify or describe emotions as they present to our own selves. The inability, at times, to fully register the feelings as they encroach.

The internal confusion and disconnect between an emotional state and the resulting disconnection in the mind and body.

It sounds so easy an issue to fix.

Just reconnect the mind and body. Align the two.

But I don't know how to do that.

I don't know where to start.
And Yuri told me that it was common for those to experience what he referred to as secondary alexithymia during periods of intense psychological stress.

But that primary alexithymia could become an enduring psychological trait, exacerbated by disconnection with others, repression of emotion, repression of self expression as it relates to emotionality.

He had zeroed in on an issue I hadn't even brought up, and it happened like this:

I had been trying to answer a question, during a session, and could feel some inner pressure - like increasing levels of steam, a pressure steadily building - and no words had come to me. My confusion must have been evident, splayed across my features (and so much for my ability to act!), when he had made the inquiry.

"Do you have difficulty processing or understanding feelings, Sherlock?"

At first, I hadn't truly understood what he was asking.

Surely, when I feel angry - when I know I feel anger - I can classify it as anger. The same would apply to all other emotional states.

But then Yuri had said something odd, something laser-sharp and which targeted in on the swirling about in my brain. Which focused sight upon my restless anxiety generated by an inability to stop the feelings from darting in and then darting away. My inability to study them.

My inability to own the emotions.

"Do you sometimes find yourself anxious because you do not know if you can identify a particular emotion? You are aware, at some level, that you feel badly, but it vacillates, and it feels like an alien emotion? Something you can't name?"

I had looked up at him, my brain temporarily slowed, the racing thoughts temporarily slowed. I had appreciated that question, liked the very possibility of hope that he was granting me if only because it had been the first time someone had ever asked that of me.

And because it fit. It described what I was feeling, paradoxically, in my lack of feeling.

"Sometimes you might feel as if you could cry or rage, but if John, for example, were to ask you why you felt upset - you'd be confused as to if you even felt sad or angry? Does that sound familiar?"

I felt something unwind in my stomach.

"Yes," I agreed, staring up at the wall. "How did you know that?"

Yuri closed his canary yellow notebook.

"As a psychiatrist, I have seen patients with a resounding need to treat their own bodies in a robotic fashion. There is a condition called superadjustment to reality - have you heard of it?"

And I shook my head, confused.

How could I not know of these states?

These states that described me so perfectly?
Why hadn't I looked these words up before?

When others could laugh, and knew they felt happy?
When others could cry, and knew they felt alone or sad or despondent or rejected?
Why was I so limited in emotional understanding?

I didn't know the name of the emotions as they tossed and turned and whipped about inside of me.

Emotional blindness, is that what this is?

This gutting need to know what's coursing through me, and a weird, hazy confusion that I can't feel anything that deeply at all?

"Sometimes individuals with this condition can appear emotionless, even limited in terms of empathizing with others-"

"Because maybe I am a sociopath," I ground out, bitter. Angry. It was unfair. "Just like I told you I am."

"No," Yuri rushed in. "It's not because you are a sociopath. Many, many psychotherapists believe that alexithymia is a condition linked to improper construction of emotional needs, the disavowing of emotional needs. It has been linked to the need to structure reality so that it is logical, not emotional. It can worsen in times of stress, and can develop at a young age, but it's not the same thing as having a personality disorder, even if there are some similarities. It is higher in those on the autism spectrum, however."

My hands twisted, turned, while my eyes shrunk back into my skull, as if trying to hide like some frightened, spooked animal.

Pickled eyes. Small and briny. As if I had cried through the entire session, even though I rarely cry.

Even when I try to cry. Even when I feel I need to do so.

"I think I am afraid of myself," I whispered. "I don't know - I can't express - I know I am disordered."

"Sherlock," Yuri soothed, "alexithymia isn't that simple. It's a trait associated with orientation towards seeing everything - people, animals or the world as it interfaces with emotions - as lacking emotionality. The need to do so or the way the world is perceived might be partially neurological, but many who study this condition believe that it can be cultivated at a young age, and it's not a conscious construct. We don't set out to divorce ourselves from our emotions. Many specialists believe it's a sign of early trauma, or even neglect in early childhood."

I exhaled, shakily, the prickling of something that I called fear making a rare appearance.

"Is it forever?," I whispered. "Will it be like this forever?"

"It doesn't have to be like this, Sherlock," Yuri calmly spoke back. "Much of what you are dealing with can change, can be improved."

I drew shapes on my lap with my finger, trying to still the fervent need for belief in him, and in
therapy, and in hope for something else.

So I sat in his home office, and I spelled out invisible words and invisible wishes on my knees.

I-AM-SAD
I-AM-LOST
I-CANT-CRY
STUCK-THROAT
NO-WORDS
HELP-ME
LOST
SHERLOCK-IS-LOST

"You are afraid right now, aren't you?"

YES, I wrote again. On my lap.

Then I nodded in a numbed fashion, disturbed that I could feel so much fear when nothing overtly bad or frightening was happening.

I was in an office, talking, speaking with a calm person. No physical pain, no screaming, nothing to generate such anxiety.

And yet even I could identify the burgeoning signs of anxiety. Even then, as I identified them, I felt separated from fully feeling them. I could feel them distantly. As if a raw limb was defrosting.

I knew there would be pain, but I also was sick of feeling numb.

My body was feeling the signs, my mind was calculating everything, as it always did.

The colours of the room. The order of the books. The placement of objects that Yuri had brought into his home. The style of architecture of his home. A photo of his husband on the wall. An antique cat dish filled partially with water speckled with a few, white long cat hairs. A majesty palm plant that had been over-watered.

"You need to stop giving them so much water. You're going to kill your plants," I had bitten out, impulsively.

My forever defense.

Focus on the inconsequential.

That which is safe.

But another part of myself felt something akin to hopefulness. A crack of light, falling through trees that had been blackened and grayed in heavy darkness just moments before.
Now, the trees held shimmering promises of green and brown. Now the trees seemed like they could be real, true lifeforms. Not merely black and white nerves, burnt-out against a faded, anemic landscape.

And that's the shining emotion I felt. So rare for me to feel it.

I let a word flitter through my mind. Toyed with the word, and held it up in the light against the trees.

And that word was:

Hope.

I spelled it with my fingertips.

H-O-P-E

So, it's only natural that I need to hear more of his words.

That he was aware of something I was experiencing.

Something I knew at once as being my long standing truth, but which I had never been able to articulate?

So, with hope came something else both rushing and dis-calibrating: a thrumming security.

Awe.

"Sherlock, is what I've told you making you afraid?"

The rawness in my throat bites and claws and makes me want to do something.

Something hidden for so long jumped up into my throat and burnt my nostrils.

My nose felt wet and I wiped away mucus.

"Are you sad right now, Sherlock?"

I shrugged, uncertain.

"You have given me a lot to think about," I ventured. "So much that it's overwhelming to hear."

But with my fingers, I wrote out:

SAD-SAD-SAD

into the air.

Other words, too:

HURTS-WHY

WHY-HURT
"Sherlock?"

WHY-ME?

"Yes," I wavered, my voice thick. "I am afraid. I know I am confused. I-," and I pressed my
fingertips against my lips, tapping them. Wanting to express something and finding myself lacking
the vocabulary to do so.

Yuri had gotten up, padded to his little bar fridge, and had come back with a San Pellegrino.
Something with sugar.

Placed it before me.

"Try to drink a little bit, Sherlock," he said softly, and I read the label. It was lemon. With real sugar.
I turned it over and read the carbohydrate values, and hated myself for the sudden swelling up of
distress that the nutrition label generated within me.

"Can I have some plain water instead?," I croaked, my chest tight, my ribs pulled too far in
discomfort at the request. "This has sugar in it. It's bad for my pancreas."

Yuri had crouched low on his haunches, held it out to me.

"I suspect your blood sugar is very, very low right now. You are incredibly pale, and that's going to
lead to you feeling shaky, and possibly a little unreal. I know you feel a little scared to do this, but I
want you to try to drink this beverage, Sherlock."

I had taken the can of San Pellegrino, cracked the tab, watched the sugary water foam up in
carbonated spurts. Fought the need to wipe my eyes, which were hot and throbbing.

"Are we going to talk about this condition - this alexithymia - anymore?," I asked carefully, the
detective in me certain that Yuri had properly Named Something that was Wrong with me, and as
such wanting to stay with this subject. Not wanting to lose my hopeful colour.

"We can if you'd like, Sherlock," he responded kindly, and I took a few sips, my hands shaking.

And after a few minutes, my hands felt less given to shaking and I felt something solidify in my
brain. As if someone had filled me up with blood or oxygen.

"I do feel a bit better," I muttered, annoyed with myself for my gross oversights. "Physically."

Yuri caught my eyes, my level of sight.

"Some of these problems - even feeling badly emotionally - are being caused by your refusal to eat
enough, or drink enough fluids. Get enough sleep. Physically take care of yourself. They are not the
only reason for why you feel so confused and scared. But they are related. You understand that,
don't you?"

I had nodded dully at the can, angry with biology, aggravated with myself, the fact that I was so
twisted in my mind to pursue my self-destruction.

Tired beyond all explanation that such a pursuit had landed me back into therapy, again.

Actually, not just landed myself back in therapy.

Dragged John down into this pit with me.
That made it even worse. The knowledge that I had gotten somebody else emotionally invested in my tiresome little life.

Upset that I had pulled them down into the mire of my pain.

"There are things in my head, Yuri. They crouch down low, where others don't see, so I can hide them or ignore them. Often, I can. But it's - lately - they are swarming now, do you see?"

Yuri tried not to frown, not to reveal his own thoughts and feelings.

"When you find that you feel this way, does it help to lessen the - swarming?" he tested, "when or if you engage in certain things physically? Like working until you are very exhausted, skipping meals? Not sleeping?"

I placed the can down, angry that I had landed back here. Again. This rotation of therapists and hospitals, and I was still in the same bloody position as when I had been a child.

I was 36 years old, and felt as terrified as when I had been 12.

Or maybe, even younger than that.

"There are things in my mind that I don't believe I can express with words," I mouthed, breath as the lightest stream of air and softer than a whisper. 'I don't just mean that I find it hard to know what I feel. I mean - memories, too. I can't order them, and when I can at all - I certainly can't speak of them."

Yuri placed his pad of paper and pen off to the side of his desk.

"Sherlock?," he started hesitantly, then seemed to stop talking until I looked up at him in apprehension. Caught sight of his eyes, looked back down at my lap in self revulsion.

"Sherlock, I feel I must establish something. I need to ask if you've ever been abused."

And it wasn't a question. It wasn't even as open ended as John's words had been to me, months back. When he had pieced everything together.

I had taken a deep breath then; I didn't know if I felt something akin to relief, or greater fear, or numbness.


Yuri was quiet for another moment, then clarified.

"As a child?," he asked gently. "This started when you were very small, didn't it?"

The storm clouds in my chest were back. Pulsing, pounding, threatening to tear my lungs open unless I opened my mouth and spoke.

"Started?," I gritted, suddenly wary. Suddenly hurt. "Did John say somethi-

"No, Sherlock," Yuri interrupted. "Not about this. I am asking this because I am trained to see patterns in those that have been hurt."

I scrapped my nails across my palms, relishing the feeling of the sharp edges. My hands flicking back
in tactile defensiveness.

"Then why 'started'? Why not 'happened'?," I croaked. "Why phrase it so well? When you know what I will say before I open my mouth?"

Yuri seemed to be waiting for me to say more, but I had nothing else I wished to divulge.

Petulant.

That's what I had been called by teachers as a child.

Petulant.

Intransigent.

Insolent.

"I'd like to establish the nature of the abuse," he said carefully, next. Null of emotion. "Do you know how it would be classified? Was it emotional? Was it something else?"

I realized then that he was speaking to me as if discussing a science problem. Keeping the language too far away from my innards.

He was trying to keep this from paining me more than was ultimately possible, and I felt a sudden, irrational sharpness lance through my eyes.

I knew in that moment he was trying to truly help me. Trying to keep the pain out of my head.

My eyes suddenly became wet, sore.

"Why are you being so nice to me?," I had asked thickly, my voice raw.

The question seemed to stymie him, throw him off course.

"Why do you feel that I am being nice to you?"

I glanced in the direction of the can, now half empty.

"You are trying to make it...not hurt. You don't want to hurt me. Have this hurt me. You care if I hurt, I think."

I felt, rather than saw, Yuri's surprise.

I felt it radiate throughout the room; the sound of a slight and immediate rustling of clothes. As if he had pulled back or moved quickly.

Flinched or jolted, as if shocked with a current.

"I am being nice because I don't want you to be in pain? That's what niceness is to you?"

My eyes suddenly felt heavy, weighed down. I closed them, could feel damp lashes against my skin.

"Yes."

"What?," John guides me, his words an anchor. "Yes - what?"
My eyes open, take in the side of his face, the corner of his mouth.

"You don't want me to hurt," I reply, suddenly aware of the time, the date.

I focus on that.

"Sherlock, you look strange. Pale. What just happened?"

It's easier to talk to a disconnected mouth, than to a person I love.

"Happened?," I inquired dully.

"You look spacey. More than lost in thought."

I glance around, and the room has changed again. Not Yuri's office.

Not Yuri's things.

I am at home. The floral wallpaper. John's UK pillow. Red and blue lines on the felt.

I bet if I grabbed at the pillow and pressed it against my nose, it would be scented like Old Spice and John's soap.

But I don't want to move, so I look about.


Cluedo off to the side of my table, near my laptop.

If I pressed in deeply against my lips, would they bleed?

"Sherlock - do you feel dissociative right now?"

Home.

words.

I am home with John.

"Sherlock!"

I nod, because even though I feel numb, on the whole - I also sense that a fall is coming.

At the back of my brain, deep down in the wiring - I can sense that something is unraveling. But it could also be that I am getting better.

Feeling more. And maybe that's good.

Maybe I need that fall.

Maybe I need more of SOMETHING as opposed to lingering about in the land of deadened bewilderment.

------------------------------------------------------

Even the old remembrance of that pain could take me back to the edge, now. So I talk, even if I want
to say nothing.

"Yes. I feel dissociative right now," I let my lips purse into their correct configuration.

I echo John's question back, in the affirmative.

Even if I simply want to stare rigidly and fixedly at the wall. My limbs immobile. A blanket over my body. Scarcely breathing.

As I did when a little boy.

catatonia.

words. psychobabble. decades old.

'Sherlock is a 12 year old boy, who presents with severe emotional issues. During time of admission, Sherlock readily exhibited catatonic tendencies.'

(don't move, sherlock. don't cry, sherlock.

stay very quiet, and let it all disintegrate into colours.

let the form vanish, until the pain vanishes. until everything vanishes.

until you are un-real).

I feel John's weight as he deposits himself next to me on the sofa. The dip of material as his body pulls in close to mine.

"I wasn't rejecting you. I believe you. If you say you are in love with me," his voice sounds strident, needful.

I frown at my lap, then look up and over his head. Read more words and titles.


The Positronic Man.

I feel my mouth tug at the corners. I am amused, distantly amused.

But amusement is good, and I will take what little peace that flickering emotion will grant me.

Amused with my collection of books, and what they reveal about me.

A warm hand, soft on the whole, calloused on the tips.

John's hand.

"Sherlock? This isn't funny," he states calmly. Forced calmness. "I need to know that you are listening to me. Not tuning me out."

"Norby, the Mixed Up Robot," I whisper, the smile refusing to leave from my face.

"What?," and John's kind eyes squint into blue-green slits. "Sherlock, what?"

I don't disconnect our hands. Just trail their combined form up to our bookshelves. Point at the bookshelves, his fingers still entwined with my own.
"I, Robot," I mutter. "It was my favourite story when I was little. Well, when I was nine."

John's eyes break away from my face and trail up to the bookshelf, take in the titles.

Comprehension dawns, and his face morphs into something sympathetic.

"Sherlock, you are not a robot."

I tense. Ignore the sentiment behind his pleading.

"There is this scene, where this young woman is engaging with a character in the novel called the 'first talking robot.' It's meant to be, essentially, an artificial intelligence. And so this young woman, a student, is trying to ascertain the whereabouts of a secondary robot. So she asks the talking robot-"


"She asks him if he knows where Robbie is. And of course the talking robot is completely overwhelmed. It cannot comprehend that another entity might exist that is exactly the same as it is. A similar being, with a similar isolation. Because it was always this thing. Just a thing. It was always alone, John. Always. Even when it did what it was supposed to do. So if there are others, just like it - it's what? A social being? Of intelligence? Then it's not alone. It's not supposed to be alone. So it breaks down. The talking machine basically, disconnects forever. He breaks. Over a question."

"Sherlock-," he tries again, voice insistent.

"In asking the question, the student destroys the robot. It might not have ever wanted to be alone, to be alone in the entire universe - but then it realizes that it's not, and that's even harder. Maybe even scarier. It's reality is destroyed. So it dies."

John's breaths degrade into something choppy. Labored.

"You are not alone, Sherlock. You never really were. You are not a robot. That is just a story."

"But something is really wrong with me," and my white noise static fills the room. My crazy words, arguing with him. "I don't even mean with eating. Or, o-overt things, like my stomach or my behaviour. I mean in my head, John. Words, feelings, concepts. I feel like it's all breaking apart. I am improperly formed. I want it to stop, I need something- I need-"

Warm hands against my back, up and trailing over my arm, my hands.

"You are in crisis, Sherlock. But you have me. I'm not leaving. I'm not going anywhere. You are not a robot."

My fingertips come up to press against my skull, my temporal lobe.

"What's wrong with me? Why can't I get it to stop?"

John's fingers have encased both my wrists. I am locked in by his human handcuffs, and for that I feel reasonably safe.

"Get what to stop?"

Part of me yearns to rest my head on John's shoulder. Stoop down and place it there, and close my eyes and have him hold me, and feel the mere physical presence and warmth, but nothing else. No feelings.
"It's like I am on a merry-go-round, and I can't get off," I exclaim, "and the thoughts keep changing. I feel okay, but then I feel dead. When I stop with the work, it comes back."

"WHAT does?"

My fingertips play a frenzied tune over my leg bones.

"I don't know! This feeling, this toying cruelty. A panic, deep inside. Hatred."

John licks his lips, jostles my wrists lightly.

"Hatred?," he questions, sounding confused. "You aren't a hateful person, Sher-"


He slowly removes his fingers from against my wrists. Draws them across the palms of my hands, stroking gently.

John's gentleness makes me want to cover my eyes with my hands and hide myself.

"I hate myself, John," and it comes out like a hiccuped bark. "I don't know why."

His hands smell of citrus dish soap, and he brings the calloused tips across my forehead, coming to let the digits fall against my eyes. They feel cool and grounding contrasted against the heat swelling up under my eyelids.

My eyelids close against his touch, and stay down this time - blanketing my world in warmth and darkness and the sounds of cars and taxis and ambulances outside our apartment window.

Sometime later, I say:

"Yuri thinks I have an attachment disorder. He told me that he thinks so. Also, something called alexithymia. It's a disconnection in my mind between what I feel and what I can comprehend. Not knowing when I am hurting. Not understanding when I am, maybe, very, very sad."

John's hands have moved across my shoulders. Rhythmic motions against my spine, too. An attempt to be soothing, comforting.

I try to tell myself that this, too, is okay.

I try to remember what Yuri said about attachment disorders.

About reactive attachment disorder. How those who entered adulthood with the disorder often could experience anxiety with even simple touches.

That a means of therapy was even created to help combat it through the use of touch.

Touch therapy, it was called.

"An attachment disorder," John muses after an interminable amount of time has passed, "okay. It's okay."

I let my head loll against his shoulder. When I focus on the sensation, and not the meaning behind it - it's not as scary.
The pressure of something real and safe and solid is, indeed, calming. Once I can get my mind out of the game.

"Yuri thinks I might have something called reactive attachment disorder. I looked it up before - before that night. Before I took the morphine, and, John-"

John's hands slow their circular orbits against my back. Then he pulls back, grasps my forearms.

"What?," he asks me severely, eyes strident. Alarmed.

I want to look away from him, but can't.

My mouth dries out.

"Can it even be fixed, John? I mean-," and I bite my lip. Hard. Aware I am breathing too quickly.

John looks weakened, eyes darting around. Zeroing in on what I've just said.

"Wait. Is that why you tried to get the morphine? Because of Yuri's...suppositions?!"

I shake my head back and forth, and bring my own arms up and through his hold. Breaking the connection.

"No, I, I-," anguish peppers my tongue. "It fits. It fits me so much! Don't call it a supposition when it fits! When it's something that makes sense, when nothing else does!"

"Alright," he offers, carefully. Eyes tracking my own. Trying to deescalate the situation. "Did he explain any more than that?"

My eyes are pulled down by sleep deprivation.

I couldn't sleep at all in the hospital.

Not with their prodding and their IVs and their tubes.

My mouth feels gummy and I poke against my teeth and lips with my tongue.

"That it may explain why I find it hard to accept comfort, especially when stressed. Patient is avoidant or unresponsive to caring gestures. Self aggression. Typically stemming from neglect. Sometimes abuse."

John says nothing for a long while. Merely leans over and pulls the afghan over my body.

I secure it tightly around myself, knowing distantly that this routine is becoming not unlike a child's security blanket.

"So he knows, then?," he asks gruffly.

I close my eyes, and let my head lean against John's chest.

I can hear his heart beating. It sounds slushy and forceful. Deep beats, healthy beats.

A healthy heart.

I want to fall asleep to this sound.

"Sherlock? He knows?," John asks more quietly now.
I spell out my invisible words against John's chest.

YES-KNOWS

For John's benefit, I also nod.

John doesn't still my hands.

Likely, he thinks I'm engaging in some odd, tic-like mannerism.

Maybe even a stim.

"Did-," John coughs, clears his throat. "Did you talk about it with him? What happened to you?"

I shake my head.

Spell out more words, yet again.

NOT-TELL

CANT-SPEAK

"Right," he rattles. "Does the blanket help?"

Another nod.

"Does this feel alright? Me holding you?"

And what had Yuri said?

That touch therapy could help with the feelings of disconnection? The sense of dissociation?

"I think so," and I lick my lips, nervously.

"Good," John supplies, securing the hold, securing the blanket around me. "Not so cold now, are you?"

I hug him first, and don't even flinch when he presses a kiss to my temple.

"I really do love you, Sherlock. You know that, right?," and his voice sails across my head. A cloud on a dream landscape, and I am warm.

This time, I feel restricted from responding. To do so would break the spell.

I paint a heart against John's back with my free, dangling arm.

YOU-TOO

YOU-TOO-JOHN

LOVE-YOU
AN: what? Another chapter so quickly, you say?

What can I say? I am trying to get back into the swing of things.

I detest going so long between postings. (Here's to turning over a new leaf!)

Please be warned - this chapter is more graphic than previous chapters, insofar as
physical violence is concerned. It discusses the abduction and murder of a child in
relative detail. Mostly taken from John's own inner imaginings and based on autopsy
reports. But it might be upsetting to some of you, so please proceed with caution.

The description of hypoglycemic shock is something I have personally experienced, and
trust me - it's not a fun experience. Death by insulin overdose would certainly not be a
peaceful way to go, although it can be relatively fast.

JOHN'S POV

We finally get to bed just before midnight.

Which is a miraculous thing in and of itself.

But an even greater ending to the evening is this:

Sherlock eats his dinner.

He doesn't eat a lot if contrasted against the national average, and I can tell he's struggling to look
normal about it...

But he eats. More than earlier in the day.

He eats with his face firm and with abiding concentration.

So I turn on the television. Find something mindless.

I do my best to appear ignorant of the fact that he's doing this on his own.

And you know what?

It seems to work.

Very quickly I am learning that he becomes much worse when too much focus is placed on him.

Especially when eating.
His older writings, scrawled on loose-leaf in Yuri's office (and was that really only several weeks ago?) lingers in my mind. How he spoke about the difficulty of getting better if too much attention was placed on him.

Of course, he needs the attention. The trick of it is, I just can't make it seem too blatant.

I can't make it seem as if I am studying him. Keeping tabs on him.

He knows, and I know he knows, that I am watching him.

But a certain level of normalcy must be sought, now.

So tonight, I turned on the tellie. I didn't serve him his food, either; I let him serve himself.

I also didn't comment about his selections.

From my offerings, quite varied, he actually chose only a few different things to eat.

One of the items was the mashed potatoes. If he could taste the butter and olive oil that I had added for a higher calorie content, he kept his mouth shut to boot.

On top of that, he squirted a generous portion of hot sauce over his fare. Which I honestly had not even brought to the table, keeping in mind that with his healing stomach spices should be regulated. If not avoided outright until he was feeling better.

But he went to the fridge on his own, plucked out the bottle, and shook it over his food. Mashing it up until the concoction was almost pink, and probably too salty to be that edible.

Still, I said nothing - even though part of me wanted to know if he was gearing for another confrontation. If he was looking for a reason to get upset.

Although seemingly illogical, that's what I thought. If only for a few seconds.

-----------------------------------------------

He resolutely avoided making eye contact while he ate. Sat down with his potatoes on a blue plate, tucked against his lap (and assisted by a small serving of broiled salmon which made me almost crazily happy).

His bites were also minuscule little things. Slowed down movements with the fork placed off to the side of his plate between every nibble.

But he watched television, and he actually ate almost everything he had served himself.

I didn't ask him how he felt about it, either. Not physically, not emotionally. I didn't make a big deal out of it at all.

Merely turned to him when I could see that he was nearly done his meal, and inquired if he wanted herbal tea as I wanted some myself.

He frowned at his plate, pushing the salmon around. Breaking it down into the smallest fragments. Eating off of one tine in a somewhat odd fashion.

"I want coffee," he groused. Poking at the salmon.

I bit back a spurt of laughter. Not that the sentiment was unusual for him. I simply was relieved he
was eating at all and so his typical grousing had me laughing in a sort of exhausted relief.

He was sounding, well, like the healthier version of himself. The version I had first met, years back. And he likely was combating demons even then, as I doubt they ever left him alone. The thing is - I didn't know his past then. I didn't know the internal struggle he likely lived every day, multiple times per day.

He sounded like a healthier version of what existed currently, even if only in the smallest way.

"Yeah. Maybe decaf," I responded with a quirk of my lips. "Maybe I'll make a pot of that."

To point out that he shouldn't - really, really shouldn't - have coffee would likely just bring more attention to the fact that he was ill.

Which would erode this hazy calmness of our evening. This relative progression towards something...better.

Of course, I tried to ignore the niggling idea that anorexics sometimes abused caffeinated beverages as a means of boosting metabolism. Or of using Tabasco sauce as a thermogenic aid for boosting the rate of caloric burn. Tried to ignore the very possibility that Sherlock would even seek both items out for such a damaging purpose at this stage.

Tried to remind myself that he had always shown a fondness for coffee, and what of it?

So do countless other people.

The vast majority of the adult UK population, probably.

Most of whom never suffer from eating disorders in their entire lives.

"No, regular, John. I want regular coffee. Decaff? What use is decaf?"

I picked some nuts off my plate, and thoughtfully chewed one. A pecan.

"Decaff has the added benefit of allowing us to actually fall asleep before, well, tomorrow," I responded with relative ease.

Sherlock bit his lip, seemed to appreciate my wording.

Seemed to appreciate the fact that I was focusing on a normal situation, a normal byproduct of increased caffeine use in any person; any person on the planet would find it difficult to sleep deeply after drinking a caffeinated beverage so close to a time when they'd be getting ready for bed.

This wasn't about him being abnormal then (his word, not mine). This wasn't about him being sick.

This was simply a fond reminder that he needed to sleep, just as I needed to sleep.

So he latched onto the normalcy of my statement with ease before he took a few more hesitant bites. Evenly spaced, fork placed down yet again between each peck.

It seemed almost ritualistic. But if it were, then I'd take that over his continued refusal to eat anything. Or almost anything.
Yuri once asked me when I first noticed - realized - that Sherlock was sick.

Not just seemingly haunted by the case, but unquestionably ill.

But I couldn't answer that.

Not really.

His decline had been incremental, and as I lived with him - it was harder to see the shifting in his size and the dropping of the weight.

Next, Yuri had wanted to know when I had first noticed Sherlock's eating atypicalities (my word, again. I refused to call Sherlock abnormal, which was a word he bandied about with a self-deprecating tone).

I had sighed, then given the psychiatrist a terse smile.

"The day I met him, Yuri," I had offered, hands up in a what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it? gesture.

"The day you met him?"

Well, no.

That wasn't quite true.

But it had been the first evening we had ever eaten a meal together.

Or rather, the first night we had ever gone to Angelo's.

I can recall my amusement when Sherlock had asked the date after I inquired if he was going to actually join me in eating anything. To his question, I had informed him it was Wednesday of that particular week.

And his response had been basically a brush off.

A dismissal.

If it was Wednesday, then that was good enough for him.

The very idea that he'd use an entire day - or longer than that, possibly - to gauge when he should eat had seemed so strange.

I had been bemused.

I hadn't thought it was anything indicating disorder, however; in such a short period of time Sherlock had already displayed so many peculiarities, and at that early association - what was one more?

From that, I had asked him later if he had a girlfriend who fed him up occasionally. Studied him as he eventually sipped at lemon water that Angelo had brought to the table.

'At least he drinks water,' I had thought that night, somewhat fascinated by this new man and his eccentric ways. This eccentric genius who seemed to run almost exclusively on coffee, cases, and the
fumes of his own fervent discoveries.

The first time I realized that Sherlock was actually becoming gaunt, and that his eating (or not eating, as the case may be) was out of control was after he had revealed to me that he had been hurt as a child.

With that knowledge, and his shrinking form, I started to make the connections more readily.

But in retrospect, it's so difficult to catch the signs of disorder when you don't know at the outset that anyone has a history of self-abuse.

Weight loss isn't something that immediately jumps out at you.

If someone is critically underweight, yes, that alone is pause for concern. And at that point, even modest losses in weight become undeniable. The slightest loss of weight becomes a staggering sign in short order when someone is already very, very underweight.

Sherlock had always been lanky, and his eating had always been 'different' - but it didn't cause me much concern. He had energy - sometimes a manic disposition, almost too much boundless energy - and I guess I thought that with his razor sharp mind and the speed of his activities - he couldn't be in such dire straits.

But when someone has always been lean, and then take to wearing baggier clothes - you don't immediately think 'eating disorder.'

You don't.

You just don't.

Especially when the person in question is as brilliant an actor as Sherlock Holmes.

You look at reasons, perhaps, for why they are stressed.

At first, that's what you do.

Because weight naturally fluctuates in everyone. It goes up a little, it goes down a little.

If someone is sick with a stomach ulcer, which he had - it can go down quite a bit.

But you don't think active self-harm.

You assume that a couple pounds lost could be due to emotional things. Such as the case. The stress of the case we had been on at the time, so different to every other case that we had ever taken previously.

The first case where I had ever felt as if we were trying to catch and reign in true evil.

Everyone was miserable and haunted by the case. Lestrade, Sally, Anderson, myself.

Why should Sherlock have been any different?
Sherlock hadn't even wanted to take the case from the outset.

I pushed him on that, too.

Pushed him way too much.

Because kids were being abducted.

Then murdered.

It was only later discovered that the children had also been sexually abused.

But one thing necessitated speed of action: Lestrade was convinced it was the work of a serial killer.

These children weren't dying at the hands of an abusive parent. They were being targeted.

Which means time was especially of the essence.

Which means Sherlock needed to take the case, and I had to convince him of that reality.

------------------------------------------

Seven children varying in ages, all under the age of 11.

Seven abducted, six killed - by the time Sherlock had been consulted.

And Sherlock had listened to Lestrade as he had outlined the case, had seemed lost in thought.

Unusually pensive.

Then proclaimed himself 'too busy.'

Too busy to help.

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I remember looking up at him in shock, if not anger.

Nobody could be that callous.

------------------------------------------

"You're being selfish," I had gritted out to him in disarming vexation after Lestrade had left the room, equally incredulous.

Sherlock had looked over the photos of the children - their little bodies placed as if in repose.

I guess it was a kind of repose. The eternal kind.

Their bodies had been re-dressed, too.

Prior to that, they had all been injected with insulin.

Yet, it was determined that post mortem that all had been struck with a large, blunt object.

The sides of their skulls had been depressed. Caved in.
I had never seen anything more sickening in all my years as a physician.
And to know that someone had done this willfully?
How could I let Sherlock turn away from such atrocity when he could help put a stop to it?
--------------------

Initially, the coroner had thought the wounding had been the cause of death, and it wasn't until the fifth child that we learned that really wasn't the case at all.

But this apparent rage didn't fit with other aspects of how the murderer had tended to the children.

Sherlock had been the one to catch it. To push for a closer examination of the corpses.

"You need to look for needle marks. You need to do a more exhaustive blood panel. Don't look for obvious poisons. Look for something less sinister. Something average. Something which, in certain contexts - might even be beneficial."

When we learned that they had been killed in a different fashion to that which had been initially presumed - and only after had their corpses been mutilated - well, then it became even stranger.

The case should have been an 11 on Sherlock's scale for case interest, yet he hadn't latched on with any desire to assist.

That in itself should have been a huge red flag that something was very, very wrong.

For him.

Still, I pushed him.
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"These little kids are being killed, Sherlock!"

And Sherlock's lazy drawl, his put-upon passivity.

"Thanks for stating the obvious yet again, John."

I had pushed myself up from the chair. Pointed at the black and white photo of a little girl. The photo had been taken in the autopsy bay. A metal tray, a Y incision, and a five year old child with water slicked hair, combed back and away from her mottled face by the ME.

"This little girl was sexually assaulted, and murdered and you just sit there-"

Sherlock waved me off.

"She wasn't sexually assaulted by the perpetrator of her murder, however. Don't muddle issues. This abductor isn't hurting them like that."

He said this with a far away look, as if distracted.

"What the hell, Sherlock?! No! He's just killing them! Not 'hurting' them at all, is he? You are acting as if murder is some downgrade from sexual abuse!"

Sherlock had brushed his hands against his lap. Stood up in a flourish.
"As typical, you've let your emotions derail you from seeing the facts. This child--"

"Annabelle Campion!," I exclaimed, "Her name was Annabelle! She wasn't an object! She wasn't a clue! She was a real flesh and blood little girl who had barely started school! Who probably couldn't even do much more than scrawl her own name on her composition books when she was murdered! She was molested by someone - we know that much! - and then she was killed! What part of the severity of this case aren't you getting?! This is fucking serious!"

Sherlock had glowered at me then, his eyes white hot with rage.

I had never seen anything quite so intensely angry on his face before, to tell you the truth.

"Don't you talk to me about not 'getting' things! I can fully comprehend that this is serious, for god's sake!"

He had tugged his belstaff around his body, and pushed up in his chair - as if to leave.

Obviously, to leave.

"Sit down! You can't just take off! Not with another child missing! We are taking this case! We have no choice. YOU have no choice!"

Sherlock had looked at me with near contempt at that point.

"Like hell we are taking this case! I don't do cases with children! It's a rule I have! It IS my choice!"

I had struggled to find an example of a case involving children. Little episodes popped up, here and there.

Routine things with interesting twists.

But nothing violent against children.

That much seemed to hold true.

------------------------------------------

My temper had gotten the better of me.

I am ashamed of what I said next, but at the time I had reached my limit.

"Oh - so you'll help a child locate their misplaced pet? That get's your bleeding attention! But when little kids really need you - you are turning away? When their bloody life is on the line? It's then that you don't care one whit?"

Sherlock's face had pulled in, resettled into something emotionless.

"You really should stop talking now. You don't know what you're talking about, John."

I had gotten up then, too. Pissed. Too pissed off to continue arguing with him.

"Oh go home! Go home and study tobacco ash or something equally meaningless and inconsequential!"

Sherlock's hands had clenched up.
"The work I do isn't meaningless. I study-

"I don't care what you study! This isn't about your auto-didactic pursuits! Your esoteric knowledge base! This is about you, in real time, refusing to help a child when they could die, and you not caring one fucking bit about them!"

He had blinked up at me dumbly, as if struck by my fists and not my words.

"I do care," he had whispered. "I just know that caring is not an advantage. One day, you'll understand that I'm right."

------------------------------------------

I hadn't listened. Hadn't looked at the strange cluster of signs proclaiming his own anxiety.

So I all but screamed at him.

"Oh, sure you do! It really looks like you care! You know another little boy has been taken, right? You know what awaits him, and you are what? Bored? And you wonder why people call you a psychopath!"

------------------------------------------

I had left before even he could depart, that day. Left before he had even had time to respond.

Mostly because I couldn't stand to hear him anymore.

Didn't even want to look at him, my anger was so fierce.

So I slammed the conference room door shut, ignoring the fact that Sherlock had refused to follow.

Distantly, I can recall how his form shuffled back to the table as I stood outside in the hallway, pacing, waiting for him to do the right thing. I can recall the dark outline of his silhouette through the glass as he sat back down in his chair. The flapping sounds of paper as he picked up what could have only been the case notes.

But, even still, I left him behind.

Even after I saw him place his head on the table, weary.

All the same, I still left.

I still left first.

------------------------------------------

Two days after that, another child's body had been found.

The seventh abducted child.

An eight year old boy by the name of Harrison McKenzie.

------------------------------------------

Harrison had been in his school's enrichment program. "Intellectually gifted," his school report had said.
He had curly black ringlets and hazel eyes. He looked like a child of the renaissance era. Face too pale and eyes too bright. Severe demeanor, at least from what I could infer from his class photos.

He looked very much as I imagined Sherlock would have looked, once upon a time. The eyes weren't enough of a match, but that wasn't important.

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The coroner's examination revealed signs of anal penetration.

Yet the scarring had been old. Too old to have been caused by the abductor.

------------------------------------------

The child had been abducted on a Friday, after school had let out and before he was expected home.

By sunset, his parents had called the authorities.

He had been held for just short of three weeks before his body had been discovered.

This time we knew to look for puncture marks.

------------------------------------------

Harrison was found on a rainy autumn morning by two patrolmen traversing the shoreline with hot coffees in hand.

Since it was dawn, the scene was masked by the peppered darkness that always mingles in with new daylight and it was only his red jumper which grabbed their attention.

Everything else about him was muddled up in the foggy air, distorted in wisps of whiteness and ethereality; a ghost realm of things not quite real, not quite fathomable. Not a world of happening things, of reasonable possibility.

------------------------------------------

In my mind, before his body had ever been found - when I had still been hoping Sherlock would come to the rescue - I had thought of Harrison as our 'lucky seven.'

I could envision us finding him. Scared undoubtedly, but relatively okay.

Certainly alive.

He would be the lucky number seven; the child who looked like a mini-Sherlock.

The child whose rescue would end the death spree of an absolute maniac.

The child Sherlock would save when everything around us seemed hopeless.

------------------------------------------

On the morning when Harrison was found, his body was covered in the whiteness of the mist and splayed out by a gusting chill. Graying leaves clumped about his body, as if nature herself had already started the burial process. Tried to place him under the protection of her own brittle shelter. Tried to make a kinder bed for his remains than the one that had been fashioned for him by human hands.
Foghorns had likely wailed in the distance, and most people were probably rushing to take the tube to work. Rushing to get chips with malt vinegar. Rushing to get to the park with their toddlers to feed the fattened ducks, or visiting their aging parents, or even returning overdue library books while counting themselves unlucky for their tardiness.

While everyone else bustled about their day, Harrison waited to be uncovered from his bed of leaves. Waited for someone to see his tiny outline against the rocks. Waited for someone to come along in rescue, before his remains could be pulled out on the tide.

------------------------------------------

One of the patrolmen had dropped their thermos upon taking in the scene, for Harrison's eyes had been so badly mutilated from the attack as to blur the orbital area into a red frothy pulp against white skin.

At the closing of his life, he ended his time on earth truly sightless.

------------------------------------------

The image of Munch's The Scream came to me, unbidden.

I felt trapped in the horror of the scene.

((((god, he has no eyes.
he lost his eyes!))))

Where once there had been brilliant hazel eyes, the colour of root beer, now there was nothing.
Nothing but a gaping wound where eyes should have been.

------------------------------------------

Sherlock had been working a petty crime case that he said had some "intriguing dynamics," and for that - the preceding week I had ignored him in anger.

I wasn't the detective. I wanted to help Lestrade find the newest child.

If there was even a chance of discovering Harrison, I wanted to help.

But I had no idea how to help.

I was merely Sherlock's blogger. I assisted him.

Yet, on my own - I had nothing to offer Scotland Yard.

Nothing but my sympathies, and those aren't worth very much when trying to capture a killer.

------------------------------------------

Lestrade had waited until my shift at the surgery had ended before sending me a text.

Short, to the point.

'H. McKenzie's body found this morning.'

I had stared at the text for what could have been 10 minutes before another one pinged in, alerting
me to its presence.

'TOD was between 11 - midnight last night. Insulin overdose like others.'

Something about the messages gutted me in a way I cannot begin to explain.

It wasn't simply the fact that another little child had died.

It was that he had been murdered at a time when he should have been sleeping.

Which might sound crazy, as far as things to focus on went.

Yet he should have been perfectly safe.

In his room, in his pajamas, with whatever comfort object a child of his age preferred.

Warm.

Not out in the darkness, all alone.

Of course, that wasn't quite correct, either.

He had certainly not been alone.

------------------------------------------

The images came to me forcefully.

A tiny boy in a car. The car parks, then the ignition turns off.

The door opens, and the child is picked up momentarily before being placed down on the rocky ground below.

His brown loafers are new, and they are clean.

He takes the man's hand; it envelopes his own.

Next, he is being led by that same hand and before long he is walked down a trail, near the Thames.

The autumn leaves crunch under his feet, splintering.

The air is scented like vegetation and fall.

The little boy squints, looks up at the man, takes the man's lead and continues to amble down the rocks.

"Are we going on the boat now?" he asks softly. Because this little boy likes boats. He draws them all the time and his mummy affixes them to his bedroom wall with double-sided tape. He has nautical print pajamas, and blue and white piping on his bed spread. He builds models of larger ships with his daddy, too. Some even get placed into green bottles, corked and placed above the fireplace in the McKenzie home. "'Cause I'd really like to go on a boat!"

When he speaks, his voice whistles out a bit of air - caught in the lost space where he's just lost a tooth. It gives his words a squeaking sound.

The man holds his hand primly, and they continue to walk in silence.
He doesn't ask about the boats after this point.

In fact, he'll never ask about boats ever again.

------------------------------------------

It would have been so dark. The city lights would have glowed eerily in the darkness, across the rippled stream.

Civilization so close to him.

Not within his reach, but almost.

Almost.

Civility, however, was light years away from Harrison McKenzie; the city lights might as well have been the distant light of stars from another galaxy, for all the hope they offered.

They were only an illusion. A mirage. An echo of existence - a light trail of people living very different lives.

The little boy in the red cable jumper didn't live in their world anymore, and the light wasn't for him.

------------------------------------------

Would he have been given the injection by the water?

While standing in confusion on the rocks?

My mind needed to know how he had perished - needed to bear witness to his final moments on earth, at least in my mind.

We do more to bear witness to the deaths of monsters.

It only felt appropriate to be with him in my mind. To consider his final moments in my own way.

To not divert my focus away from his death simply because it stung and made my heart swell with an aching sort of restlessness.

Because he had to live through it.

All of it.

I only had to comprehend what he must have endured.

And if I can't do that much...

------------------------------------------

I know, as a doctor, how quickly it would have taken for him to die based on the insulin dosage.

It would have been relatively fast.

Unfortunately, as a doctor - I also know how he would have felt as he died.

------------------------------------------
After the injection - in the first minute or so - he would have begun to feel faint.

His breathing would have increased. Short puffs of air, as if he were having a panic attack. As if he could not extract enough oxygen from his environment.

His arms and legs would have become heavy.

He might have even experienced the dysphoria and agitation that frequently accompanies such low levels of circulating blood glucose.

His vision would have become spotted - patched with blackness and the muting of sight in places where forms and colours should have existed.

Eventually, he would have stumbled. At this point, he was likely carried the rest of the way down the embankment.

Even if he could have spoken, the words would have become garbled. He would have wanted to lay down. He would have closed his eyes. His skin would have become cold and he might have felt cold internally, too, and all the layered clothing in the world wouldn't have helped him feel any warmer.

Depending on his reaction time, he may have passed through a stage of clamorous hunger. It would have been a brief ache and his yearning for a last meal would have been very short. Possibly it would have been eclipsed with confusion and the winding down of all conscious thought.

After that, the last stages of deterioration would have progressed extremely rapidly.

His heart would have continued to race, until his body went into hypoglycemic shock. Only then would it have started to slow. The organs would have started to fail: irregular heartbeat, faint and thready pulse. At that point he would have likely passed out, or started seizing. Possibly both - one followed by the other.

Shortly thereafter, without the administration of glucagon and additional medical assistance, he would have stopped breathing.

Harrison had been found wearing a burgundy cable knit jumper with elbow patches in a tawny brown and a yellow and black checkered scarf fashioned to look like Rupert bear's, from the children's stories.

His left shoe had been displaced somewhere during the event. Lost among stones and sandy earth not even twenty feet from the edge of the river.

The remaining loafer was removed by police. Tagged and cataloged and determined to have been a size 10.5 in children's sizing.

He had been an extremely petite child, with the measurements of a typical five year old.

5% percentile for weight. 7%th for height.

He had just lost a tooth, too.

His first lost tooth.

In his hands, he had been clasp his watch. The clasp undone, yet forensics yielded no prints belonging to anyone other than those of Harrison himself.
Why had he tried to remove his watch before he died?

Did he know he was dying?

Did he want to know what the time was?

Why? WHY?

His small feet had arched with rigor mortis, while his eyes...

It's hard to know if his eyes were open or shut when he died, after all.

------------------------------------------

I wanted to blame Sherlock for the death, as unfair as it was to do so.

When I had returned to the flat, I had a copy of Harrison's autopsy photo (on loan, with a promise to return it to Lestrade the following day) in my pocket.

I placed it on the kitchenette table, where he had been working on some sort of unfathomable project as if to distract himself from the presence of my ire.

I didn't speak for ages. Merely studied him, vision focused intensely on his lean, violinist fingertips as he fiddled with the knobs on his microscope.

Eventually, he looked up with a fractious gaze.

"What is it?!," he had spat.

We had been avoiding each other for the better part of a week, and even Sherlock's mood had degraded because of it.

I placed a photo of Harrison in the autopsy bay down on table. Smacked it roughly with my hand.

Sherlock, I recall, flinched.

Avoided even looking at the image.

His throat convulsed and he seemed unable to properly swallow.

"Guess who died last night?," I asked, my voice thick. "This one. Harrison McKenzie."

He didn't go back to his microscope. Nor did he reach for the photo.

But he did do something that I found peculiar.

He arched his hands down, as if needing the pressure of the table top. Pressed until he left smudgy damp spots - imprints - of his palms against the Formica.

"There was nothing anyone could do, John-"

"Don't give me that! You could have saved him, but you turned away! He needed you, Sherlock! He needed you! You are the best detective in this whole city, and you and I both know it! They begged you to help. I begged you to help!"

Sherlock remained mute. Let me rant.
He never once tried to stop my tirade.

