The Hollow Ones

by antietamfalls

Summary

The dead walk. Mangled corpses of the deceased rise and mindlessly feast upon the flesh of the living. John wakes up, alone and confused, into the remnants of a city gone mad. He will search for answers. He will find Sherlock at any cost. And he will learn that the living are far more dangerous than the dead. Fusion with AMC's The Walking Dead.

Notes

No prior knowledge of AMC's The Walking Dead is required to understand this story. No characters from The Walking Dead make an appearance herein.

Warning for zombie-related gore, violence, and character death. People will die. It's the zombie apocalypse, after all, but if you can handle the show you can probably handle this fic.

While this is intended as a spiritual offshoot of The Walking Dead, further credit for inspiration is owed to 28 Days Later, The Last of Us, The Road, and The Prize by Trillsabell.

Beta services provided by the fabulous hedgehoganddotter and kedgereec. Also, it's likely the rating will jump up to E in later chapters. And I've never been to London so if some of the
geography or details are off, please feel free to correct my Google-based deductions.

So lower your crossbows, sheathe your katanas, wash off that zombie blood, and pull up a chair round the ol' campfire. This'll be ongoing for a while. Expect updates at irregular intervals.
Warm blood trickled freely from his mouth, seeping over dry trembling lips and dribbling past his chin. The wail of sirens echoed in the distant night air and reverberated between the rain-glossed bricks of the alleyway.

Sherlock’s hand, now slick with blood and betraying any attempt to suppress its rampant shaking, pressed hard against the ruins of John's shirt, just below the ridge of his ribs.

“Hold on, John,” Sherlock said, face gone pale and voice pitched unnaturally high. "Hold on. The ambulance will be here soon."

The dark, sticky pool underneath John was already cooling on the pavement. John inhaled a wet, shuddering breath into his one good lung and sought out Sherlock’s fearful eyes, trying to communicate what his throat could not.

*Not bloody soon enough.*

The dripping woke him, but it was the thirst that kept him awake.

Consciousness swelled and constricted in the dark. It pulled by inches, resistant, until thought slowly gathered into painstaking form. Awareness rose through heavy blanketing tension, pushing upward until he emerged, anchored by the parched pain of thirst, back into the waking world.

He couldn't say when drifting turned to lucidity. He only knew what he felt, and what he felt was a blistering dryness lining the inside of his mouth. It stretched up into his nasal cavity and down into his throat, raw and tight and tortuous. He instinctively swallowed and swiftly regretted it when the sensation of sandpaper on gravel blazed a burning stripe up and down his gullet. His tongue scraped painfully against the desiccated surface of his palate, tasting nothing but bitterness.

Water dripped somewhere, hollow and metallic. His mind latched onto that singular, glorious sound.

*Water.*

John slowly opened his eyes.

A prominent dark splotch floated in the murkiness before him. He blinked once, then again, as his vision filtered into finer hues of grey and black. A thick haze enveloped his mind, rendering thought sluggish and confused. Focus was slow to return and for a long time he lay in a wandering daze, detachedly wishing for the pangs of thirst to be gone.

Eventually he grunted, a low and involuntary sound. It contrasted harshly against the steady dripping and his ears perked to attention, brain finally registering the existence of his senses and their ability to collect information from the immediate environment. Internal self-awareness clicked, like a switch being flipped, and for the first time John truly looked.
The shape in front of him was a massive water stain on the wall. It blossomed out in blurry lines and grew darker in the areas closest to the intersection with the ceiling. Filmy paint peeled from the plasterboard in uneven, corrugated welts. The dripping continued, but the source had to be coming from inside the wall.

Alarm sprang to life inside him and he tensed, flushing his body with adrenaline and even more confusion. John sucked a deep breath down his aching throat, but something was partially clogging his airway and it sent him into a sharp fit of coughing. Eye-watering pain shot through his esophagus with every convulsion of his lungs, intensifying his need to find water.

Where was he? Mindfully breathing around the obstruction in his throat, John forced his eyes to adjust enough to make out his surroundings. A closed door stood below the stain on the wall, and to the right another door was partially cracked open.

John angled his head and peered down the length of his body. He lay supine on a bed, his abdomen and legs covered by a single discolored sheet. His muscles felt unnaturally heavy. Attempts to flex them jostled the blanket in shuddering, uncoordinated movements. John lifted his head up further, dipping his chin, and found the pale pattern of a medical gown covering his chest.

He was lying in a hospital bed in near-darkness. Confusion spurred again, and John futilely grasped for an explanation. It was difficult to think against the thirst and muddled cloudiness in his head. He was in hospital? He couldn’t recall being injured, but something must have happened to land him here.

Besides the thing in his throat, there was something pressing on his cheek. John reached up with one clumsy hand and clawed at it. An adhesive strip attached to a thin, flexible tube came away in his fingers. He tugged at it lightly, and the obstruction in his throat shifted. John coughed and gagged again as he traced the line down to where it was pinned onto his gown. The end was capped off by a plastic valve. A nasogastric feeding tube, his internal medical dictionary supplied.

A feeding tube. Meaning he’d been unconscious and unable to eat for himself. But he wasn't on a respirator, which suggested he had been breathing on his own.

God, where were the nurses? Only the dripping could be heard, no familiar bustling of a functioning hospital as nurses and doctors worked their rounds, no clattering of gurneys or trolleys carting around soiled linens and supplies.

John rolled his head to the left to look for the nurse call button. Panic welled as he saw the electronic panel on his bedside wasn’t lit. Above him, the heart monitor screen was dark. The only light came from a shuttered window on the left wall, but it looked as though it had been hastily blocked off with a dark, solid object rather than the curtains. Sunlight streamed through the cracks where they misaligned, providing sparse lighting to the room.

Nothing was on. An empty IV bag hung from a metal pole next to the bed. John followed the line with his eyes until he reached his own left hand, where a cannula was embedded in a vein in the back of his hand with more adhesive tape holding it in place. There was also a pale wristband on each of his wrists. He twisted the left one around until he could see what was printed on it. Near his identifying information was a name: London Bridge Hospital.

Get a grip, Watson. He pushed his rising fear away with brutish ferocity, inhaling a few calming breaths around the tube in his throat. Observe. Think. Think like Sherlock.

His immediate thought was that there had been some sort of natural disaster. The hospital was out of power, and perhaps they hadn't had time to get him. The spreading water stain suggested a broken
Data first. Data before hypothesis.

On a small table to the right of the bedside, a dried-up bouquet of flowers sat in a clear glass vase. A stack of cards lay neatly next to it.

From visitors. They know I'm here. Sherlock knows I'm here. Unless Sherlock's been injured as well.

Why was he in hospital? John struggled again to remember being hurt, but with the fuzziness in his head and the horrible dryness in his mouth, nothing came to him. His last memories were... vague recollections of London at night. Talking with Sherlock as they strolled along the pavement. Feeling frustrated. Had they been working a case? Chances were high that Sherlock was with him when it happened.

He must be injured somewhere. John palpated the parts of his body he could reach until he encountered a dull pain pulsing in the side of his abdomen. He scabbled at the sheet and pulled back his gown until he could see it. A large dressing was taped just below his rib cage. Peeling away the tape, he lifted up the gauze and saw a dark line of stitching over a pinkish wound. It looked like it had been healing for a few weeks, at least.

Extended hospital stay.

John brought his right hand to his face to feel at his jaw. His fingers met a stiff, short beard. He was normally clean-shaven and therefore not the best judge of the growth rates of his own facial hair, but he guessed that it constituted several weeks of growth.

I've been unattended.

The bottom seemed to fall out of his stomach. If no one had been seeing to him he could very well have died. Why had he been left there?

He needed to get out and find help. The thirst was unbearable.

John picked up his feeding line and pinched the end near the valve, where it would hook up to a nutrition bag when it was time to be fed. He held his breath and slowly tugged it out through his left nostril. The plastic dislodged and slid up his esophagus.

The clear tube emerged and John began to see yellowish stains of mucus and gastric fluids. It was only meant to reach down to the base of his stomach, so it wasn't long before he felt the tip of the tube rising through his throat. It reached his gag reflex and John heaved a bit as it slid past. Finally, the tube came out.

He examined it, seeing if there were any blockages or troubling discoloration. It was difficult to tell in the low light. How long had the thing been in him? Without someone checking daily, he could easily have developed an infection.

John removed the cannula from his hand and quickly pressed the corner of the sheet to his skin to stem the bleeding. Once it stopped, he looked down the neck of his gown to see if there were any monitors. Two sticky, circular patches adhered to his bare chest. He peeled them off.

The need to find water was growing unmanageable. John eyed the ajar door to the private bathroom, hoping to God the sink was still functional despite the leaking pipes. He shifted his legs underneath the sheet, but his heavy limbs still refused to obey any commands. He doubted he had been
stationary long enough for his muscles to atrophy to any dangerous degree, but just to be sure he repeatedly forced them to contract and extend. Damn it all, he would get to the bathroom if he had to crawl.

John leaned his shoulders and the trunk of his body over the side of the bed, letting his weight slowly tip him downward. Gravity grabbed hold, tilting him further and further until he lost balance and dropped hard onto the cold linoleum floor. Just as he fell, there was a strange tug in his pelvis and immediately he knew something was wrong.

John carefully rolled himself to his back, pressing ungainly, shaking fingers against the freezing floor and lifting his head. A yellow catheter line extended out from beneath his gown, between his legs. It was connected to a collection bag attached to the underside of the hospital bed. The bag was about three-fourths full of cloudy, dark urine.

"Ffff," John wheezed, the rest of the profanity failing to get past his parched vocal cords. He collapsed his head back against the flooring.

This was bad. A feeding tube had a risk of infection, but an indwelling catheter was far, far worse. If he had been unattended as long as he suspected, it was likely he had a urinary tract infection. The opaque urine was not a good sign.

He had to get it out as soon as possible. John reached out to grip the bars underneath the bed, pulling himself closer so he could unhook the bag. He touched the side of it and found it was cool, indicating he probably hadn't produced much urine for a while. Possibly a few days.

The moving left him dizzy, and once the collection bag was freed he lay panting on the floor.

What the hell was going on? He tried to think like Sherlock again, to piece together everything from the few available clues. What did he know?

(1) He was in London Bridge Hospital, and it was damaged and powerless. A disaster either natural or man-made was a likely cause.

(2) He hadn't been retrieved by the staff. That suggested they were either incapacitated or overwhelmed with helping others. Possibly they had to evacuate and couldn't bring patients with them. That did not bode well. Hospitals would be a top priority for emergency evacuation in the event of a widespread disaster.

(3) Sherlock wasn't there.

His friend might be an insensitive prick at times, but John didn't actually believe Sherlock would abandon him to die if he could help it. Was he somewhere in the hospital, too? The private room suggested Mycroft’s influence, and if Sherlock were stuck here as well John doubted Mycroft would allow his brother to be left behind, full stop.

But if Sherlock had come and been forced to go, he would've left a note, right? A message. Something to give John a hint of what was happening, what he should do.

John angled his head until he could see the underside of the dried flowers on the table above him. The cards. There might be a note in the cards.

Water, first. He needed water, and then he could worry about the rest of it.

John lurched onto his side, not wanting to tip all the way over and risk dislodging the catheter as he made his way to the bathroom. Indwelling catheters were kept in place by a small, inflatable balloon
inside the bladder. If it was forcefully yanked out, he could damage himself very badly and compound an already worrisome problem.

With one hand he held the collection bag, trying to coordinate the muscles in his remaining three limbs to get him to the bathroom. He was sore and achy, and the sutured wound in his side began to burn with his physical movements. Slowly, he crossed the chilly floor. His arm and legs, wobbly from disuse, synchronized as he approached the cracked door, until he finally was able to push it open and clamber inside.

Standing was more difficult. John dropped the collection bag and grabbed onto the edge of the counter, pulling himself upright. He stood on shaky legs, grappling to find a solid hold. He pawed clumsily for one of the two cups next to the sink and knocked one over, sending it flying across the room and rattling onto the floor next to the shower. John was more mindful with the other. He grasped it with careful fingers and set it under the mouth of the faucet.