I called him names.

So many names.

So many untrue things.

But he didn’t stop me.

Nor, I didn’t stop myself.

Not until I was out of steam. Not until every rage filled word have been voiced.

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And that's something I will have to live with for the rest of my life.
Night torches

Chapter Summary

AN: So, I haven't done a POV of the same character two chapters in a row for some time now.

But I felt this was an essential departure point for John. Re: his feelings, and his need to understand his feelings in short order. For Sherlock to be presented with similar challenges.

It will include some scenes which could be seen as overtly sexual, but I don't want to give too much away, yet. Because while the chapter is about instigating sex, dealing with desire, and dealing with trust - it's mostly about John schooling Sherlock on what he wants for his friend. And what he wants most for Sherlock - is for Sherlock to be at peace.

Finally, this chapter does touch on self injury in slightly more revealing ways than in chapters previous. But it's Sherlock's resolute fear that once John sees and feels those old injuries, he'll depart - which drives a lot of Sherlock's behaviour here, too.

Additionally - this is a long chapter. I thought about breaking it up into three roughly equal portions, and then thought against it. Since the next few chapters with take place at Yuri's, with Mycroft - I wanted this to be the last resolute chapter where Sherlock is stuck with his secrets.

JOHN'S POV

The haze of early morning light is filtering in through the shades, which cut lines of black and taupe against Sherlock's face.

We fell asleep watching The Graham Norton Show last night, I remember that much. Daniel Radcliffe was on the show, along with a tawny brown owl which had the audience in stitches - as it wouldn't do any of the pre-established tricks it had been trained to do, and Norton's voice ("This is the owl who played Pigwidgeon in the films? Are you sure of that, Daniel?" And the actor laughing, while people awww'ed at the doltish little bird craning his neck this way and that. "I think this guy is an imposter. I don't think I've ever seen this owl before in my life." And the audience roared.)

Sherlock hadn't laughed - merely watched the exchange, slowly pecking at his salmon, and I tried to explain that the actor had been in a fantasy series as a kid, when he informed me that he 'knew that'.

'I know that, John. Everyone knows that.'

Even Sherlock recognized him as the actor who had played Harry Potter, years back. Mentioned something about Toby's birthday, then, seemingly out of the blue. His mouth quirking up when the owl kept turning to the camera, kept refusing to fly. After that, Top Gear came on - and I indicated that we could look for something new to watch, but Sherlock's eyes remained glued to the screen, as
he watched formula one racers rev around the track.

Then Sherlock took to the floor, and in roles reversed - I stayed nestled on the sofa (which is better suited to my proportions); as I did so, I helped myself to a bag of roasted almonds - periodically offering the bag to Sherlock.

Eventually he ate a few, chewing them slowly. Deep sips of water between each bite.

The sleeping bag we brought out in the later portion of the evening is half open now, with Sherlock's lanky form sprawled out within it. One of his fists has curled up against his temple, and it reminds me of the posturing of tiny infants who've fallen asleep on their back, clutching their little limbs up and near to their face.

I tentatively get off the sofa, and crouch down against my friend. He still has the remote control for the television crushed in one hand, so I extract it gently, and slowly wind his hand back up against his side. His other hand is still fisted and clenched against his skull at an awkward angle. The material of the bag has snatched itself around his middle, cutting across a portion of his belly that is still healing from surgery, so I tenderly adjust the sleeping bag so that it's not pulled so tightly against his torso. I then let my fingertips brush against his forehead. He's still cool - but not as cold as he's felt to the touch lately.

I let myself fully survey him; take in his sleeping form.

I really do love him. The feeling so intense, that I blot out a fresh and insistent need to kiss him.

-Damn it, not this again-

I have always been physically affectionate with people I've cared deeply for, but in this situation there are other complexities that make even simple touch something I keep over-analyzing. Keep refraining from initiating.

Slowly, I feel his body shift, his chest arcs up as he turns - slowly coming to awareness.

Sleep-clouded eyes open slightly, and he looks about groggily.

Eventually his eyes focus on me, blink, and I hear him clear his throat.

"Your neck must kill. You didn't fall asleep in a very good position," I reply, lamely.

He twists his neck this way and that before looking back up to me. Studying me.

Looking, oddly, like a baby owl that hasn't learned any of the pre-established tricks.

Doesn't know what he's expected to do, as this is new territory now.

"How are you feeling?" I try again, not having gotten much of a response from him the first time.

Sherlock continues to watch me, his eyes intense.

"Do you feel okay? You did-", and I realize that I don't know how to proceed. "You did really well last night."

I see his eyes glance down to his stomach. Stare at the starched white pajama top which covers his frame.
Realize, suddenly, that I shouldn't have mentioned anything at all.

I see him frown at his stomach, and then see pale fingertips dance along his ribs, splay out over his torso. Press inwardly against his meager belly.

See the frown deepen.

"Does your stomach hurt?," I inquire, a little concerned. He looks so damn upset about something.

He licks his lips again. Lets his hands gloss over his abdomen, before they come up to touch the ridges of his prominent hipbones.

I try not to stare. I feel like I'm watching something far too personal. Something private, something that's he's not quite aware he's sharing - if only because he's still so sleepy.

"Any pain?," I ask seriously now. He's been staggeringly quiet these days.

His eyes glance back to mine, and hold.

"I don't know," he says, unnerved. "Maybe."

"Maybe?," I test.

Sherlock lets his hand press in against his stomach again.

It looks as if he is measuring his dimensions. And not liking the feeling of doing so.

Or else, not liking the results his mind is providing.

"It's swollen," he replies softly. Barely making a sound at all.

I can feel my eyebrows raise to my hairline.

"Swollen?," I get out, my eyes now finally descending back down to his torso.

Even though sheathed in his sleeping attire, I can see that there is no way anything about Sherlock's form would qualify as swollen.

His rib bones make a delineated jagged cut through the cloth. His stomach is still concave.

"It feels bigger," he whispers, voice almost alarmed. "And it was just one meal."

The insanity here is that he truly sounds afraid.

He truly believes one meal, and one still not approaching a typical meal for most - has changed his form so considerably.

"There's no way that you're...swollen," I attempt, reasonably. Quieter now: "Your mind is playing tricks on you."

He shakes his head morosely, and his voice cracks.

"It's not just in my mind, John. It's not a trick. I can feel it. I can feel what I ate. What it's done. What it's doing."

His hands have now resumed their course and move up his sides, toy against his torso. Higher up.
He looks so staggeringly unnerved.

"Sherlock, nothing's-"

He reaches out with his insanely fast reflexes and grabs my hand, placing it over his belly.

He wants the confirmation.

I let my hand rest, furled up against his thin belly, his concave belly.

After a few seconds of the slight up and down rising of his body, as he inhales and exhales, I let my hand expand until my palm is flat against his own skin.

"Can you feel it?," he mutters.

My throat feels choked.

I shake my head, not trusting my voice.

"No, Sherlock, I-"

Suddenly, he pulls up the front of his pajama top, and places my hand against his flesh.

It's warmer than his hands and feet, so the sensation isn't uncomfortable.

I let my hand rest there, stunned, and take in the shape of his stomach. Can feel the edge of hipbone slue through tissue. Let my fingertips touch the hipbone. I can feel the vast difference in width between the bottom of his cored out stomach and the highest peak of bone at the top.

"What does it feel like to you?," he asks, trying to hide his anxiety.

"Sherlock, it's - your stomach is - you're not swollen. No part of you is swollen. Your stomach isn't even flat - it dips down far too much. One meal hasn't changed that fact. It's just a start," I manage to reply, my mouth dry as bone.

Sherlock looks me in the eyes. His breath comes in quicker succession.

He seems so damnably afraid of something.

Something I am doing?

And what of it?

What am I doing to scare him this badly?

"You said you loved me. Last night," he murmurs, his cheeks turning pink. Pink splaying across those high cheekbones. His eyes look bright, almost feverish.

I don't know if I should move my hand. Recall how the slight and repetitive stroking of his palm seemed to calm him down, earlier.

The monotony, or perhaps the rhythmic motion of the movement bringing him something approaching relief.

"I do," I mutter, looking back down to my hand, against his belly. "I have for awhile."

Sherlock places his hand against mine, holds his hand there. Against mine.
"I do too," he attempts awkwardly, his body tense under my hand. "I know it doesn't seem like it, but I want to show you that I can. Properly."

Thoughts bombard me all at once, and I freeze - wonder what he's playing at; my brows furrow into something confused.


My heart is racing. It's going so fast.

So fast.

I feel him nod, instead of seeing the action. My gaze strays away from us. Somewhere away from us both. Plasters its sight on the wall.

In the next second, I am staring at the years-old smiley face on the wall. The neon yellow slanted face.

He seemed almost a different person then. Different issues, sure.

But none of those issues scared me.

I could put up with guns going off, though that in itself was a type of insanity. Because who shoots off a weapon in - boredom?

And graffiti on walls. Body parts in the fridge.

His at times insufferably rude behaviour with others.

I could make excuses, if only in my own head, for why he behaved in such ways.

The words I used to justify the behaviours always the same.

Eccentric. Genius.

Hypomanic.

"Sherlock. No games right now. I don't have the patience for games right now. Does your stomach hurt?," I ask quickly, licking my lips, nervous.

"Yes," he croaks. "It always hurts."

Compassion fills me. He's been in so much pain for such a long time.

This time, I let my fingertips record new sensations.

The raised nub of keloid scar tissue. From his gastrectomy, his surgery. I imagine if I were to actually look at the skin, it would be a hot pink, too early in time to have passed into something ivory and fully healed. Or as healed as skin can become after he's been opened with scalpels. Opened up to his insides, had portions blocked off, cut off, taken out, discarded.

Necrotic tissue, they said.

Yes, of course his stomach hurts.

Of course it must.
I feel the smoothness of his skin, and the way his pajama bottoms pucker out, baggy at his hips. Even double knotted at the ties, they are still too large on his body now, and likely will be for some time.

The elastic ripples obscenely, as normally they would have been pulled taut - only he's lost so much weight.

I can feel the slight prickles of coarser hair near the top of his waist band, and my hand recoils, as if burnt.

He steadies my hand. Doesn't stop me from removing it forcefully, but holds against it, almost midair.

"It's okay," he murmurs. Looks to the wall. "It's okay."

He doesn't seem to be speaking to me at all, though. He seems to be vocalizing that sentiment to himself.

"It's okay," he repeats, while his throat convulses. "You can. I trust you."

My heart races with adrenaline.

"Sherlock? What is this?"

My hand stills, and I feel something thrum through my veins.

I have never touched him like this before, and it's quickly seeming less and less medical in nature with every passing second.

While I didn't start this, I also seem frozen in place. My brain is filled with chaotic static, hissing and making it hard to think.

This quickly feels like something that is happening to me, not something I am doing with him.

Something I can't control, and I realize that there is some ancient fear yelping up inside of me.

-harry and her girlfriends, and me - little me - stuck in the room, as they disrobed-

-harry's breathing, quick, frantic and the moans of others in the room, and the bodies-

-turning my sight away, and drawing stick men on a fogged up window in the basement-

-covering my ears and curling up in the closet-

-stop it! stop it, sherlock, fucking STOP IT!-

Distantly, I feel a part of myself wonder if this is how it seems to anyone when they aren't expecting something sexual to occur.

Only, how much more rigid and silent and frozen would someone be if they were a child, and a person advanced like this?

No, not like this at all.

But menacingly. Without compassion. With only steely-eyed intent, threats on their tongue-

(And Sherlock insinuated threats once. Weeks ago. Something about threats of broken arms, or
broken legs. But I tuned it out, couldn't hear it then...)

Force and holding and pain in their hands?

-sherlock, please stop it.-

I need him to stop this, because this isn't about trust.

Or physical enjoyment, or a need to show that he's over anything.

This is only about him relieving the worst of his pain, and having me witness that reunion in present-time.

This is Sherlock trying to show me something.

This is not Sherlock doing anything to me, other than trying to express his own confusion. And possibly, latently but possibly - his own sexuality. His own desire.

It might not seem like the right time, especially as he's still so scared - and obviously still so sick - but he's trying to show the complexity of what's happening to him. Not just what's happening in his mind, not just how he feels emotionally about me - but physically how he might feel, too.

What's more: I can't withdraw forcefully, either. I know that much.

Sherlock has known nothing but a life time of rejection.

If I handle this wrong, now -

The damage I do is going to compound problems for us both.

"I know you love me," he whispers, breaking my stream of consciousness into fragmented pieces. "I know you can help me."

He presses my hand against the ridge of his boxers, edging my fingers underneath the material. I can feel the rougher spokes of pubic hair, the slight damp skin of a man whose fallen asleep in a too-hot sleeping bag.

I can feel other things too. I firmly do not let my mind process all the other things that he's edging me to touch, overwhelmed with his behaviour. Overwhelmed by my inability to resolutely get up and walk away.

I need to put a stop to this: kindly, but firmly.

So I do, and as I do, my fingers brush against smooth, puckered lines.

So many lines. They feel cooler than the surrounding skin, and for a second I cannot understand what this crisscrossing of glossy skin is, until I realize that what my fingers are coursing over are a multitude of scars. Some scarcely more than several millimeters in diameter. Some far thicker.

Yet, scars. Undeniably so.

About a dozen or so. Maybe more. A few feel like they aren't even scars, yet. Just raw patches of grazed skin where scars are destined to form in a few weeks.

New cuts. These must be somewhat new.
This must be what they noticed, upon admittance to the hospital weeks back.

Patches of self-abused skin. I feel them, and then I feel Sherlock's hands press over mine. Press inwardly.

"I know they are ugly," he whispers. "I know a lot of parts of me are, but-"

His lithe body, lanky and frail, is trembling now. His hands shake.

I bend my head over to his face. Press my lips against his eye. Feel the shuttering of his lashes as I keep my lips pressed there. Turn several inches away. Press again against his temple for good measure.

"Nothing about you is ugly, love," I say, my body aching with sadness. "You're beautiful to me. But I think you are a little confused right now. About who you need to be, what you need to do-"

I feel Sherlock shake his head.

"I want to get better," he hisses, "and I know you'll help me. Even if I feel like it's wrong. I know you'll help it make sense, inside of me-"

An ominous sense of dread and anxiety causes my bowels to clench up.

"Sherlock, we - you -"

Even if I retreated now - got up and stammered and tried to run to the kitchenette to get my own mind and body under control, he'd always know that I had felt them. The scars. His body.

He'd know.

What's more - he'd likely feel abandoned. He's already referred to his scars as ugly.

I know he has issues with his body, how I see it.

My departure - even if just to move down the hall - would worsen those insecurities.

"There's more than those. Some on my arms, although most...most of them you can't feel with your body because they weren't as deep when I - when I made them," he whispers, his eyes closed. "But I didn't want to hide them from you anymore. I want you to feel them. Feel everything."

His fingers come up and over my own, and he presses my hand between his thighs.

I can scarcely breathe now, never mind move. I feel absolutely petrified.

A good word, too.

Petrified.

Turned to stone.

Flight or fright, and this time - my body is opting for fright.

"What are you doing?," I match the volume of his own words. Faint. "What is this?"

Of course, I know what THIS is. I know what he's starting - what he's trying to do.

"You c-can," he breathes the two words out in stuttered hesitation - anxiety - and they clang about in
my cranium. "You can touch me. Anywhere you want. Anywhere you need."

My chest is heavy and full, and my hand shakes against his skin. His own fingers have come to wrap around my digits and I hold his gaze.

"Ne-ed?," and my voice breaks into two portions, the word completely fractured. "Sherlock, I don't need this from you."

My breath is rattling, the adrenaline making my pulse thrum as if I have just run a great distance.

"I trust you to make it not hurt," he says oddly, his voice high pitched. My words do not seem to be making much of a difference, at present; I have to wonder if he's hearing me at all.

He turns away from my sight, and if I didn't know so much, didn't know his back story - the motion would seem shy, and not ashamed.

I realize his breath is coming faster too, matching my own.

"Of course I'd never hurt you," I get out thickly - although I have, of course I have. I hurt him so badly with my words - and we've never talked about the things I said to him. The names I called him, and now?, "But you're not ready for this."

Sherlock's eyes are still closed.

"I could be," he whispers. "Maybe this is exactly what I need. And you'd be in there, with me. Me and you, against him. You'd blot it out, wouldn't you?"

I try not to let the words startle me. Try to not let them startle me visibly.

"Please love, please stop this-"

Sherlock's hands flex against my own, pressing in. His face is screwed up, and his breathing quickens, more so.


In another lifetime, looking at his face from this angle, I would have taken his expression for arousal. But if I try to observe - not see, as I always do - but observe, then I can acquire new facts that show this is not arousal at all.

His skin is becoming cooler as the moments pass, not more heated.

His pupils have become constricted, not dilated.

He is breathing shallowly, quietly - as if he doesn't want me to hear him.

He can scarcely maintain eye contact, and instead lets his vision settle on the damnable skull on the mantle. That morbid thing.

"Get rid of it," he whispers peremptorily a second later - his commanding words still not belying his terror - and this time he places my hand between his legs. My brain is screaming and kicking and crying to stop this. STOP THIS! while he starts to rock. There's no build up, nothing indicating such a progression. There is certainly nothing romantic here. He just immediately starts to tilt and sway against my body, while his lips stiffen into a thin, dour line as if he's pouring hydrogen peroxide onto a wound, not chasing his own climax. A second later he lets out a sound, but it doesn't sound good -
it doesn't sound like anything skirting the world of good - and he tucks his chin to his chest, while picking up the pace of his rocking.

A strange disconnect cuts through my mind, because this looks superficially like something sexual. Undeniably he's trying to make this sexual. He's trying to make himself aroused, and in the process he's trying to make me aroused; and it's a desperate sort of rocking, now, but the motions seem akin to those of someone reliving a trauma. That awareness makes it all too real: his body damp with sweat, his thighs flexing against my shocked form, his hands curled up into little fists, pulled against his belly, his eyes scrunched up tightly as if terrified.

There are signs of arousal, too - I can feel them - and yet I know he's not enjoying this. If for no other reason than emotionally...

He's terrified.

And maybe, because of that terror - all I can see is an eight year old child, rocking into the hand of an abuser.

The construct I have is blurring and warping, like a photograph which has caught fire, and is curling up into a smoking mess, distorting features.

I pull away, sick to my core, and Sherlock's eyes open, hugely. They are wet, and red. His face is mottled with blush and a spooked sort of fright.

His chest is still rising and falling too quickly, and he pulls away from me - pulls inwardly, shrinks - as I discard my hand from his frame.

With great speed, I lower his pajama top against his stomach, fight against the urge to pick him up and hug him.

Or if not him - him as he is now - to pick up and hold the tiny little child that I can see looking back out at me this instant, with huge eyes - wondering what's happening. Wondering why we've stopped.

"We are NOT doing this," my voice comes out craggy and wrecked. "Not like, not-"

I have no words. No proper words to convey what I am feeling. What I need him to know.

"We can. If you, do you-?," he looks so lost. "John?"

I wrap my arms around his head and guide him to me.

"Stop this," I insist, against his ear. "Please stop."

Because feelings are layered beasts, and physically? Physically I'm still trying to reconcile my own feelings for him, never mind navigate through the awful land mine territory which must be his own mind.

Because I have started to have strange and advancing moments where I've contemplated something else with him. Contemplated something sexual with him, at least in the more distant imaginings of my barely aware consciousness. And while I can acknowledge that impulse - even if repressed - I can't share those thoughts with him.

Those thoughts scares me enough as it is.

And to confuse him more so? When he's already so staggeringly confused?
How do I order the subject of what I know he needs emotionally, with what he is trying to show me he is willing to do with me physically?

If that's even a need he has? Or if it's merely a need he suspects I have, and for that sake alone - is trying to awaken within himself?

And for what purpose?

Are his words even his own? Or is he merely mimicking the words of his previous boyfriend, his previous therapists? Of people who undoubtedly told him he needed to change, to be healthy, to be whole?

I push away a gnawing sort of panic, the need to place my head on my lap.

Sherlock's eyes are darting about; I realize he's as stunned by what he's just done as I am.

After a few seconds, he whispers, "But you've thought about it. Having sex, with me. I know you have."

I feel my face start to tingle with a hot embarrassment, exposed.

Because I have recently come to realize that, yes, I have thought about this.

Or rather, some part of my subconscious has thought about this: doing this, with him, in a different world, a different time.

Not in such a context. Not with this fear, these tears and mottled colours on his face.

But in my early morning barely-awake stirrings. Not quite conscious of the light of day, passing over from my darkest stage REM sleep into something hardly under my control.

To my credit, they were only dreams. Not consciously brought about for my own pleasure. Not fantasies in the truest sense, not in the way that most use the term.

Merely snippets of a different life. A better life, obviously - because in my dream happenings Sherlock was far healthier physically.

Yet, they hinted at something based on current developments, too, as Sherlock was still marginally underweight. Even in those dreams.

It might have been a different time-frame, but the imaginings were still based on a progression of our current reality. Our current situation.

Sherlock's hands have now come to clamp over my own, although he's simply holding me against him. Not doing anything similar to his earlier movements, his spasmodic jerks against me. I can feel his heart vibrate, even against my chest. I can feel the speed of the organ, racing in fear, pounding with it.

"You've thought of it, and-," his voice is plaintive and confounded. As if he can't grasp the reasons I have for being shocked at his recent behaviour. That regardless of everything that has come to light recently, my own physical history with other romantic partners aside - I'd merely let him continue? Let him contort his body to suit whatever bestial part of me would take a fleeting moment of interest in his suggestion that we have sex?

His body clenches painfully smaller with each passing second that I refuse to speak, and the image of
the burning photograph hits me anew. And this time, it's Sherlock whose burning - Sherlock aged 3, holding onto a red ball with a severe expression of distrust on his face. Toddler Sherlock that is curling inwards and sooting up, his small features engulfed in black licking flames.

"I'm sorry," he pleads, in real-time, "I thought, maybe, I thought-

I try to steady my temper, steady my anxiety and my emotions.

"You thought what? That I'd simply respond to your movements? Let you proceed? Without any consideration as to what such an activity could do to you? How it would make you feel?"

Sherlock's hands are sweating. Cold, clammy palms run their course over my forearms, then away - as if unsure if he should touch me at all.

I know that his actions have shocked me, but the anger I feel isn't really generated by him. Rather the situation, and the fact that so many have convinced him that sooner or later - anyone, especially one who says that they love him - will expect, if not demand things he cannot give without huge and tormenting doubt, if not panic.

Because while his motions indicated a proclamation of wanting something physical, his features, his motions, the clenching of his hands and the pallor of his skin - only told me that he was terrified of its progression.

"But I love you," he expels, and it comes out almost as a pejorative. As if he hates the fact that he does, in fact, love me. As if he's conflicted by that admittance because he's come to learn that love must always equal sex, and sex must be offered freely, lest it be taken by force.

"Irrelevant to the situation at hand," I grit out, fatigued with this mess. This whole, stinking, putrid mess. "Loving me doesn't change how you have to act around me. Me loving you doesn't equal any expectations of sex from you. It never will."

I sit up abruptly, certain that I know what to say now that the shock is wearing off, and as I do so I turn on the opposing table lamp, flooding our living room in the white luminescence of the halogen.

"Listen very carefully to me Sherlock. I don't expect you to really understand, deeply - what I am saying. One day, yes. But please take what I am saying as my truth. Maybe not truth for everyone who uses the word, maybe not for the majority of people. Because I'm not talking about the majority of people, nor am I interested in having a romantic relationship with any of them right now. I care about you. I love *you.* And love does not equal sex, and it will never equal sex-"

"John-," his voice is wilted, restrained, scared to speak but insistent I hear his argument.

"Wait, please. I need to say this now, and after what just happened, you need to listen. Firstly, I do not find you - any part of you, scars or no scars, thinness or not - I do not find any part of you unattractive. You have certainly never been ugly to me, and you never will be ugly to me. I love you so much that...that it makes my chest hurt sometimes, and I am truly sorry that I couldn't properly express that before, because of my own fear. I am sorry that you feel that you could be anything less than beautiful to me, but I will never find you anything other than attractive. Do you understand that?"

Sherlock stares at his lap, eyes traversing the material of his shirt. Fingernail beds torn, cuticles ripped and bleeding.

So much fear.
"Sherlock? Are you hearing me?"

Sherlock nods, tentatively.

"I believe you. I believe you believe that."

I let his statement resound without an immediate answer, before furrowing away my upset at his self-perception.

"We are coming back to the issue of your obscenely low sense of self worth later; for now-"

"John, it's not an obscenely-"

"No!" I interrupt, my voice cracking, "No. I am talking now. Please. Just for a few moments, and then you can have your piece, but there are things I need to say. NEED to say. Not need to say in the way you think some people need to have sex. I seriously mean that I need to clarify certain issues, and I need to clarify them right now. Because what happened this morning - how it happened - the reasons for why it happened - I never want you to be in that place again, alright? What you did just now Sherlock - that wasn't about expressing passion. You were expressing fear, and if you think I don't recognize the difference, well-"

Sherlock's face has lost a hue of anxiety, only to be replaced by something almost equally upsetting to behold: bewilderment.

"I wasn't that afraid," he mumbles. "I would have been able to do it."

"That's not what I'm aiming for with you, with us! That you only be 'less afraid'? There should be no fear around sex - if that is ever something that we are going to do, and it doesn't have to be! But right now, until that fear is gone entirely-," and my chest is starchy with ache and sadness. That we are going to have this conversation, and that we are going to have it tonight.

Because I wanted to cover this at another time, when he was in a better place. When someone else - his therapist, or other friends - or something! - had helped him get to a better place in his recovery, so that he could better hear and receive these words.

"I have no doubt that you could have kept your eyes closed, could have touched me how you thought I'd like to have been touched, could have even had sex. That's what concerns me - how readily you'd engage in all of that when you are afraid at all!"

Sherlock's hands are twining around the loose threads on his pajama top now, pulling against the thread in agitation. I let him continue his ministrations, if it helps him hear me out.

"Secondly, this has less to do with me and you, and more to do with how you feel inside. But you are under obligation to no one - not a single person, ever, for all time - to engage with them sensually, sexually, or in any way for their pleasure. Your body is yours. That doesn't mean I am going to let you abuse it and turn a blind eye to self-harm, but your body and the limits you have for how anyone else in the world engages with it - even me - you make those limits. You always make those limits. I don't care about what you think society says you have to do to be a good 'partner' or what 'true love' means to the rest of the world, or anything else. What you feel and what you fear - both matter to me - not what society says you should feel. Alright?"

A slight nod, and his dark curls bounce against his skin.

"If something scares you, that's a warning to yourself to slow down. If something makes you uncomfortable, you can pull back. I never want you to think that I would push you into anything. We
can talk about this more, if you want. Even later today, if it helps, and if you are confused, I get it. But this," and I place my hands gently against Sherlock's torso, then against his stomach - lightly, barely a touch at all - and finally let my hands rest against his knees, "all of this - is yours, Sherlock. It's not mine. This is your body, this is not my property. This will not become my property just because I say that I love you. It doesn't become anyone else's property either, even if they have had sex with you in the past or if they are to have sex with you in the future. It belongs to you, and you are the one who creates the boundaries between what people can touch, and what they can't touch."

Sherlock seems to startle at that, then shakes his head in debate.

"What is confusing about any of that?"

And damn it, those words sound sarcastic. I don't mean them to be, but they sound sarcastic.

Because these are things I shouldn't have to be telling him.

These are truths he should have integrated into his being as a child. Should have been taught, kindly, from his earliest moments.

His face contorts into something frustrated, insistent and frustrated.

"Because I don't know what I want! But what if...what if maybe part of me does want you like that? And what if I am too scared to admit that to myself, when I'm just-," his hands come up in a flurry of agitation, "acting standoffish and aloof and turning inwards because it's all screwed up in my mind! Has been for my whole life, probably! Because I didn't bond properly with anyone before, and am terrified to even take the steps needed to do so now! I call myself asexual, and maybe I am, but maybe I'm mistaken - and I just have a bonding issue, like Yuri says!"

Ah.

It was silly of me to think that Yuri's suggestions of an attachment disorder wouldn't wedge their way into the conversation sooner or later.

"Okay, I get it. You feel cut off from expressing your needs, or maybe even confused by knowing if you want to need anyone. But it doesn't negate the fact that both of us are facing something new and intense, and that we both might feel a bit uncertain about what's happening. You aren't alone in feeling confused, Sherlock. And we will face that together, and we can talk to Yuri. I know it scares you," I get out, haunted, "I can only imagine how it might feel. But you are not defective, you are not destroyed. And, despite everything else - you owe me nothing physically."

Sherlock shoots up quickly, plops himself down on the sofa. Restless.

"But touch therapy. Yuri said...it helps. With dissociation, and sex can release oxytocin, which increases bonding in those already romantically engaged, and I would want to be bond more with you, more than anyone, because I do, I do-"

If I wasn't so alarmed by what Sherlock did not ten minutes back, I'd probably bark out a laugh. Right now, though, I'm still feeling the raw sting of pain - for him.

"AND if I ever sense you are doing something you don't want to do because you feel I alone want it, I'm going to put a stop to it. I will not proceed. I will pause whatever activity it is. I will check in, and I will ensure that anything we ever do - ever! - is something you want to do with your whole being - that means 100%, not 90%, not 50% - or else we don't do it at all. And that can be anything physical, Sherlock. I might even want to touch your hand, or hug you at some point - I don't care if it seems
innocuous. You need to be honest with me, and you need to let me know how you're feeling. That's what I would love to see. That is what would make me feel closer to you. To know that I could trust you enough to confide in me about your space, about your boundaries. That is the type of intimacy I want us to share, more than any other kind. Okay?"

Sherlock's hands are brushing over his kneecaps now, rubbing the protrusions of bone.

"That's intimacy to you?," he asks awkwardly, his guard down.

He sounds - in this moment - so unnaturally young, so insecure - that I do want to hug him. I do. But I refrain.

"Yes, that's intimacy to me; it's you - trusting me enough that you'd confide in me about something that scares you. And most adults, myself included, want to pretend that nothing scares them. We act like...to not be afraid of anything is a display of courage, of maturity. But to talk to me - to really talk to me - about something hard like this? That shows more courage than what has come readily to me my entire life. This stuff is hard to hear, so I can't imagine how hard it is to actually express those fears in words. But I need to know that you'll be honest with me about any reservations you have. Or else, Sherlock - look at it this way: I'm not going to know if anything I am doing is making these issues worse for you. Our entire interaction will be filled with me doubting whether I can touch you in any way - be it to hold you, do anything, say anything - because deep down I'm scared to death I'm triggering you."

"But I know you've been thinking of it. Me, and you - it. Sex. I know it," he whispers. "And what if it always triggers me?"

My mind hisses with shame.

Because I have had dreams lately, and in those dreams - we were having sex. And upon awakening - at first - I tried to ignore that fact. I tried to convince myself that in the dreams we were merely sleeping against one another, and I was holding him, and that was it.

Maybe, that's even how the very first dream began - as they started abruptly, shortly after I learned about Victor - but soon, they progressed.

"Sex," I take a deep breath, "will always take a back seat to us. Us means you and me, together. It's a commitment to honor what we both need so we can be emotionally healthy together; it's not about what one of us needs so that they alone can have physical pleasure."

I close my eyes, let the shame of the dream worm its way through my mind, for in the dream we both wore our shirts, our socks. We weren't totally naked. It wasn't something racy or heated. The pace was too slow, the movements nothing if not gentle.

These weren't normal fantasies as I had experienced them with others I had an attraction for, yet, upon awakening I knew that they were about sex, just as Sherlock asserted. That what we were doing in these dreams was sexual, because our trousers and pants were always absent, and the dreams were distinctly sensual. Sherlock always surrounded my body while I was contained by his own, a blanket covering us both.

What we were doing was always gentle, but it was still sex.

In these dreams, the blinds were closed - always closed - and Sherlock would be resting to the side - in my bed. I'd be curled around him, and the dreams would unfold as if I were watching the scene play out from overhead. As if I was watching two people from above, two people who moved in
tandem. Abortive little shifts of my hips, and his own would press out, and he'd grasp my hands, silencing his vocalizations. In the dreams, at this point, I'd sometimes press my lips to his ear, whisper to him. The phrases would change depending on the dream, but typically I'd be murmuring something to him like, "Is this okay?," or "Can I hear you?"

And that's actually what I remember in most detail about these nocturnal episodes: my hands around his torso, my head against his own, and I'd whisper to him as we rocked. A variety of words, "Do you like this?" or "Sherlock, does this feel good?" or encouragements, butterfly soft - more in my head than heard aloud - encouragements for him to move, to speak, to do what he needed to do to feel in control.

Of course, eventually he'd respond. The response never differed, despite the question posed to him.

The response was always, "Yes," - barely heard, even by the dream-me, and always prompting me to awaken with a jolt.

"John?," Sherlock asks hesitantly, his legs tapping up and down against the lino. "I just wanted to show you that I could, for you-"

My mind pulls back to current time, to early morning, to our living room with the white glow of the halogen and Sherlock's pinched features studying the upholstery.

"I know," I get out, thickly. "And I know I might have said some things, before, that planted that idea-"

Sherlock stops his movements, then rises tidily and pads away.

"Sherlock! No, I have to get this out-"

He continues to amble down to the kitchenette, passes the sink, turns on the water - effectively drowning me out.

He doesn't even have a glass in hand; here's simply letting water gurgle down the drain at full blast.

I grab the tap and abruptly turn it until the water ceases.

I see his sight, alarmed and upset, go to turn it back on.

"Sherlock! Stop it! I need to clarify this with you-"

"No, you don't!," he exclaims, louder with those three words than he's been in months with anything. "You don't! I don't - it didn't - I forgot it!"

His face is tight, too tight. Too much strain.

Oh my God.

This is it.

"Listen to me, please-"

Sherlock flicks the water back on.

I turn it back off.

He starts to jog away.
I block him off at the pass.

"We HAVE to talk about this!"

His hands begin a staccato against his sides. The motion is powerful, and uncomfortable.

Words crop up in my head.

Words like: stimming behaviour.

Words like: trauma response.

"We don't have to talk about anything! Not anything else!"

His eyes bounce back and forth in his skull, alarmed.

"We do!"

He takes a hand and swings it with all his might against his belly.

"Sherlock! For God's sake, stop it!"

"WHY!?"

His agitation is turning to pure, unadulterated panic, and I step back, hands raised.

"What I did was cruel..."

He brings his hands up to his face, covering his eyes from my sight.

"Stop it! STOP IT!," he hisses.

"You didn't get anyone killed-"

"SHUT UP!," and he crumples in upon himself, legs folding into a clump, his body edging down towards the floor, wedged against the refrigerator.

"I was so devastated when I saw that little kid, Sherlock - it tore a hole in me, to see him. He looked so much like you, and I got attached - in my head. Okay? I know I said some pretty unfair things, but I never meant-"

Sherlock is shaking his head back and forth.

"Stop it," he whines.

"No: he wasn't hurt because of you, or taken because of you, or murdered because of you-"

"He WAS murdered because of me! I didn't take the case because I couldn't solve it! I couldn't think! I crossed the days out, in my calendar. Like it was a fucking count down! Like, it was a count down to Christmas - not for the killer, but for HIM! Because it is a downgrade! You asked, and it is! Murder is a downgrade from what he would have lived, all the time, all growing up - what I lived every day! I watched the days run out - not because I wanted his days to run out, but because I couldn't MOVE! All I could do was watch his time run out! I was frozen inside, and no one saw!"

Sherlock's body is shaking.

"I wanted someone to see, and no one saw! I wanted someone to ask why, why I couldn't take the
case - and I needed you to ask me, ask me why not - no, not ask - just know! Just know! So I wouldn't even have had to look you in the eyes and tell you what is was! That's how much of a coward I am! Mycroft saved me, but I couldn't save him! Because I couldn't see anything except my own fucking past when I closed my eyes! I couldn't make the connections - I couldn't see anything outside of me! All I could do was freeze up and stare at the same old photos of cut up children and bruises and flecks of blood on autopsy tables! And the same old reports! And why could no one see what was happening to me? Why does no one ever see it? They didn't see it when it was happening to me, and they didn't see it when it was happening to the others!"

I crouch down until I'm sitting on the floor aside from him.

"You aren't a sociopath, and you aren't selfish, and you are not heartless. I'm so - I'm so fucking sorry, love. I was furious with the situation - that little kids are hurt like this, that we have this time to maybe make it right, but we can't always do that, and that they die without knowing that they mattered to anyone-"

Sherlock puts his head in his hands and squeezes.

"You said - you said it was low, even for me. Low even for me," he grits out, his fingers pressing against the rubberized material of the floor. "I knew you thought I was at the far left end of the morality bell curve-"

"Sherlock, no-"

"Yes! DON'T you think I know how everyone sees me? Why do you think I call myself a sociopath? It doesn't matter how much I try to understand what people feel! I can't! I'm empty inside! I've always been empty inside! Yuri's not going to help, inpatient isn't going to help! And Harrison? I just as surely killed him as the murderer did!"

"Sherlock, you are not complicit in this!"

Sherlock tugs at the cuffs of his pajama trousers.

"No! You walked away, John! I went back in, and tried to study the notes, and I felt like I was going to vomit all over Lestrade's desk! And you were angry and you left me behind! People always leave me behind and then wonder why I find it hard to trust them later!"

I sit stunned, unblinking.

"I am sorry, Sherlock-," I take a breath, hold it. The room tilts.

"I don't need you to be sorry! Sorry doesn't change the fact that I couldn't do my job, and no one else could see that!"

"I know you didn't want him to die," I croak. "I understand now that you couldn't cope, psychologically. You couldn't process the facts that were needed to put it together. But you didn't want him to die. You didn't let his time run out, Sherlock. You were just immobilized."

"Of course I didn't want him to die. I just-," and he takes the nearest item to him - the kitchenette chair - and grabs hold of it - before trying to dislodge it. Before trying to throw it away. It's too big and bulky for that, and his agitation increases as he shoves it away from him in haste. "I had to count the numbers," he whispers. "I couldn't stop it."

I barely catch it.
"What?," and I edge forward, so incrementally. I know he must have some pretty deep anger towards me, about what I said to him on the day following Harrison's retrieval from the beach. But so far, the anger projected has been anger he's largely self-directed onto himself, his own self-assessed complicity.

"I used to count numbers. Backwards from seven when he, when it-, when it happened, and-," he stammers, "And in the case, you'd ask - or Lestrade would ask - me questions, and I couldn't think. I just saw the sevens ticking back and back in a progression, and I could never get to zero, I could never get to the end. Do you see?"

He's holding his hands up in supplication.

"What?," I ask hesitantly, totally confused.

"Mycroft told me to count backwards from 100. You start with 100, and you count backwards until you get to zero, and you have to go down by seven."

I stare at Sherlock, not truly grasping what I am hearing. It sounds insane.

"Sherlock," and I rub his arms, which are colder than cold. "You can never get to zero doing that. It will never divide evenly. It's a mathematical impossibility."

"I know! So I had to start over! And do it again! And eventually it stops. You go back to school, and no one sees, and if there are marks, you hide those under your uniform. And when it resumes, you focus on counting again! You do it over and over again until it's not real! You can do it with anything! With cases you can't make connections for because you can't even breathe! Or with sex - or with anything if you can't consider it."

I feel like I'm going to pass out.

I seriously feel as if I am going to pass out.

"You know what else?," Sherlock queries, sounding deranged. Sounding too young. "I tried to go under it once. I got to minus 5 and that didn't work, either."

I can't process what I am hearing, it sounds too bizarre to contemplate.

A surface gloss of sanity where much more devious things are fighting for control.

He's describing the most abnormal form of magical thinking. A compulsive ritual, born in his scariest moments on earth.

While commonly found in very small children, such a device isn't usually used by adults.

Yet, he still recites this in his mind when he can't cope.

This mental talisman. This mantra.

But it's all dysfunction.

And Harrison was seven. Harrison was the seventh.

Something sour hits my throat.

Salty, tangy.
"Sherlock," and I grasp his hand. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Sherlock moves his hands, splays them against the cool tile. Presses against the puckered flooring.

"I had him on the phone, you know? I asked him if he had gotten my letters," and his voice teeters off into something which can only be described as weird. Distant in a very odd, numbed fashion. "Because I had written to him so much, and he must have received at least one."

"Who?! Who did you have on the phone, Sherlock?"

"My father. Not him, but you know - my real father," Sherlock squints at the flooring again, the low light of day finally seeping into our kitchenette. "Mycroft found him, and I wrote to him. He lives in France. Not even that far from where I went to boarding school when I was little. I would have been able to have walked to his house when I was 9. He has two other children, now. Two girls - Camielle and Delphine. They are teenagers. I have little sisters."

My heart pounds frantically fast.

"You have little sisters," I repeat, dully.

Sherlock's face contorts so quickly I almost flinch.

"Somewhere - out there - I do. I looked them up on the internet. The littlest one almost looks like me, a bit. Same eyes. But he doesn't want to even know me, John. He certainly won't let me talk to them. He threatened to call the authorities if I didn't stop contacting him," he whispers, his eyes uncomprehending and seeking a pattern on the floor that will never exist.

I want to vocalize the idea that it's okay if he needs to cry.

That perhaps to do so would be something beneficial.

But his voice sounds oddly firm. His eyes are not wet.

To anyone else, he'd sound more or less okay. A little numb, perhaps, but superficially fine.

Considering what he's just told me - I know he can't be anything close to okay.

So my head swims with this newfound information.

"Your biological father? When did you contact your biological father?"

Sherlock presses his feet together, sole to sole.

"Almost seven months ago?," he tests, carefully - as if unsure of the time frame. A lilting ask, as if I can help him arrive at the correct answer.

I feel a chill work it's way through my extremities.

Here we are with sevens again.

But now I am doing it too, aren't I?

Seeing significance in arbitrary numbers? Arbitrary things?
"Seven months back? That's before the case with Harrison. That's months before Toby was even taken," I say pertly, my stomach revolting.

"Mhmm," Sherlock hums, agreeing with my math. "A couple weeks before Lestrade asked me on. I think Annabelle had been the last child, then."

"This happened right before the case with Toby?," I repeat, dumbly, too shocked to fully absorb what I'm hearing.

Because even after the horror of what happened with Harrison - Sherlock had come on to find Toby. He was a scrawny mess. He had already been losing weight and skipping out on sleep.

But he had taken the case.

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He had worked himself to the bone.

He hadn't been able to stay asleep for more than an hour at a time in weeks.

He had found the boy almost single handedly.

I can still envision that evening, when I came around the train tracks - nowhere near water at all, and wasn't that already a clue that his attack wasn't the same as the others? - and Sherlock staggered back towards me, his face a white moon, with streaks of blood wetting his cheek.

At first, I thought that he was injured, before seeing the small body cradled to his chest, the stick-man way Sherlock walked with the dead weight in his arms.

Laying Toby down away from the tracks, the rocks.

Instructing me to clear a space on the grass, to make sure there was nothing sharp in the immediate area.

And torches too. The blue-white light of Lestrade's torch cutting through the evening sky, swinging around the buildings, swinging around the lot from 100 meters away.

Garbled shouts for paramedics, Sherlock's fingertips against Toby's jugular, counting, assessing.

And then he pinched the little boy's nose. Pinched his nose, and at first - stupidly, for a second - I thought it was to stave off the flow of blood from the child's nostril.

Lips against lips, and Toby's body swelled with air. Puffed out.

Again and again, and Sherlock kept at it. Even as Donovan came around then bend, shuddered into place.

No one speaking. Just watching mutely, in shock, as Sherlock gave compressions - his lips against Toby's lips, a scratch of scarlet diagonally bisecting his left cheek as he worked.

And then, eventually, Toby sputtered. He coughed. Sherlock pulled back abruptly, almost startling himself and me, both, and a hiss came from Toby's throat. Not quite crying, and certainly not screaming. Some horrible hybrid of the two.

The side of his tiny face was bloodied and coloured in purples, greens. Someone had hit him
repeatedly with something very blunt and very, very heavy - and he tried to open his eyes, his panic palpable. One eye, so badly swollen, couldn't open at all. The other was infused with bright red, the sclera brutalized.

His hands shot out to the sky, grasping for connection.

Sherlock’s hand made that connection, and his thumb worked back and forth against the little boy's wrist.

And he announced his presence in that composed, calculating voice. But this time that voice was pained.

"My name is Sherlock Holmes. I am a detective Toby," he whispered quickly, anxious to do this right. Calm the little boy down, as the child continued to gasp out his pain.

Sherlock deposited his hand into Toby’s, encircled the smaller one.

"John," he panted, "I need your jacket. For his head. We need to support his neck, and stop some of this bleeding."

And he picked Toby up off the ground, placed him in his lap, squeezed his hand.

"We are going to get you to the hospital. I will ride with you, and you are going to be okay."

Toby couldn't hear; he simply continued to make mewling little sounds of panic, his one good eye working about in his skull.

"It's too dark," he cried, plaintively. "I want- I want," he garbled, probably not really knowing what he wanted at all.

"Sally," Sherlock nipped at her, tense. "Throw me your torch."

And Donovan just watched, uncomprehending.

"Inspector Donovan. I need your torch. I need the light," Sherlock reiterated a beat later. "It's dark, and he's scared," he murmured, low tones - just loud enough for Donovan to process. To move her to action, and she did. She processed the request then, passed her torch over to Sherlock.

Sherlock flicked the light on, and opened up one of Toby's small little hands, quickly assessing that the other had been broken. "I need you to hold this light, Toby. Hold it close to your side, okay?"

But Toby didn't grasp the torch. He refused to give up his grip on Sherlock's hand.

"John, place this by his side please. Away from his eyes."

I took the torch from them both, and wedged it into my coat. White light exploded around the boy's head and Sherlock tilted the front of the torch until the light swerved away from the child's eyes and was softened by the jacket.

"I wan- Hed-wig," Toby garbled a few moments later. "I wah- my owwl," and spittle dribbled from his mouth as he talked. And it was bloody.

Sherlock rested him hands, palm side down, gingerly, against Toby's torso. Keeping the child prone against the ground, as he was now trying to sit up, trying to sit up and move.

"Listen, Toby. One of the detectives is going to find Hedwig. But you can't move too much yet."
Okay? Your head is a bit bruised up, and a doctor needs to look at it. You need to stay very, very still until the ambulance arrives."

"I wan- him," Toby panted. "I nee Hewig." His broken arm - and it was broken, badly - started to tap against the earth, his nails digging into patches of earth, clumps of dried grass.

If the motion caused the little boy pain, he gave no indication.

Sherlock caught the arm, and immobilized its frantic search for the stuffed animal.

My own gaze locked onto Sherlock's tending, as long fingers placed the barest amount of resistance against the arm, which I could see had been shattered, portions of bone protruding through the flesh.

"Oh shit," Donovan hissed, now seeing what I could see. "Is that bone?"

Sherlock patted his sides for something - anything - retrieving a scrap of cloth. A portion of gauze.

He set to work tying the gauze around the spoke of bone that exited the child's forearm, and Toby let Sherlock proceed without protest.