He turned the faucet lever. Beautiful, clear water sprayed out into the cup. Before it was half full he brought it to his mouth and greedily drank the lukewarm fluid. He'd never tasted anything so good. The water coated his dry mouth and ran down his throat, and he could have cried from relief.

As he drank, his stomach clenched painfully around the water. The muscles knotted and spasmed as they were pried apart after so long without something to fill it, but he forced the water down anyway.

John drank five full cups before the water spouting from the faucet turned a silt-brown color. It was all right. He'd had what was in the pipes, and it had refreshed him even as he worried about the implications of the dirty water. More broken pipes? Something contaminating the water source?

Fumbling at the light switch on the wall, he flicked it up and down several times but the overhead light refused to ignite. He settled for giving himself a once-over in the mirror despite the suboptimal lighting. His beard, though short, was untidy and untrimmed, and his hair was shaggy on the ends and flattened at the back from lying pressed to the pillow. John used the questionable faucet water to douse his face, the bones around his eyes and cheeks feeling more prominent than they should.

He pulled his hospital gown up and frowned at the concave of his stomach. Emaciation wasn't the right word, but the subtle outline of his ribs definitely implied malnourishment. He needed calories, something to burn. John had treated his fair share of cases of malnutrition. His digestive tract required a slow reintroduction to solid food or he would end up sicker than he already felt.

John picked up his collection bag and shuffled out of the bathroom. Renewed, he slowly made his way over to the nurse's station and pulled open drawer after drawer until he found a sealed package with a syringe inside.

He sat down on the bed and detached the collection bag from the main catheter drainage port. Sealing off the bag, he held it up to the meager light afforded by the blocked window. The urine was definitely clouded, but he couldn't tell whether it was from bacterial infection or not.

Drawing up his hospital gown, John examined where the catheter line entered his urethra. Nothing looked inflamed or crusted over, nor did he feel any pain. He unwrapped the syringe from its packaging and stuck the needle into the valve of the balloon port. Almost instantly, the syringe began filling itself with the sterile water from the balloon in his bladder, stopping once it had drained all 10ccs.

John carefully tugged on the catheter line, sensing it dislodging. He took a deep breath and pulled on the tube until it passed all the way out of his urethra. It didn't feel particularly good, but there was no burning sensation that might indicate an infection. Still, it was best he found some antibiotics as soon
as possible, just in case.

Freed of all foreign objects, John set aside the collection bag and made a brief sweep of the room for his medical chart. Not finding it, he moved to examine the cards and dried flowers left on his bedside table.

The flowers were daffodils, and they had once been bright yellow. The petals were now dried to a crackly brownish color and low murky water filled the bottom of the vase. John picked up the pile of cards lying together.

The first was a stock get-well card. A simple printed message adorned the front, and the inside was covered in signatures from many of the officers from Scotland Yard. The only real clue was a short note under Greg Lestrade's messy scrawl:

*He's driving us mad! Please recover soon!*

Below that was a thick piece of expensive, cream-colored stationery stamped with an address from Whitehall. It, too, bore a brief message.

*Well wishes for a speedy recovery.*

_M. Holmes_

The next one was an old-fashioned folding card that looked suspiciously like it had been printed a few decades earlier. John opened it and instantly recognized the flowery script of Mrs. Hudson.

*John dear,*

_Sherlock told me what happened and I just had to write you a note before he left for hospital again. You boys are always running off into dangerous situations and it pains me when one of you doesn't make it home. I will come visit as soon as possible. Until then, please be strong, dear, and come out of it! My poor nerves can't take the worrying. 221B is waiting for you. I know Sherlock will be doing the same until you come back to him._

_Mrs. Hudson_

_(your landlady)_

After that there was another mass-signed card from Sarah Sawyer and several of the other doctors from the surgery, and then a short card from Mike Stamford with what looked to be signatures collected around from a few of their mutual acquaintances at St. Bart’s. A serene countryside image decorated the front of the last card. Inside, rows of cautious handwriting formed neat lines.
John,

I don't usually know what to write in these cards. Get well, I suppose? The words seem too small, too unimportant. When a friend is in a coma, 'get well' isn't enough.

I told Sherlock someone ought to bring you flowers. My dad always loved having flowers at his bedside. He said it helped him think positively about his recovery. I don't know what kind you like best, but Sherlock seemed adamant about the daffodils. Hopefully they help you, too.

We're all waiting for you to wake up. It's hardest on Sherlock, I think, because you're here but you're also not. He talks to you often, but sometimes he forgets that you can't answer. He needs you to come back most of all.

I know you won't let him down. No matter how long it takes.

Your friend,

Molly

So that was the answer. John had been in a coma, though he still wasn't exactly sure for how long. He flipped through the cards again, checking that he had read them all. There was no note from Sherlock. Not even a card. It was unsurprising, really, but a knot of disappointment nevertheless sank in his chest.

Setting the cards back down, John scrubbed a hand over his face. His skin felt tacky and loose and he vaguely wondered how much weight he’d lost. His stomach panged at him, roiling in discomfort and pleading for food it couldn’t yet digest.

It was time he tried to find help.

On stiff legs, John plodded across the room toward the door to the hall. He turned the handle and pushed, but the wood creaked and shuddered as it collided with a heavy blockage on the other side. John scowled quizzically and shoved at it with his shoulder. The door shifted and he heard the obnoxious sound of metal scraping against the floor of the hallway. He rammed against it over and over, until the object on the other side finally dislodged.

“Jesus,” John whispered hoarsely. His voice was scratchy and rough and it hurt to talk. Why had someone blocked his door?

The door swung just far enough for John to squeeze out. He slipped through the opening, his hospital gown briefly catching on the handle...

...and the stench of death overwhelmed him.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Main Title | The Walking Dead
John hesitated before fully passing through the doorway. He’d smelled this before. In Afghanistan. The sickly, cloying stench of concentrated human suffering. The sort of scent that lingered in his clothes and hair for hours after a particularly brutal shift of field surgery, when roadside IEDs or insurgent ambushes decimated entire units and brought an endless flood of casualties to his doorstep. It conjured memories of death and trauma and battlefield medicine.

Swallowing back his revulsion, John pressed through the gap.

Cracks of daylight bled in from adjacent rooms, but most of the hall was bathed in darkness. The fluorescent ceiling lights intermittently flickered down the long stretch of corridor, cascading an eerie artificial glow that revealed worrisome dark spatters along the beige walls. In places, frayed ends of electrical wiring sparked freely where they trailed from gouges in the drywall. A number of shadowed forms were slumped upon the floor at uneven intervals.

Bodies.

The air seemed to petrify inside John’s lungs.

Jesus.

He peeked around the edge of his door. The object blocking the other side was a gurney stacked with an assortment of random medical supplies that had no apparent function other than to weigh it down.

A barricade.

Rooted to the spot, several blank moments passed before John consciously forced himself to retreat back into his room. The door shut with a click, and he leaned against the wood.

He slapped himself. He honest-to-God hit himself in the face in hopes that it all might be some fever-induced nightmare and he could just wake up on the sofa back at home and shake his head about the bloody strange dream and go put on the kettle for two even if Sherlock didn’t fancy himself a cuppa, because Sherlock always drank it anyway when John offered it and God knew the man should eat more often.

John instinctively flexed his left hand. He longed dearly for the comforting weight of his Sig.

Fucking hell.

His heart was pounding as he glanced toward his blocked window and Sherlock’s voice suddenly came to him, scolding. *You see but you do not observe.* Whomever had covered it did so as a defensive measure. They meant to keep something out. Riots? Terrorists? World War III? What was waiting out beyond the hospital?

The clock set high on the wall was dead, the batteries long since drained. The hands had stalled at 2:37. Morning or afternoon?
As if it mattered.

No wonder he had been left behind.

And Sherlock. Christ, where the hell was he? John’s stomach clenched in a way that had nothing to do with his intense hunger. God, and his parents, and Harry. Were they safe in Chelmsford? Were they wondering what had happened to him?

Steady, soldier, he forcefully berated. Panic is counterproductive. Don’t get ahead of yourself.

John breathed long and slow, steadying his pulse and searching for the calm needed to face whatever state of emergency awaited him outside. He’d survived one warzone already. He knew how to respond and adapt in a crisis. The loss of control could be overwhelming if you let it get to you, but three tours abroad and years of surgical experience had taught him how to push those thoughts away and focus on the task at hand. Not to mention dealing with the absurd situations to which Sherlock regularly subjected him. Keeping a cool head was second nature, and he needed to maintain that now more than ever.

Whatever was happening, he could handle it. He would handle it.

John nodded once to the empty air, set his jaw, and got to work.

His hospital room proved mostly useless. A quick scouring of the cabinets netted nothing more than an array of excess medical supplies: latex gloves, sanitary wipes, rolls of surgical tape, disposable towels, neatly folded gowns, syringes of varying sizes, and coils of plastic tubing. Absent were the clothes he’d worn when admitted (did Sherlock take those back to Baker Street?), leaving John nothing to wear but his impractical hospital gown. Not even a pair of pants or, more critically, shoes.

He needed a weapon. With his diminished strength snapping off a metal implement was out of the question, so John consigned himself to hurling a visitor’s chair against the wall until one of the wooden legs splintered off. It wasn’t exactly sharp enough to act as a spear, but it was dense enough to serviceably bludgeon, if necessary.

When John exited his room once more, prepared as best as he could hope to be under the abysmal circumstances, he glanced back and forth down the hall to ascertain which direction might be more likely to hold a supply room for the hospital staff. John performed a double-take when he noticed the hall was not as he had left it.

A figure sat hunched just beyond the range of the flickering lights, not ten meters down the hall. The first living person he’d seen.

Fingers cinching tight around his makeshift weapon, John carefully reined in his surge of adrenaline and began walking toward the silhouette. The bottoms of his bare feet adhered to the sticky floor with every step. He tried not to think too hard about what exactly he was stepping on. John consciously avoided the larger globules marring the path, which suspiciously resembled leftover viscera John had witnessed at homicide scenes.

The man was huddled over one of the fallen bodies -- a Met officer wearing a stab vest. John had seen enough uniformed policemen in his time with Sherlock to recognize the signature clothing. Dried blood pooled around the officer’s body and the soles of his boots were visibly scuffed where
they breached the intermittent halo of light.

“You there!” John called as loud and clear as he could manage with his stinging vocal cords, using the sort of deliberate tone meant to prevent a soldier from accidentally getting himself shot.

A low, gurgling growl rumbled out in reply.

John instinctively stepped back, nerves tingling under his skin as his fight-or-flight response engaged. He raised his weapon as the figure rose and turned to move into the light. The man managed two stilted steps before John realized something was terribly, dreadfully wrong.

Beneath stringy wisps of fraying hair and a complexion like fouled leather, the man's throat and face were almost completely gashed away on the right side. Shredded skin had flayed away to expose the severed length of sternocleidomastoid muscle and yellowed cartilage of the larynx. The smooth white bone of his mandible peeked out below a ragged hole once covered by the cheek.

And yet the man walked. His movements were noticeably uncoordinated, but afflicted by such trauma he should be dead, or, at the very least, unconscious from unimaginable pain and blood loss.

John hefted his stick into a defensive position. “You! Stop!” he ordered with a rasp. “Don't come any closer!”

The man hissed wetly from a lipless mouth of decaying teeth. A red, pulpy half-chewed mass fell from between his parted jaws and landed on the grimy floor, forgotten. He stumbled toward John on gangly legs and reached out with hands bereft of critical fingers. Doctors' scrubs caked with blood adorned his misshapen body, the fabric torn and stained with a grisly rainbow of colors. As he approached, his eyes caught the light: cloudy white pupils gazed blankly outward amidst blood-red sclera.

Whatever it was, it was no longer human.

John swung hard as soon as it came within range. With a sickening crunch of bone and decomposing flesh, his slab of wood bashed into the creature's ribs and sent it toppling to the floor. As it fell, a loud snap of bone cracked like a gunshot through the hall. Its left foot angled grotesquely outward upon landing, the tibia broken clean through the middle. It wouldn't be walking anymore.