"He-wig missin,'" Toby cried, seemingly more upset with the loss of what I could only assume was a doll - than his own crushed arm.

Sherlock knotted the gauze, bit at the ends with his teeth, then rolled Toby's red and blue shirt back over the temporary binding.

"No. Hedwig's not missing. We will find Hedwig. I promise you, we will find him and bring him back to you."

Toby's hands worked spasmodically in Sherlock's, too caught up in his own terror to fully register the words.

Sherlock didn't move Toby after that - aware of possible spinal cord damage, aware that the injuries were voluminous, and many might not be recognized until later.

Instead, he crouched low, his hands touching the bottom of Toby's feet, unclothed.

"Sally," Sherlock whispered, "I need your scarf for his feet. He's too cold."

Donovan sat stunned, watching the scene with an odd look of disbelief on her face, before removing her autumnal garment and passing it over to Sherlock.

Sherlock bundled the cloth around Toby's feet, and removed his belstaff from his own body.

At the time, I remember being faintly concerned because he suddenly looked different. He looked thinner than I had ever seen him before.

But with so much else going on, I couldn't focus on that point in very much detail.

Sherlock took the belstaff off then, and covered Toby from his neck to his feet, rubbing his hands in circular motions.

"Okay, Toby. Until we find Hedwig, we are going to do some counting. We are going to start with 100, and we are going to count backwards by 7. What's the next number? Can you tell me what the next number might be?"
His voice sounded almost as if it belonged to a different person. This wasn't a Sherlock I had ever seen before, never imagined existed.

Everyone else was meandering about, on their mobiles, trying to reach the EMTs. Trying their best not to look at Toby's broken limb, his bloodied eyes and head.

Sherlock was the only one making eye contact. The only one answering Toby's questions, and he did so while staying oddly calm, resolutely patient, speaking in a different voice, a different tone.

He seemed, in those few minutes, to be almost a different person.

Sherlock pulls himself up to a semi-standing position with the kitchenette table, and the images of that night evaporate. No more torches, no more moonlight, no more bloodied little boy.

"I tried to tell him a bit about myself; how I always wanted to meet him. I told him I was a detective, and I worked in London, and if he wanted to communicate in French with me, he could, because I am fluent in French. I- he-," Sherlock stops, his face reddens, as if he's admitting something embarrassing. "He said I was a mistake he had made a long time ago, and I wasn't to contact him or any member of his family again. That I had my own family to look out for, and he had his own family to consider, and that he had written me off before I was born. That it was too late, too much time had gone-"

Sherlock stops talking. He's the colour of chalk.

"John, I don't want to talk anymore."

I stare at him in tempered grief.

I can't even speak. My own voice is too sore for that.

And I am not the one who has been rejected; yet again.

Even when Toby shot his arms out into the night air, Sherlock had quickly grasped his hands, quickly made that connection.

When I make to enclose him; he pulls away.

"I want to be alone in my room," he murmurs, his voice sounding robotic.

I am almost ready to let him depart - have his time alone, to deal with his emotions in private - when I recall an old conversation.

Mycroft, myself. Brandy decanters. An art deco glass door. Or was it art nouveau? And Mycroft telling me about the nursery, how it had been from Sherlock's nursery. Telling me about Sherlock as a child. How he had liked to paint with watercolours. How Mycroft thought that maybe he would become an artist, one day. Mycroft's soft voice, describing finding his brother, finding him with knife wounds through his thighs, a bottle of discarded anti-anxiety medicine by his bedside.

Of a time when Sherlock had abruptly stopped displaying all emotions. His affect flat.

Mycroft said that his affect had become flat, and that his concern - fleetingly - was that Sherlock had had a break.

I need to get Mycroft Holmes on the phone.
"I should be alone," Sherlock repeats, dulled. His head is tilted at a strange angle, rhythmic motions of fingertips counting out beats at his side.

I rise up in synchrony, matching his actions. Mirroring his actions. Not the tapping of my hands, my fingers - but standing alongside him.

"I need to be alone," he reiterates, slowly, as if I hadn't heard him the first time.

"No sweetheart, you don't," I pant out, my throat tight. Not comprehending the term of affection until it's out of my mouth in a rush.

Sherlock stares at me, confused, but doesn't argue.

He merely frowns.

"Then I want to be alone," he says. This time some sliver of emotion creeps in. It's not much, but it's something. "I want you to go away and leave me alone."

I don't miss the change in word usage from 'should' to 'need.'

To want.

My eyes suddenly fill.

"I don't think that's true at all," I get out, my breath hitching. "I don't think you've ever wanted to be alone."

Then I turn away from him, back my own sadness.

((This isn't about me.

This will never be about me.

This is his life. His pain.

Not mine.))

Sherlock hovers behind me. Rigid. Not touching me, but wanting to - as his fingers dance over my body. Not touching me, but almost.

Then, after a few seconds I hear him pad away, hear the tap spurt on and the slightly muted noise of a tumbler being filled.

Sherlock returns, holds it out to me.

"Drink this," he murmurs. "You'll feel better."

He sits down almost cross-legged, besides me. In his other hand, I can see now that he has his own tumbler, from which he's started to drink.

I stare at him, dazed.

"This sort of stuff can really give you headaches, if you let it."

I look at the glass filled with water, let myself hear the sounds of the refrigerator running in the background, the wail of an ambulance further off, the sound of cars making their way to work.
outside.

And I take a sip.

I look back to Sherlock. His glass is almost completely empty now, and he makes to rise.

I place my hand on his wrist.

"Sherlock-," and my body still hurts with what he's revealed.

My parents had their problems, but I know they always wanted me in their lives. Harry, for all her problems, still wants me in her life.

"Sherlock," I repeat, grasping for what I need to say. How to say it.

He looks up and over at me, expectantly.

"What?"

I can't make it seem like I am pitying him.

I can't.

I take a breath.

"I know you might want to be alone right now. But I don't want to be. Will you sit with me a bit more?"

Sherlock studies the questions, stares at his glass of water. Nods.

"Alright," he mutters.

I put the glass of water on the floor.

His own sits emptily besides it.

"Also, I-"

He looks up to me, his eyes stormy.

The blue of his irises is a storm cloud blue.

So many words fill my mind.

'It's not fair.'

'I'm sorry.'

'You never deserved any of it.'

But I don't say any of those things.

Instead I say, "Fuck them, Sherlock. Fuck all of them."

Sherlock blinks, his eyes widen almost imperceptibly, and then he nods again - this time more hesitantly.
His eyebrows scrunch up, and he looks back to his now empty cup.

"But how - how do I do that?," I asks, awkwardly. "I mean-," and his fingernails scratch against the lettering on the glass.

'27th National Convention for Forensic Osteology'

'Imperial College, London'

'Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea'

And of course, there is a skull graphic beneath the crimson lettering.

I look up, and take in the man that exists in front of me. Sunken cheeks, brilliant mind. A resolute kindness that even I didn't see in him when we first met. He uses his intellect as a shield - as it's been the one thing he's truly had in such surplus as to cause others to pause - but that's all it is.

Aside from his brilliance, he's also exceptional in other ways. So many other ways.

And who wouldn't want such a man for a son?

Who in their right mind would toss that aside? Throw away the gift that is his very presence in their life?

Even in his tentative leaning in, now. His pajama bottoms flaring out at his ankles, his water glass in his hand turning about in anxiety.

I asked him not to depart, and he respected that wish.

And why?

Because he thinks I am sad.

And I am sad, of course. This whole morning has been nothing if not the worst sort of sadness. For me to witness what's happened.

What I feel can hardly compare to what he must be feeling, stifled or not. Ignored or not. Repressed or not.

He's given his life to solving crimes. His life wasn't generated around making money, or exploiting others with said intellect.

But solving crimes. Trying, in his own way - as emotionally removed as he can progress - to make things better, not worse, for others.

He might say it's simply to stave off boredom. Simply to slow the racing of his mind.

But I have come to learn that what he says, and the deeper motivations for why he does what he does - very rarely line up.

I take a breath.

"You are an extraordinary human being, but your life hasn't been extraordinarily happy. It's been the very opposite. So you do everything in your power to make it extraordinarily happy - from this point on. And you don't look back. You don't look back, at them. At what they did. You look forward, and you go forward, and you get better, and you stick it to everyone who ever added to your
unhappiness. You stick it to everyone who might have ever made you feel unworthy. Unlovable. You do that by being happy. By getting healthy."

Sherlock takes a bigger breath. Holds it.

His fingers continue to scratch at the embossed image of a red skull on the glass tumbler.

"It's breakfast time," he replies a second later. "Near enough-," he adds in a whisper.

I give him a smile. Soft.

"Yes, it is. What do you want for breakfast?"

I hold my hand out and he takes it, and makes a soft groaning sound as he rights himself on the tile.

No response.

"We have eggs," I proffer, "We can use them up. Good protein." I supply.

I know we are playing at this being...easy, right now.

I know that this is far from easy for Sherlock. That no pep talk is going to make this easy.

It won't make the pain he's been carrying around for months, if not years - just depart.

It certainly won't make eating that much more attractive for him.

But he seems to relish the normalcy of it, and his look - his mood - the sound of his voice, all seem to be stabilizing as we attempt to play at being two normal adults, preparing their normal weekday brekkie.

"I have never - remotely - liked to eat eggs. Not even when I was a child, and Mycroft would try to baby me into eating them. Cut my toast into long strips-," and he makes a poking, spearing motion with his hand. "For the eggs. To put into the yolks."

I give him a look.

"Soldiers? Toast soldiers?"

Sherlock bites his lip, grins despite the morning we've had.

"Well, I've always liked soldiers," and damn it, if that doesn't sound like a Sherlockian attempt at flirting. "But I still don't want eggs," he mumbles.

"You wrote them down on the list, Sherlock!," I aim for logic, now. "We have four cartons of eggs in the fridge!"

Sherlock waves away my statement, dismissive.

"For my experiments. Eggs are wonderful harborers of many interesting bacterial strains. There are so many different types of cultures you can grow in eggs, not just salmonella, but other things too."

I look at the box of the brown, large, free run, organic 12 pack in my hand and suddenly agree with Sherlock.

Suddenly I don't feel much like eating eggs, either, and put them back into the fridge.
When I turn around, Sherlock is sitting atop the table, bypassing the use of chairs entirely. His feet graze along the floor as he swings them about, like a four year old.

"We could make cereal," he attempts calmly, pretending to be a reasonable sort of human being. "We must have something like Cheerios around here that we could make- John?"

My head curls in and rests against his shoulder, and a croak of a laugh erupts from my throat. He pauses his speech, and then slowly - I feel his arms come up and nestle around my own, holding me against him.

Even as the rush of amusement jolts through me, another emotion pulses out with the humor.

And it is pain.

"What's this, then?," he whispers softly, and how in a million years could anyone buy his sociopath routine?

I knew he was hurting, and that he was hurting all alone. Tucked up away and inside of himself.

But right now, I am hugging him because I am hurting, also.

Sherlock holds me to his body, let's his head dip down low, before resting against my own from an opposing direction.

"Thank you for wanting me, John," he whispers against my side, increasing the pressure of his hold, the intensity of his hug.

What I am feeling is a secondary type of pain.

Pain by association.

Yet, this hurts more than just about anything else I have ever experienced.

"I'll never not want you in my life," I cup his neck, careful of the vertebral jagging so typically padded up in most people. Not this stripped cording of spine, this exposure.

And right now, as I press my arms around him - it's with a clamorous sort of need that doesn't exist in extraordinarily happy people.

I am not a representation of an extraordinarily happy anything, and I shouldn't be guiding him on what he needs to do to deal with his pain.

I asked him to look forward, not back.

I asked him to make his life extraordinarily happy.

But those were just words.

Now the real work has to begin.
Dearheart

Chapter Summary

AN: Sorry I haven't written much in awhile (been suffering from a rather pernicious depression. But I always feel better when I write, and as such - tonight I just sat down, turned on some music, and tuned out the world.)

It's a departure chapter, from which the next chapter will make much more sense, and it's from a character's POV that you won't see again in this work - but which is vital for understanding Sherlock's fear, as it is exposed more and more in subsequent chapters. So this POV is from that of Victor Trevor.

Aspects of this chapter are rather graphic sexually (not TOO explicit, but certainly getting there - so please take that into consideration) and the sexual acts in question could be termed "dubious-con" or possibly even "grey non-con" between Sherlock and Victor.

And of course, I am not writing Victor as a 'good guy', nor am I am writing him as awful and cruel. I am writing him as a young, less-sensitive individual who *does* have sexual feelings for Sherlock, but who is not fully aware or cared with becoming aware - of Sherlock's fear, or the issues surrounding his problems.

INTERLUDE

VICTOR'S POV

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Autumn 1995 - Spring 1996

Recollections

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The first time I saw him, I wasn't even sure it was a him.

His back was turned to me, and his hair was nothing but raven ringlets - nearly to his shoulder. His body was all lean lines and proportions, and he was wearing a violet cardigan with a butterfly print shirt underneath.

What caused me to stop, pause, and study the figure was not how he looked, exactly, but what he was doing.

He was playing music, in the courtyard outside of the Sheldonian Theatre. Others were playing, too. But as I watched his hands move up and down over a violin with a sort of rapacious concentration, I fell into a trance.

The sun was setting - casting unearthly shadowed faces over the statues and the busts that had been worked into the building centuries ago. As the quality of light changed from that of late afternoon to
early evening, they appeared to be shifting in emotionality - also caught up in the music.

Suddenly, the music halted. And as I stood there in stunned disbelief as to the enormity of what I felt, especially for the soloist's playing, he turned around abruptly. Sharp bird-like movements, his face impassive - as if he hadn't just given one the most exquisite performances that I had ever heard with my own ears.

Since I lived off-campus at the time, I had palling around with me my terrier of three years, Bisquick. Bisquick was a Bingley terrier with a black saddle. Bisquick would have readily been a British Kennel Club winner for looks, but it was in matters of personality that he was lacking, as Biquick had a snappish temperament that caused me to watch him closely. On this particular evening, however, I was lost in my own thoughts - so entranced with what I had heard. Ironically, in my interest in introducing myself to the violinist in question - I forgot that Bisquick was in my possession, and meandered on over to introduce myself, dragging Bisquick along with little thought.

And that was my mistake.

For a few paces in, I gave a slight wave and the young man turned and set his gray gaze upon me. The gaze was as sharp as the movements of his fingers I had seen mere moments before.

His lips were an unfathomable sort of pink, almost mind-boggling to see on a man sans makeup - and they formed a perfect Cupid's bow. His face was angular, and almost alien-like in structure, but handsome in a disarming, atypical way.

"That was simply incredible," I stammered awkwardly, the faint pulsing of heat in my face relaying to me an obvious fact: where lust was concerned, I was obviously attracted to the man before me.

The man gave me a once over, and seemed hesitant to accept my praise, looking almost doubtful as he registered my words.

"It wasn't a particularly difficult piece," he said - not out of false modesty, but in an odd intonation that hinted at self-deprecation. "But - thank you?," he said again, as if coming to some conclusion that he wanted to be polite, even as his words came out in a questioning lilt.

"Just wonderful. I don't even go for classical usually-"

"Baroque," he interjected suddenly, almost forcefully, and then paused, winced and closed his eyes.

"Okay, baroque," I conceded. "At any rate, it was delightful. I had to listen to the entire thing. Me and Bisquick," I said hurriedly, sensing I was generating some form of anxiety for this bird-like creature.

His eyes immediately darted to my Bingley terrier, and as his sight settled on my crabby pet, the man's eyes had seemed to soften.

"He's an Airedale, is he not?," the young man asked quickly, licking his lips as if nervous.

"Yes - yes he is," I replied, engrossed with the man's quick stride, purposeful, as he came over slightly at last.

But before I could warn him of Biquick's feisty nature, he had bent down and turned his palm upwards, as if for Biquick's inspection - than Bisquick snapped at him.

The man drew back suddenly, not letting out a sound - simply cradling his nipped palm against his chest, eyes wide.
"Bisquick!," I shouted, pulling on the lead and Bisquick trotted back to my side where he licked his chops, looking bored. As if he hadn't just bitten the violinist. As if I hadn't just all but dragged him back to my side forcefully.

The man started to hurry off, and I felt horrible for what had occurred.

"Please. Please let me see-," I fumbled with my words, my face - I could feel - beet red.

"It's nothing," the young man rushed to say, "Nothing I can't take care of-"

"I'm so sorry. Bisquick is temperamental-"

I heard a strained, "He should be in a muzzle then," under his breath.

"You're right. He usually growls first. He's never actually bitten anyone before, though-," and I trailed off, expecting a name to follow.

The gray eyes continued to flicker over my form, not quite registering the hurt that my brat of a dog had inflicted.

"I - I had better be off," he stumbled awkwardly, brushing his injured hand against his cardigan. When his hand drew away from his clothing, I could see a smear of hot red in an arc over the wool.

"Oh God - he's broken the skin," I said queasily, never being one that was good with blood. "Oh, please - just, come with me. At least let me help you patch it."

The man's face worked awkwardly, presumably debating if he should go his own way or if he should take me up on my suggestion.

"Please," I reiterated. "I feel awful. The least I can do is patch it. It's your dominant hand, too. It's going to impact your playing. God, I'm sorry."

The man faltered, fumbled brokenly for his violin case, and I tied Bisquick up to the side of the fence, now safely away from the two of us.

Helping him deposit and secure his instrument into the case, I tried again.

"My name is Victor, by the way. Victor Trevor. I read Economics. Do you attend-?"

And again the man bit out, quickly - "Thank you for your help, Victor." His voice was gruff, almost sad.

"Listen, Bisquick can sit here for a bit and-"

"Maul other students that come too near, unaware of his temper?," the violinist responded tartly. "Do you really feel that's the best course of action?"

I didn't let his attitude derail me, however, and continued to walk astride him as he ambled along on his stick-like legs, as if he were a young adolescent still getting used to his height.

A few seconds passed before he turned back to me, his face veiled in confusion.

"What are you doing, V-Victor?," and he said my name as if he was trying to recall it, despite the fact that I had introduced myself to him only seconds prior.

"I am going to assist you back to your residence. And see to your hand; I insist on it."
The man bit his lip.

"That's really not necessary. I can take care of it myself, I assure you."

His face still had a forlorn look to it. Something quiet but ill-at-ease, and I didn't have it in me to just leave everything so badly off.

"Please," I tried a third time. "To assuage my guilt. It's my fault you're hurt, after all."

His brow crinkled, but he hurried along - all with his injured hand pressed against his clothing to absorb the blood, and his pale features whitening even further in the setting sun. It gave him a ghostly look - all thin lines and the alabaster skin of someone plagued with consumption, bitterest anxiety in his voice.

"If you insist," he mumbled.

"I do," I replied with conviction.

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We moved along the cobblestone for several minutes in total silence, and I ignored the squealing sound of Bisquick as I walked off.

Suddenly, the man stopped, his hand still bleeding profusely.

"Go and get him," he said, in a tone nothing less than imperious.

"What?"

"Go and get Bisquick. You cannot leave him chained to the fence."

The face was now ashen; from mild shock or simply a trick of the light, I was not sure. But when I glanced to his hand, I could see it was rather violently torn, and I felt adrenaline pulse out into my body, like a tapeworm of heat.

"You can't leave him," the man repeated, then licked his lips.

So I turned back, and grabbed hold of Bisquick's collar, shortening the leash by circling the excess leather around my hand until the dog was barely inches from my side.

"I'll ensure he stays well away from you," I supplied as I returned to my new companion.

Almond eyes turned to the dog, the taut leash - and he nodded shortly.

"Yes. Fine," he replied abruptly, continuing his walk.

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"Can I get a name?", I blurted out, impulsively.

The peaked face turned towards me, letting out a short huff of breath as if I had asked for a rather grand favor.

"Why on earth do you want to know my name?", and the lip darted out, moistening the Cupid's bow. I realized he did this a lot, almost like a tic. Nervous, staccato-like.
"Well, my dog bit you: the least I can do is apologize properly."

But the man continued on silently for the next few minutes, as if my query had gone unheard. Suddenly, as we neared what could only have been his dormitory building, he looked off towards a grove of trees in the next courtyard and proclaimed, "Sherlock. My name is Sherlock Holmes. And I, um, I read Chemistry."

My face opened up into a wide grin, enamored with the eccentric name. Testing it in my mind, fascinated by the kind of family Sherlock must have grown up in - the kind of family that would bestow such an odd sounding name to a child.

"Is that a family name?," I asked, amused.

His eyes darted back to my face, and he frowned.

"What's wrong with my name?," Sherlock had asked testily.

"Nothing. It's unusual. But I like it."

Sherlock sighed, laboriously, and I tried to maneuver onto a new and acceptable subject.

"If you must know - yes, it's a family name, and additionally my brother chose it for me when he was a child. He undoubtedly felt adrift in a world of normal-sounding names and resolved to do something about it."

My face quirked back into a grin.

"And so what's his name, then?"

Sherlock blinked, almost in confusion, and then kept on walking - this time at a faster pace.

"He's hardly little. Quite the opposite really, but my brother's name is Mycroft."

This time I chomped down on my bottom lip to keep myself from outright giggling.

Of course.

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Sherlock finally informed me that we were making our way to Merton College, where he also informed me that he was in his second year, reading Chemistry (as previously mentioned) but with a second focus in Molecular Biology.

Plus, he ran track. And rowed, but was considering giving it up because he found it "repetitiously boring," apparently.

"AND you play the violin? Impressive."

Sherlock seemed to tense at the compliment, but quickly responded with: "I have played the violin since the age of three. It's hardly impressive that I can play at my current grade."

"Still," I argued, "I can't play anything. Never mind the fact that I am rubbish at advanced maths, too."

Sherlock remained quiet, merely came upon his dormitory entrance, and held the door open for me and rotten old Bisquick.
"Try to, umm, hide him in your coat or something," he tested, finally, looking about for other students.

"No pet' policy?" I guessed, and Sherlock nodded.

"Although I keep an aquarium for my chameleon. Plus, I know of a handful of others in the building that keep fish, small rodents. That sort of thing. But they might have a bit more of a problem with a rabid, blood thirsty dog like yours," and for the first time of the evening, Sherlock smiled.

And it was brilliant.

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"This is posh," I remarked with a whistle, taking in the space.

On the floor were Persian rugs, and on the walls were actual paintings - not prints. Sherlock's room contained a bar fridge, an enclosed bookshelf with overhead lighting, and a Mr. Coffee coffee maker that was still half full and which oddly clashed with his many other obviously expensive possessions.

His bed was rather messy, with sheets and blankets and pajamas all mucked up, and he indicated that I should take to an Eames chair situated off in the corner of the room (which I did).

From there, he walked into his enclosed bathroom, and turned on the light which queued the fan to kick in.

I waited about, Bisquick on my lap, and let my eyes read the titles on his shelf. Most of the works were about Chemistry, although I caught some Isaac Asimov on the shelves, and a rather large volume of true crime books, as well as tomes on poisonous plants, and toxins and poisons in general. Every now and then something that seemed to be a huge departure would catch my eye: a book on Buddhism, a book on Thatcher, a book about Rupert the Bear.

To my left, a bay window cut out against the night and I could see the Japanese Maples in their reddish-purple intensity below.

On a metal shelf, I caught sight of an aquarium - probably 30 or 40 gallons, which housed the aforementioned chameleon - along with terrariums on the floor, which housed everything from a miniature botanical world filled with insects and slugs, to succulents, to what looked like a enclosure of aquatic plants, with affixed growth lights suffusing the flora in pinks and blues.

I rested Bisquick at my feet, and made my way towards Sherlock's bed, let my fingers touch discarded pajamas. Indigo with a herringbone print.

I touched the collar of the garment, the seam arcing into a Peter Pan ridge.

Silk.

Definitely silk.

And cashmere socks balled up near a wicker wastepaper basket to my right.

"Sherlock? You okay in there?" I called, suddenly aware of the boundaries I was crossing. Bisquick slumped to my side, seemingly at ease with Sherlock's dorm, although not Sherlock himself, now watched a colony of ants working this way and that, carrying pieces of what looked like toast or Hobnobs back towards an opening into the sand.
"Sherlock?," I asked again, and Sherlock himself emerged - his cardigan now off and lying on the floor of his bathroom - adding to the strange sense of mess among luxury; his good arm holding onto several packets of gauze and a first aid kit.

He was looking progressively whiter with every passing moment.

"How's the pain?"

He made a screwed up motion with his hands, dismissive.

"Can you help me open these packages, please?" he asked, and I noted the vulnerability in his voice as he passed his first aid kit over to me.

I popped the lid, and was stunned at what lay inside. Not merely the essentials, but enough first aid and injury related items to stock a mini-hospital. Butterfly plasters, gauze in three differing widths, needles with dis-solvable thread, clamps, antibiotic ointment, scar ointment, Bactine, Asprin, Codeine in a small plastic canister, hydrogen peroxide, anti-pyretics and so on.

"Wow."

Sherlock suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"I aim to always be prepared for any occurrence," he responded in a clipped voice, and I fought off an odd sense of apprehension.

"Accident prone?," I tested, unease worming through the back of my mind.

"Not more than the average," he said in short tenseness, and I let the subject drop.

"Okay. Let's see Bisquick's damage," I muttered, and Sherlock held his hand out to me, almost timidly.

I picked up the hydrogen peroxide, and doused the cotton in it.

"Oh, I hate this bit," I said awkwardly, and Sherlock huffed at my statement.

I dabbed at the gash with the peroxide, and he flinched, but gave no outwards cry of pain, and the wound fizzed white and the skin suddenly looked hot and pink when I removed the pad from his hand. Fresh curdling of blood welled up to the surface, and my stomach writhed in empathy.

"Now the Bactine?," I tested, and Sherlock shrugged, as I spritzed the injury with the pain reliever. After a few seconds, the tension in his face diminished, as did the tension in my own stomach.

"I'd recommend the liquid bandage next, followed by the medium width gauze," Sherlock ventured, his body slowly easing with the reduction of pain. "I have special tape for the gauze which will keep everything affixed."

Which is exactly what I did.

I wrapped his limb, hot and sore, with the gauze, and affixed it with special white tape that had a gummy snap and seemed to adhere velcro-like to the bandages.

Sherlock flexed his fingers when I was through with my tending, and I glanced about his space, suddenly at a loss as to how to proceed.

"Would you like to see Vernet?," and the voice sounded far younger, and apprehensive.
I had never seen a chameleon in the flesh before, and was careful with my handling of the gentle animal - so different in character to that of quick-tempered Bisquick.

"He's not turning black, like my trousers," I murmured aloud, and Sherlock inclined his head, his eyes switching back and forth between me and the slothful Vernet, whose small body inched along my trouser leg in the smallest of increments.

"That's because that aspect of a chameleon's nature is generally linked to a perceived need for self preservation. It's a form of camouflage, and it's unlikely to ever be an exact match in terms of hue or pattern. Additionally, it always indicates some measure of internal stress."

"Therefore it's a good thing he's remaining his, umm, typical colour?"

Sherlock nodded.

"Indeed. If he had started to change in any overt way, I would have taken him off you and returned him to his tank. I would not subject him to the stress; it's not good for their longevity or happiness."

Something warm filled my chest at that declaration, not to mention the tender way Sherlock's hand hovered near the oddly-eyed creature, as if expecting it to stumble from my body. In fact, he kept his good arm low to it's tiny form as if to break a fall should his pet slip.

It was obvious then that he cared deeply for the being, and as I glanced up at Sherlock out of the corner of my eye, I could see the red and oranges of butterflies on his shirt, the tapered nails of someone incredibly aware of their personal hygiene, the delicate hands - one now swollen and puffed out with gauze and the wetness of rose blood that continued to flow from the bite, despite my ministrations.

He watched Vernet with intense focus, and a peacefulness I hadn't seen once in the evening prior.

I cleared my throat.

"Why did you name him Vernet?"

Sherlock pulled his body inwardly, until he was sitting cross legged on his Persian rug. His feet were clad in chrome yellow socks, and they kept flexing back and forth rhythmically.

"He's a member of our family. An ancestor."

"The painter?" I asked, surprised.

But somehow that information just seems so wholly possible in relation to what I'd quickly come to learn about Sherlock that I wasn't all too surprised, either.

"Yes. The painter," Sherlock responded, now collecting Vernet-the-chameleon from my leg, and angling his hand in such a way as to let the Old World lizard begin an ascent to Sherlock's shoulder, where it came to rest. "Although, I never really experimented with the visual arts, myself. Aside from anatomy drawings."

I quirked an eyebrow.

"Like nude model things?" I said with a smirk.

Sherlock looked confused for a second, then suddenly frowned.
"Nooo," he drawled out. "No, I meant anatomy drawings."

He sashayed back a few moments later, Vernet cupped in one hand and a rather large burgundy tome in the other.

"Like this," he said, his voice a little more tentative. Softer. He opened the pages of the book.

It was a medical book, replete with black and white sketches, highly detailed, of different organ systems. Pancreas, liver, female reproductive organs, the lungs. Sherlock's spidery fingers turned through the pages, and Vernet squirmed.

"Let me put him back," Sherlock responded tightly, and he suddenly seemed uncomfortable as I turned the pages. A piece of onionskin paper fluttered to the floor and I picked it up.

It was a sketching of a woman's interior. A heavily pregnant woman. The drawing focused in greatest detail on the curvature of the fetus, the hands so miniaturized, the face serene.

I picked it up carefully, taken by the soft lines used to depict the womb itself and the sharp and precise contrast of the unborn.

"This is beautiful," I said in earnest, and Sherlock flushed crimson.

"I forgot that was in there," Sherlock responded primly, face cautious.

"Well, I really like it. The child looks as if she's dreaming."

Sherlock's eyes moved from mine and back to the drawing.

"No. Male," and he hesitantly pointed out the slight protrusion towards the bottom of the sketching that was partially hidden in shading.

"He," I amended. "He looks as if he's dreaming."

Sherlock's head slanted and he sat down a few feet from me, awkwardly crossing his legs. Fiddled with his cardigan, splayed over his lap. Probably Merino or Angora, or something equally expensive.

"Maybe he is dreaming," he supplied a few seconds later. "Yes. I like that. He is dreaming. What else would he be doing?" he asserted, and I fought back a smile at the tone.

------------------------------------

After Sherlock's insistence that his hand was absolutely fine, and after I had scanned some more of the art book, he seemed to fall into a bit of a wordless anxiety. He padded around, balling up his strewn-around and undeniably-posh clothing and stuffed them into his closet, where he'd hidden a wicker hamper.

"Ah, so I probably should head off then," I said in measured beats, and watched as Sherlock's head nodded. He'd become seemingly interested in arranging items on hangers, and I felt a bit silly for injecting myself into his dormitory without a proper invitation.

"Alright," I tried again, wondering suddenly if I've done something to offend the now-mute man before me. "Well, maybe I'll see you around on campus?"

Sherlock turned, arms holding onto three different hangers.

"I don't know how likely that will be; we don't take any of the same classes, I presume," he said
brusquely. "Economics is not really my area."

"Well, that hardly matters. Just tell me when your next musical concert is scheduled, and I'll be there," I tried brightly, amused when Sherlock’s cheeks tinted rose.

"That was hardly a concert," he replied quickly, licking his lips for what felt like the 20th time of the evening, obviously nervous.

"Well, even so - I enjoyed your music."

Sherlock scratched the back of his neck, uncomfortable with the praise.

"Yes, well. I, um, I hold practice sessions sometimes. Near the Sheldonian. Usually Wednesday evenings. Sometimes Friday nights. 6 to 7."

I nodded in encouragement, and made to speak, when he added: "And I enjoy a good game of Weiqi - which also goes by the name of Go - at least twice a week. I play with some of the others in first and second year. Do you know the game?"

He licked his lips again, and I felt a surge of quiet and low-key fondness.

"Not really. I've heard of it, but I've never played."

Sherlock hesitated, and then said in a rush: "I can teach you, if you'd like? We don't have a large enough group of us to actually start a student's group - not yet - but-"

I chuckled, and Sherlock flinched, so I quickly rose and shouldered my bag.

"I'd like that. I've always been interested in learning that game. When do you play?"

Sherlock had resumed the sorting of his closet and the clothes within.

"Typically on weekends. But if you leave your student email near my study desk, I can forward you the specifics of the meet-ups," he rushed, sounding semi-distracted by ordering the colours of his button downs.

He didn't turn around, and so I headed back towards his desk. Finally noticing a memo pad and assortment of mechanical pencils and fineliner pens that he'd housed in a metallic mesh holder, I scrawled my email and my name with a sprightly smiley face on the clean yellow paper, and then detached it from the pad before affixing the sticky portion to the outside of his laptop.

"Alright then, I guess I will see you at your next Go meet up. Or your next...musical event. Whatever comes first."

Sherlock nodded, his back to me, while I located my Dockers. When I was ready to leave, I muttered a "See you around, then," and called Bisquick to my side. Sherlock kept a wide distance between me and the dog, and I felt somewhat confused by the interaction, but on the whole - intrigued.

------------------------------------

The leaves were turning from their vibrant gold to a much more sedate brown and the early morning fog cast the park in an eerie sort of autumnal splendor. I pulled my scarf tightly across my throat and took a sip of my Americano, then glanced at my watch, fiddled with the leather strap.

I knew I was early, and as such - being ridiculous. And yet, Sherlock was a hard person to get a feel for - both in person, and through email correspondence. He divided his words between excited
statements about random things and then a withdrawn sort of sensitivity, whereby I quickly felt as if I were intruding into his space.

He's hard to gauge. And yet, I remind myself, he offered to teach me how to play this game.

I did not push him for another interaction, another meeting.

Through the whiteness, I could see his lanky form approach. He was wearing an over-sized navy peacoat, and his dark tresses, normally curly, were flattened beneath a lighter blue Laplander hat that covered his ears. Even from the distance, I could see the tell-tale signs of an ember glowing red-hot. He took a drag, then coughed, before finally stamping the thing out with the toe of his shoe.

Coming closer, he caught sight of me near one of the old pine-wood benches where I've taken up while waiting for him. Eyed the additional Americano cooling on the frosty wood, the little pile of sugars and creamers. Bit his lip.

I broke the silence first. "Yes, it's for you. I didn't know how you took your coffee."

Sherlock sniffed, his nose ruddy in the brisk air, the rest of his face white as a sheet.

"Obviously," he said, voice all careful enunciation and shielding. "It's never come up before, so how would you?"

I nudged the creamers over towards him; he picked up both packets of sugar and poured them into his beverage.

"Thank you," he replied in hesitation, and it came out almost questioning in tone. As if he rarely even said thank you, the words themselves sounding brittle and foreign in his mouth.

"No problem. I recommend trying the hazelnut creamer. It's actually quite good."

Sherlock's gaze floated over the little canisters of cream. 18% plain. 18% Irish Creme. 18% Hazelnut.

"Those are absolutely full of fat," he informed me briskly, and the words themselves come out as snappish. Then he rubbed his hands together as if to fight off the chill in the air. A moment later, I realized that his hands were actually trembling.

I didn't even know how to respond to such a statement, and pondered the words for a few seconds; decided to say nothing.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to head indoors?"

He looked back up to me, a little more openly.

"Are you cold?," he asked in confusion, and I shook my head in uneasy dismissal.

"No, I'm fine, really, but you look a little chilled."

Sherlock ignored my statement, and instead unfolded a wooden Go set, pinned in the center. In one cupped palm he held out two clear bags filled with narrowed black and white stones.

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine with this weather. Just do whatever would be more comfortable for you," he responded with a practiced smile, face squinting against the board, nudging the now cast aside creamers to the side of the table.
It’s had been nearing 7 pm by the time we decided to call it an evening. The game itself was fast-paced and interesting, but I failed spectacularly against Sherlock on all three games we played together.

"Thank you for the Go instruction," I said quickly, helping Sherlock count out the stones and organize them into separate piles before putting them back into their respective bags.

Sherlock tensed a little, nodded in my general direction, then blurted out: "Thank you for the coffee, and the sugar."

I smiled at him.

"Black. Two sugars," I said easily, and Sherlock nodded again.

"Alright, well I better head off. Unless you'd want to stop by somewhere else with me, first; I'm heading to Browns. The coffee made me even hungrier than I was before."

Sherlock looked up at me; his smile stretched in tenseness.

"No, I - well, thank you - I am a tutor for organic chem, and-," Sherlock's hands fluttered about his sides in nervousness.

I felt something distantly sad then - a pale sadness, and pushed it away.

"Sherlock, listen - it's just an invite. I get it; you're busy. No worries. Maybe another time?," I responded with greater speed than I normally would, if only because he sounded so damn stressed.

"Maybe another time. Yes," Sherlock whispered flatly, and started to pad away, leaving me - for the second time in just about as many weeks - confused as hell.

------------------------------------

For several weeks, we played Go, sometimes Chess. I bought him banana nut muffins from the student canteen, and always an extra large biscotti coffee, which I quickly came to realize was his favourite. Black. Two sugars. I deposited them in front of Sherlock when we sat down in the park to play our games, to chat; I felt an abundant happiness when he nibbled at my offerings. As if he were a mercurial God, and I had provideded him a sacrifice of highest quality, which he deemed worthy of consumption.

I was not stupid. I knew something was up. A something people didn't talk about, in relation to men. Especially *not* in relation to men. And especially not of those who tried so damnnably hard to keep it to themselves. Because I knew he was not avoiding eating for attention. It might have done a good deal for attention, sure - but I could see how he ate, how odd he was with it all, and I could also sense when he tried to play it cool. In this area, at least, his behaviour didn't stem from a need to garner attention at all.

In fact, one time - just once - I tried to ask him about it, and ended up with a flurry of "I"s and "umm's" and the oddest deflections before he pulled his satchel across his chest and informed me that he was late to a tutoring session.

Ever since then, I had brought him foodstuffs. He had his preferences, too. Things that had nuts he could pull off and eat in small succession. Candies, gummies, things he could slowly chew. Things he could shell such as pistachios, sunflower seeds. Deep drags of diet Coke, slurped between each nibble. Actually, he gulped at Diet Coke like he smoked. Deep inhalations.
One time - a couple months after we had become friends - I went into the city center to help him buy groceries. He carried along a small list. Vegetables for his pet, and everything else - finicky, almost prissy and expensive, for the most part, but resoundingly nutritionless. Expensive roasted Italian coffee. Cocoa flavoured thins biscuits (sugar free, fat free, likely taste free), which Sherlock pecked at occasionally, dipped into his espresso. Packs of gum, of mints, of toothpaste and dental rinse. Crab meat, which he seemed to live off of - aside from the treats I'd bring him during our evenings together. Oh, and oddly enough -cilantro, by itself - which he'd make a "salad" out of and douse in tomato sauce and Keen's mustard. And crazy amounts of salad.

I knew it wasn't healthy, and I certainly knew it wasn't normal. But I didn't know how to speak of it without breaking our general ease.

------------------------------------

One night, we stayed out too late in the park playing Go. The sky moved from inky-blue to inky-black so rapidly that Sherlock and I had a bit of a time counting all the game pieces, even as the bright and powerful white lights of the campus turned on. Sherlock looked even paler and more surreal in the darkness. Snowflakes started to fall, which made the evening seem somewhat magical. Prettily romantic, though I dared not voice this thought.

Wet flakes melted on his blue toque, wet his face, fell on his eyelashes. And I was entranced by his face, the cold steel of his irises clashing with the tentative warmth of his gaze when he looked at me. When he looked up at me hesitantly. Flustered.

And in that moment I had a tremendous urge to kiss him.

So I did.

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We walked along the cobblestone, back to my residence. Sherlock rubbed his hands together occasionally, to heat them up.

"You need some warmer garments," I supplied readily, and he frowned, looked up at me sharply. "Or more padding on your frame. Not sure, really."

"I'm fine," he muttered, and I paused my walking, waited for him to stop.

He did. Looked across to me, apprehensive, like always, his dark curls vignetting his white face in dramatic fashion.

"I'm fine, Victor," he repeated, and I let my hand reach out to touch his cheeks, his cheek bone. "Please don't...fret. It makes me agitated."

"Fine, huh? You don't look all that fine lately, Lock," I whispered, and Sherlock closed his eyes. When he opened them up again, they were damp.

I cupped his neck, and he moved into me, towards me - his white cold cheek grazing my own.

"What is it, eh? You're dropping weight, dearheart," I muttered to his side, against his ear, and he pulled back. Microscopically pulled back.

"Are we friends?," he queried, and the expression on his face was unlike anything I had seen on him before. Unlike anything I had seen on anyone before.
"Of course," I enthused, grabbing his hand, rubbed the knuckles. Brought the knuckles up to my lips. Kissed the soft skin.

Sherlock's mouth opened, slightly in time to his eyes snapping shut. I saw and felt his body tense.

"I am fine. I will be fine. It's just, a thing. It's nothing."

His eyes remained closed, as if he did not wish to take in my expression.

"Okay. But you'll let me help you if this gets...less fine. Right?"

Sherlock suddenly opened his eyes, seemed to be lost in thought. Finally nodded.

"Okay then. That's all I needed to hear. Or rather, that and your response now: want to come inside? Get some coffee? Heat up?"

Sherlock looked at me, suddenly fearful.

"Is that literal coffee? Or is this innuendo, Victor?"

His gaze remained off to my side. Unwilling to look me in the eyes.

"It is innuendo if you want it to be, Lock. And it's literal coffee if you prefer that. It's what you want. That's it."

His throat convulsed, so I pulled him into me, hugged him. Realized he was trembling.

Felt a surge of affection and sadness for my friend, this man, so gifted and yet so afraid. I knew that's not what most people saw in him - fear, I mean. Most people didn't see him as afraid. They saw someone stuffy, aloof, impressively brilliant, untouchable.

They didn't see a potential friend, a potential lover. They didn't see his worth. They only sensed the power of his mind, strictly as it related to academia.

"Time to turn off this big brain of yours for a few hours, Lock," I murmured against his ear, and I felt his fingertips dig into my back, felt the pointed weight of his chin against my shoulders.

"I-I don't know what to do. I don't know what's happening here; I thought this was just friendship," and his voice sounded high. Almost alarmed. "I am not good with," and when he licked his lips, I felt a shiver go through my core, "reciprocation in these matters. I won't say the right words, do the right things. And I don't need coffee. Not any kind. I'm okay."

I kissed his temple, and he stilled. The fluttering motions of his hands, when worked up, stilled. He tightened his grasp around my torso, and I kissed his temple again. And then again, and then wound my kisses around to his cheek, kissed the corner of his lips.

Sherlock fisted the material of my coat.

"Victor - someone will see, someone, they will - they will-." and he moved his body into mine, as if seeking out heat.

"I don't care. I don't give a flying fuck, Sherlock," and I bent down and lightly teased his lips, which were also cold. Sherlock opened his mouth slowly, so damn slowly, and I moved my tongue against his lips. Pushed back and opened the semi-closed barrier, let my tongue run over his teeth, slide over his tongue. Tasted his cinnamon gum and Earl Grey tea. He let out a sound, not quite a moan (something more from the gut) and I suddenly realized that maybe he was right. Maybe I should stop.
The last thing either of us needed was an ASBO for indecent exposure. Sherlock had already acquired an ASBO for something else, which he'd never precisely told me about in detail. But it was enough for him to be more cautious now, and I understood that motivation.

So I broke the kiss, quickly. Pecked against his cheek again.

"Come on."

I grabbed his gloved hand, and whisked him upstairs.

------------------------------------

Once inside my suite, I didn't pour coffee. Or tea.

I cracked open a bottle of Bordeaux, and served us both a generous portion.

Sherlock took his share, and the glass hopped around in his hands. He downed the entire offering as if it were water and he were severely dehydrated.

I poured him some more, and sipped at my own with far less nervousness or speed.

In fact, I was not nervous at all. I was entranced, and felt alive and libidinous and fascinated by his anxiety.

Watching him fascinated me at any time, of course, but even more so as his eyelids closed with sleepiness as the wine worked its way through his vessels. His body lost an edge of tenseness as he relaxed.

I helped him peel off his gloves, his toque. Take off his greatcoat.

By the time he started sipping at his fourth drink, his motions became a little uncoordinated.

"Victor," he pat my hand, looked up at me tiredly, as I moved in closer to him. "You scare me sometimes. This scares me, I mean. Sometimes, I think everything scares me."

I realized then he must be at least marginally intoxicated. He wouldn't be speaking like this, otherwise.

I brushed his damp hair out of his eyes.

"Nothing to be afraid of with me, dearheart," and Sherlock rubbed the edges of my sweater between his fingers, seemingly absorbed by the material.

Took another sip of red, then. Some of the wine dribbled down the corner of his mouth, and I moved in and kissed the wine away with my tongue.

"No, Victor, lissen," he slurred. "I can't do this with you-" and he waved his hands around, then motioned between himself and myself. "It alarms me."

"What alarms you, Lock?," I stroked the sides of his ribcage, gently. "Hey? Go on. Tell me."


"Not for you?," I queried gently while I pushed against his knees. He spread his legs open without argument, his eyes owlish and huge.
"Victor, I *can't.* I can't," he tapped my hand. "I shouldn't. It would all fall apart."

I smiled against his neck, tongued the skin. White, still cool - but not so cold.

Wormed my hands against his chest, let my fingers dip underneath the wool of his sweater.

"This thing must feel so itchy against your belly," I growled, and Sherlock shook his head at me, eyes still wide.

"It's fine. It's warm," he murmured, suddenly picking up my hands, and fiddling with my digits. Long, lean artist hands, and an expression of such childish naïveté, that I wanted to simply collide with him. Wipe that look off of his face. Wake him up, and know that I had been the one to do so.

Sherlock took another sip of his Bordeaux, and I helped him tilt the glass upwards. Helped him pour the alcohol down, as he gulped at the drink. Waited several minutes, until he seemed to calm, and eventually relaxed into me.

"Let's take this off," I encouraged, slowly peeling the garment from his lanky body. It catched his undershirt, and the two items of clothing came off together, disturbed Sherlock's hair. Electrified Sherlock's hair with static, which I smoothed down with my hands.

I watched his hands. Off to the side. Not touching me. Not touching himself.

I moved in, nipped at the side of his ear, brought my body over his lap, and moved against his frame. Felt him gasp, hands flushed against the seat of my sofa. Immobile.

As he seemed to relax, his body became more placid; I tilt and angled my lower body to graze against his pelvis, then I recaptured his mouth. Kissed him with greater forcefulness.

Sherlock broke the kiss after a minute or so.

"Maybe we should stop," he said in a tiny voice.

"You don't really want to stop," I smiled at him between kisses, pressing the bulk of my weight into his too-lean body, until he collapsed against the sofa. He let my hand wander over the top of his jeans, slip underneath the denim band. He said nothing. Just closed his eyes, his breath harsh and quick and labored.

I tentatively pressed against him, barely thrusted. Gentle with my movements.

Sherlock bucked at the sensation, and made a high pitched noise that caused me to grin widely.

"That feel good?," I tested, as I lowered him down to his back, until his head rested against one of my throw pillows. I encouraged him to let his arms drape to the side of his body. "Just relax, Lock."

Sherlock's cheeks became hot pink and his breath came in sporadic gasps.