But, oblivious to its bodily trauma, the creature snarled at John again, unrelenting. John watched in horror as it began clawing toward him with its mangled hands, smearing the floor with blackened fluids.

He took no pity upon it. This time, John aimed his blows to kill.

The skull collapsed inward with disturbing softness when struck dead on, like an overripe melon crushed into its rotten core. Gore slopped onto the floor only inches from John's bare feet, putrid and rank. Its brain cavity destroyed, the creature finally stilled.

Some time passed after that, although John wasn't exactly sure how long. He found himself shaking and leaning against the dirty walls, stick dripping dark viscous blood, and trying to remember how to breathe. Flecks of brain matter and torn scalp stuck to the end of his weapon and he absently shook it, trying to remove the excess.

He felt sick. Sick and confused. How was this possible? How many more of those things were out there?

God, he had to leave. The hospital wasn’t safe. John dazedly pushed off the wall with one trembling
hand and stepped past the seeping corpse of the thing that had once been human.

The dead Met officer still lay in his pool of congealed blood. Clamping a hand over his nose and mouth to block the worst of the smell, John approached to inspect the body. The officer’s head and throat were shredded apart, as if a wild animal had viciously mauled him to death. Down lower, his uniform was nearly soaked through with blood and ripped in places, and John saw clear evidence of fresh bite marks in the meat of his belly and arms.

Christ. The creature had been feeding on him.

John tugged off the officer’s boots. He slipped them on over his bare feet (a size too big) and picked up the officer’s extendable baton (not nearly big enough). The officer’s stab vest and leather belt were unusable, but John took the small torch from one pouch. Bloody glove prints glistened on the black handle. He wiped it off on the clean spots of the man’s trousers, hoping to avoid bacterial contamination.

He made his way into the flickering darkness, all the while gripping his baton tightly and keeping his eyes and ears open. At each open doorway John paused, briefly, before peeking in and making a tactical sweep with his torch. As each room proved empty he breathed a quiet sigh of relief, maintaining his readiness to react in case he discovered another of those creatures.

The contents of most rooms were violently upturned with no evidence left behind but foul-smelling streaks of human remains. Some contained mostly-eaten patients still lying in their hospital beds. John silently thanked whomever had decided to block off his own door.

Similar wreckage littered the corridors branching away from the main hall. Broken hulks of overturned gurneys and crushed equipment signaled the rush of panic the hospital had seen. John’s army-trained eyes automatically sought out the clusters of bullet holes on certain walls, their targets’ rusty bloodstains old and fading. The military must’ve evacuated everyone, and rightly so. But where had they all gone?

He passed a nurse's station and spotted a landline phone on the desk. John picked up the receiver and held it to his ear, hoping desperately to hear a dial tone.

The receiver was silent.

He set it back down.

At the end of the hall, two massive steel doors stood padlocked and spray-painted with the words 'KEEP SHUT'. As John stood considering which direction to turn, the doors began creaking and shuddering. The chain around the handles strained outward; something from within was pressing on it and trying to break through. Multiple disembodied voices growled through the dark crack, shriveled fingertips barely visible as they clawed at the metal.

John quickly decided on the left-hand turn.
The strong smell of antiseptic reached his nose long before he found the supply room.

It was powerless, and as John shone his torch inside the beam revealed a jumbled mess of medical items. The shelving unit had fallen over and scattered medication bottles and sanitation supplies across the floor. Puddles of disinfectant leaked from cracked plastic bottles.

Inside, John placed the still-lit torch onto the countertop and traded his hospital gown for a fresh set of aqua green scrubs. As he tightened the drawstring around his waist, he angled his body into the light and studied the wad of dressing taped to his stomach. John peeled it away and pressed at his sutures. A column of tender pain lit up under his rib cage, indicative of a deep wound that had required surgery. Unfortunately, the stitches were not dissolvable; he’d need to remove them, but without some clue as to the extent of his injuries he was at risk to potentially tear something. The last thing he needed was a bleeding wound, so John decided to leave the stitches be.

An abandoned knapsack left in one of the storage bins seemed serviceable enough, so he started scrounging around for useful supplies. John picked through the bottles on the floor until he found a suitable broad-spectrum antibiotic. He popped the lid and swallowed two dry, then threw the rest into the bag.

He opened a few of the lower cupboards and scanned his torch beam into the back recesses. The light struck the corner of a dark blue box peeking out from behind several shrink-wrapped parcels. The bold lettering looked vaguely familiar.

“Oh, please, God,” he whispered as he plunged his hand inside.

It was an unopened box of protein bars and the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. John breathed out a thankful, shuddering burst of air. Gold. He’d struck gold, and God help him he’d never again dismissively glance past this fantastic brand while shopping at a Tesco.

With trembling fingers he inelegantly tore open the cardboard, sending the bars tumbling to the floor. He ripped one open and, fighting the impulse to shove the whole thing into his mouth at once, broke off a tiny corner. It tasted divine and he forced himself to suck slowly on the morsel rather than swallow it whole, allowing his mouth to properly water around it. He would have to rely on his nutrient-laced saliva to gradually deliver the calories for now, but with any luck he’d retrain his stomach to accept solid food and be able to eat the rest normally before long.

As he enjoyed his first solid meal in what had likely been weeks, John added a few rolls of duct tape, plastic ties, and a portable first-aid kit to his growing stash of supplies. He discovered four small jugs of distilled water with their seals unbroken, drinking one on the spot and storing the other three. Lastly, he found a threadbare red zip-up hoodie abandoned by its previous owner. It was oversized and sported a flowery motif up one sleeve, but it was clean of blood, so he considered it a win.

The nurse wore scrubs streaked with browning bloodstains and shook soundlessly as she cried. Defeat was written in the withering slump of her shoulders, in the unkempt knot of her dark brown hair. She squatted in misery, clearly visible in the glass-paned administrative office, without any
outward concern for her own safety.

John watched her through two doorways and fifteen meters of open corridor. One floor down from where he had woken, he hadn’t run across any more of those creatures. An unmoving body lay before the nurse, but it didn’t look like she was trying to gorge on the flesh. John decided to risk it.

He crept quietly toward her. Sherlock could be silent when he wished, but even the detective admitted that quiet movement came more naturally to John than himself. John had told Sherlock that any trait would come naturally when it was one of the few things keeping you alive and unshot every day for months on end.

In the last few hours, the old sensation of hyper-vigilance had reasserted itself with a vengeance. John’s internal sense of impending danger had swelled past anything he’d experienced since Afghanistan. And now as he closed the distance toward the crying nurse, John carefully split his attention among all 360 degrees of his surroundings, constantly swiveling his head to spot-check his blind areas for threats. His training had taught him to operate alone, if necessary, but nothing could make up for the solid reassurance of an ally at your back. John was unitless, partnerless, and, most aggravatingly, gunless. His left hand kept instinctively groping for his Sig, a pang of anxiety washing through him every time his attention was drawn back to its absence.

Two meters from the open doorway of the office, John stopped. “Hello?” he called hesitantly.

The woman’s back was to John. She remained in her fearful huddle, swaying on her heels like a frightened child, and made no indication she had heard his voice. John edged to the door jamb to get a better look.

Stiff patches of dried blood dulled her hair in places. Christ, she was covered in it.

The body in front of her, a male, wore similar nursing scrubs and lay upon his back. Eyes closed with a bruised and bloody face, he was rigid and, in John's assessment, almost certainly dead.

“Hello?” John said again.

The nurse turned her head, finally. Tear tracks streaked her dirty face beneath eyes red and raw. She looked at John with a haunted expression, staring absentely as if seeing straight through him. It was the distant, glazed look common among shaken soldiers who had witnessed unspoken atrocities during combat. The thousand-yard stare. Prime candidates for a whopping case of PTSD.

But she looked unharmed, for the most part. Not one of those... things.

John swallowed, which hurt to no end, and stepped across the threshold of the office. He sat on his heels next to her and set his bag on the floor. “Pardon me, but do you need help?”

She startled at his words, her dark brown irises focusing onto him for the first time, but she didn’t otherwise move or speak.

“I’m a doctor,” John said carefully. “Do you need help?”

She startled at his words, her dark brown irises focusing onto him for the first time, but she didn’t otherwise move or speak.

“I’m a doctor,” John said carefully. “Do you need help?”

The woman remained silent, and John wondered if she was catatonic. He glanced instead to the man on the ground and shifted to conduct a closer inspection.

That garnered a reaction. "NO!" the woman shouted. Thin, cold fingers were abruptly shoving at John, pushing him away from the body.

“I’m a doctor!” he said again, struggling against the nurse briefly before finally backing off. He
relented, sliding away from both of them.

She flinched when he spoke, eyes wide and spastic as if suddenly woken from a nightmare. The woman studied John’s scrubs like she didn’t recognize them.

“What happened to this man?” John asked, enunciating slowly.

“Damnation,” she moaned.

“Can I take a look at him?”

Her eyes flicked to the downed nurse and back. She rocked harder where she sat. “It’s not time! It’s not. Don’t touch him.”

John raised his hands in an unthreatening manner. “Okay. All right, okay. I won’t touch him. I’ll just look, I promise.” John inched forward so as not to startle her again. “What’s your name?”

A nervous tic spasmed at the corner of her mouth. Her hands were trembling. “Caroline,” she muttered.

“It’s good to meet you, Caroline,” he said. A muscle-memory smile formed on his lips, leftover from long years of managing panicked soldiers in crises. "My name is John. Are you a nurse here?"

“I was. I was.”

One close glance confirmed the man was dead. His chest was unnaturally still and a necrotic red-brown discoloration tinged his skin. John leaned over him, careful not to touch, and identified a vicious, oozing bite mark adorning his far oblique, straight through his clothing.

“He’s gone, I’m afraid,” John told Caroline. He looked up to examine her, as well. “Are you injured?”

“It’s not time. Soon,” she replied, mostly to herself. No open injuries were visible on her exposed skin, and John didn’t see any fresh blood stains on her garments.

Getting useful information out of her would be a chore, but it didn’t appear he had many options. “Can you tell me what’s happened? What’s caused certain people to attack others?” John indicated the bite mark. "Biological agents? Disease? Hysteria?”

Piercing certainty lit her eyes. “Punishment," she whispered. "God is punishing us.”

John rubbed at his forehead. It was obvious Caroline needed psychiatric attention as soon as possible, but that sort of care was beyond what he could provide. "Okay. All right,” he said. “I’ve seen signs the military’s been deployed. We can find their base of operations. Get out of here.”

Caroline blinked at John, confused. “They left us,” she said, as if John should know it, too.

“Who left us?”

“Everyone.” She pointed to the nearby window. It was shuttered against the daylight.

John watched her for a long moment. There was something in the way she said it, so matter-of-factly, that caused him to rise and cross to the sill. He cracked open a gap in the dirty blinds. And then he saw.

Looking north across the Thames, a thick layer of ash-grey cloud cover hung low over the skyline of
London. Drifting fog banks obscured the distant buildings into a row of silent shrouded monoliths, punctuated only by pinpoints of bright fire. John estimated he couldn’t see more than a mile or two out.

London Bridge, just to the west, was a blackened ruin of twisted girders and crumbling concrete. John had seen the aftermath of IEDs in civilian populations, and he knew the telltale signs. The destruction of the bridge was too orderly for random explosives. From this distance, he could identify where each individual detonation package had been placed. Ideally spaced. Someone had intentionally destroyed the bridge.

All along the visible roads cars were jammed like sardines, some damaged or smoking or flipped completely over. Almost every street-level shop bore smashed windows and gaping holes, spewing smoke and flickering incandescent lights where not entirely dark. Scorched chunks of debris pitted the rainbow-oiled river water. The whole damned city, everywhere John could see, looked like a godforsaken warzone. The Blitz had nothing on this scale of destruction.

Human figures dotted the distant wreckage. They moved slowly in lumbering, aimless patterns. The harder John looked the more of them he noticed, like ants festering on a mound. They were everywhere.

“What are they?” John asked softly.