"This your first time?," I said, presuming our further activities. Not giving Sherlock the head-space to psych himself out.

"Victor, I don't know. I don't know if I, if we, if I can-"

I stilled his objections with a kiss, wrapped my hands around his skull, and rocked into his body until I felt what I am looking for; what I needed to feel.

"Your body knows what it wants, at least," I broke the kiss, brought my hands back to his chest. "I'm
not going to hurt you, Sherlock. Alright?"

Sherlock's throat bobbed and stilled. His eyes stopped their frantic shifting and closed.


He nodded again, and I pressed a kiss to his eyes, still closed, before I let myself reach for his body. Sherlock's eyes immediately opened, as if he'd been shot.

"That woke you up, Lock. Feels good, huh?," I teased, stroked the skin gently, non-aggressively. "You're almost there already."

Sherlock bit his lip, shifted his focus to my coffee table. I saw him mouth something, quietly. Soundlessly. For a second, I was convinced he was reciting a string of digits.

My hands slowed, and I frowned.

"What's the problem?," I asked carefully.

"I can't - I don't, do this. With anyone. We shouldn't-Victor, I should-"

I let my hands brush against his lips, and he stopped talking.

"You need to stop doing that. We aren't doing anything wrong, you know. I care about you, Sherlock."

Sherlock's eyes darted back and forth across my face. His hands curled into little fists.

"I-I am sorry, Victor. I, this, I-"

I gave Sherlock's shoulder a little squeeze.

"This is new for you, and you're just stressing yourself out. You know that, right?"

Sherlock continued to study me. "I know that."

I unhooked the button of his trousers, pulled the material down over his legs. Tucked my fingers under his pants and pulled those down, too.

Sherlock stopped talking. Stopped protesting. Laid there silently, his chest and face flushed the colour of a sunset. His body moved in little rhythmic jumps and stops, obviously enjoying the sensation, even if finding it intense.

"Remember, Lock. Don't over-think this. Just give your body what it needs," I murmured against his ear, and he started to move, then. Furtive little shifts, his eyes closed tightly, as if watching a terrifying film.

On the other hand, I didn't close my eyes for a second. Just continued my motions, until I realized I was close to climaxing, and Sherlock was still stuck half-way between physical pleasure and fear.
I looked over at Sherlock, his face contorted - and let my hand stoke his cheekbone to reassure him. A deep and vibrant sex-flush ran up the length of his torso, and splashed his face in colour. Suddenly, his eyes opened, and turned to settle on a piece of artwork overhanging my study desk. His face settled into something calm, something almost voided entirely of his earlier apprehensiveness, and he sped up his own motions.

"Victor," he panted, realizing I had pulled back. "You've, you're -"

Sherlock stopped moving, and his body shuddered with pent up need.

"Would you like some help?," I inquired and Sherlock covered his face in sudden embarrassment.

"I'm sorry; I should- we can stop if you're done-"

He squeezed my fingers so tightly that I am reminded of the tales I have heard regarding the bone-crushing grip of women in labor.

Realizing his nervousness hasn't departed as I had hoped for initially, I decided to bring him to an end state quickly.

And then he's turned away from me - his face pushed into the corner of my sofa until all I can see is the naked form of his backside, his spine.

"Jesus," I muttered, somewhat off-put, "Why are you pulling this act? I thought we were making some sort of progress, tonight. What's going on with you?"

I heard Sherlock sniffle against the leather, and for the first time, I felt a sense of foreboding.

"You're okay, you're fine," I rushed, then let my hands dance over his prominent spine. Traced the bone. "Just a little intense, huh?"

Sherlock didn't respond, just toyed with the fleece blanket that he'd semi-wrapped around his torso.

"Look, Lock. You needed that. You're wound too tightly."

Sherlock sighed, and it came out as a wet rattle. I suddenly detected the first sounds of a person trying to keep back a sob.

"Awww, come on. Stop doing this to yourself," and I turned him away from his corner of the sofa, wrapped him up with the rest of the throw. His face was streaked with tears and he pinched at his nose.

"Oh hell, Lock," I encouraged, "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd get this upset. I thought it was just first-time jitters. Please calm down."

Sherlock grasped my forearms, his body trembled, and I pulled him back against my side, rocked again.

The motion seemed to quiet him, and eventually he just went limp. Rag-doll limp. Exhausted limp.
For a few minutes, I just held him, and he just let me. His tears tempered, his breathing started to regulate.

Then, I nudged him.

"This alright? Me holding you?"

He nodded his head, murmured, "I like this," and I rubbed his back in small, soft circles.

"Good. I like holding you. But I think maybe we should get you cleaned up now, okay? You'll feel better. Hot steam to clear your head."

Sherlock looked at me questioningly.

"'We'?," he questioned.

"Come on," and I took his hand, led him into my bathroom. Closed the door.

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Sherlock pulled off his remnant clothing - socks - before he let the fleece blanket fall to the bathroom floor. He crossed his arms over his torso - his movements oddly shy.

"I'm not going to see a damn thing of yours in the steam," I chuckled, a slight guilt lurking in my belly.

I stripped easily, carelessly, and entered the shower first. Then turned the tap to the far left until the water became very, very hot.

"Get in," I commanded Sherlock, and he did, all skinny legs and concave belly, and his long, dangling artist arms across his ribcage.

I moved his body with my hands until he'd become soaked by the spray, and then motioned for him to bend forward a few inches. He tilted his head.

"I have this stuff. You're going to love it. Smells amazing," and I showed him a bottle of boutique shampoo. Pear scented. Worked the mixture into Sherlock's scalp, massaged gingerly. His eyes closed gently - not tightly, like before - and he let me position him into the spray like a doll. Malleable. I told myself that if he had been truly afraid of what we had done, he would have fled long ago. He simply needed his downtime. He needed to process what had happened.

But he'd be okay.

Of course he would be.

"This feels good?," I questioned, as I massaged his scalp with the cleanser.

I saw his head go to nod, then stop. Stultified.

"Yes."

I smiled. Kissed his neck. The spot where his vertebrae extended furthest from his skin, almost obscenely in his thinness.

"You need a bit more meat on you, dearheart."
Sherlock's chin lolled against his chest and he remained quiet as I worked the shampoo through his hair.

"Okay, tilt back now. Going to rinse this stuff out."

He did, and I disconnected my shower attachment; the water pulsed over Sherlock's scalp. Small bubbles flowed down his chest and back, and swirled down into the drain.

"Time for cream rinse."

Sherlock turned around, looked less apprehensive now. He tapped against my hipbone lightly with his fingertips.

"Hmm?," I asked, and turned to give him a smile.

"What are we, Victor?"

I squinted up at him, the water had blanketed my dark hair into a carpet-like fringe over my eyes. I pushed at it, and let the water cascade down my throat.

"We're friends," I assured him easily, and saw a muscle work in his cheek.

"We can't be just friends. Not with what we did," Sherlock sputtered, hands brought up to his face.

I watched him for a moment, then rubbed a soft patch of skin at his hip bone.

"Why not? Why can't we be friends? Friends can have sex."

Sherlock frowned.

"Tonight wasn't- we aren't-," he stopped, sputtered, looks frustrated with his inability to get the words out. "Tonight wasn't normal. Not for friends. Not for "just" friends."

I tilted his head forward. Washed out the conditioner.

"You're going to smell like an orchard in a few minutes. Then I'll be wanting you all over again."

"Victor!," Sherlock started, an edge of hysteria had crept back into his words. "I don't know how to do this! I can't just have some form of 'benefits' arrangement with you. I can't think of you like that."

I took in his eyes, caught the worry in them. The near-panic.

"So...what? You want to be something else? Something more than friends? Boyfriends? Because I honestly wouldn't mind being your boyfriend, Lock. I just...look: I didn't want you stressing even more about a stupid label."

Sherlock's mouth opened and closed.

He wrapped his arms over my chest. Pulled me into a tight hug.

"I like you more hands-on like this, Lock," I assured him. "I hated seeing you so fearful. Hated feeling like I pushed you, or something."

He just continued to hold me.

"You're going to be fine. Just fine," I assured him, rubbing his cording spine. "I promise."
Sherlock's hold increased around my frame. I didn't say anything else, and he didn't say anything else, either.

I simply let him hold me until the water turned cold.
I hear muffled shouting, and make my way downstairs. Catch Sherlock sitting on our sofa, a bowl of yogurt in his lap, probiotics capsules on top of the yogurt. He's mashing them with the back of a spoon. Splintering the capsule into shards.

Additionally, he's watching Jeremy Kyle at an almost obscene volume and I reach for the remote to reduce the noise.

He looks up at me with a quiet tiredness permeating his being.

He's trying. It's something. It's more than something, really, because he's eating, and whether he went into the kitchen and got his breakfast in anticipation of my seeing this act or not - it's still something profound.

"These two sisters are drug addicts John, and-"

I turn, run my hands through my hair. Look at the clock. Fight an impulse to groan when I realize what I'm realizing, given the time.

"Why aren't you dressed yet?" I grouse and Sherlock stops talking. Licks at his lemon meringue yogurt. Pulls one of the probiotic pills off the top and chews it up.

"Sherlock! It's almost noon! You have your appointment with Yuri this afternoon!"

Sherlock's scrapes another bit of yogurt from the bowl and while internally I'm cheering, externally I don't want to come across as a push-over. He's eating, thank God, but he's still lazing about when he should be out of the flat and on his way to see his psychiatrist.

"I have time, yet. Obviously," he says with no depiction of concern. Places his lunch, meager as it is, against the side table and reaches back for the remote. Presumably to drown me out.

I take in his form. He's had his shower (his hair is still damp, but not sopping), and he's in jeans (something I've never seen him wear, honestly), but he's far from ready. Sock-less, still clad in a silk pajama top. He hasn't even shaved, and the slight scruff on him looks odd.

I try not to go into over-protective mood. Over-analysis mode.

I want to believe that deviations from the norm we had in the past are fine. Because while I have this mental image of Sherlock being 'fine' when I met him, I need to accept that he has never been wholly fine. He's been haunted, and he's struggled on his own for almost his entire life, and on his own he's done admirably.
But he wasn't healthy in his mind before; not entirely. So it shouldn't make me squirm with anxiety if he's wearing different clothes now. Or that he hasn't shaved. I simply knew a version of Sherlock that seemed healthier in the past, even if he still struggled with eating. Still struggled with dark thoughts and superficial success.

"Sherlock! Get up! Get your socks on. Brush your hair! You're not four years old, and I'm not your primary school teacher; I shouldn't have to nag you to do these things," I grouse.

I play at being annoyed, sometimes. I'm not actually annoyed, but I don't want him skipping out on yet another appointment. Not when I know he needs this. He needs someone who he can talk to about this stuff. Someone that isn't me.

"And call Yuri - let him know you're running late."

Sherlock flips the channel, seemingly ignoring me. I know he isn't. Not really.

After a few moments, he settles on Graham Norton.


"Oh relax, John. We still have enough time; you haven't even showered yet. I can be ready before-"

I hold up a hand, confused.

"What does my not having had a shower yet have to do with you dragging out getting ready?"

Sherlock suddenly blinks. Sits up stiffly against the sofa.

"You're coming with me though, John," he speaks slowly, unsure. "You always come with me."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. Fight back a moan.

"Sherlock, we discussed this yesterday! Last night in fact."

Sherlock is now looking somewhat perturbed.

"What did we discuss?," he asks quickly, anxiously. He licks his lips. Pushes away his yogurt.

No.

Don't do that.

Don't push the yogurt away.

Eat the damn bowl. It's not even 200 grams. Just eat it.

I meander over to 'my' chair, toss the bloody Union Jack pillow to the floor. Fall into the padded seat with a huff.

"We discussed how you really aren't discussing anything with Yuri. Not really. How you come to sessions, leave ten minutes later. How perhaps I am enabling you? Does any of this ring a bell?"

My flatmate blinks quickly, scratches his cheek.

"Not really," he says hesitantly, "I must have deleted it."

I get up, briskly walk to the kitchenette. Find Sherlock's mobile, return to the living room, toss it to
him.

"Text Yuri. Let him know we're running late. By about 15 minutes."

Sherlock catches the mobile easily, but his expression remains guarded.

"We?," he confirms, and I see a slight notch decrease in his features. A very, very slight reduction in anxiety.

"Yes. We. If that's what it takes," and I look around, wondering the best way to pull myself together in less than 10 minutes. I won't have time to shower, but at the end of the day, that hardly matters.

What matters is that Sherlock goes to this meeting.

What matters is that Sherlock doesn't continue to find creative ways to fight going to his sessions.

"So you're coming?," he confirms, a moment later. Staring at his yogurt, still only partially consumed.

He looks so purely apprehensive that I suddenly feel a slight surge of compassion.

"Yes. One last time. But we aren't dragging this out. It's not fair to Yuri. And you're finishing that yogurt. Then I want you upstairs for a check in."

Sherlock studies me silently, then rises from his little blanket cocoon on the couch and trots up the stairs back to his room.

"That's not necessary," he says stiffly, the anxiety fresh again.

I hold his sight, and shake my head soundlessly.

"Don't do this. Don't make this a damn struggle every morning," I whisper, suddenly so tired myself that I just want to put on my jacket and walk to Speedy's. Leave him on the sofa with his pathetic breakfast.

But I can't.

Sherlock's throat convulses.

"We did that yesterday," he says almost timidly. "Every day isn't necessary."

I watch him. Sad.

There is no way that this entire thing isn't fucking sad. Not the most poetic of terms. Not phrased eloquently.

But that's what we have here. What's happening here is so complex, so self-directed, this anger, this sickness. It's hard to feel that it matches the tragedy of his childhood, or the turmoil of his depression as an adolescent. In moments like this, when he eats his yogurt, and he argues and he tries to appease me rationally, with a stack of books on forensic science off to his side and a folder of cold case files from Lestrade opened and half marked with pen, I can almost forget that the greater tragedy of his life isn't even his past.

Because maybe it's not.

Maybe it's this.
This purgatory.

The monotony of his activities, the acedic nature of this subsistence, the repetitiously boring nature of his disease.

Or how - on days like this when he eats a little, and doesn't seem too morose - I almost want to say, 'screw it, Sherlock. Do what you want!'

Because it's a slow meandering away from anything good, but sometimes you want to cave. You want to give him the basics to choose to fight or not, especially when you're tired of fighting and arguing on the little things. And then it becomes so easy - too easy! - to remember that all these little things, these little moments - are what determine the course of a life. The content and substance and sense of what that life is and how it feels and what it must add up to for the person trapped in that body, dealing with that sickness.

You don't walk away because you stop loving a person. You walk away from the arguments and the trials and the tantrums and the deception because you do love them. But sometimes you forget that you are not fighting them, you are fighting a disorder.

--------------------------------------------------------

It's a human sort of frailty. To forget the longest stretch ahead for a reprieve in the moment.

"Get up," I say again, stiffness in my voice. "I'm not changing my mind on this. We can't afford to go backwards, here," I add a moment later.

Damn it, Sherlock.

Damn this.

--------------------------------------------------------

To his credit, he can move fast.

I've barely brushed my teeth when I see him in my peripheral vision, freshly dressed in an emerald green jumper. The jeans, however, remain.

I give him a once-over, and as I do - I spit out anise toothpaste into the sink, then gargle with some Listerine. Spit that out too, while Sherlock half leans across the bathroom's entrance, watching me with a bored expression.

"Are you done yet?" he asks with some measure of impatience, and I glance up in the mirror. Capture his gaze.

He can't be serious.

"You're jumping the gun. You know the drill," I reply.

The drill, in this case, is very simple.

No shirt. Only boxers or pajama bottoms.

No socks. Nothing with pockets.

And he has to use the washroom first.
"John, I haven't even had a coffee this morning," he stresses, cheeks tinted fuchsia.

I huff, knowing there is no real way to determine the veracity of this statement.

"You know our agreement."

He stares at me, looking deflated.

Turns around, then pulls off his emerald jumper. Unzips his jeans. Pulls them off.

When he's standing in nothing but his pants, he turns back to face me. Lightly presses against his bladder for show.

"I. do. not. have. to. urinate," he stresses, upset. "I'm working at this properly! Nothing is the matter! I'm certainly not water-loading," he rushes, suddenly looking so dejected that I just want to take the bloody scales and smash them with a hammer so no reading is ever gleaned from them again.

I nod, somewhat appeased but still not foolish enough to assume he's telling me the truth.

"Hop on then," I say lightly; a test. A challenge.

He meets my eyes, and I see his un-padded heart spasm in his chest.

I can see his frenetic and palpable anxiety.

I touch his wrist. Stroke the flesh carefully. Hate the fact that I can feel old pin-prick scars from needle use. A history of red constellations when starving wasn't enough.

----------------------------------------------

Sherlock moves towards the scale, and steps on carefully. As if he doesn't want to add too much of his body to the scale too quickly.

His eyes scan over the layout. The readout.

"113 or so," I say, confirming what he can already see.

I know this isn't how it's done. I know, from my readings, that most eating disorder clinics often hide the numbers from patients.

But he's doing this with me. He's doing this completely outpatient, and he wanted to know, he wanted to see.

He told me as much three days ago. Worried about re-feeding problems, he argued.

Wanted to face it head on, he said.

His lowest weight, out of the hospital, was just shy of 111 lbs. Close to 10 lbs lower than even I had expected, and it made me sick to contemplate how a man just under 6 ft 1 could exist in such a stretched out, under-nourished state.

Of course, it's not that much of a weight gain. It's the bare minimum that could possibly be expected in three days, and all of it is likely due to proper hydration, but his features still pull back in something not unlike disgust.

"Do you see what's a bit not good about this situation?" I try, gently.
Sherlock huffs out a breath. Looks up at me, face hot.

"I've gained! How come I'm still somehow screwing up in your estimation? I'm doing everything you're asking!"

He climbs off the scale, and starts to tug his jeans back up his legs. He looks distraught.

"You're not screwing up at all! You were seriously dehydrated, and now you are probably in a slightly safer place! 2 lbs is the minimum I'd expect in terms of weight gain when you probably were so dehydrated upon admittance!"

"John", he says, face stone. "Please-," he trails off.

I don't say anything else. I don't know what else to say; how to properly order the complexity of what I feel.

I give him his space and then I tread back to my room to finish getting dressed.

----------------------------------------------

Five minutes pass, and once I am dressed I make my way back to the bathroom. Sherlock pulls his jumper back over his head. His hair, I notice absently, is now almost dry and has curled quite tightly around his skull.

"Have you texted Yuri back *yet*?", I attempt, in distraction.

Sherlock nods carefully, eyes squinting into something sour.

"What's wrong?"

He looks back up at me hurriedly, face pinched.

"Nothing. I'll wait down on the landing," he states as a reply, curt.

----------------------------------------------

It's not that cold. Not by a long shot, and yet Sherlock is currently dressed in an undershirt, a button down and a jumper, replete with his navy coat, his black gloves and his blue scarf.

Additionally, his silhouette is further bulked up by what looks to be a hand-knit toque. In some ways, he reminds me of a little kid whose been overdressed by a mother on the first chilly day of autumn.

But I don't comment on his selection of clothes. I don't comment on the fact that his abnormal sensitivity to the cold is part and parcel of his being sick. I wouldn't be informing him of something of which he wasn't already, at least on some level, aware. So I simply walk alongside him at a semi-rushed pace as we make our way to the tube.

From the corner of my eye I can see him periodically bite his cheek. Evidence of nervousness.

"What's got you worked up?", I query, and Sherlock tucks his hands into the overcoat's pockets. Continues to look ahead.

"Like I told you earlier. Nothing is wrong. Nothing is the matter. Lay off."

I slow my pace, and he overtakes me by half a block before he realizes that I've paused. Rushes back, eyes downcast. Same tentative expression.
"John. You said it yourself - we're already late."

There's something in his voice that I dislike.

Some faint trill. Some faint catch that isn't deception and isn't anger and isn't Sherlock just dealing with This.

Something else.

Something fearful.

Not in the sense of eating, and gaining, and having me monitoring the process. Or blood work and tests and comments by others on the possible damage he's already done to himself.

No, it's a different sort of fear.

Something more alight with immediate doom. A look of dejection.

I cross my hands over my chest. No-nonsense.

"Right. But two or three minutes more at this point isn't going to make that much of a difference, is it? So you'd better get to the point and tell me what's bothering you. And don't tell me 'nothing' again, Sherlock. You promised me; no subterfuge. Openness. My first condition. The primary condition."

Sherlock suddenly looks agitated. His expression tightens as he studies god-knows-what on the pavement. Kicks at a clump of wet leaves with his shoe.

"I'm waiting for your response," I mumble, not unkindly.

"I'm not upset, exactly. I'm not, I-"

I remain silent, brows raised.

"How do you think today's session is going to go, John?"

I tilt my head, confused by the question.

"What do you mean?"

Sherlock's hands rub against the sides of his legs.

"He's going to be furious with me," he hisses at last, looking up at me with an undeniable vulnerability.

"Who? Yuri?," I ramble, confused. "Why the heck would Yuri be furious with you?"

Sherlock scrapes the heel of his shoe against the edge of the kerb.

"Of *course* Yuri," he mumbles. "And I really don't see how I need to answer that question. You know why. You know exactly why."

My head feels cotton baton-y with his words. As if he's speaking to me through a mental wool filter, and the words are distorted and jumbled.

"Sherlock," I start gingerly, moving slightly into his space. Aware of the rigidity of his posture, and
his general need for several feet of space around his person-hood that no one (not even me) infringes upon when he's stressed.

But this time, with these words, I can't help but test him a little bit. Test this situation. See what he'll do if I move fractionally closer to him.

He looks back up at me, and then down to his hands.

"This is going to be the first session since I-," and his voice drops off suddenly. A boulder plunged from a precipice.

The crashing of the boulder against the waves below is the pounding of my heart when I realize what he's alluding to, and so I take his hand. Squeeze it.

"Yuri is *not* going to be furious with you!," I whisper urgently, and see a flicker of a smile as Sherlock's mind registers my protectiveness.

"I won't let anyone treat you in any way that brings you down. Never again. You hear?"

His glands work, noisily swallowing, and his voice croaks when he replies in the affirmative.

"I hear that. I know you *mean* that, but-"

He stalls.

I give his left gloved hand one last squeeze, and he looks up at me.

Mouths the one word. Just the one.

'Please.'

He needs an assurance. He doesn't need a force asking him to bare his soul. Not at this moment.

He knows that's to follow.

He needs my words. Maybe until he finds his own.

"Okay; here's how I think this session is going to go. I think that, most likely, Yuri's going to ask how you're feeling now. Today, certainly. Maybe the last few days. Most likely that night."

Sherlock's breath hitches, and I cup his wrist with my fingers. A tether. An anchor.

"He might want to ask if you are able to identify what triggered you, before. He's going to be concerned, of course he is, but-," and I slow, unsure of how to proceed.

Sherlock runs his hands over his coat, smoothing it out. Glancing back up towards my line of sight, but carefully avoiding making prolonged eye contact.

"Did he request to see me alone? Is that why you decided-?," and he trails off, his nervousness not entirely eradicated although it does seem somewhat less intense now.

Damn it. He shouldn't be this scared to accept help.

No one should be.

"Sherlock," I rush, "Listen to me: it's going to be okay. Nothing is going to happen today you won't
be able to handle. I promise you.”

Sherlock's voice warbles back to me, unsure, unsteady.

"You shouldn't make promises like that, John."

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

When we are half-way to Yuri's, I come to a decision, and pat down my coat pocket. Feel the small plastic container jingle with pills. Retrieve it from my jacket and let my thumb gloss over the words.

'Holmes, Sherlock

LORAZEPAM. 2 mg

To be taken with food.'

"Sherlock?"

He's watching the train jet through the tunnel, seemingly transfixed by the interplay of lightness and darkness.

"Mmh?," he queries, distractedly.

I take his hand, and pass him the bottle. He looks down to the yellow-tinged plastic medication container. The child-proof cream coloured safety lid. The NHS logo on the side, on a waterproof sticker. His name, the medication's name, the dosage strength, and Yuri's clinician information.

He blinks, and breathes in quickly. Holds a breath. Doesn't exhale.

"Sherlock? Hey, c'mon. Try to calm down a bit, alright?," and I remove one of his gloves. The black leather which grips his flesh like a second skin. Let my thumb stroke his palm rhythmically.

"Yuri thinks I need an anxiolytic?," and his timber is low, gravelly.

I don't respond immediately - simply help him turn the bottle around.

"Look at the date."

Sherlock's eyes widen almost imperceptibly.

"This is very recent. This was after that night."

By 'that night' he means the night he secured his lethal quantity of morphine.

The night he overdosed on morphine.

The night he deliberately overdosed on morphine.

Largely because I pushed him on an issue he couldn't face yet. Because I couldn't see that he had reached his limit for what he could handle.

I did that. That was my fault.

I made this worse.

Me. John Watson.
I took an oath to first do no harm.

And I harmed a man already in so much pain.

"You got this filled three days ago," Sherlock determines, glancing back to me.

I nod, watch him as he clutches the bottle tightly, his mouth pinched downwards.

"I'm supposed to take this?," he asks in confusion. "Do you think so? Think that I need medication too?"

And for some reason I cannot begin to fathom, he sounds almost hurt.

"You're to have it, if you need it. Yuri wanted you to feel calm enough to attend sessions. He felt that given what has happened, how hopeless-,"

Sherlock fidgets about, looking among the car for anyone leaning in too close. Anyone being nosy.

"I'm whispering, Sherlock. No one's paying attention. Even if they were, they can't hear this," I murmur.

Sherlock nods, but still glances about uneasily. Pockets the medication.

"I have some water in my pack, if you want to take one. It's likely another 45 minutes before we get to Yuri's, so now is a good time."

He closes his eyes. Presses against his temples, then puts his gloves back on.

"I don't need medication. I'm not that bad."

I squeeze his hand, again, since hugs have become more awkward for me. Especially since his return from the hospital. His pale, beaten throat against my neck, and the muscles of his torso pulling in as he tries not to breathe. Tries not to exhale. Tries to keep his form, already so withered, as constricted as possible. As if, by touching him, he wants me to feel the bones of his body and not the small remainder of what exists of his musculature.

And then, concurrently, he will wear layers upon layers of clothing. As if trying to disguise his thinness. The ultimate paradox. I don't even know if he wants me to sense what he's become, or if he wants to hide it from me.

Probably both.

"I'm not that bad yet," he reiterates, and my musings shift and re-orient on our present. Us together, us together on the tube. The two of us, in now-time. Sherlock, 113 lbs and 6 ft 1, wearing too many layers, but somehow seeming so much better in the course of only three days. A Tim Burton leaness. Unnatural, but his eyes. God, his eyes. Not hopeful enough in himself, but hope that he turns on me. His lips, no longer quite so cracked. Making eye contact. Furtive eye contact. But trying so damnable hard.

Me at present: 144 lbs at 5 ft 6. Also trying so damnable hard, but in a different way, under a different strain, with different fears.

"It's not about being 'bad'. It's about what might reduce your stress well enough that you're able to get through the next while without feeling so conflicted. So you can deal with treatment, and everything that entails," and I debate saying more. Decide that if I expect bravery from Sherlock, I likewise need
to show bravery myself. It's only fair.

"I don't want you to feel scared anymore, Sherlock. Neither does Yuri. He's certainly not furious with you. I give you my word that he's not."

Sherlock's quiet for a few minutes, and I don't needle him. Don't press him for a response. I let him process my words, their meaning, the options that have opened up to him. The reality that I've addressed, and how no one hates him for what he's feeling, or for what he did when he could no longer see a non-destructive way to vocalize his needs.

I nudge his shoulder with my own solid one.

"It's going to be okay," I parse slowly. Taking the time to enunciate each word. "You're getting better, and it's okay to not be 100% right now. It's *okay* to be where you are right now."

Sherlock turns back to watching the tracks alternate their course of dark and light. Black charcoal nothingness interspersed with brilliant flashes of steel and substance.

----------------------------------------------

What I thought was quite a bit of anxiety on the train turns out to be a pale reflection of what I was to come to see, evidently.

We are making our way up the walk to Yuri's home, and Sherlock's posture has become brittle. His face is grey.

I give him a look, remind myself to keep the incredulity out of my tone.

It's hard to do.

"Come on; you've got this," I attempt reassuringly.

My worry is that it will sound pat. Almost flippant.

I've seen this man, my friend - my absolute best friend and now an almost unnameable 'more' - face the most stress filled interactions. Within hours of knowing him, he was facing down a gun. Being plied to take poisoned pills. People had called him a freak, mocked him, outright belittled him.

None of that seemed to impact him that deeply.

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Perhaps the operative word here is 'seemed.'

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Perhaps all of it was impacting him, and like the consummate actor I've seen before, he acted again. Then again.

But it didn't *seem* that way. He truly seemed nonchalant in his outwards manner that I felt as if I had stumbled across the path of an alien. Of someone so different in their very psychological composition that I couldn't help but wonder if the assertions of others were true.

Which is a horrible thing to think, now. To realize I did wonder if there was something so unmoving within him that the harshest words and the most dire attacks would leave him more or less unaffected.
Part of me wanted to look, and see. Look and see, and spot the start of a crack.

Not to see someone in pain.

No, not at all.

I didn't want to develop such fondness for Sherlock, and then see him break.

I just wanted to see if he could feel like I felt, somewhat. If the jeers and the fearful moments were, somehow, registering.

I was entranced by his mind, and his mind's seeming ability to disconnect from horror. Which, upon our first interaction, was a subject that haunted me. I was haunted by my own obsessiveness. Stuck in a world of nightmares and past mistakes. Ever repeating nocturnal regrets.

So when I met him, and when he opened his mouth and said such ridiculous things, and appeared so untouchable, so full of self-regard as to not let anything derail him from his passions - I wanted to learn his secret.

I wanted to learn the tricks he used to avoid anxiety. To avoid regrets.

To avoid pain.

He seemed above pain somehow, and that's possibly what drew me in - at least initially. That he could feel things with such passion, be it his love for science and criminology, or his music, or his experiments - be shrug off horror.

Which sounds so insane now. How could I have ever been so child-like in my thinking as to assume that Sherlock - who is perhaps the most passionate person I have ever known - could avoid feeling pain?

How could I have convinced myself of such an impossibility?

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I knock when, after a full minute, Sherlock seemingly cannot.

He seems rooted to the spot. Two steps down on the landing, behind me. His gloved hands in his pockets, his coat jostling with the movement of his agitation.

Then the door opens, and the jostling and rustling motions behind me stop.

I see a slightly glass-blurred Yuri press against the latch, and open the second and exterior door, holding it at such an angle that I can catch it easily with my fingertips.

"Hey guys," he says informally, his eyes ghosting over my frame, over Sherlock's own.

"Hello, Sherlock," he says carefully, and I can hear that sound I've heard a thousand times in my practice. Careful regard. A 'don't spook' them voice. I've heard the tonal qualities come from my very own mouth when in the presence of a person so tightly and overtly anxious that the wrong word could cause them to leave, even when they were very much in need of being seen.

I recognize similar qualities in Yuri's tone now. Surprise, perhaps, at what appears to be Sherlock's obvious fear. Hesitation to say the wrong thing. To appear to forward, but also a hesitation to appear reticent lest Sherlock take silence as a personal dismissal.
Turning to Sherlock, I press against the glass partition with my shoulder as Yuri pads back down the hallway.


Yuri seems more or less the same as the last time I saw him.

I am not sure, given Sherlock's extreme anxiety, if this is for the best or not. If Sherlock will start fabricating reasons and conditions that take on structure and power in his mind, when the situation is fine. When things are truly okay.

Yuri has the study ready for us. He's put out a tray of different snacks this time - something I've never seen before - and has a pitcher of lemon water and tumblers off to one side.

I sit first, not awkwardly, but also not easily. Sherlock's anxiety weighs heavily upon my mind and I discard my jacket and try to pay attention to my flatmate's actions.

A moment later Sherlock sits down besides me, but he keeps his outerwear on; his coat, mittens, his scarf.

Yuri pours himself a glass of lemon water, nods at me to do the same, so I get myself a small paper plate and load it with grapes, cherry tomatoes and a few cubes of Gouda. Take my water glass, and add some seltzer water.

Sherlock sits rigidly besides me, not touching anything, and Yuri doesn't speak of the matter.

A few moments later, he pulls apart some printed sheets affixed with paperclips and spreads them out. A pen clicks in his hand.

Sherlock watches everything with a strong unease, and I find it difficult to swallow down the fruit.

"So, I guess-," Yuri starts carefully, taking in the rigidity of Sherlock's form. For all the issues he's likely had with Sherlock in the past, not opening up - not being accessible - Sherlock now seems much more stressed. The room buzzes with the energy of his fear. "I just want to start with a few questions, Sherlock. You were aware that this session was scheduled for you and I alone, right? Why has John accompanied you today?"

Sherlock freezes up more so, if that's possible.

"John always accompanies me on these excursions," he says softly, a few seconds later.

Yuri plucks a grape from his own plate and eats it. Chews. Nods as he chews. Swallows, then speaks.

"That's true. He does. But we discussed how I'd like to start seeing you alone during our last session. Do you remember the reasons for that request? Do you understand why I felt that might be a good idea?"

Sherlock freezes up more so, if that's possible.

"Sherlock?," Yuri tries again, looking patiently in Sherlock's direction.

"Yes," Sherlock replies evenly and it's unclear what he's saying 'yes' to, really. He's only offering the
bare minimum in his speech, now. Short, clipped sentences - a few words at a time. I suspect if he
spoke too much, the anxiety would be revealed in tremulous speech and a shakiness when he talked,
and that he's trying to disguise his anxiety by reign ing in how much he reveals.

"Yes? Yes you remember the reasons for that request, or yes - you agree that it's a good idea?"

Sherlock tugs at one of his gloves. Not because he's hot, I suspect; more to do with the fact that he
wants to keep his attention focused on anything that is removed, in some form, from this line of
questioning.

"There is nothing I need to discuss with you that I cannot discuss in John's presence."

Yuri pushes back a frown, aiming for equanimity.

"But you do remember why I felt it might be a good idea to test out a few sessions, alone?"

Sherlock is currently the colour of milk, and I hate that this - not criminals intent on poisoning him,
not bullying co-workers at the Yard, not the cruel speech of those who don't 'get' him, but a kind
psychiatrist asking wholly carefully crafted sentences - could bring out such fear and anticipation of
bad things, of dark things.

"I never said I agreed with your assessment," Sherlock all but breathes. "I never said - I never gave
any indication."

And he stops talking then. Breaks off. His body is clad with layers upon layers of clothing. But if we
stripped those layers away, I'm sure we'd see a rapid inhalation and exhalation of his lungs. The fear
of his mind made evident in his breath, the tensing of his flesh.

"Why is John here today, Sherlock?", Yuri tries. "Did you refuse to come without him?"

The question so bare-bones, so in-his-face, that it leaves little room for Sherlock to hide. It leaves no
room for shelter in words and meandering thoughts and displaced ideas. It's too blunt for that.

Sherlock swallows and the sound is painfully loud in the small space. The loudness of the sound
makes me feel oddly disconnected. Far more than I would have thought. And that's the thing about
emotions, isn't it? They attach to singular events, cuts of memory, as if the memory of life is film, and
one sound, one colourful ream of film, one scent - can have such weighted meaning. More, perhaps,
than a host of cruelties and injustices inflicted upon the body for years at a time.

Or perhaps the body attaches meaning and significance to a short-hand version of expression. A
look, something of a nanosecond, something that barely seems to have anything of lasting impact -
and that encapsulates an entire emotion. And eventually perhaps becomes a mascot for an entire
disorder. Those little catches and splinters of life, so watered down, represent years of hell. Years of
suffering, of grief, of bitterest solitude, of starvation. Of being alone and engaging in painful things,
with few people ever comprehending the depth or seriousness of the situation.

And all those days of personal suffering get lost in a tide of bleached memory. Days of restricting
what he ate, and doing sit ups in his room when I could not see and as such not intervene. Until his
spine was bruised and blackened, and until the skin came off and the surrounding flesh began to scar.
And those moments become secondary in the scheme of his pain, as something seemingly
innocuous. The bruising looked bad, and still does, but it's just a cover for something I will never be
able to take in with my sight, which is obviously much worse.

His being here, in relative safety, among people who want him to get better? That seems to fill him
with a type of nameless dread. He's currently among people who want the best for him, and he's
fucking terrified.

It's just so wrong.

Which he knows, which he must know.

But his anxiety isn't lessened in that knowledge. In some strange, unfathomable manner - it's all the worse for the knowledge, perhaps.

"I didn't refuse. I would have attended this session even if John hadn't accompanied me," he mutters at last, brow flexing into something that almost looks like confusion.

"You would have?," Yuri says calmly, looking at me quickly, then back to Sherlock.

Sherlock nods. "Yes, I would have. I made a promise to John, to try. I'm trying to uphold that promise," he whispers, and damn it. I want to hug him. It's not the right time to do so, but I want to offer him that little bit of surface strength.

Yuri takes a sip of his beverage, organizes some of the paper work he seemingly has printed out for us, and then inquires, "So if I felt that maybe John should leave for a bit - perhaps go for a short walk around the block while we continued our session - you'd be alright with that?"


"I wanted to say something," Sherlock eventually mumbles, finally removing the other glove. Laying both on his lap. "I didn't want to have to say the same thing twice, to you both. With John here, I only have to say it once."

Yuri looks surprised, and his eyes narrow slightly.

"Alright," he responds tentatively. "What did you want to say to us?"

Sherlock stills, an odd smile gracing his mouth as he flexes his fingers back and forth. The bones pop and then recede through his flesh with the movement, like ripples in a pond.

"I'm not suicidal," he says thickly. "I don't even think I was suicidal - then. That night."

Yuri is watching Sherlock intently.

"You mean when you took the morphine?"

Sherlock nods, but the motion is so regimented and small that it's barely much of a nod at all.

"Why do you feel that you are not suicidal? Because you don't want to kill yourself?"

Sherlock is studying his fingers. The tips are red and the cuticles look bitten.

"I don't want to kill myself," he whispers.

"Is that what you think being suicidal is in its entirety? Wanting to kill yourself?"

Sherlock frowns, looks off-put.

"Of course," he replies. "That's what it means to be suicidal. Wanting to die. Conceptualizing how and when you will die, by your own hand. Planning it. Committing it is following through on those plans."
Yuri looks over to me, catches my head, shakes his head softly. 'No.'

No.

And no to what?

No to *what*?

"I have a supposition. Just - hear me out," Yuri starts, pushing his plate off to the side. "Do you have a friend other than John that we can use for an example? You don't have to tell me their full name, if you feel uncomfortable doing so. But if you can provide a name which is a placeholder for someone who matters to you, that would be important."

Sherlock squirms in his seat.

"Molly," he breathes. "I have a friend - I guess she might consider me a friend - named Molly."

Yuri gives a very terse, encouraging smile. It's quick and bright. Reflexive.

"Do you see Molly most days?"

Sherlock hesitates.

"No. Not most days, not now."

"Alright. Let's say that a month ago you saw Molly. She seemed alright. A little despondent perhaps. Not quite herself. Not overtly weepy or sad to any considerable degree, but just preoccupied and perhaps more somber than usual. Would you be concerned?"

Sherlock hesitates.

"I don't know. I mean, if she seemed to be down for an extended period of time, perhaps."

I look up, startled. Not because I truly have ever believed that Sherlock lacks compassion. Only that the admittance of his compassion is something he's always tried to deny.

"Now, let's say a couple more months go by - and Molly loses weight. Far too much. Would you consider her potentially suicidal based on this alone?"

Sherlock's feet are tapping restlessly against the parquet. I can't help but wonder if he's aware of this fact.

"I'd have no way of knowing if she would be entertaining suicidal ideas, no."

Yuri nods, his face serious, cocked to the side.

"What if Molly started speeding while driving? Started drinking to excess, let's say. Started putting herself into risky situations, whereby she had a much greater chance of getting seriously hurt. Would she be potentially suicidal in your eyes then? If she were engaging in not one, but a multitude of behaviours that could lead to her getting very, very hurt? That most likely, statistically, would eventually lead her to a very bad place?"

Sherlock's eyes squeeze shut.

"I'd think she wasn't taking care of herself. I would be concerned. But I would have no way -," and he stops vocalizing his statement.
"So suicidal behaviours are essentially what? To you?"

The tapping stops, and Sherlock sighs his rattled sigh.

"When a person takes definite, permanent steps to end their life."

Yuri jots something down on one of his canary yellow pads.

"Definite steps? Can you give me an example of a 'definite step'?"

Sherlock scratches his wrists. Digs deeply, as the flesh turns a shade of sun-burnt pink.

"Slicing through your radial artery. Shooting yourself in the head. Hanging yourself," he grits out. "Taking arsenic! Any of the above, Yuri!"

His breath is coming in rapid pulses, and he slips his scarf off from around his neck with misplaced agitation. In the next moment, Yuri looks over, his eyes settling in on the purple bruising, which has now slipped down a notch into something bluish and tinged with green mottling.

Sherlock suddenly realizes his mistake, and goes to re-affix the scarf, and I shoot Yuri a look. A 'please don't let this go' look.

Which the psychiatrist obviously receives, as he nods to me, his eyes radiating a sort of severity I haven't yet seen before, and he gets up from his chair and walks around the desk. Comes to sit down in the chair opposing Sherlock's own. Looks at Sherlock. Looks Sherlock in the eye, but doesn't mention the bruising of his neck.

No.

Instead, he asks: "Do you want to hear my definition for what it means to be suicidal?"

Sherlock's lips come and dart out, like one of those bolting lizards that race out from under desert rocks - dashing for a bit of food or water, only to retreat once again to the quietude of their shadowed homes.

"Alright," Sherlock says hesitantly. As if Yuri has just asked a trick question - a layered beast with no true 'correct' answer.

Yuri removes his glasses. Wipes at his eyes, then wipes at the lenses before pushing the glasses back over his nose. He's quiet for a few seconds, composing his words.

"I believe that, yes, a person commits suicide when they - as you say - slice through their arteries with deliberation. When they shoot themselves in the head. When they jump in front of a train. They are committing the last action in a frequently drawn-out procession of actions which all play vital, if incremental roles, leading to their last moment on earth. To their own premature death. But that is how I define committing suicide, Sherlock. Feeling suicidal is far more layered in my estimation. Having a draw towards suicidal thoughts starts with smaller actions. Actions which, taken in momentary isolation, might never lead to death at all."

Sherlock studies Yuri from the corner of his vision, dark hair splashing over his eyes, over his pale skin.

"I believe that a spectrum exists to suicidality, just as there might be a spectrum to everything in life. As a psychiatrist, we speak of spectrums and bell curves when discussing intelligence, when discussing matters relating to introversion and extroversion, when discussing PDD disorders. We
know that even sexual expression itself frequently exists in a layered and fluid dynamic. That most of what we see in therapy sessions is not going to present in discrete, binary displays."

Sherlock picks up his tumbler of sparkling water. Takes a greedy sip. Holds the tumbler in both hands for a few stressed seconds.

"It would be easier if it did," he mutters, finally replacing his glass with trembling hands. "If we presented in assured units. Something solid. Something which can't be taken away easily."

I feel a weird tightness in my stomach. A brief, fluttering awareness of pain.

Yuri inclines his head in agreement and then seems to fully register Sherlock's words. Seems to be aware of just how revealing those words are in their unguarded totality.

"Perhaps it would make things easier diagnostically. However, I don't believe that life itself would be easier if things were black and white. I think it would make certain situations more haunting, in their immobility. In their fixed nature. There would be less of a chance of fixing the hurtful things. In reducing our pain, perhaps."

Sherlock's mouth warps into the slightest, smallest, irrepressible frown.

"I'm not *in* pain!," he finally utters in whispered harshness, the individual words almost shrill. "I wish you both would stop talking down to me like I was some pathetic child! I don't need your condescension: I'm not stupid, and I'm not weak!"

A ripple of shock pulses through my head, and I can't help but make my position known.

I try to make eye contact with Sherlock, but his eyes scan the floors, the wood paneling. His eyes studiously seek out patterns and objects, and obviously avoid connection with my own line of sight.

"I've never thought you were weak, and I never will. And how could anyone in their right mind think you are less than brilliant, Sherlock?," I ask, almost irritated that he's digging it out of me.

Thin arms come around and slowly dislodge the blue greatcoat. His arms are thinner than I remember, even accounting for the modest weight gain of the last half week. Next: a flurry of motion, and the scarf is slowly displaced and set aside. I see it as an un-vocalized challenge. An anger put on display, and the bruising now on trial.

Yuri is quiet during this exchange, then slowly passes over a file folder to Sherlock.

"You've already played this trick on me!," he spits out, stress lining his face.

A sad shake of the head, and Yuri's mouth quirks into something imploring.

"This isn't your file. This isn't a file for anyone you know."

Sherlock slowly opens the folder, pulls out several photos. Stares at the first few, his eyes shifting in perplexed anxiety before he passes me a couple pages.

There is no name attached to the file - just images. The first photo is of a child's arms, skeletal and scarred. A black jelly bracelet on one small wrist. The forearms covered in dozens upon dozens of various thin scars. Short, controlled nicks. Most of the scars are white, but some are obviously newer
injuries and still stand out as a stark purple-pink against a backdrop of ashen skin. The body looks as if it's that of a young adolescent.

"I don't understand," Sherlock mumbles. "Was this one of your patients?"

Yuri doesn't respond immediately.

"Those are photos of a case I was asked to consult on. After Adam died, his parents created a fund in his memory and made these images publicly accessible. They wanted to raise awareness about his condition. These images are from their own website on recognizing suicidal ideation in adolescents."

Sherlock traces the lines on the photo, and subconsciously seems to withdraw. Pulls at the cuffs of his sweater as if to cover up his own wrists.

"How did he die?," I ask suddenly. Not knowing what photos are still to come, and not knowing if I want to be presented with certain images given how I am currently feeling.

Yuri sighs, deeply. Almost resignedly.

"Boerhaave Syndrome. Adam's esophagus ruptured. He was bulimic, and had been purging for years. Since the age of 10, actually. One day, during a violent purging session, the intraesophageal pressure increased to such a degree that he went into shock and died within an hour. But not before experiencing excruciating abdominal and thoracic pain."

Sherlock's mouth pinches up tightly, his eyes darker and angry. He pushes the photos away violently.

"You said his parents created a website to address his suicide. But this was an accident. His death was accidental!," he breathes, looking discomfited.

The psychiatrist holds out a hand for the folder, and Sherlock hurriedly hands back the photographs.

"Adam was a very good person. Perfectionistic, a brilliant dancer, self-deprecating. He was witty, and unfailingly kind. Kind to everyone in the world, aside from himself. When it came to matters of the self, he was very cruel. And Sherlock? You're right - he never saw his death coming, I don't think. He died at the age of 13. At a dance studio, following a class. Did he wake up that morning, expecting to die before the day was out? No, I don't think he did. But nothing about his death was accidental."

Sherlock looks up hotly, his eyes flashing in bitterness.

"Oh, I see! He was a child, but even so - you couldn't treat him! Couldn't save him! So you want to blame him for his own tragic death, is that it?"