“Walkers,” replied Caroline. “We get bitten, we get sick, we die. And then we rise.”

John shook his head. “That’s not possible.”

"Tell that to London,” she muttered.

Oh, God.

Sherlock.

He was out there somewhere.

John backed away from the window, willing the terror in his stomach to not make him vomit then and there. Sherlock was out there. Alone? Injured? Christ, he might even be--

"The bridges blew and they abandoned us,” Caroline detachedly continued. "They thought they were safe from the walkers. Nowhere is safe. Not in this Hell. I saw the lights of the fires. They’re burning on the north bank, just as we are. It’s everywhere. God help us, there's no escape.”

John numbly turned to stare at Caroline. “Listen. I’ve been asleep,” he said, trying not to sound as desperate as he felt. “Upstairs, the floor above this one. Please, I need to know if you’ve seen a man here. Tall, dark curly hair, deep voice.”

Caroline didn’t answer for a long while. Finally, she looked at John. “Mad bloke in a bloody big coat?”

John’s heart leapt and he could’ve kissed her. “That’s Sherlock. God, you’ve seen him?”

“Russell,” she said pensively.

“Sorry?”

Her eyes went distant. “Russell worked upstairs. Before. Told us all about this man in a big flappy
coat, always pestering him and complaining about one thing or another. Security tried to toss him out most nights after visiting hours were over, but he always got back in. He--" she paused, looking askance at John as if considering his identity for the first time. "You’re him? The one he visited? You’re-- oh. You were the one in the coma."

“I need to find him,” John said.

She frowned. “He’s dead.”

His windpipe seemed to vanish. John dared not even breathe. “You can’t know that,” he countered. “If he hasn’t been seen since... you can’t know that.”

“Anyone alive out there, they’re good as dead. It’s only a matter of time,” Caroline said in a hollow tone. “The walking dead. They just don’t know it. But I know. Oh, do I know.”

“I need to reach him,” John insisted. “Baker Street. I need to reach Baker Street, near Regent’s Park. It's where we-- he's my flatmate. I've got to find him."

"He's not there, doctor. If he survived the outbreak, between the fires and the walkers and the evacuations, he's probably turned somewhere out in the countryside. That's where they went, in the beginning. Looking for salvation."

John licked his lips. What would Sherlock do in the face of a widespread emergency? Would he stay in 221B? Would Mycroft evacuate him somewhere safe, outside London, or would Sherlock resist and stay in his own, known territory?

John didn't know, but Baker Street was all he had. "He's there,” John said stubbornly. “He's got to be there. It's our flat. I'm going to find him, and you can either help me or piss off."  

Caroline watched him with tired eyes. Then she reached to her waist and produced a six-inch stainless steel surgical blade. John tensed when he saw its gleaming edge, but Caroline turned the handle toward him, offering it, and gestured to her stained clothing. “The walkers, they smell you. They hear you," she said. “You’ve got to blend, doctor. We waited. We waited and we blended, but no one came. No one is coming. There’s no one left to come.”

John studied her grimy outfit. Camouflage. Would that really work?

That was when the dead man stirred. John, taken by surprise, skittered away from him and toward the door. The dead man’s fingers twitched and he let out a low, reedy breath, like a gust of wind through dead autumn leaves.

“It’s time,” Caroline whispered, standing. Her eyes glistened with tears waiting to fall as she pressed the grip of the knife into John’s palm. “It’s over.”

The dead man’s eyes slid open. Empty, colorless pupils gazed coldly up at the ceiling.

“Come on, we need to leave,” John urged, picking up his bag and beckoning Caroline to come. He turned, expecting her to follow, but as he crossed back into the hall he heard the snap and click of the door.

John immediately spun on his heel and experienced a twinge of panic. Through the clear-paned wall, he saw Caroline pull the office key away from the knob.

Shit.
She’d locked herself inside.

“Caroline!” John rapped urgently on the door with two knuckles. “Caroline, what are you doing? Open the door!”

“I made my choice,” she answered, muffled through the wood.

John understood, then, what she intended. He pounded his fist against the door. “God, you can’t just- come with me! I can help you,” he implored. “We’ll find help, Caroline. We’ll get out of here! Together!”

Through the window, the dead man flexed his jaw. Dark spittle discolored his teeth. Caroline ignored him and calmly shook her head. “There’s nothing left. My son was bitten. My husband, he’s dead too.” She pressed her hand against the glass. “If you find your Sherlock, be merciful and put him down with the others. Mercy’s all we have.”

John tossed his bag to the floor, dropping his blade alongside it, and rammed himself against the wood as he called her name. It didn’t budge, so he backed up and tried his booted foot on the weak point near the handle. The door rattled and produced a small splintering sound, but it didn’t crack. Caroline stood watching as he frantically attempted to reach her. She wore a melancholic smile. How could this be what she wanted? How could this be better?

What little strength he had soon gave out, leaving John to despondently twist at the knob and hope it would break. It wasn’t long before he heard her shriek.

John pressed his forehead against the door, the bite of failure sharp in his veins as her screams were drowned out by horrible growling better suited to a sadistic dog. He was supposed to save people. That’s what they did, him and Sherlock.

Was Sherlock even alive? Was he a walker? John shuddered to think what he might find when he returned home. How was he supposed to get to Baker Street when all of London was overrun?

He looked up. Blood coated the window, a transparent film of red tinting the dark figure crouched inside.

Inhuman. Incomprehensible. John didn’t know what to make of it. Everything he knew about biology had been flipped on its head. It didn’t make any sense. Nothing he’d ever read in a medical journal ever came close to this sort of post-mortem transformation.

He only knew one thing. If Sherlock was alive, somehow, somewhere, then John would find him. *He had* to find him, because a world without Sherlock Holmes -- even a mad, broken, confounding world -- was unthinkable. Cold fear coiled around his insides. If something had happened to Sherlock, something he could have prevented… John would never forgive himself for being so despicably late.

John collected his bag and his knife and stumbled away from the grisly scene, blocking out the ravenous sounds drifting from the locked office. He plodded toward the flickering stairwell sign as fast as he could move and squeezed the handle of his surgical knife until his knuckles turned white, wishing for all the world that it was his faithful gun.