The jab is cruel, and Yuri's small intake of breath tears from his lungs as if he's shocked. When he removes his glasses this time, he doesn't clean the lenses and put them back on. Instead, he folds them up and places them off to the corner on his desk, his face looking brittle and tired.

"You're right; I couldn't save him. I knew Adam was sick, and I knew he was purging; I had spent months talking to him by that point, and three weeks before he was to receive inpatient care for his problems - he passed away. It *was* tragic, Sherlock, all the more so as he never intended to die."

Sherlock looks somewhat mollified, and settles into a more reserved placidity.

"I have never believed that those who are suicidal start out actively wanting to die," Yuri says more
I glance at Sherlock and see his posturing change into something tight and stressed as Yuri's words finally register.

Because that's how he nearly died, through his own overtaking of need. His own painful selection of tools, his own undeniable self-violence and his own impulsivity.

And just as I know he's aware of what he did - the enormity of what he almost achieved - I also suspect that his impulsive nature scares him, still. That he's scared not only by what he almost did, but the potential of what he could still do if those feelings were ever to make a reappearance.

"I called the ambulance! I wasn't trying to hurt myself. I was just so-," Sherlock stops speaking abruptly, his eyes flashing to hold my own for the first time since the session began. His fingertips have come to rest along his throat, and press lightly against the discolouration from injuries he still won't discuss.

It makes me want to wince.

"You were 'just so' what?" I rush, frustrated. "You were just so WHAT, Sherlock?"

Sherlock looks at me strangely, almost imploringly, before glancing up and over my head. He finally settles his vision on a bust enclosed in a glass partition on Yuri's bookcase. The marble of the sculpture is lit up by an internal halogen - on the underside of the shelving - and the cherry wood creates a heated glow about the figurine not unlike a burst of red sunlight.

In a moment of inverted symbolism, I see the spark of Sherlock's own inner fire - as expressed in his unwavering protest - start to wane. A notching down into something so exhausted that even pretending to be okay probably seems daunting by this point.

"Aren't you tired? Don't you want to stop feeling like this?" I plead.

Sherlock's eyelids have drooped down to rest at half mast. His fatigue is palatable.

"Sherlock," I try again. I never will stop trying. "You asked me to come to this session, so I did. You told Yuri that you had something you wanted to say to us both, yet even so you're still holding back."

My friend coughs and the sound is constricted. Sickly and choleric.

I nudge my chair closer to his own until I've cut into his line of sight.

"You have to let it go. Whatever it is, whatever is going around and around in your mind - you have to let it go. Give it to us. And if you can't do that, just give it to *me*. I can carry it for a bit. I promise."

Pale blue eyes, the colour of early winter frost, rise up and hold my own.

"I'm very angry," Sherlock exhalles, body finally settling into a muted pose, "I'm very angry at what you said!"

My mind jolts to attention, scouring through compiled memories. Our recent interactions. And that could be so many things, really - so many things I've said. Hell, I might have said something..."
inadvertently hurtful well before I even knew he was sick.

"When?," I request feebly, as my face prickles with heat. "Is this about what I said during the case? When you didn't want to take the case? Before Toby?"

"No! It's not about that!," Sherlock seethes, although there is something newly taut in his anger that makes me think that, yes, he's royally pissed at me for those words, too.

"Then what? What did I say? When? I can't make something better if I don't know what I did that upset you so much in the first place!"

Pale hands race to his hair, tug at his strands. His flesh blanches around the area of impact, and I resist an impulse to hold him down.

"That night! Before I left! You said what he said, right before-," and his voice is thick and painful. "And so I went through with it, for him. I did it all for him! Told myself it was okay, because he was my friend. And Mycroft too, not even getting it! Thinks he's so smart, but he doesn't understand! No one does! Telling me it was all okay, because I loved him, and then your words! You can speak about my fear in such easy tones, can't you John? Because how it feels to me is so alien to you, isn't it? God - do you have any idea what you did?"

Sherlock gets up abruptly, and with strange awareness I realize he's shaking. I suddenly see him so brightly, and in such awful clarity: his eyes are full and glistening, his cheeks mapped by wetness. Before I can do anything - before I can respond - reach out, touch him, try to make this right (make this right, John!) - he shuffles from the room.

"Sherlock," I bite out, not knowing what else I can say. What I honestly *should* say in order to fix whatever it is that I've done.

His gloves, greatcoat and his scarf remain in his chair, but he departs all the same - jetting from the room in nothing more than his cardigan and jeans.

Yuri intercedes a moment later - pulling on his winter jacket, quickly reaching for his shoes - just as we both hear the door to the house rattle shut with a weak slam.

"Stay here," I'm informed briskly while nausea bubbles up in my gut. "I'll go and make sure he's okay."

"Yuri, I don't know what he's talking about! Not really! I know he's hurt, but I don't really know what I *did*."

The psychiatrist finishes knotting his laces, and gives me a compassionate look.

"This isn't about you, John. This is about what others have done to him; things he can't easily talk about. You're probably little more than a placeholder for his rage right now, but you're not the cause of it."

I sit back down in my chair numbly, feeling lost.

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After a few minutes, I extricate myself from the chair. Fiddle with the volume on my phone. Ensure the blasted thing is on.

It is on. Only neither Sherlock nor Yuri have contacted me.
Not sure if that's a good sign or not.

A weeding sense of personal failure laps about me.

I feel so done in. So angry with myself, yes, but also with the entire bloody situation.

So I walk around the perimeter of Yuri's home office, glancing at the book titles on his shelf, study the framed photos of him and his husband, Patrick. Try to distract myself in the happiness of others, and let my gaze dance over about 20 years worth of archived happenings. The start of a relationship, it's progression. A photo of a marriage ceremony. Photos of a tropical climate.

And then something grabs my attention and I scour my sight back to the first few photos. Study the photographs in more fervent inspection.

Yuri, 20 years younger, maybe more. His husband - Patrick - equally young. Curly blond hair, and lively eyes. But the photo is strange.

Yuri looks fine. Young, but healthy.

Patrick looks excessively lean, skinny. His face contorted by dark shadows, his expression severe.

I quickly study the other photographs, and see a variation in weight, in size. The oldest photographs are the most marked, and the man in these photos looks the sickest. In one, he's wearing a red polo shirt, and his face is the colour of Elmer's glue. His green eyes marred by deep under-eye shadowing.

Faster now, my gaze fights to decode the images.

A form of cancer? Leukemia, perhaps?

On the far left of the bookshelves, top row, there's a photo of Yuri and Patrick in their mid 20's; Patrick looks as if he's reclining in a chair. His smile is frail. This photo is different from the others: it's housed in a small frame and inscribed with a message under the bronze borders. I squint to read the message, distantly aware that I shouldn't be doing this at all.

"There is no magic cure, no making it all go away forever.

There are only small steps upward; an easier day, an unexpected laugh

a mirror that doesn't matter anymore."

In a rush of horrible understanding I pull back - ashamed of my trespassing for a completely different reason now, yet equally calmed by something even more resoundingly clear: Yuri knows what I'm going through.

He knows exactly how this feels.

But so much more importantly, he knows what it's like to go through this ache with someone he loves, and to reach the other side. A place - a terminus - where things are so much better.

A place where life is free of chronic illness; where the person he loves is healed.

And when I finally sit back down in my seat, and wait for Yuri and Sherlock's return, it's not so much with the faint overwhelm of Sherlock's ire or Yuri's admonishments - but a tremulous hope that everything Sherlock has ever needed is within his grasp - right here in this office.
"I did it all to myself."

Chapter Summary

AN: This chapter is about Sherlock's realization that what he's feeling isn't some base anger over people who may have wounded him once, or twice, or even repeatedly. But a deeper and darker sense of injustice at what he feels he's lost forever. And how likely is it that such anger would have been properly vented, especially when Sherlock is so adept at donning masks and playing roles and considers himself bad at 'getting emotions'?

WARNINGS: for conceptualizations and musings on self-harm. Rather detailed emotionality and speech about psychological duress. Nothing too involved, and really - this entire story deals with self-harm as an undercurrent focus - but this chapter is slightly more detailed on the subject. So proceed with caution.

And we are back to: SHERLOCK'S POV

My feet burn against the icy pavement, and I remember this fact: that coldness, at first, can often feel like a biting heat.

And sometimes, too, the first shock of glass doesn't feel like a slice, but again like heat.

Sometimes the pain doesn't come for an obscenely long time following an injury; more so if the injury is sharp and decisive and made by my own hand, in rage.

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When my skin opens up, I sometimes feel a glowing ember of promise in the pain that has yet to arrive.

But here's the thing that I worry about, sometimes.

The thing I am concerned no one else but me alone feels.

When I inflict pain onto myself, it sometimes feels like a warmth I need.

It doesn't hurt like when someone else wounds me.

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Not initially, anyway.

Initially the pain is so faint that the sensation of burnt warmth is stronger. And then I realize that it actually feels *good* - that strange warmth. That slicing heat, by my own hand.

Because no one is going to give you the heat that you need, anyway.

You have to provide that for yourself.

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I cannot have been the only eight year old to have taken a straight razor to my skin, and to have cut open geometric patterns along my legs.

It is not possible that this only ever happened to me. It is not possible that no one else escaped such a life.

Is it?

No, of course not.

Life can be cruel. People are cruel.

Being a detective has taught me that.

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It feels impossible that others could not have sought out the heat and the lines and the geometric redness, too.

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The pain becomes a line of crimson that wells up to form a river along my arm, or along my leg, or along territories of flesh far more embarrassing to address, and far more sensitive in their reception of aggression. My inner thighs, and higher still. Places so risky, so revealing - that I've been made hot-faced by the meaning of it all.

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I have always been so terribly cold.

Is that perhaps why I am drawn to pain?

Because my body and brain associate pain with heat, and heat with comfort?

For the heat of it? The burn of it as it rouses within me something that paradoxically doesn't hurt - never hurts, exactly - but feels controlled and assured and regimented?

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After a few minutes of running, I realize that my arms and cheeks feel frosty.

It's early December and the air nips at my nose and my lungs when I inhale too quickly, so I cover my mouth with my hand.

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I've just run down three streets in my socks.

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I realize, next, that I've pounded the gravel into the soles of my feet, which sting and feel wet.

So I look down at my feet, and lift up each sole. Inspect the underside.

My right foot looks as if it's blotted up red paint.

(It's been scratched; probably on a rock.)
I am not sure when that actually happened.

But something has happened, yet again. And it's something I didn't really feel in totality until after I saw the blood.

I certainly didn't feel the pain.

But I rarely do.

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I come to rest under a large cluster of trees near a stop sign.

I'm already feeling chilled, and regret (yet again) my impulsive stupidity.

I always regret it, but rarely seem to be able to avoid succumbing to my mercurial happenings. These mindless ventures out towards something. Something ill-defined.

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It's not that I have to run away from others.

It's that I have to run away from myself.

That's the real insanity.

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The only thing I can trust and look to for guidance and support are facts. Quantifiable, unchanging data.

Not people, not faces with red cheeks and kind words, because those words can turn cruel without notice.

And never subjective analysis. Not philosophy, nor poetry, nor literature. I can study these subjects academically, and use an awareness of their component parts to help me better make sense of others.

Yet what I need is something that is fixed and firm and grounding. A solidity I can grasp, a certitude I can read in science manuals, in case reports.

The analysis of 240 different kinds of tobacco ash is a safer and realer state of existence for me than one where John loves me at all.

Love is far too wispy. Far too able to shift and depart.

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When I was two and a half, I took a bright orange crayon - the colour of a pumpkin - and I scrawled the word "Lost" on Mycroft's school planner.

LOST.

I was a toddler, and that was the first word I knew how to spell.

That was the first word that - in a definitional sense - owned me.

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I finally reach the end of the stretch of sidewalk, and glance across the road. The houses here are brick and vine-trellised and I find that something inside me wants to curl up under one of the eaves while I try to push all the stuffing back inside my body. The stuffing that has come out of my mouth, run down my shirt, spilled from my eyes so embarrassingly.

It's not a stuffing anyone can actually see, to be sure.

But people more receptive to emotions always seem to feel it.

It's a foamy, sad, unreal pathetic-ness that I feel lives inside me.

And when it leaves my body, like it did a few minutes ago, the inside of my being feels less padded and less numb, and for that alone: far less safe.

Sometimes I think that there is nothing really wrong with me.

Really awful things have happened to me, to be sure.

I know this intellectually.

I can itemize the order of severity in my head.

I can tell myself that there is a twisted and dark wrongness in what happened.

I can remember being a child, and I can remember when he made me bleed, and I can itemize this as a 11 (out of a possible 10) for acts of perversity.

But I can also remember being slightly older, and holding a shaving razor in the palm of my hand, and trying to grasp what the word 'alive' meant.

And cutting myself to see if I could feel the word 'resplendent.'

Realizing that even if I couldn't spell it with any certainty, I could know what resplendence felt like.

(It felt like heat, when seconds earlier you had only felt coldness.)

"Resplendence" felt like taking back something that should have always been yours.

And even if you were cutting yourself with a razor blade in the downstairs guest bathroom with the lights off, clad in nothing at all but your underpants because you were well aware of how terribly angry the others would be if they knew what you doing - it still felt like a resplendent sort of lashing back against those that wanted to harm you.

It's only later, as an adult, that this very memory fills you with something that you, upon contemplation, might deem as "sadness."

Because you are then in a position whereby you must ask: if they knew about your proposal of turned-in defiance, and anger redirected back onto your own searing body, would they have even cared?

And you realize they wouldn't have cared. Not about the pain of it, anyway.

And that's such a low and disarming thought to hold in your mind.
That you scarcely mattered to anyone at all.

Ironically, it was something I would later seek to hide from anyone who might have been able to help me.

Because that's what it means to be enslaved by fear.

That's what slavery is...

Being a slave means being afraid.

Terrible mind-chilling fear? That is the greatest and most controlling form of slavery, I think.

It means that you are afraid of even the moments you spend in solitude, once they have departed. You are afraid in such a way that you need to blot out the noise and colour of the external world at all times, not only when you feel preyed upon. You need to get rid of the noises of others, and curl inwards like a wounded animal.

That even once they retreat, the attack continues in your own mind.

There is no rest time, but perpetual alert and guarded suffering.

That's my definition of slavery.

Yuri asked me awhile ago if I could fully accept how badly I had been hurt when I was a child.

And if I could be honest with him, with John - and most of all, with myself - about how much my body had registered this apparent 'hurt'.

I had sat tight-lipped (read: ashamed) in his office.

I had told him that I didn't feel pain when I thought of my past.

That it didn't matter now. Because the past was gone.

The past was dead.

It was never meant to be for me, anyway. Some idealistic Norman Rockwell childhood?

Did I honestly think that was something that I could have ever had in any time-line?

Of course not.

So why should it hurt? Why should the excessive displays of a dramatically indulged childhood - of unabashed trust and stupidity heralded as naiveté - why should that even matter to me, anyway?

I was a scientist, and as such - I only came into my own being, fully and with open interest, once I left the tiresome hurt of my childhood in the past.

Once I had killed it in my own mind, perhaps.

That's what childhood came to mean to me, I guess.
Something that required a strong, dedicated acceptance of developmental-euthanasia.

Because I can accept at some level that being small and vulnerable was something that I needed to snuff out.

Needed to put down.

Like Redbeard, with his cancer.

It's what you do when someone is suffering.

Even if that someone is you.

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Right now I want to close my eyes and feel warmth, and cease my running and stop the physical burning in my lungs.

So I press against the metallic cross-walk sign. Press the button. Ignore the shuffled, scraping sound from behind me.

"Sherlock!" the voice pants out. This person has raced. Run after me.

It's not John's voice, however.

It's Yuri's.

I turn around slowly, the heat of my flesh melting the frost on the sidewalk beneath the soles of my feet.

Making my feet start to writhe with an ache of cold and the slight sting of where I've cut my sole.

"Sherlock," Yuri rushes forward - his hands outwards. Splayed in some laughable and almost-alien gesture of peace.

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"Stop, Sherlock. Please stop," Yuri pants - out of breath - now pacing closer and closer to where I've crouched down.

I look past his face - past his normal face and his normal, understandable expressiveness - and I look at the house besides me.

The roan brick house. The frost on the windows. The lace curtains.

There is a marmalade cat lurking near the frosted glass, holding me in her sight.

And what of that little home?

Would there be a fire burning inside in a fireplace? A heat that was safe in how it enveloped a person?

Not the heat that I bring to my body with rage and neglect and sharp things? But a friendly and enveloping warmth? Accompanied by the scents of cooked food, and the sounds of normal family life?
And is it so wrong to want the heat of a home? One that is tied to a number on the door, rusted and long-standing?

A number you know is your number, your place of purpose and safety in a disorganized universe?

Is it so wrong to want those things?

"Are you going to come back with me without a fight?," Yuri asks in utter seriousness, and my mouth quips up in amusement.

Without a fight?

Without a FIGHT?

I snort, my teeth cutting into my lip because I can't help but find such a vocalization to be anything other than hilarious.

And as I laugh, I see Yuri's face cloud in concern.

"Because I can take the next step, Sherlock, if I deem it necessary. I can call for emergency aid, if you can't come back on your own."

In his left hand, I can see his black mobile phone.

My mind locks in on his phone; it morphs and becomes altered in my brain.

It becomes a snake, and it hisses with the promise of "reigning me in."

Because I am unwell, he'd say.

That's how he'd account for the wandering paths my brain takes.

My creative divergence from normalcy or predictability.

"Why are you doing this to me?!," I grit out suddenly, the humor leaving as quickly as the heat.

Because it's not like I asked him to follow me.

And I already assured him - assured them both - that I wasn't suicidal.

I always feel it deep down. Under the cold masquerading as heat.

It's always there.

My rage.

Yuri is currently watching me in a manner I don't appreciate.

Because he feels that I am the very thing I have repeatedly told John I am not.

Because he thinks that I am sick.
S-I-C-K.

And deep-down, sometimes, I wonder if he's right.

"I am not doing anything to you, Sherlock. Neither is John."

And did I ask this question of him?

Did I really?

My body is drawn to a rhythmic motion, and always has been in times of personal stress.

But I refrain now; it would look like a stim.

It would look odd and something worthy of yet another diagnosis.

So I quell the impulse to rock.

"Can you leave me alone, please?" I ask carefully, my throat tight.

Yuri's breath hitches, and he comes to sit down besides me on the sidewalk pavement, outside the little roan house with the number "417 Ashkin" on the door.

His fingers reach out and grasp my own.

A moment later I realize his actions have a narrower focus; an end-goal distinct from merely offering me comfort.

His fingers encircle my wrist. His fingers press against my wrist, and take my pulse.

"Your heart is beating incredibly quickly. Too quickly."

I pull my hand away from him, upset.

I feel used somehow, even as I know I am being ridiculous.

"Please go away," I bite out.

I want to stare up at my little 417 Ashkin home, and study the forms in the windows and the placement of the plant life that the homeowners have selected for the living room and watch as the marmalade cat cozies up to the window ledge and falls into a napping state.

I want to imagine what it could feel like to grow up from the time I am very small and to live here throughout all my early years, and to emerge from childhood without euthanasia on my mind.

In essence, to grow up and to be okay.

How the wood paneling would appear and feel as you walked over it each morning, and how the objects would singe into your memory with comforting familiarity. How the decorations of the house would become a background hum in your mind, and how the white-painted bathroom with the lemon-yellow soap would smell like cleanliness, and not of threats.

Perhaps there would even be a bedroom inhabited by a little boy who liked reading books about pirates, or poisonous plants, or chemistry.
Just as I did when I was a child; when I sketched with charcoal pencils and painted with water colours.

I didn't know then, of course, that what I was actually painting were dreams.

Impossibilities.

="/""I can't go away, Sherlock," Yuri says a moment later, and I am connected enough to the moment to know that he feels what John would call "empathy" for me.

"Why can't you?," I whisper.

The cat has awoken and has now moved away from the window, and has rustled the lace-detailed curtains in the process.

In my mind's eye, a little boy of about three years has now propped himself up against a lounge chair and is looking out towards me over the crazed-white patch of frosted winter grass.

In his hand, he's holding onto a stuffed bear - the colour of molasses. One amber eye of the toy is lost, but he loves it all the more because it's injured.

He has to; it's only right.

The teddy bear hits the window's edge, and the little boy reaches down - out of sight - for his friend.

I name the little boy Sherrinford, and urge him to remain seated with the marmalade cat for just a while longer.

Even if I can no longer see him.

Even if I could never really see him, as such.

"I can't leave for several reasons. The most pressing being that it's below freezing, and you're dressed in nothing more than jeans and a cardigan. You're not even wearing shoes, Sherlock. You need to return to the house."

="/""Voices hiss a warning that I've always heard under the surface of my outwards form - below the atrium of my heart, the pleural lining of my lungs.

A voice throughout my whole body, louder in it's silent rantings than John's pleadings and Mycroft's offerings and bribes.

And, of course, no one else could have ever heard it.

The voices were only meant for one person.

The voices were only ever meant for me, alone.

="/""Yuri suddenly removed his jacket, and holds it out to me.
"Put this on. Now," he responds gruffly, and I take the article, stare at it.

He then passes my shoes over to me.

I didn't even realize he had run down the street with them, but obviously he had - since there they are with him, in his arms, right now.

Right in front of me.

Yuri looks past me, his eyes fixing on something, and he stands.

Holds out his hand for me to take.

"Get up, Sherlock. Get up off the ground."

I stare at him, tiredly.

Get up...

Get up off the ground.

And is that what I am doing, anyhow?

"I'm not even cold," I mumble, resignedly.

I don't know where this mood is coming from - this sudden apathy.

And I don't know why I am lying about not feeling cold, either.

I am freezing.

I don't recall a time when I haven't been terribly, infuriatingly cold.

I want water bottles and hot tea and a thousand layers.

I need the comfort of feeling and being warm enough, and I am aware of this.

But I don't let myself have this.

And I don't know why.

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Yuri points at a blinking sign infused with neon halogens, and so I follow his glancing. See an image of a crow against a blood-red moon.

"Charley Crow's", the sign reads, the letters electric yellow, the crow cartoon soot-black.

Underneath the glowing sign front, a smaller sign reads: "Thick-cut chips. Piping hot burgers. Ice-cream Floats. Brooklyn-inspired Egg Creams...and more! Come on in and see for yourself what all the crowing is about!"

The lower font is brown and orange and a retro cartoon crow winks at me. The wink is nearly eternal, because the sign is illuminated by lights that pulse in and out to 'animate' the cartoon in red-expressiveness. A red cartoon eye opens, then winks shuts, and progresses to do the same thing all over again not a moment later, and then again the moment following, and so on. Ad infinitum.
A thought assails me, foreign and torn from a reality I cannot easily place but sense I have, at some point, lived; a cross, illuminated in red electricity, scorching a purpling night-sky.

I shake away the image, feeling disjointed and afraid in my inability to place it's existence.

Because I never went to church as a child (and certainly never when older), and I never believed in God. Beyond that the memory is old and stale, too. I can sense as much. But I can't place it, and as such I cannot organize it, nor attach any context or date or importance to the clip.

It serves only to infuriate me, as do all sense-memories when I can't contextualize the meaning behind their history.

Red religious icons, flickering away in some barely touched dust-filled wing in my Mind Palace?

Well, that's not even the worst of it.

Eerie, perhaps. But not scary in that segmentation alone.

What scares me is that accompanying the red-flickering cross and the night and the wasted sense of hope I can suddenly recall a scent, too. A memory-scent of antiseptic. And a memory-taste of blood.

Blood running down the back of my throat.

And like a rush of water in my head, drowning out the noise of the street - the sound of cars honking, an ambulance a mile off, a creaky Radio Flyer wagon being pulled across the street by a little girl - the past becomes renewed.

Blood - mine! (when? and from my throat? coming up!) and coughing.

Mycroft's voice. Younger, and less deliberate. Less accustomed to precision and put-upon solemnity and devoid of his current smarmy, too-aware-of-himself nature.

'That's it, brother. Just like that. Over the bucket.'

A sense impression, too: Mycroft's arms around my belly, helping me bring up blood into a bucket.

(And it makes no sense! None at all! I never was abused in such a manner. I was never hit!)

Chills roll up my arms, and play a game of gooseflesh snakes and ladders - hopping around my flesh as I try to breathe in the late-autumnal air and determine if I can, indeed, smell heme. Smell iron and metal and the scent of bleach and linen and pain. Smell blood, and wonder why.

Push away the decades-old image of a red, blazing electric cross and wonder when and how and why.

''Get up,'' Yuri repeats, and I do.

I follow him to the edge of the lane, away from 417 Ashkin, and to the periphery of the 1950's themed establishment.

Everything in the restaurant is the inverse of fog. Not misty whiteness, but a misty darkness.

It comforts me, though. It's warm, and dark, and smells like chips, malt vinegar, sarsaparilla, and barbecue sauce.
Yuri ushers me to a seat with plush fabric - and I sink into the padded body of the booth.

I feel warm, dark, enclosed.

I feel better than I did outside, in the white-winter sunlight and the frost.

My hands reach out for a bright red bottle of ketchup on the table, before moving onto a bottle of HP Sauce. Picking that up too. Letting my thumb graze over the sticky bottle. Read the ingredients for something to do. Hear a slight clicking sound. Fingers against plastic.

And I look up.

Yuri instead, appears to be texting.

Undoubtedly, he's texting John.

('OH, Sherlock - the mess you've made.')

I replace the HP sauce and go back to staring at the condiment bottles, and imagine what it would be like to just pick them up with the intention of actually using them. Without the fear of doing so.

Just douse chips with malt vinegar. Ketchup. A smattering of sea salt and lemon.

Eat the damn basket of them.

And not feel sick after.

Not feel agitated.

Not feel the keening need to cry.

Yuri's putting his phone away now.

Gives me a terse smile.

"Warmer?"

I look about the establishment. Catch one of those hackneyed "Keep calm and carry on" posters on the wall.

Feel something sort of quietly doleful in my belly.

Keep calm and carry on.

Over and over again, until you die.

Carry on.

Carry on.

"Yes," I say suddenly, surprising myself. "I'm warmer."

My psychiatrist nods, eyes open. Unguarded.

"Thank you," I whisper. Knowing it's the 'done' thing. "For your coat."

The coat is too short for me. My wrists extend by several inches.
But it heats me up, and in a strange way, I am starting to feel fatigued.

But pleasantly.

Drowsy.

Yuri waves to one of the employees of the restaurant; a man situated at the far side of the restaurant whose currently cleaning up a sticky table. Loading used dishes smudged with Tabasco sauce into a green plastic bucket.

The man saunters over, black apron tied loosely around his waist. Seems to recognize Yuri, and gives a slight smile. Looks quickly to me next, and tries to inconspicuously 'scan' me.

My teeth solidify into a lock-jaw tension, and the man turns his gaze back to Yuri.

I have to give him credit, though; he's fairly adept at pretending he isn't looking, even when he is...

I zip up Yuri's jacket. The loan-jacket. Zip it to my throat, immediately embarrassed.

"Hey Jake," Yuri starts calmly, as if I'm not tensing up awkwardly and not drawing attention to myself.

"I'm wondering if I can put in an order for two baskets of chips. Say, medium for both? And a Coke for myself. Sherlock?," Yuri asks suddenly, "Want something to drink?"

My throat works reflexively.

From times past. So many times, and my answer is rushed. Auto-pilot.


Yuri nods to Jake, then quickly adds. "Can we make that a decaf please, Jake?", while I fight an impulse to squirm in my seat.

*Decaf, please.*

Because I am no longer 'allowed' caffeinated beverages, apparently.

Jake nods, then saunters off to get our Coke, coffee, and two baskets of chips.

I look back down to the smudged table. Little fingerprints cover my end of the plastic-topped furniture. I place my own hands next to the smudges.

My hands dwarf the smaller fossilized markings of a tiny, tiny human and I stare at the record in mixed emotionality.

Realize I feel some rush of faint, unmistakable anger when I consider the reality of the ghost child.

The shadow child.

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The child that had been lurking around me now was, in my mind's eye at least, happy and fat. Gobbling chips and wiping greasy digits on the 1950's themed table-top in impetuous, normal self-abandon.
He was being treated, and someone took him out to an establishment that was "family friendly." Let him make a mess from his high chair. Let him giggle and throw about his food, and gorge himself on junk food.

'Spoiled brat', my mind stresses, sibilant. 'Little fucking fat brat', it adds a moment later.

I know that this sentiment is rather mean.

I know I'm being unfairly and immaturity mean right now.

I know I am also unreasonably angry at the shadow child.

'Spoiled pig.'

I frown at my imaginings, my undeniable bitterness.

My anger edging towards something cruel.

Look back to the white highchair, smeared in condiments. Such a mess.

Such a normal, toddler-mess.

'A toddler,' I hear John's voice intercede. 'Little more than a baby. Really, Sherlock? Really?'

Always so damn reasonable.

'You can't honestly be angry at an innocent toddler, Sherlock,' imagined-John replies patiently when I don't answer. 'Babies never hurt you. Babies never hurt anyone.'

And part of me knows it, too. Maybe even feels it as truth.

But a loud part of me rants and screams inside.

Because I never got away with anything.

Never got away with anything...

Never got away...

Never got...

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never, never, never, never.

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Look back down to the tiny smudged reminders of other childhoods being lived out in real time.

Consider the minuscule little thumb print. The babyish whorls and ridges of the fingerprints.

Realize that I'm torn between envy and an unnameable, swirling mass of emotion.

Then, just as quickly, I erase the fingerprints with my own hands. Wipe away the physical reminders that a child was ever here at all. Wipe away at the greasy palimpsest with serviette paper. Push the mass of paper off to the side of the table, as if it's infectious. As if it's contaminated and could make me sick.
Realize time is passing, and I am not speaking, and Yuri's not speaking.

So I look up, and catch Yuri studying me.

"Don't," I warn, pulling back into my mind.

"Sherlock," he mumbles, looking sad.

"This place is filthy," I vent, aware my emotions are on display. Aware it's worse than that, perhaps: my slipping mind is on display because Yuri's a psychiatrist.

And a damn good one, even if I want to pretend that he's clueless.

"I can get Jake back here to clean the table," he says evenly, reasonably.

I glower at the serviettes.

"I've cleaned the table now," I assure my doctor. Wanting to put my head on the table and close my eyes and sleep.

Yuri goes back to his quiet-routine, and I stare at the table that I've just 'cleaned.' Feel something bite at me, from inside.

Something hurts.

Because I just eradicated 'him.' And he wasn't doing anything wrong, either.

Damnit, damnit, damnit.

"Sherlock," Yuri says softly. "You need to talk to John. Properly. About this thing that is scaring you. Because he can't read minds."

I pick up the ketchup bottle and draw a red smiley face on a serviette. Realize it looks rather furious for a smiley face. Poke at the ketchup with my finger, until the face is blotted out into a red mass.

'It was a fatal-automobile-accident, my dear sir,' my mind supplies, my eyes seizing on all the red, and wanting to think of other topics, other things. Even ridiculous things. 'We're so sorry for your loss, but we couldn't save him.'

I smirk at the napkin, and push that off to the side, too.

"And you can?," I whisper. "What do you even KNOW about it?," I ask rashly, a nanosecond later. "You make these assertions! Like I am not being forthright, like I'm not trying!"

Yuri looks as if he's about to speak, but refrains as our waiter approaches - a Coke in one hand, a black (decaf!) coffee in the other. Both items are deposited in front of us, and I pick mine up greedily. Not hungry, I don't think, and definitely not thirsty - but wanting to hold onto something warm. Something with which I can fidget.

I pick it up, inhale the scent of coffee, and let my lips taste the beverage. It tastes too sweet for two lumps of sugar.

Put it back down, my heart beating furiously.

Two sugars, my ass.
"What have I ever done or said that gives you an impression that I don't think you're trying?," Yuri asks me reasonably, taking a sip of his cola a second later.

I scowl at the coffee mug. It's also fashioned to look like a crow. The beak is somewhat chipped.

This is certainly not an establishment that Mycroft would ever voluntarily enter.

"You don't think I am, though, do you?," I whisper, tentatively, not even asking a question. Not really. "You don't think I am trying at all."

Yuri stops drinking, and places his white tumbler off to the side.

"I definitely do think you are trying. I think you are trying extremely hard," he says evenly, carefully. His eyes try to make connection with mine, and I look away, suddenly embarrassed.

Stare at my mug, not thirsty, not hungry, terribly sad.

"You said," I whisper, looking about for Jake-the-watchful, and realizing he's gone back to the dishroom. "You said I have to talk to John about something. I don't understand-," and my voice breaks off, cleanly. I pause, and reconsider what I need to say. "What is it that you don't think I have shared with John? What do you think I am hiding?," I grit out.

Yuri's eyebrows raise in immediate surprise.

"I don't think it's about trying to hide anything from him, Sherlock. I think it's about fear as to how he'll feel, or how he'll respond. I think it's about rationalizing that it's not a huge source of anxiety for you, and pushing it out of your mind. But I don't feel that's going to work, in the end. It's only going to delay the inevitable."

I nudge my crow coffee mug over to the side of the table.

"Inevitable WHAT?," I stress, anxiety making my voice strident. "There are so many things about my life which would bother John, Yuri. You'll have to clarify."

Yuri takes another sip of his beverage. His eyes squish up in contemplation. Then he lays his hands down against the formica.

"How much have you told him about Victor?," he asks carefully. Deliberately. "Really told him, I mean?"

A sour lump presses against my windpipe.

"I've told him about Victor," I wheeze. "Told him we were together. Even - you know - even like *that*."

Yuri gives me a hard look, unyielding. Not unkind, but too-knowing.

"Like that," he mumbles to himself, looking thrown by my word choice. Glances back up to me. "Have you discussed what he did? How it actually unfolded?"

I shake my head rapidly.

'No, no.'

No.
Take a deep breath.

I'd even eat chips right now, if it meant getting my psychiatrist to shut up.

"Victor didn't 'do' anything to me," I murmur, voice-low. Mostly spoken in my head, with very little exiting my mouth. "I did it all to myself."

Yuri's eying me oddly.

"Sherlock-"

I shake my head in dismissal.

"I did it all to myself."

After that, I am silent, and there is nothing to listen to save for the beeping of a jukebox in the corner, requesting change periodically, and the buzzing hiss of the red signs.
Chapter Summary

A.N: What a hectic last few months. Sickness (and yes, depression) have made many tasks of a non-vital nature especially hard to conquer. Writing has taken a lower-than-ideal priority in my life, but I hope to write more, even daily, in small nuggets (because I do miss writing, and I miss writing this story, in particular). Thank you for your patience, your reviews, and your support.

Warnings: for the typical subject matter. If you’ve read up to this point in the story, you realize what those warnings will be, but to be on the safe side: discussions of abuse, self-harm and trauma.

N.B: In some ways, this chapter represents the greatest strides in psychological growth for Sherlock; although, in other ways, psychological growth can also hurt more than psychological stagnancy – at least initially.

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Oh, we are back to JOHN'S POV.

I don't know how it happens, exactly. Sleep deprivation, most likely.

One minute, I am analyzing the contents of Yuri's bookcase – and feeling haunted in my realization of what I've seen regarding his partner – and the next, I am wandering back to the couch of his home-slash-office space, perusing a book on child abuse.

And there it is, in a grubby red leather-bound tome: words, and even worse – images: a newborn with bruises covering her body, and on the next page – an older child, but not older by much – staring vacantly in my direction in stark black and white.

My eyes sweep over the chapter title, and I feel the breath catch in my throat.

"Reactive Attachment Disorder: Symptoms, Diagnostic Practices, and Treatment."

I let myself read what I feel I must confront.

"Reactive Attachment Disorder is defined as the condition in which individuals have difficulty forming lasting relationships. They often show nearly a complete lack of ability to be genuinely affectionate with others. They typically fail to develop a conscience and do not learn to trust. The proposed causes of Reactive Attachment Disorder are believed to stem from longstanding neglect or severe abuse – most commonly physical or sexual in nature – which impede normal bonding during early childhood. The hypothesis of the risk for the development of RAD is believed to be caused by severe trauma during the first three years of a child's life, with the risk decreasing for each year past this age of development."

I grab my bottle of seltzer water that Yuri had offered me earlier on in the session, and take a sip.

The lemon water tastes sour; the water tastes bitter.
I do not want to read any more, but I feel I must.

I must.

"Attachment Disorder Symptoms include:

* Superficially engaging & charming
* Not affectionate on parents' terms (not 'cuddly')
* Destructive to self, others and material things
* No impulse controls (frequently acts hyperactive)
* Abnormal eating patterns
* Poor peer relationships
* Preoccupation with blood & gore
* Abnormal speech patterns
* Presumptive entitlement issues
* Parents appear hostile and angry

The list goes on, and I almost close the book, when I see the following:

"At the core of the unattached is a deep-seated rage, far beyond normal anger."

Rage.

Of course, rage.

Who wouldn't feel rage if they had survived such trauma?

And then I close the book, and the child with the vacant stare is lost between the pages.

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At some point shortly thereafter, I close my eyes. My eyes are burning.

In all honesty, I haven't slept much since Sherlock returned from the hospital. Part of that was severe anxiety over if I could afford to sleep - if I could afford to let my 'guard' down.

And I want to trust Sherlock. In many respects, I do.

But not when it comes to his safety. Not when it comes to the fact that he's self destructive.

So, for this reason alone, despite what I've just read – I nod off. I doze, and fall into the oddest of dreams, and do not awaken until sometime much later – when the sunlight has diminished, and the study is cast in shadows, the room nearly dark.

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I recover by jolting upright in my chair, momentarily confused. Looking around, I can see a red light flashing on Yuri's answering machine.

It reminds me of a heart rate monitor.

I crack my neck, pad my pockets for my mobile, then turn it on.
2 missed calls.

1 text.

I check the text first. It's from Yuri.

'Heading back now. Sorry for the delay, John. Everything is stable.'

I can respect the fact that Yuri doesn't employ typical niceties by writing that everything is "fine" – and then I rise, turn on the lights, and hurriedly busy myself with covering the red leather bound book under a mound of papers and magazines. It feels safer to gloss over the unsettling works with innocuous things like New Scientist – than to let them stand out in prominent space.

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At quarter past six, they return. Yuri enters first, Sherlock trails behind, shoulders tense, odd look on his face.

The type of expression he'd have if gearing up for a fight, although Yuri – paradoxically - seems composed.

The dynamic feels strange. Off.

And Sherlock refuses to sit down.

"Let's go home;" he mutters to me when I look up at him expectantly, some emotion tingeing his voice. Some emotion I can't quite discern. Not anxiety, really, and neither anger nor aggression either.

More a petulant and withdrawn agitation, perhaps.

"Let's go, John!," Sherlock responds hotly now, turning on his heel, his boots already laced.

He obviously wants to leave, but is expressing his insistence that we do so in a new manner.

One I haven't seen from him yet; not in this context of how he's responded to these sessions, to Yuri, to treatment.

Something's happened, and as Sherlock glides to the door and moves out of my line of sight, I turn to the psychiatrist in question, confused.

"I'll call you later-," he begins.

"Yuri? What-,"

"Later," Yuri replies tersely, mouth pursed. "I promise. For now, I think it's best Sherlock just get home. He needs to decompress."

I find myself stricken with a bout of paranoia, as if Yuri is somehow aware that I've let myself peruse the contents of his bookshelves, or that he knows – again, paranoia - the reality of what I have seen among his personal photos. Then I tell myself that's an asinine thought, since he's far more likely to be concerned about Sherlock, and the tenseness stems from that alone.
"Okay," I mumble, lost – worried - and still so damnably exhausted.

Sherlock, for his part, is waiting for me on the steps outside, hands stuffed into the pockets of his greatcoat, his eyes distant.

When he catches sight of me at the door, he graces me with a fast and all-too fake smile. Taut, put upon.

He's obviously unhappy about something. Unhappy about something new, I mean, and I am at a loss as to how I am expected to respond. How I *should* respond.

But just as obviously – he does not wish to discuss the details with me.

Before I can even put a coherent sentence together, he's trundling down the steps with his old feline grace, the overt signs of the day's previous anxiety displaced by a stronger need to walk four paces ahead of anyone on the path.

"Sherlock, wait-," I start awkwardly – timid, hesitant.

The roles have suddenly reversed from this morning.

He turns back to me, my friend, my best friend – and for a moment I see a version of Sherlock that has become the template of what I used to associate with his overall nature: aloof, flippant, driven, quicker than lightening in bodily movements.

"Really? What?," he asks, an undercurrent of something gritty in his voice now. "I think even you can ascertain that I just want to get home, John!"

I bite back my retort, feelings mixed. Worried, yes, but also a little vexed.

For all the raw and horrible truths we've faced in the last few months, his demeanor now seems almost cold. Impersonal – as if he's trying to create a wall, for the sole purpose of keeping me at bay.

As if I am someone who poses a threat, and not someone whose been in his corner since day one.

He continues his brisk stride, never once looking back, and after a few seconds of composing what I want to say, I give up – and pick up my own pace until I match his tempo.

This is bizarre.

He's not lost in thought. He's simply ignoring my obvious attempts to engage with him in any meaningful way.

"Listen, I get it if you are mad-," I begin.
I don't get far.

"According to Yuri you don't get anything," he replies, his voice cutting through the fog of my confusion.

Oyster card in hand, he passes through the first gate of the terminal and walks over to the station platform.

This time, I pick up speed to overtake his steps, and since he has nowhere to go – nowhere to flee – I reach out and grab his gloved hand.

"What is going on with you now? Because, believe me, your moods are difficult to navigate at the best of times," I bark, voice low but direct. I glance around at the dozen or so passengers also awaiting the arrival of the train. "You up and leave, are gone for HOURS, come back with this sort of attitude."

Sherlock snorts. He actually snorts.

And for a moment – just the smallest fraction of a second – I see red.

My mind hisses a word to me, low and in warning.

Rage.

I shake his hand for emphasis.

'At the core of the unattached is a deep-seated rage,' my mind supplies.

He pulls it back harshly.

"What happened?" I grouse.

Sherlock exhales, his chest rising. Even in the modest din of the space, I can see the tremulous way he expels the air.

"Nothing of any importance," he responds in measured tones.

I glance around.

"Something happened."

"Nothing of any importance!," he reiterates, voice rising, then moves away from me and hurries onto the train as I follow behind in a daze.

Even the approaching sight of Baker Street doesn't lessen my agitation, and as Sherlock retrieves his keys and hurries himself with getting inside, I pause for a moment, taking in the form of this frail man, his leanness distorting his proportions. He looks almost supernatural in his physical expression, not unlike a creature crafted from wire.

I stand on the steps and glance up at the awning to Speedy's café. Then I glance down the street and
take in a couple with looped arms, meandering about normally. Happily. Seemingly in love.

When I look back to my home – our home – I see that Sherlock has already slipped inside and has disappeared from view.

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The tellie is on; I can hear as much from the hallway.

Some sort of crap show, the volume almost uncomfortably loud.

I give Sherlock a once over; he's removed his coat, but has left on his scarf.

"Can you turn that down a smidgen, please?" I ask carefully, testing the waters.

His chest, concealed before by the garment, is now painfully revealing: his breaths are fast, and he stares at the show grimly, his face stone. If he's heard me, he gives no indication.

"Sherlock! Can you turn the television down please?" I ask again.

He doesn't want mollycoddling. So he's not getting mollycoddling.

This time his hand retrieves the remote by his side, and he – miraculously – does turn down the volume to a reasonable level, although his bottom lip is now pinched by his teeth.

I don't speak further, and he doesn't speak. Instead, I make my way to the kitchen, turn on the kettle, busy about and grab two mugs. Check the fridge for meal ideas and check the fridge for fresh cream.

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When I return five minutes later, it is with a plate of smoked salmon, baby carrots, hummus. Two blue plates, equal portions. (I'm not making the mistake of giving us variant amounts of food ever again). I set one plate down on the coffee table by Sherlock before I return a moment later with our beverages.

"Nudge over," I command him, which - also miraculously – he does.

I take a sip of my tea, vision trained on the television.

"What are we watching?," I inquire, playing for normalcy.

He blinks a few times, seemingly coming back to himself.

"I don't know," he says primly, and it's only now that I hear it: a raspy edge to his voice. A hoarseness.

I frown at my plate, take the tine of my fork and skewer the salmon. A tentative bite.

"Eat your food, please," I state cleanly when he makes no move to do likewise. No obsequiousness
in my tone, however - nothing that should grate on his nerves.

He picks up the fork – pale grey eyes still focused on the screen - and slices off a segment of fish. Looks down at his meal, and as I glance over at him, I see his jaw clench.

"Sherlock, look-,

"I don't want to talk about it right now," he whispers, voice raw.

"Okay; we won't talk about it right now, then."

He takes a bite. Then another. Then he eats some carrots. Takes a sip of tea.

I do my best to look as if there is nothing surprising about this fact whatsoever.

When he pushes his plate away not four minutes later, I reign in my admonishment.

Something tells me that this is not the time to get on his case about eating. Or not eating, as the case may be here.

Not now.

Not at this moment.

His breaths are still rapid.

"Do you want to watch a movie?"

Arms curl around a wasted torso.

"Alright," he mutters after a pause, the heat of earlier displaced somewhat into this; whatever 'this' is.

"Alright," I confirm.

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I've retrieved my ancient box set of what I call "old school" Star Wars. Study the titles, and settle on The Empire Strikes Back.

"Seen this one?" I inquire, and Sherlock shakes his head curtly.

I do not ask for further permission, and beyond that – I highly doubt Sherlock cares what we watch.

He's obviously upset.

'Rage', my mind hisses.

And, more intricately now – the words from earlier repeat in my mind's eye. This time in Times New Roman font, as if the book is still held in my possession:

"At the core of the unattached is a deep-seated rage."
We get about half way through the film, when I notice he's most openly refusing to look at the screen.

I glance at him, pause the film.

"Not your thing?," I inquire, aiming for what could only come across as mild concern.

Sherlock's brow is furrowed.

"You haven't checked your phone. Not once since we've been back. I can tell you want to do so. But you haven't."

For a moment I am confused, and glance at my jacket, flung haphazardly over the love-seat.

I clear my throat.

"I haven't, no."

Sherlock turns his arms over, and seemingly studies his wrists.

"Why haven't you?," he mutters. "Yuri's undoubtedly texted you by now."

I turn slightly from my place on the sofa and try to make eye contact.

"What is Yuri going to say in his texts?"

Sherlock is calmer than earlier, but the change from guarded and snarky to withdrawn and quiet is not a victory, either. He almost looks defeated.

"Nothing important," he states dully.

"I find that hard to believe," I respond, more calmly than I feel.

Sherlock glances back to the screen; Yoda has been frozen in place. In the midst of Dagobah, piggybacking on Luke Skywalker's white-shirted frame.

"I can't help what people do or don't believe," he deploys, next. His moods have been all over the place for weeks now, but this is something else. This is a rapid cycling of emotions in the space of less than three hours, and it's making me feel ill-prepared to deal with him tonight.

I click off the power and the screen goes black.

"Can we try to have that conversation now?," I test, not knowing if I should still be playing for time, or facing this head on. "Or some truncated version of a conversation at least? Because I really think we should."

Sherlock reaches over for the remote, fumbling in his attempts to pull it from my grasp.

"Hold on for a moment. Just give me a minute of your time, alright?"

He stills, exhaustion evident in his pose.

"Listen: I'm not the bad guy here. Neither is Yuri."
That hits its mark, and his jaw clenches under too-tight skin. I can see the bones of his skull pulse out against his temples.

"Sherlock? Come on. I can't make this go away. I can't do this alone. I need you to communicate with me."

His throat seems to hitch, spasm, and he reaches forward for the DVD box. Pulls it towards his lap, and turns it over – as if he's reading about the film when we both know that's not the case.

I feel something, then: a static edge to the air; a weird awareness – almost cellular in nature – warning me that I have to take this slowly. Proceed carefully.

Fingertips, torn from nail biting, graze over the glossy packaging.

My hands take the item from him and place it on the table.

"You must know that I care about you more than anyone else on this planet. You have to know that much, intellectually, even if you don't feel it."

His hands, suddenly, seem to tremble and when I glance up to his face, I can see that his mouth is trembling, too.

"No," he barks out, and then forces his face into his palms. His fingertips grip his skull so intensely that they turn white. "That's just the thing. I don't."

The words are nonsensical.

It's akin to if he'd just told me that he can't read. It's something that you know has to be patently untrue if only because you've seen the negation of the stated reality so many times beforehand, with your own eyes.

I take a deep breath.

"You don't know it? Or you don't feel it to be true?"

"Those are the same thing, John," Sherlock whispers. "In this case, at any rate, they amount to the same thing."

I sit for a moment, rooted to the spot.

Swallow.

"What can I do to convince you of that truth, then?" I attempt, as response.

Sherlock's eyes look red and hot and he closes them slowly. His next breath is a hiccuping rattle.

"I don't know. Because you are talking about a lack, John! A lack of something! How do I possibly explain a lack of something? That's no different from asking a colour-blind person to describe a colour. They might be able to intellectually appreciate that in this world there are things that people call 'colours' and they might be able to feign that they see them! But they don't see them and asking them to describe the beauty of a sunset or to expound in any meaningful way about the reality of colours isn't going to do a whit of good! Because they can't see things that almost everyone else can see! And I'm like that! Only… with feeling things!"

I give him a wary glance.
"Sherlock, I know that, sometimes, emotions can be hard to name. But you must hear that passion in your voice. That's not a lack. That's the opposite of a lack of something. Nothing about you is lacking!"

He glances at me, face contorted.

"Everything about me is lacking! I try, and I try, and I try to FEEL – to feel, really feel - that you care about me, and all I feel is numb! In my mind, I know you are doing all the right things! I can add up all the kind words – all your efforts - and appreciate that what you are doing constitutes concern. Possibly even love. But I can't *feel* anything like I'm supposed to, and-," his voice cracks.

He swipes at his eyes.

"Jesus, come here-," I whisper, to which he immediately shakes his head back and forth with furious speed.

I touch his shoulder.

"Forget about Yuri. Forget about talking. Just come here."

My hand secures his back and he falls against my frame. I can feel the ripples of tension coursing through his body.

"I've got you. You know that, don't you?"

"No," he breathes against my ear, the voice strange. Discordant. Lost. "No. I don't know that."

"Sherlock," and I grasp his neck, stroke the skin lightly. The repetitive motion, I hope, is calming. "I'm not Victor, or your father, or anyone else on the planet. I'm just me. John. I'm not going to hurt you."

"No," he reiterates, his fingertips pinching my sides, my back where he's holding me. There is a certain frustrated insistence that I must be wrong in what I'm saying.

At this point, I have a vague awareness as to what he's saying 'no' to, and yet don't want to vocalize those suspicions lest I be wrong.

"Do you think I really needed to talk to Yuri to figure this out?," I reply evenly. "I can only imagine how unsettling this is for you."

I feel a certain sharpness infuse his spine, his back, his form. An unnatural rigidity.

It takes me a moment to realize exactly what I'm feeling.

Fear.

"Sherl-"

"I can't," he rasps, and I take a moment to inconspicuously study him: eyes closed, lashes damp. Back bowed.

"'You can't - what?," I murmur against his temple. "What can't you do?"

His fingertips continue to twist the material of my jumper.

"I can't," he mouths again. And then again - the words almost soundless even in the quiet of the
room, and I stare at him, distantly aware that my throat is on fire: swollen and achy and hot.

"Alright," I say gently. "I respect that, Sherlock. Whatever you can't do – that's okay. Whatever you can do – that's okay, too."

He rubs at his eyes and I can sense that a bit of the tension has left his body. Not much. But some. It's a start.

"I-," and that's all he says, the rest of the sentence pulled back inside his throat, though he finally makes eye contact with me. Shakes his head back and forth, not breaking the connection. Each shake another 'no' he can't vocalize.

The ache in my throat is now a physical pain. Sharp.

I tilt my head. Nod once just to be contrary, perhaps.

"I get that you are dealing with something incredibly difficult to describe, and that a lot of this stems from a lack of trust. Maybe even all of this stems from broken trust," I reply, the words thick against my teeth, and my tongue gummy. "But can you try doing something for me? We can test something out, not unlike an experiment. You are excellent with experimentation. So let's look at this issue not from an emotional state. Let's try something new, alright? Can we try doing that?"

Sherlock's head comes to rest against my clavicle, and he repositions himself in such a way as to slump against my side.

"How?," he inquires, sounding more composed but also impossibly young in his hopefulness.

For a second, I freeze. Because I don't know how to proceed. Not really.

This isn't a form of therapy. This isn't something I have read about in any of my 'helping your partner through abuse' books.

"Well," I exhale. "Perhaps I could ask you questions. And perhaps you could answer them more… scientifically? Or, not scientifically, exactly, but more a simple laying out of all salient points?"

He pulls back and studies me with something that could be termed vague interest.

"Like what?"

"Well, tonight – after you returned to Yuri's, you seemed irritated. I could tell you were irritated, I could tell you were trying to avoid discussing something. Can you tell me what happened? Not in emotional terms. Just, well, logically. As if you were observing the situation as an outsider, and had to make a deduction – and simply state that deduction to the best of your ability?"

Sherlock blinks rapidly, as if he's pulling back into awareness after an extended period of time in his mind palace.

"I was upset with Yuri. Because he thinks that I am not being honest with you. Not being honest with him, either, perhaps. It angered me."

I consider his words, and consider their context.

While Sherlock had concealed aspects of his disorder from me at the beginning, when the knowledge that he was sick came to light – he also did his best to address my questions. His reservations to be as descriptive as possible always seemed more the byproduct of pain and not a need to be disingenuous.
"Not being honest with me, or him, about what? About what in particular?"

A deeper breath then, and then he looks back to the television, now silent.

"He thinks that Victor was coercive when he was with me. That it's impacting how I see my relationship with you – or, not just you, really. How I just see all relationships, no matter the person involved. Which isn't the truth at all, as I realize you are different to him; it's not as if I am so out of touch with reality as to confuse you two."

I have to push down my furor at the prospect that what Yuri is considering is very likely true. Of course, I had already considered that reality, and had already read between the lines with the barest details Sherlock had previously provided.

I rub my hands on my jeans to rid them of moisture.

"Was he coercive with you? Did Victor push you?"

Sherlock seems to hesitate.

"Sherlock?"

He wads up his scarf and throws it halfheartedly over the sofa.

"I don't know! Maybe! But that's not how I choose to remember what happened!"

Choose?

Choose to remember?

It's almost as if he feels memories are choices. Things to be edited at will.

And then I get it: his mind palace. His profound ability to delete or retain information as it suits his emotional state. He's always seemed so capable of just disregarding what he didn't wish to recall; I used to consider it a cute quirk. I used to believe that it was his means of choosing what to study, what to discard. A time saving device, a memory aid. Little more than that.

I realize suddenly, like a thunderclap, that it's never been that simple.

"How do you remember what happened, then? You were with him, you told me. You were with him sexually. What memories do you have of that time, Sherlock?"

Sherlock's face flushes.

"That's hardly anyone else's business," he begins.

"Sherlock," I respond in slight frustration. "You said you'd try to answer these questions. To provide more facts."

He closes his eyes, and his shoulders slump.

After a few moments, he begins to speak.

"I remember everything like it was...like it..." he pauses, opens his eyes, and looks back to the television. "Like it was on there," and he points over to the now-blank screen. "Like it was happening, but not really happening. Happening on a television, perhaps? In my mind? It was black and white and fuzzy and strange like an old out-of-focus movie, and I was watching it as an outsider
– not a participant. It was merely happening to someone else, and I was just forc-"

He stops in the middle of his sentence, his eyes widening at what he’s almost revealed.

"You were – what?," I prod. "Forced? Forced to watch something unfold?"

His fingers curl inwards. Curl into white-knuckled fists.

"That's what you were going to say, wasn't it? That you were just 'forced' to watch the proceedings?," I press my fingertips against my temples. "Fuck," I growl, the word slipping out as if beyond my control.

Sherlock's fists thump against his sides in frustration.

"It's not Victor's fault that I was screwed up, John! That I am screwed up! He loved me in his own way! I was the one who didn't respond properly!"

I stand up then, feeling a deep need to pace. If I don't dispel some of the tension in my system, I'm going to start ranting, and that would not be to Sherlock's benefit. Not with the amount of adrenaline coursing through my entire body at present.

"John?," Sherlock queries tensely.

"It WAS his fault – at least for the role he played in worsening these issues! He must have known that you weren't receptive. Anyone with any inkling of empathy would have been able to figure that much out, Sherlock. So yes, I would say – considering you just described dissociating during sex – that he was pretty damn coercive. I'd say that's exactly what he was!"

I move to the coffee table, and pick up the cups and the plates. The uneaten salmon, and the uneaten vegetables, and the barely touched tea – and make my way down to the kitchenette.

I'm fuming mad, but not with Sherlock, and I don't want him mistakenly taking my anger at the situation as anger with him.

"So he knew!," Sherlock suddenly hisses from the corner of the living room, the scarf now back in his hands, cording through his fingers, "So he knew that I wasn't into it. That I was distant. That I zoned out. That sometimes I seemed upset afterwards. So what?"

I spin around, uncomprehending.

"Are you seriously asking me "so what?" right now?!"

Sherlock sways back, chin raised slightly. Almost like a child, facing punishment, yet too indignant to back down or recant a statement.

"So what', Sherlock? So everything! Don't you see what's wrong with this picture?! That's no way anyone in any sane universe treats a person he loves like that! That isn't love, Sherlock! That was never love!"

Sherlock's eyes fill with tears and I immediately realize how he's taken my statement.

"Sherlock-,

"So he didn't love me then, John! So no one ever did! Is that what you really wanted to hear me say?! That I knew he gave every indication of having used me, but I let it happen anyway, because he at least SAID he loved me? And I wanted that to count for something? Because-," his voice
crumples, "because I wanted to pretend it was true?"

Damn it.

Damn it.

He starts to meander a path around me, as if making his way upstairs.

Correction: exactly as if he's making his way upstairs.

"I'm sorry," I blurt. "I'm just angry! With him – with, with them! And I'm making a mess of this, all of this and-"

Sherlock swivels back to me with a flourish.

"Yuri thinks I have an attachment disorder!," he rasps, then glances at me, cursorily. His eyes are like X-rays. "But you already knew that, didn't you, John? That's why you tried to cover up your discovery with mail order science circulations! As if that would throw me off track!"

I blink back my overwhelm.

"What?"

"Yeah. I can figure things out, too. I'm clever that way."

He bounds up the steps in leporine fashion.

A moment later, I hear the door to his bedroom slam shut.

**********************************************************************

The dishes sit in the sink, doused in a covering of cold water and stale bubbles. The water is cloudy from cream and remnant bits of food.

The dishes have also been sitting for at least an hour because I have neglected to wash them. Instead, I've slumped down in chair in the far off corner of the kitchenette, considering ways to make this better.

Of course, I have tried to make our situation better time and time again.

I'm failing him, and I have no bloody idea what to do.

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Shortly after 11 pm, I ascend the stairs. Knock on his door.

Sherlock undoubtedly hears me, but ignores me all the same.

I knock again, more insistently this time. The locks have been dismantled – and have been since before Sherlock was released from the clinic – though that doesn't mean I want to barge into his space without his permission or without necessitating medical circumstances.
"Sherlock? Answer me, please! Or I'm coming in."

A few moments later, I hear the light padding of his feet, and the door opens slightly.

He glares at me.

"Can I please come in?," I request.

His glare intensifies.

"Oh, stop it with this charade! I have no control over anything anymore! Come in if you want. Stand outside the door if you want. Go to sleep if that suits you! I don't have any say in what you do, and you know that already!"

He trundles back to his bed, where he crawls away from me, before he repositions the duvet over his body.

My thoughts race.

"Can we talk about it? Because I certainly don't want to leave everything as we've left it."

Sherlock opts for silence, and simply grabs at what I can now see is a medical textbook.

"You can talk, but I'm going to read. Or does that not meet your approval? Going to take that away from me too?"

I slide down the wall, near the door, to give him his space.

"I'm not trying to take anything away from you, Sherlock. The opposite, in fact."

He flips a page of the book. Then another. Too quickly, really.

Obviously, he's not reading the book at all.

"That's rich given what's just happened," he grouses a second or two later.

I suppress my irritation at his behaviour.

"That's the truth," I volley back. "Even if I'm terrible at this; because I know I am. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm trying to help you."

He remains mute, and flips a couple more pages of his book with almost hypo-manic speed.

"I'm going to screw up sometimes, Sherlock. I'm not a psychiatrist. I am not trained to deal with these issues, and I'm not going to apologize for being a fallible human. I'm trying my best."

He closes the book, restless.

"You don't need to apologize, John," he verbalizes, stiffly, his fingers tracing absent minded patterns on the spine of the textbook. "I know you are trying to help."

My head quirks up.

"Then why are you angry at me?"

Sherlock startles. Places the book over his lap.
He looks almost dejected, though the expression doesn't make sense given the way I am attempting to interact with him.

"This isn't about you, John. This has nothing to do with you," he pants. "Isn't it possible that I could just be angry and yet - miraculously - not be angry with you?," he finishes, voice clipped.

I settle my limbs into a cross-legged position and ignore the pain that shoots through my left knee with the movement.

"Yeah," I mutter, looking down at my socks. One is torn, and the pink flesh of my heel protrudes from the argyle garment. "Yeah, that makes sense. Thank you, Sherlock. Thank you for that, I mean."

Sherlock turns back towards the wall.

"I've thought about what you said," he admits shakily. "About how I should be trying to focus on everything with less emotion than I have in the past."

I cringe.

"That's not actually what I'm trying to encourage at all. I simply thought we could use it as a tool. A test, I guess, to see if it helped us discuss some subjects. Obviously, it hasn't worked out very well so far."

My friend tightens his hold on the blanket, and is quiet for an impossibly long time before responding.

Then, without notice:

"When I came in here earlier tonight, I was so angry. But I couldn't determine who I was angry at, or how I could make that feeling go away."

"That's understandable, given the circumstances. Some emotions are-"

"I wanted to hurt myself," he interrupts in rushed tones, words blending together.

I freeze, alarmed.

"Cut," he whispers in clarification – looking over my head at an old periodic table of elements chart on his wall. "Cut myself, I mean. That was the impulse when I came in here. I wanted to do it to spite you, as horrible as that sounds. That's what my anger generates. Do you see?"

As fast as a rocket, I'm up, turning on the light, then over to his bedside in the next breath.

He curls inwards.


I still my hands from doing their search – from pulling back the duvet, and lifting up his undershirt and looking for injuries.

"I didn't do anything," Sherlock stresses, face contorted earnestly. "You don't have to check me," and the emptying of his throat sounds painful. "I just-"

"Sherlock-," I cough, pained.
"I wanted to, John. And then I realized how completely, unarguably insane that would be. I was feeling so awful, I was so angry – and my first impulse was to feel something else. Something not as wrong, I guess. But hurting myself is wrong, too, isn't it? That's not what I'm supposed to feel when I'm angry, is it? It's a bad response, and I know that, but I still seek it out. And I don't know why."

My heart pounds violently in my chest.

"I don't think it's about what you're 'supposed' to feel," I manage to get out, almost dizzy with grief. "There's simply what you feel, and what you don't feel - and healthy or unhealthy responses to those emotions. That response – to harm yourself - is an unhealthy one. I think you know that much. I think you appreciate that intellectually."

Sherlock nods against his pillow, his dark tresses clinging to his skull with sweat.

"I know," he exclaims, "But sometimes I don't… I don't care."

I inch closer to where he's curled up, the room still dark.

"What made you stop?," I inquire, gingerly.

His arm stops tugging on the blanket, and he leans back fully against his pillow.

"I don't know," he admits, voice cracking. "I guess, it felt unfair. I thought: 'Why do I feel compelled to do this – to make myself hurt - when nothing happened to them? When I didn't even retaliate? When I didn't harm them back?' Why do I feel like this, when nothing ever happened to them? When they can just go about their lives and be at peace, even if they destroyed my own peace?"

His eyes look cloudy and vacant.

"Then I realized that I don't actually have to do this. That I just want to, and I felt…oh, I don't even know! It made me even angrier, I guess? I can't really put it into words – but I - I stopped. I decided I had to stop since I couldn't even determine the reasons for why I wanted to start in the first place."

I try to regulate my breathing.

"It's good that you stopped, Sherlock. Very good," I encourage, licking my lips.

"I still want to do something though, John. I feel – I don't know? I don't know. Wound up, maybe? It feels as if something inside my brain is going to explode if I can't bring my equilibrium under control; I need to stop that from happening. Maybe that's the reason. Maybe that's always been the reason, screwed up or not."

My thoughts race.

I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do.

"Do you want to destroy something?" my words rush and tangle. "Break something? A physical object? Would that help, maybe?"

Sherlock huffs.

"This is embarrassing - you even needing to ask. It feels…," he sputters, "What the hell is wrong with me?," he asks, sibilant.

I reach over, and lightly touch his hand.
"Can you sit up?"

He flops from belly to back and looks at me, eyes darting over my head. Studying the wall.

Ashamed.

I weave my fingers through his own lightly; stroke his palm with my thumb.

"You have every right in the world to feel very, very angry right now. That is not an unhealthy emotion. That is a healthy response to what happened."

Sherlock shakes his head.

"It doesn't feel very healthy, John."

"What makes it unhealthy is HOW you deal with the feelings. Not the feelings themselves. Feelings on their own are not bad or wrong – they just are. Can you trust me on that?"

Sherlock hesitates.

"I am trying," he whispers. "I'm trying to trust you."

I reaffix his duvet, and he shuffles back down under the mound. Then I walk around to his window and open the Venetians and crack the window open to let in fresh air. Moonlight spills through segmented lines and creates a linear pattern of light and dark as cover over our bodies.

"Do you think you can fall asleep?" I murmur, before settling down on the bed.

Sherlock's breath hitches.

"Can you stay here with me until I do?" he inquires, sotto voce.

My lips purse.

"I think I can. I'm just about ready to pass out myself though, Sherlock."

He compacts himself further, as if to give me space, and I settle down near to him but leave the bedding alone. Leave him to his cocoon. That basic boundary – that physical limit – is one that I feel I need to maintain just as surely as I feel he needs its maintenance.

"I'm proud of you, yeah? You know that, right? You're the bravest person I know. To tell me what you've told me tonight? To confide in me like that?"

Sherlock sags into the mattress, not turning to address my statement.

"Sherlock?"

His fingers dig around mine and squeeze.

"I'm the opposite of brave, John," he breathes. "I'm scared all the time. That's why I told you anything at all - because I'm scared and I don't want to feel like this anymore. That's not bravery. 
That's cowardice."

I lean forward and quickly kiss his temple. It's chaste and light and barely a kiss at all, but he seems to settle against the motion.

"No, Sherlock," I murmur, sleep settling in to take residence at the edge of my consciousness. "That's the epitome of bravery."

My arms come to wrap around his frame when he fails to say anything else; I try to ignore the bony protrusion of vertebrae as he shifts closer to me.
Perspective

Chapter Summary

A.N: So we are trying something new; a Molly POV. Why? Perhaps because I self-identify as being the most 'like' Molly and want to see how writing such a chapter would go. :) 

MOLLY'S POV

"But these heavy hands
They're pulling me down on my chest
Latching on, coloring all of my flesh
Quietly, you hover over me
And I fight but it feels like wasted time" - Olafur Arnalds, "Particles"

My alarm doesn't wake me up.

Instead Bruno wakes me up, with a soft and repetitive batting against my cheeks.

I open my eyes warily, not wanting to get nicked on his nails, and push at him lightly.


When I finally meander into the kitchen it's just as the coffee maker's automation begins. Before long, the entire kitchen smells like hazelnuts and dark roast.

Today is my 'off' day, so that means - usually - I lounge around, do washing up and laundry and boring adult tasks. Talk to the cats, water the plants, renew my library books online and consult my 'bucket' list of social activities (which rarely goes anywhere. The social activities, I mean).

Sometimes, I check out John's blog. I haven't checked out Sherlock's in the last while, since he's not updated anything in over three months.

The realization causes a slight pang to course through my heart and beat double-time.

Sherlock.

Damnit, I haven't talked to him for weeks. Not since John's cryptic e-mail exchange with me over a fortnight ago.

A brief allusion to a hospital stay, and Sherlock not feeling 'up' to visitors. And I didn't push, I didn't pry, but I still feel like I should reach out in some low key way.

Sherlock might think he's convinced the entire world that he's a heartless bastard, but I know better.
He's uniquely sensitive, and self-derisive in a way I've only come to see recently.

And then, unbidden - an image of that night. At my apartment. Me and John, eating our soup, pecking at our salads and our biscuits, and Sherlock - throat convulsing, eyelashes darkened from dampness - struggling to skewer a cherry tomato. A fine ripple of anxiety shredding through his system, and then when he turned and stared at me, I saw a veil of emotional repression settle over his face. I saw the barrier come down and the outwards expression morph into something different, and the acting would have been tremendously convincing if I had missed the way he had seemed moments prior, missed the conversion.

I learned that I cannot truly trust his emotional expression as an indicator of how he feels deep down. That he's a master at pretending to be fine, when he's not. Just as he's tried to convince the world he lacks any emotional sensitivity, when again, it's precisely the opposite.

And John's message to me, several weeks back:

'Sherlock is in clinic. I don't want to give too many details unless things change. He's physically safe, and getting better, but he might not be around much the next while.'

Of course he wound up in clinic. I could see that possibility from the time he tried to have dinner at my apartment, and barely consumed more than a couple bites of salad before hurrying away.

Still, enough time has passed that I feel I should at least make an effort to reach out to him. Otherwise, he might take it as avoidance. As if I am ashamed OF him, and not merely trying to give him some privacy.

I know that the feeling of shame and the perception of being shunned, in particular, are hard to bear. As a teen and young adult, I experienced it quite frequently with extended family, who saw me as "odd." My cousins were popular, financially successful, married with children. They had an easy and relaxed sense of self, and though it veered sometimes towards something decidedly narcissistic, they were all part of a team. They chatted and had family dinners with their spouses and play dates with their children. And in the era of social media, whenever I likewise reached out, there would consistently be a complete lack of response.

For a long time, it hurt. Then, as I moved up the ranks professionally and became 'somewhat' more respected among my extended family, my hurt turned to anger when the dinner invitations and the responses finally came in.

And I realized that when I needed the support, I did not have it. I had deliberate avoidance and dismissal - and for that reason, had perpetually felt devalued.

But blood relations or not, that feeling of being looked down upon is incredibly painful and damaging.

So, with that in mind - and to completely prevent Sherlock from having similar worries, even if he doesn't consider me his closest friend - I send off the PM.

'Hi Sherlock,' it begins, 'I have the day off, and since I'm all caught up on my boring 'adulting' tasks, I was wondering if you wanted to catch up. Haven't heard from you in a few weeks, and I've put aside a gallbladder and pancreas for you two days ago at Bart's (it's in cold storage; don't bug Rudy for it. Just ask me, okay?). Not sure if you are in the experimentation mindset these days, but if you're not - fancy a coffee or tea or a baked pretzel (whatever!) and a meet up at the park? Near Centennial? Meet near the carousel? Hope to hear from you soon. Hugs, Molls. x~'
I send it after lunch, while I finish drying three loads of laundry. Soon, the flat is scented like Snuggle, and I stop the dryers every ten minutes to take out items and put away garments, fold pillowcases, replace the hand towels in the bathroom.

************************************************

At quarter past 3, my phone chirrups.

'What exactly are 'adulting' tasks? - SH'

The response makes me smile, because it seems so typically him. No anxiety, no 'hi, how are you?' or even an answer to my general question. A derailment off course into something that, on the whole, seems inconsequential.

I text back: 'Stuff like laundry and groceries and online bill paying. Stuff like that.'

At 3:17, I get a response.

'Boring. - SH.'

I fight back the smile.

'Indeed. Yet oh-so-necessary. You never answered my primary question. Fancy a park day?'

3:35 PM:

'I have an appointment at 6:30, but I could meet up at 4:30 for an hour or so. Does that work? - SH'

This time, I don't fight back the smile at all.

************************************************

I'm wearing my cherry cardigan and an anatomy t-shirt. It's of a Da Vinci sketching, and gifted to me from my old time Uni-slash-flatmate, Meena.

The combination is neither sophisticated or womanly, but it's me, and by this point in my life I have stopped caring quite so much what other people think of my attire.

I see Sherlock first. Greatcoat and all, sitting against a park bench near the carousel. He checks his watch, and I see his shoulders tense.

I frown at the reveal: he's either nervous, cold, or both.

Waiting a few more seconds, I jog up steadily and usher a "Sherlock, hi!" and he turns abruptly, a practiced look of carefully crafted calm gracing his features.

Another transformation of emotions in the space of a few nanoseconds.

As he turns, and pulls his scarf closer to his throat; I try to do my best not to stare.

He's lost weight.

He's LOST weight.

My intake of breath is involuntary, and I see him swallow, harshly.

I move to him first, give him a gentle hug, try to avoid the fact that his vertebrae press through the
Greatcoat. Try to push down the sense of fierce protectiveness, the savage sense of concerning affection mingled with something that I can only compare to a maternal drive.

Which doesn't make much sense, given that Sherlock is older than me, and a prior crush of mine.

And yet, the feeling is one that I can only compare to how I've felt when witnessing a child being harshly teased or bullied, or treated unfairly, or openly distressed.

It's a need to soothe, a need to offer support that is softer and more gentle than what I normally would feel for an adult friend or colleague, even one in distress.

He seems to pick up on my emotional state, and I hear a fuzzy voice near my temple say, tentatively:

"I'm gaining weight, Molly. Please don't worry."

I pull back and break our hug. Let my eyes travel to his.

He looks both nervous and a little bit self-conscious.

I nod in confirmation, showing him that I'm listening to his words, even if those words don't strike me as making much sense.

"You're gaining weight, yeah? Okay," I breathe out, then look back to his eyes. "You look like you've dropped weight since I last saw you, Sherlock."

This time, I hear his swallow.

He glances downwards to his hands, to his torn cuticles.

"Can we please not talk about my weight?," he asks very, very quietly. "Can we get our tea and just - be normal? Please?," and his voice cracks on the 'please.'

I pat his hand once to confirm the suggestion.


As we walk through the park with our respective beverages - a macchiato for myself, a London Fog with cashew cream for him - he softly tells me about the cold case he's started working on. Gives me an update on John. Mentions in a mad rush that he's seeing a therapist.

I don't slow my walking; I don't make the moment awkward.

He might need to talk about this, but he surely doesn't want what he perceives as 'pity.'

"How's that going?," I say evenly, trying to keep the discussion from terminating prematurely. "With your therapist? He's helping? If it's a 'he', I mean."

Sherlock let's out a shuddery breath.

"It's hard," he whispers. "But he's - good. And yes, it's a male doctor. It was deemed 'for the best'. John agrees, too. That it might help more, you know - with a male doctor."

This time I do stop walking, and he looks back at me in confusion.
"What?," he asks quietly.

"Why'd John think that? That you should see a male doctor?," and I don't even know what it is that I'm zeroing in on, here. What I feel is so unusual about the words. Other than the fact that whatever illness is impacting Sherlock's dietary practices would not seem to-

Sherlock interrupts my thoughts.

"I was-," he begins quickly, then stops - looks at me, pulls back, eyes wide.

I see him make a 180 degree arc, drink the last of his London Fog, and then toss the Styrofoam container into the nearest receptacle.

I saunter over to him.

"Sherlock?"

He turns around in a rapid flounce, eyes bright.

"What?," he asks oddly, licking his lips, before leaning his light frame against the fence. Seems to study the carousel with the white lights and the expressions of the children as they play about on the antique wood-work horses.

I take a sip of my drink.

"They look so peaceful, don't they?," I try, changing the subject, sensing his awkward fear.

Sherlock nods, his eyes dark and expressive and strange.

"They don't know any better. They are lucky for not knowing any better. Maybe."

I frown at the reveal, and glance over to my friend, his teeth working at his bottom lip, causing the entire thing to puff and swell and go hot cherry red. His face, already wind chaffed and pale from the low light of the late winter, looks ghostly.

"Yeah, they are," I test, uneasily. I can feel the shift in mood, and can sense it's abrupt nature. It's complicated display of something tinged with anger, but also a deep and typically repressed sadness.

"Although, that's when we are generally the most at peace. When we are children. That's when we should be most at peace, I think."

Sherlock is quiet at that, and studies the carousel rotating in its slow, creaking way. His eyes flounce to the sign for corn-on-the-cob; candied apples with fantastically bright gleaming coats of crimson and bright dots of pastel coated chocolate; candy floss - electric pink and neon blue; hot chocolate with whipped cream and multi-coloured sprinkles.

His eyes clench up, as if he's squinting against bright light. Even though the day is moody and grey with melting pockets of snow and a frosty edge turning the air into something sharp, and yet oddly clean. Like breathing in ice-cold alpine air. Invigorating, but brisk. A sensation of something good, but nestled on the cusp of being almost too painful.

I realize then that I definitely did not dress for the weather, and put my macchiato down on a nearby fence post ledge to blow hot air into my cupped hands.

Sherlock turns to me, catches the motions, and pulls off his gloves.

"I'm fine," I say, touched by the action, but I take them anyway. Put them on, because I can sense
that's what he needs me to do. To accept this offering.

He goes back to studying the food carts.

"I think I want a caramel apple," he says, apropos of nothing.

I tug his over-sized charcoal gloves onto my hands. When I bring my beverage back to my lips, I can smell the scents of cedar and something vaguely like book binding glue.

Smells that remind me of 221B. Bay leaves and tea and supplies for his experiments.

******************

We walk the long way around the fence to get his treat, and as we do I hear the buzz of Sherlock's mobile. He tugs at it with his lean fingers, and reads the incoming message.

Types back a quick reply.

Catches me studying him, and gives me a terse grin.

"Just John. Wondering where I wandered off to, I guess."

The phone chirrups again a second later.

Sherlock reads the message, smiles faintly, then passes it to me.

'Well, at least I know you are in good hands. Give Molly a hug from me.'

I glance back to Sherlock, touched, and he smiles back at the phone.

"He really likes you, you know," he says carefully. "I mean he really trusts you."

And he's talking about John, at least partially, and yet the words seem sort of disconnected from the afternoon, and the discussions we've broached.

I could almost be convinced that Sherlock is not really talking about John at all. He might not be saying anything untrue about John's feelings for me as a friend, but there is something strangely self-confessional about how he's avoiding my line of sight while speaking about trust.

"Yeah?"

Sherlock looks back to me, cheeks puffy from holding in a breath of air. He lets the breath out, and his mouth quirks up in debate of something he hasn't yet vocalized.

"Yes. Of course. Of course he trusts you. Who wouldn't?"

I give him a toothy grin and he gives me a less boisterous one back in response.

"So - caramel apple?" I remind him, and Sherlock looks back up to the food cart.

I see his jaw clench, and something steely slide in under his eyes.

"Yes."

******************

"This is probably a bad choice; a bad allotment of my daily calories," he says in a mock blase tone.
Like he doesn't really care about eating junk, when we both know he obviously does. When we both know the degree to which he does, indeed, care has consumed him.

"Much of that is just pure apple. So you're getting fiber and vitamins from the fruit alone. Some of it is candy, but on the whole - it's not the most unhealthy thing you could have selected," I volley back, hoping the encouragement reaches the deeper part of his awareness. "The candy floss would have to be far less healthy, and even so - treats are treats, right? They are never really 'bad.'"

Sherlock shrugs, takes a bite. Moves towards a bench, as if fatigued. We've been walking through the park for about 45 minutes, true, but he's never shown such fatigue in all the years I've known him.

Takes a few more bites, looks at the item.

"I think I'm full," he admits, a note of self-deprecation in his words.

I squeeze his shoulder.

"Which is fine," I say in neutral tones, hiding my concern.

He looks back to the caramel apple, his back suddenly rigid.

"You want the half I haven't touched?," he asks carefully. Then winces, as if berating himself for the question.

I think through the possibilities of how various responses would be received, especially considering the fact that I've seen such a different side to him lately.

A painfully self-condemning side.

The confident - at times almost arrogant - display he's employed in the past has been stripped away, almost in accordance to the withering of his physical body.

I realize, suddenly, in the time frame of a thunderclap - that my natural affection for Sherlock must never have had much to do with that put-upon display. Or perhaps, I always sensed a latent vulnerability.

The things that make Sherlock, well, Sherlock - are still present. His rapidity of thought, his intelligence, his ability to look and study and SEE a person in their complexity, his ineffable and hard-to-identify traits that make him seem almost ethereal. I'm just seeing them from a different angle. The social awkwardness, which I used to think was more a disinterest in social connection - has done a complete turn in my mind, has morphed into a new awareness.

He does care.

He does want connection.

He's just afraid.

Which is why I think he's struggling, now.

"Sure. Pass it over," I quip, grabbing the wood stick portion that props up the treat before taking a mightily aggressive bite from the unconsumed portion.

Sherlock's features soften as he relaxes at my casual display of consumption.
His phone buzzes again, and he shoots off a response with lightning-quick speed.

"Thank you," he says quietly as he types, and for a moment I do not respond, since it's come out of left field.

I take another bite of the apple, only to do something which does not employ talking.

"Why are you thanking me?," I inquire, aiming for a light, easy manner.

He colours then, his face tinging with pink.

He merely repeats the words.

"Just - thank you, Molly."

"Wha- for?," I question, garbled, my mouth full of Red Delicious. I don't know what I think I am doing, requesting a more extracted admission. What I think it will accomplish.

Except, perhaps, maybe I want to draw him out of his shell. Get him talking, since I sense he probably needs to do so.

Sherlock squints at the early evening horizon line, the sun passing down and glossing the terrain in orange and scarlet.

"For everything. For not judging me. Not once. For never making me feel out of place," he says in a breathless rush. "And not taking my...callousness personally. Which it never was, by the way. I just - I think I pushed you away for a bit there, because I did like you. Not, you know - romantically - but-"

I put down the apple.

"You don't have to thank me for that, Sherlock. That's what friends do for each other. That's what makes someone a friend in the first place," I insist.

His throat bulges.

"You never treated me like I was wrong," he says, his voice pained. "And you never made me feel different, even when I wasn't always that good of a friend to you. You are special - to me. You ARE my friend. You know that, right? I know I haven't always been the best one in return, yet-"

I wipe my sticky hand against my jacket, and sigh.

"Sherlock - you don't need to apologize for being human. Everyone has less than ideal moments. You've done a lot of kind things for me, too, which I think you are either overlooking or just failing to recognize right now. But I did - and I do - recognize those moments, and I have never forgotten them."

He fidgets with the end of his coat sleeve, nervously.

"Can I tell you something?," he queries. "Since I'm being annoyingly confessional today, anyway?"

I roll my eyes.

"You're not being annoyingly confessional. You're not being annoyingly anything. You don't annoy me, and you never have. I enjoy spending time with you. Especially when you're not pointing out my lipstick choices or unfashionable clothing choices," and I nudge his shoulder as I finish my
sentence, to show that I'm kidding. Partially.

Sherlock turns and gives me a tense smile.

"Well," he breathes in a rush. "That was for show, mostly. I actually like your clothing choices. They suit you, Molly. I think, maybe, I didn't want you to get...too close? I just didn't approach the subject very well. I wanted a boundary, and I don't know why I need that boundary, really. But I did, and I wasn't always that kind in how I made that known," he ends in a whisper. "I was stupid."

I frown at his commentary.

"You were not stupid, Sherlock. I probably came on too strong," I offer, then bark out a laugh - not for once feeling awkward with myself.

Sherlock looks back to the children, their giggled and hurried chatter changing the quality of the evening, the feeling of our communication.

"No. You didn't come on too strong," and he turns off his phone then. Puts it in his pocket. "I just wasn't very good at being the type of friend you deserved."

I don't try to erase his words. I let them stand, not believing in their accuracy - but not wanting him to think I am discounting the greater meaning of what he's trying to convey.

"What did you want to say, earlier?," I ask abruptly, trying to change his focus. Pull him out of his melancholic rut. "You asked if you could tell me something. What was it?"

Sherlock's motions have become stiff. He wraps his arms, undoubtedly unconsciously, over his chest, then stops his motions. Forces them back down to his side in an effort to feign general composure.

"So you know - therapy. With John. It's been hard."

"That's why you're in therapy? This has to do with John?," I ask hesitantly. Because I know I am missing something.

Sherlock shuffles about on the bench, as if uncomfortable.

"I love him," he mutters, the pink of his face merging into something more intense as redness swims into his cheeks.

"Yes?," I prod, gingerly. Not wanting to mess this up. "So? Is that supposed to come as a surprise to me, Sherlock Holmes?," and I fix him with a grin.

Sherlock bites back a laugh.

"You don't seem that surprised," he murmurs, looking calmed by my response. Temporarily subdued.

I shake my head, mildly amused.

"It wasn't hard to figure out. If you want to know the truth, realizing that point helped me - you know - figure out why you might have been putting up those 'boundaries' as you call them - in the first place. But it's alright Sherlock. More than alright. You guys work together. Fit together."

Sherlock studies my lips as I talk, then glances away, scratching his neck.

"I mean, I think I might be-," he gulps. "You know."
He trails off.

I get it.

"In love with him," I supply, since he's suddenly gone mute. "Is that it?"

He nods in a stilted fashion, studying the sunset.

"Yeah, I think so."

As far as revelations go, it's far from overwhelming.

It's more or less what I had suspected for the last year or so, anyway.

I debate if I should tell him that, too, or if that would further add to his anxiety.

Still: I'm missing something so I press lightly against his arm. Tap his side. Let my hand touch his wrist bone. Briefly.

"Does this-," and I indicate the thinness of his wrist, "have to do with John, too?"

Sherlock frowns, and I wonder if he's missing my meaning.

He's not.

"I think so; in part," he mumbles. "I mean, it's complicated, right?" He stalls, collects his thoughts. "This isn't new. This...thing."

I try not to look discomfited.

"No?"

He shakes his head.

I decide to not address the fact that calling it a 'thing' denies the darker aspect of the entire situation.

Now is not the time. Perhaps there will never be a time for me to broach the specifics of this disorder with him, and as it stands - it's likely not something that I need to discuss with him.

He's in therapy for those same issues, and my presence in his life needs to be one where I listen and aid and contribute a presence that is not in demand of information that already causes him pain.

If he wants to talk about an issue, he will - on his own time.

No doubt, he's already asked all sorts of questions that are hard to answer when attends his sessions.

Everyone needs a reprieve from that level of intense interaction, whether the deeper motivation is to bring about healing or not.

Everyone needs to be able to head out, grab a snack with a friend, watch the sunset fall upon the earth - and not feel pressure, in any way, to discuss the very things that have made them sick in the first place.

"I've been here - before. When I was young," he offers, breaking my reverie.

I cough, my throat suddenly sore.
"Oh?," I state, my head filled with swarming and noise; the revelation hurts.

He closes his eyes.

"When I was 12," he states, and I just like that: I feel sucker punched.

"12?," and my mouth feels puckered and dry, like I've bit into a persimmon.

Sherlock goes back to looking at the dying expanse of light on the horizon. The colours in a matter of minutes have shifted as the late afternoon sky turns into the palest indigo and purple.

It's supremely beautiful, but also supremely sad.

All around us is this beauty, and yet Sherlock is where he is: fighting something I never knew existed until recently.

"Was it treated at the time?," I ask tentatively. "Someone got you help, yeah?"

Because - 12.

He was 12.

A kid.

A fairly little kid, all things considered.

And even now - even as adult - he looks breakable.

But as a child?

The disclosure makes me want to hug him, anew.

"Mycroft put me into clinic the next year, shortly after my thirteenth birthday. 14 weeks at The Priory. Inpatient," he barks out a cough, pushes his dark curls away from his eyes. They nestle back down over his face a second later, uncontrollably long, grown out and lanky.

I don't say anything, and he, too, goes mute.

For a minute perhaps. Perhaps longer than that.

Silence.

I know I should say something, but I have no idea what to say.

I have no idea what to say.

I want to ask "why?" but that is an impossible question to pose; it would be unfair to expect a response.

Because there likely isn't a single 'why' in this case. There is almost certainly not a 'why' that can be answered in a sentence or two.

And if there is, how understandable is that 'why' to Sherlock, whose still dealing with this old foe - brought back from the past - decades later?

I turn to him, give him a slight nod.
My hand hovers a few inches from his back; I realize I don't know what he wants, what could make him feel vulnerable or safe, or worsen his embarrassment.

I want to show the depth of my friendship, to offer him my support in a way that he can sense goes deeper than mere words or superficial expressions, and yet-

"I was molested."

The words hit me a few moments later. Discordant. As if stolen from a different reality.

One that should have nothing to do with his life.

His voice has a crackle, and a light, almost breathy sound to it like a leaf crinkling in the wind.

Here and not here.

"My father. He-," he trails off, anxiously.

The blood whirls through my head, making me dizzy.

"Never mind," he whispers. "Forget it."

Sherlock pulls his knees up to his chest, looks down and over to my shoes - training his sight on something neutral. Something that cannot contemplate his words; an inanimate object that can never shocked at such an admission.

His face slackens, and his eyes change in quality, turning into something murky, shaded.

"Sorry," he rasps when I fail to verbally respond.

I freeze in place.

Sorry?

Sorry?!

I want to reach out and hold his hand.

In light of his words, I feel hesitant to do so.

"I shouldn't have said that. I-," and he fidgets with his scarf.

I reach for him, without thought, and wrap my arms around his back, pulling him to my chest.

"I'm sorry," he repeats, the words blending into one. "For putting that on you, for-"

And then my voice comes back. Shock dissipating into insistent anger that he stops his apologizing. Stops his apologizing this second.

"You are never to say sorry for telling me something like that, alright? You never say sorry for that truth. You got it?," I rasp against his ear.

He carefully lets his arms come to wrap around mine, securing the hug.

I can feel his heart pounding against my frame, leaping from his chest, and I hold onto him with greater force.
As the sky turns dark, his heart starts to slow, and when we break apart, he's studying the snow beneath our feet.

"Sherlock?," I attempt, sensing his shame.

The pools of water are cementing as the day turns to night and grows colder; when he breathes, the air from his lungs plumes out white in the early evening.

"Yes?," and the word is clipped.

I realize, sadly, that he has taken my earlier inability to respond as - what?

Disgust?

Or disinterest?

Could he really think such a thing to be true?

I fight an impulse to rub at my eyes.

"I lost a friend, once. To something sort of similar to what you're going through now, and I could never understand."

His face becomes steely.

"You could never understand how anyone could do this to themselves. Why they just wouldn't eat," he grinds out. "Yes. I get it; I'm disordered. I am not-

I shake my head.

"No. That's not what I meant at all. I could get the deeper motivations. I meant - I could never understand why other people could not see more than the surface of it all. Because this thing? That you're fighting? I don't think you're doing this to hurt yourself. Not really."

Sherlock looks up to me in confusion.

"If you take this as something you are doing, to yourself, to hurt yourself - you're not seeing what I'm seeing. Not entirely. What I'm seeing in you."

He looks at me with unconstrained intensity.

"What?," he rasps, "are you possibly seeing in me that isn't self-destructive? Because I know that-," and his mouth screws up. "I'm sick, okay? I know it's wrong. I know it's hurting John, and I know it's hurting me - and I still hold on to it. And I don't know why. Why I want it. Why it feels like I need it! So how is that not self-destructive?"

I splay my hands out in front of me, thinking of a way of putting my thoughts into something vocally cohesive.

"Maybe it's not about self-destruction. Maybe it's about precisely the opposite."

Sherlock's eyes blink rapidly; he looks to me with curiosity and uncharacteristic apprehension.

"H-how?," he stumbles. "I don't understand."

"Maybe you are not trying to destroy yourself. Maybe you are trying to destroy something inside you
that doesn't belong, and never did."

He looks adrift.

"Look," I mumble, glancing around to ensure we are - indeed - alone. "Abuse takes something out of people. It takes something from children most of all: the ability to trust, primarily. But it doesn't just take away from people. It leaves them with certain things, too. Things that never should have been their lives. And I think that's what you are trying to destroy."

Sherlock ponders my words.

"What things?," he demands, his voice faint. Exhausted.

I mull over my response.

'Oh,' I think. 'Fuck it.'

"Why did you say 'sorry' right now? Why 'sorry'? Out of everything you could have said right now - you tried to apologize. Apologize for being hurt."

My friend pulls back, suddenly looking pained.

I move over a few inches on the bench.

"And you're pulling back, now. You're pulling back, and you're apologizing. For someone else's crime. Why is that?"

Sherlock shakes his head.

"You can't own this, Sherlock. Don't let someone else's actions become your shame."

He breathes faster then, his eyes closing.

"Why?," he croaks. "If it's not supposed to be mine, then why do I feel it like it is? If I didn't cause it, then why do I feel like I did?"

I release my breath, winded by his comments.

They are not simply innocent; they are equally self-condemning.

And that hurts.

"Because that's what the human mind is designed to do: to make meaning, even if the situation is devoid of meaning. You endured, Sherlock. Through something that will never make sense. Maybe you endured by turning someone else's - your father's? - cruelty into a sense of complicity. Maybe you needed that event to mean something, to have a reason - a reason that you had some control over. Even though you had no control over any of it. Never could have had control over it. Over any of it."

Sherlock kicks at a patch of snow, mashing it beneath his boot.

"Does that sound possible?," I ask, my pulse racing.

He's silent, and I place my hand on his leg gently, which causes him to stop his attack on the walkway.
"Could that make some sort of sense?," I try again.

Sherlock pushes against his knees, righting his position.

"Maybe," he whispers. "I don't know. I don't know anything, anymore, Molly."

******************

The walk home could be uncomfortable, but it's not.

Sherlock tells me about his doctor. But he keeps the topics light. Filler, mostly.

"Yuri, huh?," I clarify, "How long have you been seeing him?"

We walk the 15 blocks back to his flat side-by-side. I give him a playful glance when he stops and gets another beverage on the way home. I do not remind him that coffee is no substitute for dinner, since I am assuming that John is already overlooking most of Sherlock's meals.

And he still needs the surface gloss of normalcy.

"A couple months," he admits, pocketing his change from the vendor; popping the lid of the coffee.

"He's helping?"

Sherlock's mouth purses into something confused.

He stares at his drink. Takes a sip.

"Too sweet," he mutters under his breath, distractedly. "I think so. I mean, he's a good doctor. He came highly recommended."

I consider the words. Realize that, on their own, they are more or less useless as to how Sherlock, himself, is perceiving the situation.

"Forget if he came highly recommended. Do you like him? Is he actually helping you?"

Sherlock hesitates, then nods.

"It's - you know - therapy. It's not exactly fun. In a different context, I'd probably like him more."

I try not to look too sympathetic; I don't want it to be taken as pity.

"That sounds really unfair, doesn't it?," he remarks some time later. "Really unfair of me."

"No, it doesn't sound unfair. I imagine therapy has got to be one of the least fun things there is... But you realize you can like a person, and not like the situation that leads you to need that person, right? I mean, I might like my dentist, as far as personality goes. Doesn't mean I want to spend a second longer than necessary in a chair getting cavities filled."

Sherlock smirks at that, the tension from earlier reduced.

"At any rate," he drawls in clean notes, his speech polished, "It's not as if a therapist is a friend."

I give him a quick glance, my expression unsettled.

Sherlock in turn glances to me, sees my expression, shifts his head.
"What?"

I consider my words.

"Who says they can't be a friend?"

He grins then. It looks a little manic.

"Every book ever written about psychotherapy in the last 20 years, Molly? I mean, Yuri is great. But he doesn't consider me a friend. This isn't an extension of "Ordinary People." I'm his patient. That's it. He's paid to help me."

I don't respond, and merely traverse the remaining distance with him until we get back to his flat.

Even from this distance, I can make out John, black-patched coat and sandy hair, waiting on the steps.

He looks up from his mobile as he sees us approach and gives me a light smile.

Sherlock seems to quiet as we amble the last few paces before turning back to me awkwardly.

"You-," I intone both lightly and seriously, "You go, and you get better. I want to see you back at Bart's hassling me for body parts by the end of the month, yeah? Which is probably the oddest thing I've ever said to anyone. But-

Sherlock gives me a shy smile.

"Yeah, that's the plan, Molly. I'm doing all this therapy jazz primarily to secure more organs from you. That's my most pressing need these days."

It's a put-upon complacency. A false, "I'm okay; please just run with this" act.

So I run with it - if only to preserve his sense of security that he can share what he's shared with me, and not have me change. Not have me harden, or become grave or overtly piteous in his presence.

"And I still want that pancreas you promised me," he adds quietly, waiting for my response.

I snort involuntarily - then return his gloves to him; he makes short order of pulling them back over his hands.

"Listen: you let John help you, too. If you put your trust in anyone, put your trust in him," I say softly, still far enough from our mutual friend that the conversation remains private, though John graces us with a questioning look, as if wondering about the hold up.

I give John a slight smile to show my awareness that they have to get going. That they are already, no doubt, running late.

Sherlock bites his lip, then looks to my face, his blue eyes glassy in the night air.

"I'm trying. With-," he pauses, his eyebrows scrunching in contemplation. "trust."

I give him a smile, and he gives me a weak one in response, then starts to make his way across towards Speedy's.

Impulsively, I blurt out: "Sherlock?"
He turns, and looks back to me, eyebrows raised.

"You can do this," I stress. "I know you can. I know you will. It's going to get better. Trust in that first, alright? Trust in yourself most of all."

He licks his lips, and stills, hands worming their way into his pockets.

"Thank you, Molly," he mouths soundlessly, then returns a soft wave in my direction before turning back around and walking towards John.
A Provision of Anger

Chapter Summary

AUTHOR’S NOTES: This will be one of the last chapters in which Sherlock *overtly* struggles with a lot of his issues. (Are they gone? Of course not. The operative word is overt. But they won’t be so front-and-center after chapter 43). In fact, in a sense, this chapter is going to be the turning point for him and his obsessiveness with the next few leading to some pretty giant changes in terms of how he sees himself (which will be fleshed out in greater detail in chapter 43).

In fact, I have tried to incorporate a little bit more of Sherlock’s classic acerbic wit in this chapter to show that even though he is still struggling – he is starting to move beyond the darkest portion of his depression and is now letting himself face the emotional fallout that comes with accepting what came before in the worst moments of his life.

----- SHERLOCK’S POV-------

Two weeks later

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I awake feeling a gnawing cold and survey my room; frosty light, white and piercing, is streaming through the venetians and it makes me want to groan and turn away from the source.

Instead, I pad on over to my closet and pull at my robe, securing it around my body. I’m already sheathed in flannel pajamas – a recent gift from John – and simple in its design. Fleece ones: navy blue with grey stripes – not the fussiness of a Mycroft granted acquisition. They were, according to John, “new pajamas for new times.” Better times, really, is what his eyes seemed to be saying. And they are warm, as far as pajamas go. Because lately, according to Yuri’s “homework assignments” – I have been trying to categorize and pay attention to physical sensations with greater diligence. One of my recent laments is that I feel too cold – always too cold – and so John’s gift was a way of helping to counterbalance the aching coldness that I feel almost perpetually.

Anyway – back to Yuri. What did he call it, exactly? Oh yes: a reconnection with the self; reconnecting how I feel physically with what I am doing in present time, and how I can improve my physical state with attentive “self-care.”

That’s another term he likes to throw around a lot.

Self-care.

Apparently, it’s something I have failed to provide for myself for, well, my entire life, really. Except it’s not something I have always willingly ignored. I argued with him – that it wasn’t self-harm. I simply forget, sometimes, to get up and get myself a glass of water when my throat is parched, and sometimes I get too busy to fuss with applying a bandage to a wound that has already stopped bleeding, or in setting up appointments with doctors once a year because annual health checks are things I see in movies, but doubt that anyone really ever have done. (Really, does it even matter? I have my own doctor living in the flat who would zero in on anything abnormal in a heartbeat, although Yuri says this is simply another excuse. Another “justification” to ignore my body. He can
But truthfully, I have prized my mind above my body, and while I don’t see all these smaller aspects of how my personality asserts itself as self-harm, Yuri says that I don’t really have the best handle on what that means, either. Because, apparently, this needs to change if I want to get Well. (When he says the word, it is capitalized. It means something much grander than any other word in the sentence).

Wellness.

I asked him about this as well. To define wellness for me.

His response?

It’s a state of wholeness in which every part of my being works in congruence. Not the willful ignoring of that which might be painful, even minutely, for that which captures my attention because it lacks pain.

‘You need to wrap up a physical wound to let it heal. But to heal an emotional wound, Sherlock? You can’t wrap that up and expect the pain to go away. If anything, you need to reverse course. You need to pay attention to the physical issues as they arise and address injuries to your body by sheltering those wounds – so the body can heal them as the body is best fit to do – but you also need to rid yourself of emotional duress as the body was intended to do. And that means letting them out, and not hiding them away. You can’t apply a layer of mental gauze to emotional pain. It doesn’t work that way.’

And apparently Yuri feels that the body expresses emotional pain even though I keep telling him that I don’t feel as if I am in emotional pain, as such.

So does he expect me to…what? Cry when discussing certain things, or yell, or get angry?

Crying leaves me feeling utterly devoid of energy. I know this well. I know this from all the times I used to cry when I was small; it never worked out well for me – and that’s why I discarded it as an outlet.

Even so, I need to start focusing on what Wellness means, he says. Wellness for myself, individually tailored.

And he says it has to start with my thoughts. Because it is my thinking that needs to change if I am to feel better. I have to take a look at what I am doing – or what I am not doing – and assess if it’s something I need to have in my life to get me to this place that I’ve never really known. That’s the intimidating part, really. Not just the changes – changes in weight, or in mood, or how others see me – but to get to this destination that I have never arrived at before and have no conception of what I can expect to find when I finally arrive.

Certainly such a shift will change me as a person. But do I want that? To change on such a grand scale? When I don’t even know what to expect going into the entire endeavor?

(“It’s hard to let yourself feel emotional pain if you’re dizzy. If you’re faint with hunger. Or using. They deaden you to those feelings.” That’s what he had said, in particular).

Yet, how do I turn something on in my being that someone else has slowly annihilated over many years? Effectively, how do I flick on the switch? It’s not like there is a manual here for what to do, even if I trusted that his ideas could have merit. I will admit that sometimes I feel something edging close to the surface of my awareness. It edges closer – like a flock of birds settling along a telephone
wire. But whenever I try to let myself just feel the sensation - the moment I try to examine the feelings in a way to have them feel real – they fly away. They move on, to safer territory. To a place that isn’t thrumming with live-wire scalding currents.

So I pick up my journal: a Moleskin in a burgundy red with creamy, lined paper that feels soft to the touch.

“February 11th” I write now, in slightly messy point-form cursive. ‘Woke up feeling cold. Got robe. Put on robe. Still feel cold, but not as severely.’

I stop, and survey my room. Close my bedroom window, and then walk to my dresser to retrieve some cashmere socks.

‘Put on socks. Closed bedroom window. Will get something warm to consume. Might take hot shower.’

After I complete the little ritual of writing I attempt Yuri’s “top-down” exercise.

It goes as follows: every morning when I awaken – and every evening before bed – I am to start from the top of my physical being and analyze each sensation for each portion of my being. Does my head hurt? Do I have a stiff neck? Do my eyes itch, or hurt, or feel hot? Do I have a sore throat? And so on.

Is it tedious? Oh, of course. Extremely.

I usually get to my stomach, and stop there. The data is confusing since my stomach often feels swollen and hot – as if an acidic bite is glomming onto my flesh and feeding. What’s more - I find that out of all the areas of my body I have difficulty understanding my stomach and head are the hardest to handle, hardest to consider - if only because I often seem to confuse the physical pains that could be caused by an ulcer, apparently, with the emotional issues that could cause nausea or waves of pain.

And as Yuri and John both insist: the emotional can produce physical symptoms.

For example, do I feel dizzy on days when I haven’t kept my blood sugar on an even keel? Or do I feel dizzy because a subject is being discussed in a therapy session that is provoking anxiety? And if so, how am I supposed to know the difference?

‘Gastritis pain is moderate this morning,’ I note. ‘Will take morning ranitidine and prescribed medicines.’

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I stare at the little yellow tube of anti-anxiety medication on my bedside table.

It only contains three pills. John’s removed the rest, as three pills is enough to knock me out for an entire day and then some – and above the dosage I ever should take at any one time, which is a single pill – but he’s left me some room to take a small dose, here and there, before requesting more. (He still requests that he signs the notebook when I do take anything, of course, even a quartered dose - but it’s his overprotective means of granting me the illusion that I still have some small, fractured control.)

As of present, since first prescribed the medication – I have taken a grand total of six pills. For roughly a month, I have taken six pills. Definitely not addict-like behavior, and for that, I should get some sort of psychotherapy gold star.

Anyway, I am ‘allowed’ up to four of them per day, in six hour intervals, and because of my
reticence, my general disdain for seeming as if I need them – I have tried to avoid them except in cases where my mouth is drying out, and my hands are shaking, and I feel queasy and sick. In fact, most of the time John is the one suggesting that I take one of the anxiolytics.

John says that I need to get in touch with my body – and certainly in terms of understanding when I am anxious. Not only that: I need to learn how to ask for help. I need to vocalize when I am confused about an experience, or if I have questions.

Questions.

That suggestion almost made me laugh.

Because I am a scientist. More than that – I am a detective. But apparently I might have questions about how to document my own experiences and there is something horrendously ironic about that supposition.

This morning I stare at the vial of pills, pocket them, and then head out to the living room to see what has been prepared for breakfast. The excuse that I am not a “breakfast person” really doesn’t go over well these days, and prolonging the inevitable just pushes me into a confrontation anyway, so it’s really not worth the delay.

John is already awake. Of course he is; our roles seem to have reversed themselves in the last few weeks. Well, not exactly reverse, as such: he still sleeps a solid seven to eight hours a night, but I seem to be edging towards sleeping an obscene amount lately. Whereas I used to get perhaps five solid hours of sleep, on a good day, I seem to be edging closer to about 11 hours or more recently.

Again, it’s obscene… all of this sleeping with no solved cases to show for any of it.

I know what John’s thinking, too.

He’s thinking that I am depressed.

And I can’t even say if I agree or disagree with his assessment.

I mostly feel numb. And when I don’t feel numb – I mostly feel bad – that much is true. But “feeling bad” is not a good enough descriptor for what I am experience according to Doctor John and Doctor Yuri. I know they want more than words that are baldly basic such as “bad” or “off” or words like “numb” even though this is the closest I can get towards describing my reality without inserting other statements which I have a hard time grasping.

The worst of it, though, is that my ability to organize my life as I always have done in years past - to find clarity and order - have been undermined. Stripped away. That would likely make anyone feel a little bit lost.

When John sees me approach, he stops what he’s doing – which is reading. He’s reading one of those hateful books on my ‘condition.’ (And which condition is it this morning? There are several that have him preoccupied these days. Is he filling his mind with writings by doctors who specialize in child abuse, or is he reading about treatment for eating disorders in adult males?). And how do ordinary people who have experienced trauma do this? How do they attempt to survey their emotional world – swirling with red and black and filled with a sharpness akin to the cut of
glass or something awful like cloying pressure and a strangling ache – and separate the distinct emotions? How do they do it?

How?

“Sherlock?,” John says, his natural warmth tinged with something indicating hyper-focus. “You okay?”

I can feel the weight of the pill container in my robe pocket. I pull it out and put it in front of him, not daring to swallow.

He rises, then trots over to me.

“What’s going on? Hey?,” and there it is again: that gentle tone.

I forbid myself to close my eyes.

“Am I doing well with your plan? I mean, with the nutrition goals as outlined and discussed?,” I ask rapidly, licking my lips.

His eyes squint into confusion.

“Umm. Yeah. You’re doing really well. You’re keeping on target. Why? Did you think that somehow you weren’t?”

I forbid myself to press against my stomach, against my hip bones – which are now rapidly disappearing. Or perhaps I should clarify: the feel of the bony outline, I mean, is rapidly disappearing – not my stomach, definitely not – which seems to be inexorably taking on a new shape.

Reversing shape, even. Going from the concave to the convex. Not terribly convex at that – but it’s there when it wasn’t there before - this slight swell to accommodate, as John has reminded me almost every other day, everything that needs to be contained in that portion of my body. Swelling with food, and water, and accommodating my organs.

I try to push the thoughts out of my mind and ignore the changes that incrementally are occurring with every bite of food I swallow and keep down. I know that if I do meditate on it for too long that I will feel a swell of self-hatred. And I know that there has been only one sure-fire way that I have rid myself of that feeling in the past; the way that brought me here, to this time, and to Yuri.

“Do you really think I need to see this nutritionist?”

John looks surprised.

“Are you nervous about seeing the nutritionist?,” he volleys back.

Reframing my question as an inverse of his question is another thing he’s been doing a lot lately, and it makes me want to scream. I can feel my breath coming in staccato bursts.

“Is that ridiculous?”

John looks at me in confusion – then catches sight of the Moleskin notebook in my hands.

“Look, Sherlock. This is going to be, as far as I understand it, much more efficient and far less unsettling than therapy. We’re going in, we discuss your current diet, your current health issues, we get a more detailed plan with additional target foods, and we’re out of there. Then we can do whatever we please with the rest of our day.”
I nod my head. I know this. Well, I don’t really agree with the “whatever we please” portion since I am limited from doing just about everything I please right now, though I understand the sentiment of what he is saying, and that’s enough.

“Do you think you would feel better if you took a pill?,” he asks a moment later.

I look at the bottle.

“I don’t know,” I reply, hating myself yet again for how lost I sound.

John sighs.

“Want me to review your homework?”

I give him a pained look before handing over the book. I feel like a child who has been asked to hand over his report card. He takes it gently - his eyes still trained on me before he sits back down on the sofa.

“Still feeling cold,” he states. It’s not a question. “It’s not getting better? The coldness?”

I do not hug my knees. I keep myself in an upright position. I’m getting better, and part of getting better must be found in riding myself of these childish, impulsive displays of insecurity that have become annoyingly regular as of late.

“I don’t know,” I repeat, more softly than before. “I am confused. I just know I am cold now. I don’t know how to compare it to what I felt before.”

John, thankfully, doesn’t look over at me in pity.

“So let’s go over the assignment. Let’s be methodical here. We know that we can extract all the information that we need to solve this, right?”

I cannot reply to that with any certitude – so I don’t reply at all.

“When you woke up this morning you were feeling cold. Were you feeling anything else?”

“Physically?,” I query.

“Physically or emotionally.”

I resist the impulse to dig my nails into my palms.

“That wasn’t part of the assignment,” I reply tersely. “The last bit. Definitely not. I am simply supposed to-”

John sighs and I stop talking. He then puts the notebook down on his lap and looks me in the eyes.

“How are you feeling, Sherlock? Emotionally, how are you feeling right now?”

I want to get up and march into the kitchen and drink my coffee – is I doubt that impulse can be conveyed in a single feeling.

“I have decided that I definitely do NOT want to consume the decaf garbage which I’ve been limited to having in lieu of the real stuff. That is how I am feeling.”

Because – fuck it – I am sick to death of thinking about, talking about, describing emotions. Or
failing to describe them adequately as determined by others.

John just stares at me, unperturbed.

“You know I can’t answer these questions. I’m no good at this work!”

John’s gaze doesn’t falter.

“But you’re feeling anxious, I take it? Anything else?”

I have a million swirling thoughts, all vying for my attention right now. I have a hundred different things I could say to John – only, as with everything else these days – I don’t know if I want to talk, or if I want to remain silent. If I could wish for any one thing to really change, it wouldn’t be my weight. It would be my thoughts. I want my thoughts to be clear. I want to feel level-headed. To have a feeling in my gut mean something similar in my mind, and to know I am giving it the correct label to an experience as it unfolds.

I want to feel that I am not lacking in this regard – not lacking in this measure of sanity.

Maybe I should just say that? Let John deal with the rest.

“Sherlock,” John tests.

“I feel like the questions I am supposed to answer are these states of being that are supposed to be easy to name. But I can’t name them and it’s making me feel, I guess…keyed up. Only ‘keyed up’ isn’t an emotional state, according to Yuri’s-”

“Anxious,” John repeats, interrupting my tirade. He’s been considerably less likely to get riled up with me lately. I can’t tell if that hints that he’s losing patience with this consumptive drive that has caused him so much stress, or if he’s trying to allay what Yuri calls my “insecurities regarding safety.” Another stupid assertion, that – because I could ever be afraid of John.

I’m not afraid of John.

The suggestion is ridiculous.

This time I do close my eyes. I’ve always been able to talk to him more easily when I cannot see his face. When my voice feels removed from my body.

A small, mocking voice pipes up in my mind: ‘Here, Sherlock. Look back on this wretched day, when this wretched thing happened to your poor little wretched child body, and don’t look away…”

And isn’t that a little cruel? To make someone not simply address what haunts them, but to then ask them to look at it head on and describe it in detail to a party that never had to experience anything similar in the first place?

“Do you know what it’s like to feel something pulse inside you, and know before you open your mouth that you can’t even identify what it is? It’s just this pressure – and I know Yuri says they are emotions – but I can’t NAME them, John. Not because,” I swallow, “not because I am not trying to do so but because I don’t connect with them as if they are mine at all. They just sit in me, and they are nebulous and that, that-“

He lets me try to finish my sentence, resolutely hopeful as always.

“I think, maybe, that I am scared of them. I mean – how would I know? How would anyone know?”
“Are you asking me to define fear?,” John qualifies.

I lick my lips.

“I’m asking you how to know what fear feels like! When it’s tangled up with everything else, and when everything you suspect you know about life was memorized from a dictionary. I have memorized the word, but as soon as I think I feel it – then just as assuredly I think I rather feel-”

John gives me a tainted smile; a worried one, dampened down around the edges so that I only see, what he hopes, is the smile by itself – not his own anxiety about who I am. What I am.

“I can’t hold onto them. Do you see? I try, but I can’t. It’s like holding onto a puff of air from your lungs. And then trying to open your hands up to study the puff of air. As soon as I try, it’s gone.”

I feel his warmth. I feel my coldness next to his warmth, and if this is what thawing out feels like, if this is what feeling anything deeply is like – then it’s not very pleasant.

“Scared of the enormity of them?”

I shake my head in resolution.

“No. Numb but not numb, and it makes me feel unreal. Or – or things feel bright and then dark. I feel angry – for a moment – and then, Oh God – I have described it before, and it’s not getting better trying to describe it in more detail! It’s not fixing anything!”

I don’t say what’s generating the source of the fear, however; I do not say that I feel as if I am losing my mind.

His hand comes to brush against my own.

“Sherlock? Listen to me, alright? We are going to solve this, okay? I know I have said this before, but we are going to get this all straightened out.”

I know there is something sitting at the edge of my eyes, begging to be let out. Hot and intense and so frequently felt throughout my life – mostly in my youth – and yet so stridently ignored. Pushed down, maybe. What Yuri calls “repression.”

But who is it that is repressing everything? The Sherlock that goes to his goddamn therapy sessions, and eats close to 4,000 calories a day at last count? The Sherlock that confides in Molly about triggers and abusive fathers? If I’m doing all that, and ‘all of that’ is considered the “right step” – then why would I sabotage myself on this aspect of my recovery and lie about any of it?

Why?

And the word, too – the word called recovery. As if I could just get better from a state so different and unlike that of having pneumonia or influenza.

I open my eyes, and stare at the coffee table, splayed with the hateful books. A new impulse, then: to kick them off and onto the floor.

“It’s not supposed to be like this, John. It’s supposed to be getting better. Isn’t it? Isn’t that what therapy is designed to do: help me feel better?”

John gives me a small smile. “I think feeling better takes some time. I don’t think it ever just happens right away. But you’ll get there. You’ll feel better. You’re doing better, for what it’s worth – and I’m
I don’t look at him. I just sit there and try to push down the feeling that everyone is telling me is anxiety. Free-floating anxiety, specifically – a rotten beast that pops up and instills within my mind this sense of doom, even when nothing surrounding me is going badly or testing me. It comes, and swells over me like a high tide, and blots out the numbness – which I have also started to dislike – but it doesn’t leave me with answers.

John looks back to my notebook, flipping through pages and reviewing the previous week of notations.

“I am, you know,” he repeats. “I’m proud of you.”

I try to feel something good at the assertion - something that counterbalances the agitation filling my cells. I don’t feel anything like that, though. I feel…
I feel…

“Everything is rotten. Inside,” I whisper, looking away quickly. Mentally kicking myself a second later for the words that have just tumbled out of my mouth.

John sits up with more attentiveness.

“What does that feel like? What does rotten mean?”

My exhalation is harsh. Strident.

Why did I open my mouth?

If I simply hadn’t opened my mouth to begin with I wouldn’t have to do any of these exercises right now.

“Like-,” and my voice is rough – my mouth suddenly parched. “I want to vomit. Like I am sick of looking in the mirror and seeing my own face, my own flesh. I look and I hate-,” my voice bites off.

What the hell am I doing?

This isn’t a therapy session. This is John. And he’s not paid to listen to these issues. What am I doing?

Does he need to hear this? Would he want to?

Of course not.
No one wants to hear this.

I feel his hands slide up to hold my own. I feel the pressure of his fingers, tracing patterns on my own. It’s his thing. Driven by some belief, I have speculated, that in physically touching me in even a very basic way – I’ll not drift away into my mind.

“I want you to stop thinking that I want to be removed from this. That I’m doing any of this for the outward display of doing the “right thing” – or to somehow check something off some friendship to-do list, alright? I want you to get it out, so it can be gotten rid of – these sort of feelings. It’s not weak to do that. Do you understand?”

I shudder into attention, still unaware if my previous thoughts were actually spoken aloud. Because I do that, too, don’t I? Speak aloud without realizing it? And when did that ridiculous habit start? How
many stupid things have I said aloud when I really believed that they had remained private? The very awareness that he’s likely heard far more than I feel comfortable sharing – because I’ve been too out of it to check myself – has me wanting to kick something.

Was I always this odd? And if I was, what parts need to be excised and what parts of me should be preserved?

“Sherlock? Did you hear me?”

I nod. The old achy feeling of distrust is making me feel sick – and guilty. John has earned my trust. More than earned it. But I trust him on a level that isn’t matched by the fervor and the insatiable clamoring of my mind whispering to me that I am wrong.

That I look like an infant.
That I am weak.
Weak, and repugnant.
Hideous.

When I look down at my hands, I study the ridged nodes along my knuckles, the prominent veins, the pallor. The shame is back. A dark demon with its claws gripping around my ribcage is taking away my breath and squeezing against my heart. I pull away from him, and resist the urge to press against my eyes. The heat is back, prickling my retinas.
I mouth the word to myself, testing it out. John tries to catch my gaze.

“What was that?,” he murmurs, his voice light - barely there at all.

“I feel ugly,” I whisper, pulling my robe further down over my body and over my hands.

John stills. He doesn’t respond. Not quickly.

I realize then that even though, over the last four months, John and I have discussed a great many things I have never said that word aloud. I have never admitted to feeling – to considering myself to be – ugly, even though it’s been one of the words most frequently found taking precedence in my mind. Ugly. My mind is a rotisserie cooker and on display during my downtime (when my thoughts are not filled with casework and trivia) – when I have a moments reprieve to focus on my life the merry-go-round of my thoughts is nothing more than an obsessively hateful six-course meal of pejoratives.

“I’m sorry that you are feeling so awful,” he whispers back to me. “I wish I could do something to make you see yourself just how I see you. Because if I could – if I had that power – if my words had that sort of power – you’d never feel anything close to ugly ever again. You’d feel the opposite.”

I am mute as I absorb the words.

“Your mind,” he states – louder now – “is not merely twisting reality – it’s doing something else, too. Do you understand what I’m referencing?”

My mind is hissing suggestions at me; none of them are kind. But that is nothing new, and nothing I haven’t experienced countless times a day for the entirety of my time on earth.

“Sherlock?”

But I don’t know. I don’t know what he is referencing.

I have no idea. I shake my head in confusion.
John opens the notebook.

“Take a look. What do you see?”

My eyes scan the pages, looking for some sort of connection.

“I don’t understand,” I murmur, re-reading through the journal.

Stupid.
Stupid Sherlock.

“Your vision for almost everything around you is eagle-eyed. It is precise, and scholarly in its detail. But not when it comes to yourself. When it comes to how you see yourself there is an absence of clear sight. Your ‘notes’ are barely that. They are a bare, short hand version meant to fulfill an assignment but they do not come from the same place that you access when you work on a case. When you look at me, and make a declaration – those determinations come from a different place, too. One that doesn’t cause you pain. And because it doesn’t cause you pain you can engage with the objective of your focus. Be it me, or Molly, or a suspect on a case. Because you are actively engaged in the material. But you are not actively engaged in yourself-”

I bite back a groan.

“I’ve been nothing if not self-absorbed for the entirety of my life, John,” I mumble, disheartened. “Look at the stress I have caused others, the upset-”

“Stop it,” he implores. “Please stop. Please just listen.”

I don’t understand his assertions.

I have always been called self-absorbed.
Egotistical.
Even vain.

So how could my self-analysis be somehow lacking? When I have undoubtedly been too proud, and too selfish and too childishly narcissistic in my own peculiar ways?

“You have trained your sight on everyone and everything else that happens outside of yourself. You have made that impeccable, breathtaking skill into more than just a science. You have made it an art form. And because you have that skill – an exquisite skill – because of that, I have some hope here – that one day you will feel better. I can hope that with your mind and your ability to see deeper than anyone I have ever met – you can one day apply that same ability to your own life. But you cannot see yourself clearly right now. Right now your perception is warped, and it’s wrong. On this issue, it’s dead wrong.”

I shake my head, again. Frustrated.

“I do see myself clearly! Maybe for the first time in months,” I sputter. “I’m…I am barely much beyond emaciated, even now. According to the diagnostic criteria, anyway. My face is sunken. Everyone can see it. I look sick, and they all know why. Everyone who knows me at all knows exactly why I look like this. I don’t have cancer! I’m not even back on drugs! Even when I thought that no one could really see – everyone knew – like it was a joke, but it was being played on me. And I walked around, and I LIED to people because I had to have this be my outlet. And I thought it was safe, and hidden. But everyone knew. I went into Scotland Yard – and they saw! Lestrade, and Donovan, and Anderson-”
“They know what I was! What I am, still. And I have to get up each morning and brush my hair and put on my clothes - and see the scars from injecting drugs into my veins for years. From the time I was a teenager! And I see them each time I change. Round, and white, and mocking – because those are never going away – don’t kid yourself. Each time I get a bath I stare at them, and I hate them. I have scars lining my goddamn thighs. And worse. Worse, John! Not war wounds! Not because I did anything valiant and saved anyone but because I did the opposite. And I can’t just talk those away. Every time I change into a new shirt, or put on new trousers, I see them. And they are, by definition, ugly. All of those things by definition make me an ugly person.”

John pulls back, his face in a grimace.

John doesn’t argue.
He doesn’t say stop.
He doesn’t talk at all.

Instead, he blinks in succession, as if he’s been stunned.

Then he stands up, and pads to the bookshelf. Looks into the fireplace for a moment. I can hear his breathing. I can see his hands toying with his jumper. He’s agitated. And I caused that, too.

He’s trying to be a helpful friend, and I’m countering his kindnesses with further reasons for why I am not a proper recipient for the effort. Then he pulls a book down from the shelf, cups it in his hands, and returns to the sofa.

“And, yup, here-,” he mumbles more to himself than for my benefit. “I want you to read this, Sherlock.”

I shake my head in defiance.

“Reading a passage isn’t going to change this! It can’t.”

John exhales, his mouth firm.

“Read it. Please.”

I take the book, and hold it to my lap and start to read.

“No. Not to yourself. Aloud.”

I look up to him in questioning confusion.

A hand comes to rest on the small of my back.

“Aloud, please.”

I give a theatrical moan, not quite sure what he is intending me to read, and not much caring.

“If this is some poetic lark that is supposed to make me become all touchy-feely-”

“Sherlock,” John almost growls, his mouth slipping into a small smile – almost, but not quite, amused by my words. “It’s not poetry. I promise.”

I give him a raised eyebrow before taking the book and trying to quell my need to act in an
imperiously dismissive fashion.

“Oh, if it makes you all that happy,” I drawl, trying to hide my jitters. I want to get back on even footing. I want to feel that calmer presence of mind. When I acted for a case, and didn’t think about all this emotional refuse. This fetid and aggressive inner voice was always much quieter when I worked on cases.

And why now?
After years of passing for my so-called normal: why now?
Why did it have to come back when I worked so hard to keep it away?

I clear my throat, beginning to read before fully scanning the pages.

“‘Reactive Attachment-’,” and I stop with a frown. “Reactive Attachment Disorder is defined as the condition in which individuals have difficulty forming lasting relationships”, I begin, a lump forming in my throat. I can see passages that John has crossed out. Others that he has underlined in red. He’s been over this a lot, and I hate that too.

“‘The proposed causes of Reactive Attachment Disorder are be-believed,’” I falter. Take a breath. “Are believed to stem from longstanding neglect or severe abuse,” this time I put down the book.

“Continue. Please. It’s important, Sherlock.”

“To what end is this important?!”

He squeezes my hand, gently.

“Please go on. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

“‘From…from longstanding,’” and my voice dies down into a low, almost inaudible drone, “neglect or severe abuse - most commonly physical or sexual in nature – which impedes normal bonding during early childhood.” – There is a list here, John. Tedious. Am I to read all of this off too?,” I mutter, my face feeling stung. My words attempting to send a barb back in retaliation for having been asked to read this at all.

“No, you can skip over those for now. But the next passage, if you will.”

My throat is tight, and I whisper the next portion.

“‘At the core of the unattached is a deep-seated rage, far beyond normal anger. This rage is a natural byproduct of protracted, severed trust to a degree that is found in the most serious cases of childhood abuse, especially in cases of rape or molestation. Confusion and physical pain alone do not generally account for the detachment. Instead, an underlying motivation – one rooted in the preservation of a sane but self-imposed reality-,’” I stop, breathing harshly. The heat in my head is almost unbearable. It feels like a gasket, ready to burst.

John’s hands rest on the book, too – his fingers nudging my own.

“Can you continue? Just to the end of the paragraph? Then stop?”

My teeth bite into my lip.

“I know. This is a hellish thing to talk about. I know,” he whispers. “But let’s just see this one part through, alright? To the end.”

When I feel moderately more composed, I continue on – my voice shaking with greater obviousness
than in the preceding moments.

“‘One rooted in the preservation of a sane but self-imposed reality seems to be the impetus for the detached emotional state. In such cases, the chi-child – reaching for order and sanity in a world that is nothing but disorganized and insane – pulls back as a means of survival,’” and I pause, letting the words settle over my mind like a blanket. The knowledge that John has read all of this before, has processed it, and is firmly aware of aspects of my formative years – the worst portions – make me feel almost light headed.

Suddenly I wish I could stop time. Go back. Go back and take away that awareness. His awareness. Take away his knowledge. Because how do I accept that he knows? That he knows what he does, and look at him with anything approaching confidence?

“‘In the most extreme cases,’” I finish, “this allows the child to remain in their physically and emotionally hostile world while mentally being able to re-position himself in a different landscape. One in which he suffers no abuse. One in which he feels no pain. How-however, having limited or absent understanding of a world in which security, comfort and compassion are offered – the child has an impoverished awareness of how to self-soothe and often clings to intellectual exercises that redirect focus but do not address emotional needs.”

I put down the book, my arms feeling leaden.

“I don’t see what that accomplishes,” I whisper. “So it applies to me. Poor little dissociative Sherlock. Oh boo hoo. Let’s all pity him,” I retort hotly, my face burning. “And you know what the worst thing is? That now I have to wake up each day and have people stare at me in understanding… “oh, that’s why he is such a freak!””

John gives me an incredulous look.

“That’s what you got out of this?,” John exclaims. “Not, I don’t know – “these points are valid, and make logical sense”? Not “children devise the most creative and hopeful means to escape horror, and that these escapes are normal and indicate a state of mental health”? YOU are not a freak! You have never been a freak! Your reactions are entirely – entirely – understandable! That’s the salient point here. You did what you had to do to survive. SURVIVE, Sherlock. But just because you survived doesn’t mean that you got through that portion of your life unscathed! Everything was taken away-”

“I know that everything was taken away from me! Don’t you think I am aware of that fact?! It might be the only thing that I do know!”

“And doesn’t it make sense then?! Doesn’t rage make sense?,” John volleys back, not to be off-put. “Yes!,” I thunder, before I can stop myself. “Of course it does!”

And something crystallizes in my mind, then - something close to an awareness that wasn’t there before.

That I have been gifted a provision of anger. Granted to me, by John, now.

The allowance of anger, the allowance of rage.

Because as a child all I had really wanted was some measure of comfort, and instead I was given poison.

And I wasn’t simply given poison – but I was forced to consume it. Held down, my mouth pried
open, while it was poured down my throat. And it burnt me from the inside out and made me want to sick up. And when I did sick up – and when I cried, or when I dared to scream – there was no reprieve. There was simply more poison. And then more, and even more – until I stopped screaming. Until I stopped crying.

Until I stopped feeling.

Everything I had given to me, in lieu of sustenance, was poisoned. And I was expected to grow up on it, and not have it hurt. And that wasn’t sane. It wasn’t!

And then, in the company of others, the only time I was given anything other than poison was when I was given food itself. Food presented on lavish plates or served on fine bone gilded china. Crystal goblets filled with expensive drinks. And little-me would have to sit in the dining room, or the fancy restaurants with silent waiters who came and went about like spirits, and take the non-poison and chew it and swallow it all down when what I wanted was to continue throwing up.

John sits up after a few minutes when he realizes that I need to be silent and process what he’s said, before he wanders into the kitchenette.

“I’ve made you some decaf. Breakfast is ready – and your stomach meds and supplements are all measured out. Do you want to get a shower before we head out?”

I nod curtly, my head on fire.

At least I know one way to microscopically make myself feel better: warm showers.

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Our washroom has been transformed since I came home from the hospital.

Gone are the harsh halogens. John has outfitted the washroom with battery operated candles that can be turned on when I get an evening bath and an Ott light for daytime use on days when it is overcast.

The previous weekend he also did a revamp of larger proportions. The room is no longer dark and heavy – but has been painted a periwinkle blue. A new shower curtain, and new towels – a crisp, spa white. The detective in me knows why, too. It’s easier to determine if I am hurt – or, more specifically – if I have hurt myself, as he fears I still could do (or worse: want to do) – with pale towels.

Still, some things have improved. I have been granted access to an electric razor that I can use whenever I feel fit. So I wash my face, then lather up some shaving foam, and go at sprucing myself up for my upcoming appointment.

Then I turn on the Ott lamp and disrobe. Let myself look down at my lower extremities for the first time in over a week.

The weight gain is obvious, and I take a steady, measured breath. Curve my hands, and let them trail over my stomach, over my thighs. Let myself feel the keloid ridges of old, badly healed scars in the softest inner portion of flesh right beside my genitals. And the hot feeling behind my eyes is back, so I focus on an exercise Yuri taught me. It’s called a self-love exercise, and so I move to the shower and turn on a stream of warm water. Let the ghost of a memory from my last session with Yuri fill me.

“I’m sorry you’re hurting,” I whisper to myself – knowing that between the spray of the water and
the music John has since put on in the kitchen – that he cannot hear these words. “I’m sorry that you feel like you need to hurt.”

I lather up the shampoo and run it through my hair.

“Never again,” I repeat the mantra. Frown at the tile. “Never again will I hurt you.”

This whole exercise feels so ridiculous. But I do it, because Yuri told me that perhaps, eventually, it will help. That one day the words won’t merely be words, but a changed belief.

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When I get out of the shower I dry off quickly, changing into black trousers and a grey silk shirt. It’s a size larger than I normally would have worn – even at my highest weight – and it billows around me.

I top the shirt with a navy blue sweater, pulling the folded collar down over the top. My hair is starting to curl slightly and I brush it with care. Yuri says that is important, too. Tending to my self-care with diligence, even on days when I’d rather curl up and go back to bed.

Routines, he says, can create a sense of security when someone feels as if the very ground they walk on is giving way.

A rap on the door lets me know that we are running out of time.

“Sherlock? Almost done?,” John queries, his voice warping underneath the sound of the fan.

I don’t respond. I merely open the door, dabbing at the last of the cinnamon toothpaste that is starting to dry on my lips.

John gives me a grin.

“Very GQ” he says in a semi-joking tone.

“Shut up,” I murmur, my heart not really in the retort.

We walk back to the living room, and I pick up the bottle of anti-anxiety medication. Try not to glance at John as I do so. Open it, and deposit one into my mouth before swallowing it sans water.

“Ready to go,” I state - not really feeling ready at all.

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The tube is its typical bustling affair, yet I watch the people coming and going with a rapidly dulling awareness. A glossy, cotton-battony feeling of disconnect.

John senses it too.

He doesn’t say anything.

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The building is a blue-green glass affair with new fixtures. The entry way is polished, bright and clean.

It looks upscale.
When we get to the intake counter, we are informed that we should take a seat – as an appointment is running slightly late – and that we are to help ourselves to a cup of tea. A little chrome plug-in kettle sits on a rotating disc, surrounded by a wooden container housing various green and white teas. I pick up one from the offering pile, and take the tea bag back with me as I sit down again in the waiting room chair, smelling the scent of jasmine as if the bag is a talisman meant to ward off evil.

It reminds me of China Town. Of earlier days – solving cases with John – when I seemed healthier, when I seemed more in control; when maybe, in some respects, I was healthier, and more in control.

If John finds my behavior odd, he doesn’t comment. Instead he gets up and makes himself a cup of tea and returns within a minute with an eco-friendly cup, the scent of Oolong permeating his space.

When we are called, I rise tentatively, hyper-conscious of my every movement. John accompanies me and we are shepherded to a back office replete with frosted glass windows and an open door. The doctor in question, Dr. Amelia Davidson, is seated at a hard wood desk and is making notes on a tablet. She raises her head when she sees us approach and gives us a perfunctory sort of smile – and then waves us forward.

There are four metal chairs with curved seats set out (obviously for patients) and I take the one closest to the door while John deposits himself into the one nearest my own. Instead of letting myself fidget, I command myself to take in the room.

The walls are painted an eggshell white and a pale pink-purple orchid stands out impressively on a circular table in the center of the space, obviously well tended for and almost supernaturally large. My eyes next trail the walls and catch an assortment of classic dietician styled posters intermingled with art work. I catch sight of a sculpture, all lean lines and muted colours as if inspired from a da Vinci sketching.

The doctor looks at me appraisingly, then shifts her gaze to John and then again back to me. “You must be Sherlock,” she responds primly: kind, but not ingratiatingly so.

“Mmm,” I respond, non-committed in tone. “Is it really that obvious?” I can almost sense John rolling his eyes at the comment.

“Right. And you must be John,” she replies to my flatmate before pulling out a file folder. “Before we begin: do either of you have any questions about what this meeting will entail?” I stare across at the desk. At the file with my name on it. Another spike of self-revulsion swims over me and I shake my head.

“Well, I can see that John’s found our selection of teas. Are you sure you wouldn’t like to make yourself a beverage before we begin, Sherlock?” “No thank you,” I reply briskly, my heart thrumming away in my chest. The medication has dulled my anxiety but has evidentially not extinguished it entirely.

“Alright,” Dr. Davidson begins, fingers looped together. The universal meeting gesture of let’s-get-down-to-business. “So I’ll just quickly fill you both in on my history and what I am working to accomplish right now. My original profession was that of a gastroenterologist.”
I feel myself perk up, surprised at the revelation.

“Why did you, I mean – why did you gave up your practice? To become a dietician?”

John lets out a huff of air and a slight shake of the head, too. As if he cannot believe I’ve just said that.

Dr. Davidson, to her credit, laughs lightly.

“I know. It seems strange. But it’s an excellent question. Basically, I saw a need in the public health sphere and wanted to help address issues that I didn’t feel were getting the sort of attention they deserved. Namely that of patients who had severe GI disorders that needed help adjusting to a post-surgery diet, or those who due to absorption issues, or other conditions, were liable to have additional issues with weight maintenance or potential complications not normally seen in other populations.”

John looks like he wants to interject something and I rotate in my chair, my senses on high alert.

“Has Yuri informed you of the “additional issues” as they pertain to Sherlock?,” he asks carefully, unsure of how much to reveal without my say-so.

Dr. Davidson gives us an open if measured look before placing my NHS file on the table.

“Yes, to a point. As it stands with Dr. Pascal, well, he frequently refers patients to me. Your file, Sherlock, does contain further information about your particular situation.”

My muscles feel taut, and I will myself to relax.

When I do not launch back a response Dr. Davidson asks more carefully, “Your file indicates that you have recently been diagnosed with anorexia nervosa? Purging subtype?”

To hear it spoken about with so much freedom feels a bit like a slap in the face.

After a moment I realize the doctor is awaiting my response.

“Yes,” I mumble, “I guess that’s the diagnosis.”

Dr. Davidson looks at me intently, then to John, as if confused by my words.

“You guess?”

I look at the orchid.

“Yes. That’s my diagnosis,” I reply with uncharacteristic acceptance. “I just don’t like it much,” I mumble, not really considering my words until they are out of my mouth.

John looks over at me, startled. I see a small smile come to his face before he looks away quickly.

“Well, that’s an excellent sign,” Dr. Davidson begins, also granting me a smile. “That means you want to change your diagnosis, doesn’t it? And from what I can see here-,” and she flips to another page – one that I can tell is a newer report documenting my blood results from the last two weeks – “You are on the right path.”


She puts down the files and picks up new forms. They look more or less blank.

“Then this is for you. We can cover some of this now to get started. But some of this you might want
to complete at home when you have more time to consider the questions.”

I pull the forms towards me. Give them a cursory read-through.

“Yahoo. More homework,” I reply with what is obviously mock irritation, before passing them over to John to survey.

“Ahh. Dr. Pascal and his famous homework assignments,” she replies fondly.

I look up quickly.

“You know about that?,” I inquire, my brow furrowing.

“We attended many of the same medical classes. Initially. Yuri ended up pursuing psychiatry, and I went towards GI specialization. But we have stayed in basic contact throughout the last decade or so, and I am aware of some of his trademark methods. He always had this belief that it was easier for patients to express thoughts when they wrote them down first on their own time, and not simply when questioned about them in an office.”

Nodding, I take the forms back, and then re-read the questions.

‘Patient Review and Assessment,’ the form reads. ‘Please review the following questions and provide detailed descriptions to the questions below.’

“This looks as if you want me to, umm, provide a list of my favourite foods? Least favourite foods? Activities?”

John meets my eyes and gives me an encouraging nod.

“Oh, that won’t be too hard, Sherlock,” and then he turns to Dr. Davidson. “Fair warning: he’s just going to write coffee ten times in succession,” he replies, biting off a laugh.

“And none of this decaf nonsense,” I add, feeling somewhat lighter in this moment than I have ages. Interests? Disinterests? Favourite modes of exercises? Pastimes?

I can do this.

There’s nothing on here about feelings.

“Ok. Next step is to establish a baseline for where you are now. I can see that your blood work and medical checks are up to date as of the last week. It’s one thing I want to really focus on – continued tests, and regimented panels. Not simply in terms of changes in weight, but I would highly recommend a comprehensive exam that addresses different issues.”

I find myself tapping my knee in rapid succession.

“What sort of tests?,” I supply, uncertain about this next component.

“Ideally things like a DEXA scan – to determine current bone health and to reassess bone health and density as you progress. It will make a difference when calculating your target weight with greater accuracy as well as creating a more complete profile of health risks and relative strengths.”

I look towards John, hesitant.

“It doesn’t hurt, Sherlock,” he informs me, needlessly, and I feel myself flush in response. “It’s just as the name implies – a scan.”
My hands make their characteristic dismissive fashion of not really caring, not really being one bit concerned.

“I don’t care if it hurts,” I reply quickly, not liking the assertion that I would somehow be afraid of a little medical exam. Even one that caused pain. “And as you can see – my potassium and electrolyte numbers are much better than they were when contrasted against the previous two weeks.”

The doctor smiles at me, unfazed by my attitude.

“Yes. You are making excellent progress. The issue here isn’t so much that you are not making the ideal progress we want to see – but it really comes down to what I can do to help you and John formulate a plan that addresses issues such as nausea, gastric pain, gastroparesis symptoms – you name it. A gastrectomy is no small operation, and from your files it appears that the degree of damage to your stomach was severe. From that information alone, I know that you are in a substantial amount of physical pain, even now. Adapting to any diet is a challenge after a surgery. My goal is to help create a lifestyle plan that surrounds dietary practices and changes in exercise that will help you feel physically better. Ideally, in the future, I would also want to see you get you off some of these medications as we go further along.”

I give John a shrug. An ‘Okay. Let’s do this’ sort of shrug.

“Back to my old self,” I intone.

John’s face takes on a peculiar expression. A flash of hesitancy followed by an assertive, “Perhaps even healthier than that, really.”

I swallow, then look back to the ridiculously healthy orchid, and try to let myself consider that this is a possibility.

“Alright. Healthier than that.”

Doctor Davidson talks to us for another half hour or so, going over modifications and suggestions of various food additions while taking into account what I prefer, taste-wise and texture-wise, before providing me with a list of companies that specialize in nutrient-dense products for people who have undergone the type of surgery that I have.

When we finally leave, it’s with a bundle of nutrition guides and even more books on gastrectomies, along with a multitude of forms and ‘homework’ for our next appointment.

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When we get back to the tube, I am feeling – if pressed to qualify – a type of low grade calmness.

“Thank you,” I mumble, standing beside John on the platform. “Thank you – for earlier. It was, umm, good.”

John turns to look at me fully.

“Office-before? Or home-before?,” he clarifies.

“Home before,” I mutter. “With the, umm, with the book.”

John squeezes my hand.

“Feeling a little bit more like you’re standing on solid ground?”
I nod, looking down.

“T’ma starting to feel a little less,” and I make a fidgeting motion about my head, indicating confusion. “You know…,” I trail off.

He nods in understanding.

“Yeah,” he sighs, “I know.”

A thought comes to me then and I vocalize it.

“Toby’s birthday is next week.”

John cracks a grin. “You want to do this today, then?”

I nod my head. “Why not? We’re out already, and it would only take a slight detour-”

John checks his watch, dramatically.

“And look at that – I have absolutely nothing on at the moment,” and his tone sounds so relaxed that it almost reminds me of when we first became flatmates. Running around, doing things here and there when we felt like it. Not constrained by appointments and hospitals and sadness or me being sick.

“We could head out towards Regent’s Park. Go for just a bit of a walk. Grab a coffee. Hamley’s is quite close,” I stress at the end.

A chuckle, then.

“Not leaving this to the possible second, then? Progress!,” he enthuses, with a laugh. “Alright. I’m game. I haven’t set foot into a toy store in possibly 20 years.”

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One of the things I miss doing with regularity is getting coffee at the little neighbourhood cafes. The ones lined with old metal dining sets along the exterior. Little wooden signs proclaiming hours, and soft coloured curtains that pull closed towards the end of the day.

Usually John and I would pop into these places during cases and it became a sort of ritual for me. I’d generally get the same thing every time: light roast, black, double sugar – but some days the ritual would take on a soothing quality that others might associate with lavender infused baths or Yoga classes.

My favourite days were those that were not excessively cheerful – as far as weather goes – but felt rather dark and brisk. Days when I could wear my greatcoat and the rain was falling lightly – just enough to dampen John’s hair into something a little darker, bringing out caramel tones that contrasted against the hue of his skin.

And when there was fog coursing throughout the streets, and the evenings seemed fresh and cold and a little bit biting, I’d hold onto the coffee and smell its aroma. I loved the contrast of the cool world, doused in whiteness, the streets looking cleaner than they ever would on a hot day – and my hands would grasp a cup of heat that smelled divine. John would usually change his order about much more than I ever did, and so on these trips, if I was standing in close proximity to him – I would catch notes of hazelnut, or French vanilla, or Dulche de leche with cinnamon and cloves.
And what I realize is funny, now, is that for all John has said about how I brought new things into his life – adventure, or challenge, or even danger – he brought similar changes into my own life; safer changes, for the most part – but changes that I could reach out towards without wholly owning.

If I felt compelled to always affix my scarf in a particular manner, or always order the same beverage – his inclusion into my world also allowed me to smell, and see, and even feel the other offerings that had always been there and to test them out by proxy.

Now, as we make our way closer to an establishment we haven’t yet tried – “The Little One Coffee Shop” – I can see John’s strides quicken and he holds the door out and away from himself, granting me access.

“You seem terribly excited for a beverage that you just had this morning,” I mutter.

John laughs.

“I’m not making two pots of the same thing each day just to ensure one is decaffeinated. And I truly wouldn’t mind having a little caffeine right now.”

I stop, and consider his words.

Could I have been so unaware as to not consider that John has been drinking – and even eating – much of the same beverages and foods as I have been doing these last few weeks? That these were the concessions he has made silently while I’ve griped about decaffeinated coffee as if it was the end of the world?

We approach the counter, and my eyes survey the overhead menu before I can remind myself that my order should never change. That the ritual could crumble if I do.

John nudges me with his shoe, and I turn and look at him in confusion.

“Go ahead,” he says with a slight groan. “But make it a small, eh?”

I blink in confusion before clarifying.

“Whatsoever I want? I mean…whatever? Truly?”

“Let’s keep the caffeine hit down to something rather small, though, alright? You’ve been off it for over a month. I’d rather this trip not end in an afternoon filled with heart palpitations for you.”

I smile and place my order, and am rewarded with the best coffee – regular, not decaf – of my life. And this time I order it with sugar (not splenda, as I had taken to doing in the previous months).

John places his order after me and adds a croissant to the mix.

“Sherlock,” he says, nudging my hand. “Do you want to try one of their-,” and he reads from the signage above, “‘freshly made in-store croissants’?”

I try to consider what this means. This trip. My responses.

“Alright,” I hesitate. “Alright, then.”

John orders two, with butter, and asks for them to be heated up in the retrofitted convection oven that sits atop the counter.
The croissants are outfitted in their own little brown bags, with the name of the shop on the front. A couple of serviettes included in each bag.

We take our treats and make our way to a side table that has a variety of coffee add-ons placed in diminutive metal containers. Nutmeg. Cinnamon. Vanilla. Chocolate.

John adds various offerings to his coffee, and I pick up the nutmeg, give it a sniff. Add a light tap against my opened cup, before affixing the plastic top.

We then find an outside table with two chairs and people-watch for a few minutes as we eat the pastries. The little flecks of the croissant break apart and fall over the table with messy abandon while I take measured bites, trying to focus on the taste and the heat as contrasted by the relative damp of the outside air.

The experience is different this time. I let myself eat and not obsess. I let myself consume, and when the inner harsh words of my mind hiss at me, I redirect my focus onto a standard poodle that has been tied up against one of the bike stands. The animal is sitting in elegant form - its fur slightly matted by the rain, and I watch it yawn in relaxed patience for its guardian to return.

“Have you ever thought about getting another dog?,“ John states, following my gaze.

“Hmm? Now? With our schedules?”

John grins.

“You have a self-imposed schedule, Sherlock. You always have.”

I take a sip of coffee. It’s still much too hot, so I crack open the lid and blow against the top, rewarded in the process with a slight wafting aroma of nutmeg.

“You think I should get a dog?”

John’s grin morphs into a chuckle.

“Oh god. Can you imagine our life with a puppy?”

I fight back a laugh of my own.

“Dogs are an extraordinary amount of work, John. They need full-time attention. It’s like having a child.”

John starts coughing on his coffee and then gives me a watery eyed look of humor.

“And we have no experience with that whatsoever, now do we?”

I take another sip of my coffee before responding.

“Oh do shut up.”

He laughs again then proceeds to finish off the last of his croissant. When I look down, I realize I’ve only consumed a little more than a third of mine.

“Take your time. Truly. Hamley’s is open for several more hours…there’s no rush.”

I do, but find it excessively more difficult now that John has now finished his own. Still, I manage to finish the rest of the snack without too much of a delay, before rising and shaking off my coat to
discard errant crumbs that have clung to the blue wool.

“Come on. Let’s go pick out a present for Toby,” he states in ease, zipping up his jacket.

I follow him along the street, portioning out my coffee intake into fractionated sips – prolonging the taste and the warmth.

Most of all, I try to remind myself that the significance of this moment doesn’t have to be overwhelming. I can let myself stay in this space for a little while longer and accept whatever small comforts I am taking from this time – and not rush mentally onwards to bigger or weightier days or events that could be on the horizon.

I look back down to my hands – hands that, just this morning, I had considered ugly – and I try to pull back and see them as something different.

Something frail, perhaps, but human.

Human.

Now that I am able to feel the weight of a cup of coffee, and hold it, and connect with it in a way I have never really done in the past – I realize, with a faint spike of sadness – that I probably would have liked (very much would have liked) to have been able to have felt all those little moments without the numbness and without the frenzied need to deny them when they tried to surface.

And my life can become more about the small moments, though – can’t it? Maybe it needs to be.

Maybe this one moment can be more than enough to help me get back to a place that I didn’t even realize I was missing until now.
My throat is sore, and I awake blurry eyed before turning off the multiple alarms I had set on my mobile phone the night before. I reach across the bed expecting to feel Patrick’s warmth but feeling nothing but cool sheets.

When I find my slippers (half-way beneath the pine bed) I slip them on and make my way downstairs and into the living room.

Patrick is watching re-runs of Doctor Who on our large screen TV; I gaze at him fondly for a few moments before he realizes that he is not alone and looks up and over to me with a smile. His hair is a blond mess and sticks up against his ears in damp curls.

“Well you look like shit,” he yawns, turning down the volume on the tellie. I wander over to him and press a kiss to the side of his face.

“And you look – and feel - like you need a shave, love,” I reply, coursing my hands through his curls before kissing the side of his mouth. “But you taste like those sour jujubes. Again.”

Patrick gives me cheeky grin at the mention of his insatiable sweet tooth then pulls around an art deco bowl that the two of us purchased on a trip to Chicago several years back to celebrate our 20th anniversary. I can see now that the bowl has had its decorative lemons and pears removed and has become Patrick’s rather expensive candy container, instead.

“Well, THAT seems like a nutritious breakfast, Imp,” I chuckle, grabbing his least favourite flavor – licorice – and popping it into my mouth.

“Up for a little one-on-one time with my favourite doctor?,” he smirks before grabbing a lime jujube, devouring it, and wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

His question would likely sound like a euphemism to someone who didn’t know him all that well, and that would be an understandable belief - yet they’d be dead-wrong.

For starters, Patrick isn’t fond of euphemisms in general, and certainly not when they have to do with sex. In fact, he tends to be almost bashful when it comes to instigating anything physical between us,
even though we have been together for more than two decades. Instead, he prefers to show his interest in quieter ways until I take the hint.

“Oh, you mean me?,” I say with a smile, kissing his ear again. “Aren’t I your favourite doctor?”

Patrick just laughs and chucks a licorice jujube at my head. He has a boyish disposition that comes out in overt playfulness though he never fails to make me laugh when he sets his mind to it.

“Manners!,” I chuckle, locating the candy in my pajama top and brushing it off where it falls onto the coffee table. “Oh, right, of course – your favourite doctor is David Tennant.”

My partner lounges back against a silk encased throw pillow and gives me a lazy scan. He’s still wearing his white and baby blue pinstriped pajamas and the type of faux fur reading socks that seem to be all the rage these days. And because Patrick tends to run hot he often wakes up with his hair matted with sweat. When his hair starts to dry, it forms a cascade of tiny curls (I tease him about it but the truth is I find it to be the cutest thing. It makes him look rather deceptively like a cherub).

“You’d be so hot if you were a time lord, Yuri,” he says in absent-minded affection before returning to his program. “You sort of have that whole, umm, nerdy librarian look going on anyway. But that could be upgraded into something utterly adorable with a bow-tie.”

“Nuh uh,” I nudge his shoulder. “Not going to happen. Besides, you know that I need the space now. I’m sorry love but I’m going to have to put an end to your session with your favourite doctor.” As an afterthought I add, “Anyway, don’t you have to be at work in less than an hour?”

Patrick works for a tech company and I’m lucky insofar that his schedule often dovetails my own. Given my long office hours Monday through Friday, my sessions with Sherlock extended on Tuesday evenings at my home and then again on Saturday mornings, and my volunteer work with three round-table support therapy groups on Sunday - we generally wouldn’t have much time for each other if he worked late into the evenings.

Even so, I am less of a homebody than Patrick is - who outside of his running schedule in the early mornings prefers a world of film consumption and board game playing with heavy candy supplementation. Case in point: Settlers of Catan – Star Trek edition is still lying out on the table, small pieces and cards littered about.

Patrick makes a drawn-out sigh of feigned disappointment.

“So no more Tennant for ol’ Patrick because your clients don’t want to obey your office hours, eh? You’re a real softie, you know that?,” he smirks before turning off the show and reaffecting the pillows and throws so that it looks presentable as an office and not simply a grown man’s playroom.

“Please put these away too, before I chuck all of these teeny-tiny pieces into the linen closet for good,” I laugh, already sorting the coloured plastic into their respective bags – no real heat in my words.

Tidy he is not, but he ventures around to my side and helps me put the last of the game into the box before shoving the entire thing under the coffee table. It’s not where it goes either, really, but I know better than to comment. It would fall on deaf ears. Just as would be my request that he put his socks and running kit into the laundry hamper at the end of each run and not leave it nestled between the shower and the toilet.

That’s not to say that the man isn’t thoughtful, though. He is. If I forget my lunch, for example, he’s apt to show up at my office with a container filled with egg foo yung, lo mein, a coffee with extra
cinnamon and a handwritten note written with his calligraphy pen – something that takes considerably longer than picking up after himself or chucking his sweats into the mesh bag above the washing machine once a day.

He’s simply not fastidious, and he’s doubly absent-minded unless highly interested in a subject, whereas I can be far too concerned with tidiness and have an almost exhausting level of focus.

Together it works well, though, because together we balance each other.

“I guess I am off then. You need the shower first? I mean, you do look a tad on the crappy side,” Patrick interjects, pulling me out of my thoughts. “No offense.”

“Oh, thanks for that!,“ I smirk. “Just a sore throat, but I appreciate your overabundance of concern; I’ll take some Nyquil.”

My better half looks delighted.

“I’d actually pay to see you conduct a session doped up on Nyquil. For shame, these doctor-patient confidentiality arran-“

“Move it you lunatic,” I laugh, cutting him off. He picks up the candy-filled bowl before slowly making his way up the stairs to get ready for his day. “And, c’mon. Don’t make me lecture you, alright? REAL brekkie, yeah? Something with protein and vitamins? Maybe some vitamin C? No more jujubes!”

I am rewarded with an eye roll as he departs.

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I met Patrick when we were 22 and I was completing my last undergrad year at University.

He was – and always has been - brilliantly funny, relentlessly kind, and quirky in all the best ways. Yet at the time he seemed like the type of rascal I used to consider a “player.” Of course, this wasn’t based on me actually knowing the man with anything approaching depth and more my appreciation of the stereotypes.

He was also my lab partner, of sorts. He was taking a biology class and the accompanying lab class to help him fulfill his science obligations for his degree. I wasn’t taking the biology lab, really, but I was acting as a TA for the professor as I had taken it two years prior and had completed all of my other science pre-reqs.

Anyway, since he didn’t take to the subject naturally I became something of a tutor to him over the course of the winter semester. And it was during those review sessions (and all the small moments shared between the two of us when others were not really around) that I slowly got to learn that first appearances are rarely all that accurate.

Not only was Patrick the opposite of a player, but his carefree extroversion was a mask for deep problems which became more and more apparent over the course of October and which eventually culminated in a confrontation by late November.

At first I considered drugs, and then when that hypothesis was omitted as being impossible - I was forced to consider that which didn’t seem possible given his overall temperament but which remained as the only possibility; I knew of his eating habits, his exercise routine, and the stunning amount of weight he had lost since the summer semester had begun.
I also started to notice other things, too. His perfectionism in certain discrete domains. His sense of
detail – again, not found in general tidiness, but in how he fashioned his routines, his activities, his
appearance all wrapped up in a tendency for boisterous displays that kept people at ease and from
looking too closely in his direction.
And even then I had been drawn to psychiatry and had considered it as my profession of choice if I
were to proceed in any direction based on personal interest and not parental expectation – so I began
looking at my friend from the perspective of one motivated by the study of human behavior as it
applied to mental health issues.

Within a few days I was fairly convinced that he suffered from some sort of eating disorder – most
likely bulimia with an excessive amount of exercise thrown into the mix - and the feeling of nameless
dread, if not horror, was what prompted me to confront him one dismally cold evening after he had
returned from a rowing meet-up, his alumni sweatshirt looking baggy and stained in sweat.

His face had been pale before the confrontation – but had turned dead-white in fear and exposure
after – and his eyes had looked everywhere around us without settling on my own.

It could have been the end of the friendship. He could have laughed harshly at my words or tried to
convince me of their inaccuracy if not ridiculousness. Most of all, for the sake of preserving his
‘habit’ as I have come to think of it – not a drug habit, but a habit all the same with the same
addictive components - he could have written me off and avoided further interactions.

But he didn’t.

Somehow he didn’t do any of that, and I don’t know why he didn’t given what I now know about
the psychology of eating disorders – but he stayed. And he listened.
And he talked to me.

Not easily, mind you. His responses were laconic and shrouded in shame, but he talked about what
had been going on with him; he replied that it was just a little thing that had become “a bigger little
thing” over the autumn months. And while he didn’t respond with his normal cheerfulness, I could
see the effort he was putting into making me feel at ease.

Eventually, he did relent, and he admitted that he didn’t realize his issues were so obvious and that he
didn’t want me to worry. That most of all he didn’t want to lose our friendship and for that reason
alone – beyond all others - he’d come with me to talk to one of the University counselors in the
psychology department. He also agreed to let me get him some contact information for a support
group and most importantly of all he agreed to see a doctor.

I had been in tears at that point, demanding with each accepted condition that he still needed to get
checked out and that I wouldn’t tutor him any longer until he did so. I told him my conscience
wouldn’t allow for it.

In that moment, we both become something more than friends.

We became confidants.

I helped him, and he helped me in a different way – since I had newly come out as being gay to the
world and was dealing with the fallout of this information having made its way back to my non-
accepting family.

It was a confusing time.

Moreover, the sting of their rejection was still newly painful and isolating, and the last thing I wanted
to do was give an ultimatum to a friend who also seemed to be caught up in something equally painful and isolating.

But I didn’t see any alternative: he had dropped such a large amount of weight so quickly that I was becoming terrified. I knew the mortality rates on the condition when it became severe; I knew that cardiac arrest was a genuine possibility, even in a 22-year-old - and especially given the degree he pushed himself when it came to physical activities such as rowing, swimming and long-distance running with his track team.

I knew that heart attacks were actually the primary cause of sudden death in anorexics, and since I didn’t know if that would be his diagnosis since I was operating more on hunches and behavioural observations – I was still quite scared. Because I knew that heart attacks could occur even when the person in question seemed wired with energy, bright and alert and that youth alone was no safety-guard against the heart muscle wastage that inevitably led to its failure.

I also knew that suicide was astronomically more common in this particular population and that it generally brought the fatality rate up to 10% within a relatively short period of time.

I told him this, and then I shoved his shoulder in unconstrained upset – furious at him and furious at myself for not cluing in months sooner, but mostly just furious at the disease. The insanity of it all – of a disease that seemed to take over the mind of an otherwise highly logical, highly compassionate, and highly intelligent person; alien, almost, in its ability to warp the mind of the sufferer to such a degree that horrible abuses were carried out with all-consuming focus and tireless dedication against the same very body that housed the mind that sought its wastage.

It truly is one of the scariest and most confounding diseases from my perspective - especially since it seemed so self-directed and controlled; for those reasons alone it filled me with wordless terror.

As I spoke my mind (panicked, rambling) - overwhelmed by the situation and already feeling denied the support of my mother and father - I began to cry in earnest. Patrick brought his frail torso next to my somewhat stolid one and captured me in as strong a hug as he was able given his weakened condition. Our close proximity caused my glasses to fog up with steam until the details of his face blurred in front of me, and when he spoke again he merely said, over and over again, “I’m sorry, Yuri. I’m sorry. Please don’t cry.”

Suffice it to say our status changed to that of best friends pretty quickly after this point, and later on – over a year later when he had reached his target weight - we became romantically involved.

This newfound stage mostly involved movie dates while we started on our respective graduate level courses (combined with the typically noted romantic detours and activities of young couples in love): kissing, cuddling, behaviours that skirted near to having sex without actually being such.

Eventually, too, we became sexually involved. In fact, Patrick became my first sexual partner, and I became his – though navigating those waters lead to several relapses for him and awakened me to the reality that having an eating disorder isn’t an all or nothing thing. That it has to be treated much the same way as alcoholism. Or drug addiction.

Only that, with eating disorders – the body remains the trigger - and exposure of the body to another for any reason remains an issue of incredible sensitivity for a very long time after recovery. In fact, the typical and expected timeframe most need to get used to sharing oneself with another is on a much longer and circuitous path for those with the disorder - sometimes to such a degree that many partners become frustrated and give up on their partner for that reason alone.

Of course, I knew that I would never do this to Patrick. I knew that no matter how long it took, I would never desert him. Not just because I loved him – although that reality cemented my resolve –
but because I knew that I had cared about him as a friend, first, and that our friendship was something that I wanted to preserve for the rest of our lives.

In Patrick’s case, his relapses were quickly addressed and firmly reversed. They might not have been if I hadn’t been there – all too attuned to the possibility of their probable occurrence in the first place – but they were managed.

Usually, during these periods, Patrick would pull back and show increased anxiety if we attempted anything sexual - all too aware of his physical self and terribly self-conscious despite my attempts at consolation. I understood well enough by that point to realize the issue had nothing to do with his trust in me nor was it rooted in trauma in his particular case.

If anything, Patrick came from an exceptional home.

Additionally, his entire family was wholly supportive of not only my work and my boundless enthusiasm and friendship with their son but of our progressively evolving relationship. They accepted me when my own parents had essentially disowned me and over time I became wholly committed to them as well.

Quickly I realized that the reasons for my boyfriend’s addiction didn’t appear to stem from unresolved emotional problems. And since the nurture component could be cut out of the equation (at least, it seemed that he didn’t have emotional problems originating from trauma) – that left nature: the biological predisposition that sets one up for such a sickness.

So I watched over him even more diligently and I looked for patterns of behavior that mimicked other disorders with strong genetic components – and as I did so, I became more and more aware of the parallels between anorexia, in particular, and that of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Patrick was my first real human contact with the pernicious world of hiding food, and hiding vomiting and hiding over-exercising and all the other strange, seemingly unrelated traits that I have since learned often go hand-in-hand with these disorders. He also challenged my suppositions from the get-go and worked with me to formulate theories for what could be triggering his relapses - what could likely “flip the switch in his brain” (his term) for a “slide-back” (also his term). He became my sounding board for all the questions to which I needed answers, and I became his; eventually, the two of us worked at deepening our appreciation for what he was struggling with from a completely judgment-free and relatively scientifically objective position. We documented. We had graphs. It wasn’t what most did, but it was my scholastic focus as I finished up my first thesis.

And there was great healing in taking that route, I think. For starters, we both became over-exposed to the terminology, and for Patrick at least – it seemed to take the sting out of the words. In a sense, we talked about it to death.

Not only that: it put us both on equal footing – that of fellow research-scientists, of sorts. Patrick would clue me in whenever he read something that he thought could be of benefit to my thesis, while I would ask him questions and get him to provide detailed responses in a manner that I know I would never nor could never attempt with any of my patients today.

In the truest sense, I owe my entire psychiatry practice to Patrick’s willingness to confide in me that one night over 27 years ago. He made me realize that my input could have value when it came to encouraging someone else to get the help they were denying they needed. He made me appreciate the power of words – and the power of confrontation when others would rather deny a situation.

Because of Patrick, I also learned that denial in and of itself is a tell. That it reveals conditions about the person being confronted.

Denial, like so many other things, is a coping mechanism.
It’s just not a very good one.

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Before Patrick leaves – freshly shaven and smelling like mint – he ambles back into our shared work/TV room.

“How do I look?” he asks openly, moving around in an arcing motion as if modeling new clothes.

I bite down a grin.

His irreverent nature has been a counterbalance to my generally more serious and introverted one since the day we became a couple (and I love the contrast) but sometimes it can become a distraction. Feeling cheery to excess is something he brings out in me naturally and yet my patients are usually going through incredibly draining and frightening situations. So for their sake, not mine, I am usually diligent to prepare myself not only mentally but emotionally for whatever an upcoming session might reveal.

Part of the preparation means that I cannot let myself get too caught up in my own joy or domestic contentment deliberately preceding an appointment. If I aim for equanimity then it must come with the pre-session downtime of being alone to compose my thoughts – to read or focus on case notes - and not entertaining my husband and laughing at his antics.

At least, not at that precise moment.

I give my imp a nod, though. Then a smile.

“You are looking even more handsome than you were twenty-five minutes ago - if that’s possible,” I reply, glancing back down to Sherlock’s file.


While we never discuss cases in any detail whatsoever for the obvious privacy reasons, he still checks in with me. He’s always been concerned by the possibility that one day I could burn-out. “Compassion fatigue” is the phrase he likes to throw around occasionally – usually after a rather draining session.

“The toughest sort of case. Tragic, really,” I murmur, knowing that with our routines and my general hyper-focus on preserving trust that the words alone could never reveal anything about any particular patient. “But enough about that. You look very ‘ready-to-take-on-the-day’. Had your breakfast yet?,” I inquire a moment later.

Patrick frowns quickly before recovering. I’ve already mentioned breakfast twice in less than an hour, and that’s just not something I get on him about anymore; hasn’t been in over a decade, really, save for comments made more out of habit than genuine concern.

So that in itself is a reveal.

“Toast and eggs,” he supplies, still studying me before coming closer. “Plus a little something-something for you,” he says with put-upon levity. “Ta da!,” and a bottle of teal cold and flu medicine drops into my lap.

I pick it up with a nodded thanks while he smacks a big, wet, exuberant kiss on my cheek.

“So I’m off now, Mr. Serious. Are we still going to that whole Jenny dinner thingamajig tonight? Or
do you think we can use your cold as an excuse to skip? Aelish has the flu, so I mean-

I groan, having forgotten entirely about our evening meal with Patrick’s eldest sister, husband, and their adolescent gum-smacking twin girls.

“Oh god, of course. Haven’t forgotten,” I reply with a speed too unnatural to be believed.

“Uh huh. Sure. I’ll see you later, sweets,” he says, rooting around for his coat and gloves. “And Yuri?”

I look up, still bracing the file awkwardly so that only I can read the information contained within when he adds, “You’ve got this. You always do.”

I mutter my thanks, before looking back down at my previous session notes with Sherlock.

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I write session notes in a clipped format, sometimes in shorthand. The most vitally important information gets re-written into a more detailed file and electronically saved for posterity. Today, I have Sherlock’s most recent case notes (as well as his faxed blood test results from the previous two weeks) out in front of me and I am trying to determine the best course of action for our upcoming session.

‘SH & I discussed feelings, moods. Having substantial issues with organizing thoughts. Feels unsettled. Still won’t address many questions posed. Weight gain is modest but consistent. Exceptional anger when attempt was made to discuss father, brother.’

I sigh, and put away the folder before setting out a tray of beverages and snacks as I always do for my clients.

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I hear a rapping against the front door two minutes past 11 am, and call out to Sherlock that the door is unlocked. A few moments later, I hear the squeak of the front door as it opens and closes, followed by the sound of Sherlock removing his boots and coat.

When he makes his way into the study, coat draped over his arms, I can see that he’s looking relatively well rested and healthier than on our previous meet up although he seems somewhat fatigued – as if he’s pulled an all-nighter.

I also know that commenting, however positively, on a recovering anorexic’s newfound health improvement is a terribly bad idea. It is almost always taken the wrong way – as a suggestion that their weight gain is abnormal, or excessive, and typically causes renewed and unfounded anxiety.

“You know the routine,” I say with a smile, indicating the beverages and tumbler cups.

Sherlock appraises the offerings before picking up a Perrier – as is his routine - cracking the lid, and winding his way around to the sofa – not the loveseat as he usually selects.

He flops down on the furniture in a dramatic fashion, lying halfway across the grey fabric, his eyes at half-mast.

“Tired?,” I test.
He takes a sip, nods his head slowly, then stretches out one languid arm to deposit his beverage on the side table. His movements and demeanor seem more feline than human and he takes over the sofa with far less tentativeness than he has in the past. That in itself is a form of progress. It means that his very anxiety regarding attending a session is dissipating.

“Just thinking. Of developments,” he drawls in his baritone voice.

I sit quietly and wait for him to expound; he turns to me with a raised eyebrow.

“Aren’t you going to ask “what developments, Sherlock?””

I try not to snort. In some respects, given the gravity of his situation, he has a way of keeping even the most educated clinician off his back. He works to do just that, of course, and I have no doubt that his flippant demeanor is largely an act. Even so, he often displays child-like behavioral traits.

And I feel for him. I can’t help it.

I might have been trained to detach emotionally during interactions with patients, but I’m only human and the situation is still tough to consider even for one with professional training.

Perhaps, in a sense, the situation is simply more complicated for one with professional training to consider; it’s a double-edged sword of awareness. I am acutely aware of the long-standing devastation that child abuse can create, and I have learned enough from Sherlock to know that his experiences were particularly brutal if not sadistic in intent. So I consider Sherlock now, and his need for control.

If I could – if I thought it would serve him and give him the elusive sense of safety that he’s craving – I’d merely play along.

And yet I know better. I know that to do so is only prolonging our sessions and prolonging the work we still have to do and would ultimately only be prolonging the time it takes for him to start feeling better. Emotionally.

“Okay. I’ll bite. What are these recent developments?”

Sherlock glances around the room as if studying the decorations for the first time.

“I think I am able to name anger. Feel it, name it – own it – take your pick,” he murmurs.

I keep my facial features even.

“Why do you believe that you can now feel anger? Has something happened recently to make you feel angry?”

Sherlock’s hands are fidgeting with his coat; plucking the buttons before tugging on them.

“John had me read something. It wasn’t something that hasn’t been suggested in one way or another before, but this time it took root.”

I take a sip of my tea.

“What did John have you read?”

Sherlock seemingly ignores my question and brings his hands up and over into his peripheral vision as if making animal shapes. The type of physical hand movements a parent would do if wanting to project shadow animals onto a wall for their child.
It’s not something I have ever seen him do before and so I watch the display with a sort of foreboding hesitation.

“Sherlock?”

“Oh, right,” he says in an unhurried manner. “That.”

I resist an impulse to sigh.

“Yes. ‘That.’”

“John had me read a passage from one of his,” and he makes air quotes with his hands. “‘Trauma recovery books.’ It was all about how children resort to intellectual exercises when overwhelmed by disturbing events, which indicates that my predilection for doing so now isn’t abnormal.”

I jot down a couple notes, ignoring the pedantic and rehearsed language. Again, that’s nothing unusual with Sherlock. He often sounds as if he’s reading from a textbook whenever he speaks. He does his homework and I believe that he structures and considers what he wants to say in therapy beforehand not unlike a student preparing for an essay, but it’s still another way of prohibiting how much he can reveal naturally.

“I never said that your responses were abnormal, Sherlock.”

Sherlock lets out of a huff of air.

“Then why am I in therapy if what I’m doing – how I am responding – isn’t abnormal? Isn’t therapy for abnormal people? Not people coping in a normal fashion?”

I put down the parchment and raise an eyebrow.

“Is this really how you want to go about today’s session? Playing games?”

Sherlock sits up.

“I’m not playing games. Anger is a normal response to what I went through,” he replies quietly but with an edge of irritation. Not quite whispering, but almost. “And I think I am angry. I think I am furious.”

“What does feeling furious mean to you?”

Sherlock’s hands slide down to rest on his lap and he turns to read the titles of my psychiatry texts on the shelf.

“I could kill him, you know. If he were still alive, I could kill him. I could. I’m not just saying that. I could do it,” he responds with forced composure and repetitious words - as if by repeating his position, I will believe it. Or maybe that he’ll believe it.

He does sound angry though, that much is true.

In days prior, his responses had been more or less one-word answers. I would try to engage him but it was not unlike pulling teeth. He didn’t want to give anything up, and I didn’t want to push. So we often were at a standstill with me suggesting calming activities or anti-anxiety methods to help him deal with his obvious anxiety issues while he would nod and doodle away with black markers on slips of loose leaf as if writing down coded messages.

But we were making comparatively little headway on particulars, and each new reveal usually had us
cutting the session short since the very act of admitting much of anything seemed to exhaust him to a considerable degree.

I swallow down the taste of cloying Nyquil before responding.

“How would you kill your father, Sherlock?,” I ask in even tones - no doubt that this is the person he is referencing and aware that if I am wrong on this point he will correct my misunderstanding quickly.

Sherlock looks at his hands, at the bitten and ravaged nails – many wrapped up in bandages.

“I thought about this a lot last night, actually. When I was falling asleep. Trying to fall asleep. I have determined that I would drug him – just a little, just enough to paralyze him – but I’d get the dosage perfectly correct. I’d immobilize him, and then when he was conscious, but too weak to do much of anything – I would slit his throat with an exacto-blade. And he’d have to watch his blood spurt up and he’d gurgle in fear and plead for help. And there would be no help. And no one would come. No one would ever come. And I would just watch. Maybe I would smirk at him as he died – just like he used to smirk at me."

My heart pounds against my ribcage. Not out of fear of him, but out of sadness for him. And also, if I am being completely honest – because this degree of rage, which has obviously been nesting deep within him for years, decades even, can be a powerful force when it is finally unlocked in anyone.

It can make patients do impulsive things. It can make them act out in unusual, unexpected ways. Ways that don’t necessarily help reduce their rage. Ways that only serve to cause themselves more pain.

Not to mention that the symbolism here is undeniably textbook. The parcel knife that Sherlock used to hurt himself as an adolescent would be turned on his abuser. Drugging his father would make the older man – had he still been alive, that is - physically weak and prevent all attempts at crying out for aid. It is a classic reversal of roles.

Instead of a child being incapacitated and wounded, it would be the victimizer forced to face terror with the understanding that no one would step in. That no one would help or offer salvation.

I look down at my notes.

“You haven’t talked in great detail before about what your father did to you, Sherlock. I know that he abused you, and you indicated that the nature of his abuse was sexual during our previous session. You also mentioned last week that during one of these attacks you dissociated, and believed that you had died. How old were you when that event occurred?”

Sherlock slumps back down on the sofa. His response is muffled.

“Almost three,” he whispers.

I wait a few seconds to determine if he’s going to add anything more.

He doesn’t.

“What made you believe that you had died?”

Sherlock pulls his wool coat close to his face then turns on his side as if preparing to take a nap. In effect, he’s turned completely away from me – and now speaks to the television.

“Because,” he starts. Stops. I hear him take a gasp of air. “Because I saw my spirit come out of my
body and travel up the walls. I saw my body on the bed, and it wasn’t moving around anymore or
making any noise, and my spirit could see it and it could see my father, and I didn’t feel anything.
Not my inner body. Not my outer body. I couldn’t feel pain, or sadness, or fear. Just dead.”

I put down my teacup.

“And where did you go? Where did your spirit go?”

Sherlock tugs on the fabric of his sweater and brings it closer to his face, making his words harder –
but not impossible – to decipher.

“I climbed up to the rod that held Grandmother’s lace curtains in place, and I shrank my spirit down
until it was terribly small – no larger than a bee - and then I hid behind the curtains where no one
could ever find me.”

Swallowing down a painful lump, I respond.

“I see. And you were safe behind the curtains?”

Sherlock nods, body pulled tightly in.

“I was very safe there,” he whispers, and I have to strain once more to hear the admission. “He never
found me. Not once. Who would think that I could hide up on a curtain rod, anyway? It was
peaceful and dark. Everything was blue from moonlight, and eventually I fell asleep high up by the
ceiling, behind the venetians.”

I ignore the impulse to remove my glasses and press against my eyes.

“So you – your mind – was able to go somewhere he’d never think to look.”

“Mhmm,” Sherlock agrees. “I stayed as a ghost for a long time.”

“Do you remember returning to your body?”

Sherlock shakes his head. He doesn’t respond verbally, and I don’t push him on that question.

Instead I ask, “Could you see what was happening to your body when you were sitting on the
curtain rod?”

Sherlock’s head pivots up and down in affirmation and his hands curl into fists.

A couple minutes pass in complete silence before he speaks again.

“I hate him,” he murmurs. “He’s dead, and I still hate him. I just want- I want-”

I let him try to get this out; responding now would be a mistake. Not when he is in the middle of
trying to compose his thoughts.

“I don’t know if I could really kill him. Maybe not, but-,” the sound cuts off into something like a
cry. “I wanted him to love me. Even after. Even after, and-,” I hear the choked sound of strangled
hiccoughed laughter so incongruous with his overall mood that I simply study him, keeping my
alarm in check.

The room suddenly feels stuffy. Oppressive.

“Sherlock, I need to ask: did your father rape you?”
Sherlock goes stone-cold still.

“Not then,” he replies faintly. “But I don’t want to talk about that. I’m not ever going to talk about that – not even with you.”

“Oh, I say carefully. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I want to talk about how I can feel anger now. I didn’t come here today to get upset!,” he adds with an invective tone, as if he wants to swear but is restraining himself from doing so.

“You do realize that feeling upset over what you’ve just told me would not be an abnormal response, don’t you?”

Sherlock doesn’t respond. Instead, he moodily glowers at the television set.

“Does it feel better than the numbness? To feel anger towards him?,” I test. “Does feeling angry feel good?”

He sits up from his position on the sofa and looks at me with red and swollen eyes.

“It feels powerful,” he hisses. “It feels powerful to hate him so much when before I hated myself. And I think that’s only fair – to hate him. To not hate myself anymore.”

His words are posed as statements, not questions, and yet I can hear nothing but an eternal question being raised.

“Why do you think that you hate yourself?,” I ask once I can be sure my words will come out in even and measured strength.

Sherlock looks down at his lap, and this time I see tears well up in his eyes. They swell to the point of breaking then descend over his cheeks in sluicing lines. He wipes them away with a harsh chuckle. More tears fall as he does so, and he wipes these away too.

“I don’t know,” he stumbles, his voice cracking. “I don’t know why. I just do.”

I get up from my chair and crouch down in front of him.

“What’s inside you that anyone could possibly hate? Hmm?,” I question gently. “What is inside you that deserves to be hated?”

He closes his eyes and wipes his cheeks before cupping his face into his hands.

“There has to be something,” he croaks. “There has to be. Or else it doesn’t make any fucking sense!”

I take a deep breath.

It’s all too easy to hurt for him and I can’t afford to lose control of the situation right now. Not letting how I feel when a patient reveals something that has been wounding them for a considerably long time has always been the toughest part of my job.

I take a breath, and determine the best course of action before proceeding.

“But what if there’s nothing bad inside you? What then?”

“I don’t know!,” he manages to get out. “Only that-,” and the rest of his words degrade into
unintelligible mumbling.

And then it happens.

He bursts into tears.

I sit down on my haunches and tentatively reach out for his hand. Remarkably, Sherlock doesn’t push me away. Instead, his body shakes silently as he cries – as if he’s been trained not to make any sound at all. I guess in a sense he has.

“Can you repeat what you last said?,” I murmur gingerly. “I couldn’t make it out, I’m sorry. Can you repeat it?”

I give his hand a slight squeeze when he fails to respond, his breathing harsh and his chest rising in sharp bursts.

“There’s nothing bad inside you, Sherlock,” I whisper. “There never was.”

He keeps his face hidden but his fingers spasm against my touch as if he’s pulsing with energy.

After a while he speaks – his voice sounding as if he has been strangled.

“There must be something there. Something really bad. There must be.”

I remove my eyeglasses and lay them beside his bottle of Perrier.

“I promise you there isn’t.”

He stays like that for a few minutes, and I finally sit down properly on the side of the sofa until he has calmed down enough to respond.

The energy he’s putting into trying to recover from showing his upset is formidable, and some might even wish to call it stoic – but stoicism doesn’t really help in these situations. His words are also quite revealing given his history; while I have known that he has an almost scary ability to turn off his awareness of emotional pain, I am now getting to experience this occurrence first hand. Witness it with my own eyes.

I am getting to see in real time how he systematically removes himself from the moment. How he pushes down that which he equally needs to let up and express.

The process must be incredibly exhausting.

After a few more moments his eyes open, and he squints against the light streaming through the windows.

“It’s too bright in here,” he murmurs, wiping at his eyes. “It’s giving me a headache and making my eyes sting.”

I shelve my growing concern and do not comment when he shakes my hand off. With that dismissal, I amble over to the window and pull down the blinds until the room darkens. Then, I walk back towards my desk and turn on the table lamp.

“Better?,” I query, tailoring my facial expression into something resembling professional equanimity.

Sherlock nods – his red eyes studying the woven design of the floor rug.
“How are you feeling?”

Sherlock lies back down, turning onto his belly and mashing his face into the throw cushion.

“Embarrassed,” he murmurs.

I nod in acceptance of that fact: shame is one of the hardest demons to drive away.

“Why do you feel embarrassed?”

He opens one eye and stares at me in annoyance.

“Because I almost started crying like a mewling infant in your office, Yuri, that’s why,” he grouses.

I swallow down the last of my tea and don’t mention that he did, in fact, cry. Nor do I mention the fact that it was very likely to his benefit. Neither assertion would go over well.

“Is crying something that only children should do?”

Sherlock presses against his eyes.

“Even children *shouldn’t* cry. It doesn’t solve anything. It’s a pointless activity!”

I deposit myself into the nearby loveseat - the one that Sherlock usually takes.

“People often feel better after they cry, Sherlock. It releases tension. And there are many reasons why people feel the need to cry – momentary sadness being just one of a few. Frustration, chronic fatigue, unremitting emotional pain, and of course unresolved grief. And let’s be open about that issue, too. Grief is something that I believe is at the heart of everything you are experiencing right now.”

Sherlock sits up straighter in his seat before hastily divesting himself of his sweater. When he’s through with the process, I can see just how thin he still is despite his recent high-calorie diet.

“What do you mean, “grief”? I just told you that I feel like killing him. That’s not grief! I don’t grieve him! What is there to grieve other than the fact that I didn’t?”

“Grief is a response to loss, Sherlock. You may not grieve the loss of the man that was your father. But that doesn’t mean that you cannot grieve everything else that usually accompanies such a death. The loss of what you know you can never have: the childhood that you never got to experience - the type of childhood that you could see others enjoying and wished for yourself, or the bonds with your parents that you rightfully should have experienced and would have experienced if they had been loving and mentally healthy people. Those are all losses. The most terrible kinds of losses.”

Sherlock sits quietly, digesting my words.


The questions are naively simplistic, and when I look at my patient his eyes are open and comprehending.

“Possibly for those very same reasons, as strange as it sounds. No, don’t give me that look – hear me out. You HAVE done well for yourself professionally and you have a social support system now in John, in Molly, and probably in others. These might not have been resources you had in such supply when you were younger.”
“Exactly! Support systems. I should be happy!,” he exclaims.

“You also mentioned the other week that you tried contacting your biological father last year. That he did not accept your request to see him and that he insisted that you do not contact him ever again. You learned that you have two half-sisters who you have also been asked not to contact. That understanding is another massive blow. Not only that, but you have talked about how your feelings for John have become more complicated over this previous year, as well. It creates an unsettling feeling for anyone – when feelings for a person who means a great deal to you shift – because it opens you up to perceived risk. The risk of knowing something is shifting and might become better – but not the assurance of everything going well. This is unknown territory for you.”

Sherlock grimaces.

“I’m not AFRAID of John. You’ve insinuated that before, and it’s ridiculous!”

“You don’t need to be afraid of John, as a person, to be afraid of the situation or changes to your relationship status. Any change from what you’ve established as your norm, your normal platonic friendship - is a stressor. This is true for anyone, by the way. The primary difference, I feel, is one of intensity in your case. John isn’t just your friend. He’s your best friend, and a person that you live with and work with on cases. And all of this is occurring during a time when you are already experiencing additional turmoil. In your situation, especially given what you experienced as a child, the issues surrounding romantic feelings or intimacy could-"

“Oh God. Don’t start on that! I’m not discussing intimacy with you, Yuri!”

I give him a cautious smile. He’s always been caustically dismissive of this subject and as is my way – I won’t push him on this subject, either - though one day it does need to be addressed more fully. Probably sometime soon, too, given the direction that John and Sherlock have been heading as of late.

“Still. That could have been all the stressor you needed. That one thing alone, Sherlock, could have made you feel lost and unprepared for upcoming events. Given your history, that’s all that needed to be causing you anxiety to have had you scrambling to find something for which you could control. And with everything else, including the case with the children - these were all undeniably huge taxes on your already taxed psychological reserves. Any one of them could have triggered a relapse, and you experienced three emotionally destabilizing events that target different emotional states in a very short period of time.”

Sherlock looks up at me in apparent confusion as if he’d only been giving me his partial focus, so I list them off with my fingers.

“The sense of rejection and all that entails when your biological father denied wanting to establish a relationship with you. The sense of anxiety that can accompany any shift with a significant other – certainly a best friend – out of fear of what could change. The horror that accompanied a brutal case, especially one with parallels to your own childhood and the grief – yes, grief - over not being able to save those children.”

Sherlock hunches over and picks up an errant card from Patrick’s board game.

“I helped to save one of them,” he murmurs. “I helped to save one of them, at least.”

Something flutters in my chest at the comment. Something warm and hopeful.

“Yes, you did - because you are excellent at what you do. You are an excellent detective, and from
what I can infer – you are likewise excellent at helping others in need – because you care and not in spite of caring. You are the antithesis of a sociopath. So let me just say this once more: I want that to be your next homework assignment. To stop using false labels when describing yourself.”

Sherlock makes a small moaning sound.

“It’s not completely inaccurate as far-”

“It is completely wrong. You are not a sociopath,” I repeat with greater insistence now. “You do care about others and as horrible as the last case was for everyone involved, if it doesn’t reveal that much to you – then the tragedy of those deaths is only worsened. You should be doing your work without setbacks caused by these issues. You are made for it.”

Sherlock’s fidgeting ceases momentarily as he considers my words and the deeper meaning behind them.

“He could have been me,” he replies softly. “The last one. Not Toby, but the last one who was murdered. And now he’s gone forever, even though he only really suffered while he was here. And I can’t fix anything. I can’t make it better for him.”

“I know,” I agree quietly. “He died and he never learned how much you wanted to help him. How much you needed to save him. But that wasn’t your fault. His death could never be your fault.”

Sherlock flips the card over in his hand, seemingly studying the design. He opens his mouth as if to interject something before pausing.

“Do you want to talk about that little boy, Sherlock?”

A shake of his head.

“Alright. Can I ask how you are feeling right now?”

“Here-not-here,” he mutters, his eyes shutting. “I am tired.”

I glance at the clock. It’s edging to half-past twelve. I know John’s schedule well enough to be aware that he will be doing rounds at the clinic until nearly 4:30. And Sherlock is my only patient on Saturdays.

He’s also a patient I don’t want to send home right now. Not alone.

“Okay,” I reply evenly. “Do you want me to let you rest your eyes for a little while? I can work on some reports if you want to take a break and just rest?”

Sherlock hesitates for a moment before nodding, and I pass him an afghan which he secures over his body.

“I’m just going to stay here and work on some writing,” I repeat, “I’ll wake you up in an hour or so.”

If he’s heard me, he doesn’t reply - simply turns inwards until his face is nestled between the throw cushions, his lithe form starting to relax in the cool darkness of the space.

Within a few minutes I hear nothing but the softest sound of even breathing indicating sleep.

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