*I’m coming, Sherlock*, he silently vowed again and again. *I promise I’m coming. Please, God, just be all right.*

*Chapter End Notes*
Apocalypse Radio: *Now | Paramore*

(John's apocalypse anthem)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Occasionally there will be flashbacks to things that happened prior to the beginning of the story. This is the first.

John glanced up, momentarily startled, as Molly set a steaming cup of tea down before him on the laboratory worktop, its creamy brown contents sloshing against the thick paper brim.

“Oh! Thank you, Molly,” he said, accepting the hot beverage with a grateful smile despite the prickle of embarrassment running down his spine. He hadn’t even noticed she’d left the lab. “Sorry. I was just… spacing out, I guess.”

“I thought you might need some caffeine,” Molly told him. "Dr. Oberman used up the last of the sugar and we only had skimmed milk left. I hope that’s all right.” She smiled sheepishly, one hand curling around her own freshly-brewed cup. “And I didn’t… he seems busy, so I thought--”

Her eyes skirted across the lab toward Sherlock. The detective’s face was pressed snugly to the eyepiece of his microscope, as it had been for the last hour and a half. The only signs of life he gave were the subtle shifts of his hands as he worked the focusing lenses. John had considered going up to test for a pulse, just to be sure.

“Right now he wouldn’t notice a marching band if it paraded through the lab, let alone anyone bringing him a cup of tea,” John sighed disconsolately. He rubbed tiredly at his eyes and tried once again to tabulate just how long it had been since he last slept. He’d lost count around hour thirty-seven, when he and Sherlock had spent an indeterminate amount of time scouring a drainage outflow for the missing blue diamond. The case was at last coming to a close now that Sherlock had got his hands on the gemstone, and John’s thoughts were gravitating toward Baker Street and the comforts of a good night’s rest.

John offered Molly a weary grin and patted the empty chair next to him in invitation. “Isn’t it a bit late for you to be here?”

Molly settled gratefully into the seat and sipped at her tea. “Oh, no, it’s fine. I’ll just lock up the lab when you’re both finished.”

Molly once again glanced earnestly toward Sherlock’s fixed form and John felt a twinge of annoyance. He hated the way Sherlock so easily manipulated Molly into giving them unrestricted access to the labs at Bart’s. Her schoolgirl crush had faded considerably since John first met her, but Sherlock still managed to curry favors with discomforting ease. The detective’s callous behavior toward her was quite inexcusable.

John took a long swig of his tea. It tasted thin and over-steeped. “It’s not always a bad thing to make him wait, you know,” he noted quietly.

“I don’t mind.” Molly replied. Her long ponytail swished against her lab coat as she looked back to John. “An hour can mean the difference between life and death in your line of work, whereas in
mine... they'll still be dead, when I get to them.”

They both laughed, stupidly amused, and John felt the pent-up tension draining from his shoulders. He leaned on one hand and let out a blustering sigh of satisfaction despite himself.

It always felt good at the end of a case. Sherlock would be gregariously happy for a few precious hours, his eyes achingly bright and a sincere, dazzling grin plastered across his face as he reveled in his own mental prowess. He’d eat anything John put in front of him, without complaint, and blessedly crash into a much-needed hibernation period. Molly’s allowing them into the lab, manipulative underpinnings aside, had spared John an evening of listening to his flatmate rant about the inability to complete his tests.

John smiled at her. "You really are indispensable, Molly. Truly.”

Her cheeks pinked and she studied John for a few thoughtful moments. "That's very kind of you to say, but I don't think it's quite true. For Sherlock, at least."

“Well, I appreciate what you do for us,” John said with as much reassurance as he could muster. “He would, too, if he ever pulled his head out of his arse and paid attention.”

Molly’s gaze roamed to Sherlock and back to John, slow and meaningful. "I just mean, I think there’s only one person he would ever call indispensable,” she said pointedly. "And it's not me."

Warmth touched John's face as he realized Molly was referring to him. He licked his lips, an anxious habit when reminded of the resident ache deep in his chest, and consciously prevented himself from glancing at Sherlock.

"Oh, I don't do all that much,” John deflected, cupping both hands around his tea and pressing distractedly at the moistening paper. "Legwork, mostly, or a medical opinion here and there. He still hates the blog. Sometimes I feel entirely useless. No better than the old skull on the mantelpiece."

Molly brought her drink to her mouth and hummed softly, as if she didn't quite buy John's protestations. Her eyes crinkled above what could only be a camouflaged smile. John coughed briefly into his hand. God, he hated how easily people noticed.

"It's-- did you get a chance to look at it?" he asked, hoping to turn the tables to a more comfortable topic.

Lowering her tea, Molly shook her head. "The diamond from the Morcar homicide, isn't it? The body came through two days ago."

"Twenty-four and a half carats and a beautiful sky-blue color. I'll have Sherlock show you when he's done messing about with it."

"That's precisely what Morcar did," John told her. "He only ever took it out on certain days, and when he did it was placed in a time-locked, bullet-proof display case at the jeweler's shop. Sherlock only got interested because the thieves managed to steal it without triggering three separate electronic security systems."

"So what's he doing now?"

Shrugging, John swilled another mouthful of tea. "I don't know. He said he wanted to examine it, but
I'm not sure what he expects to find. It's a diamond, for Christ's sake. I doubt he'll pull any fingerprints off it. We found it in an outflow about to be washed out into the Thames."

"How much is it worth?" Molly asked.

John smirked conspiratorially. "About twelve million quid."

Molly had barely begun to gape when Sherlock suddenly let out a loud, contemptuous groan.

John and Molly simultaneously turned their heads in surprise as Sherlock lifted his face from the microscope to reveal an enormous scowl. "Those *idiots*!" he shouted to no one in particular, eyes blazing in disgust.

Then Sherlock rose from his chair, grabbed the precious blue stone from beneath the high-powered lens, and chucked it clear across the lab. It sailed ten meters, sparkling lavishly as it flew, and *clanged* loudly against a far metal cabinet. After depositing an angular dent in the polished surface, the diamond dropped out of sight onto the floor.

"Jesus, Sherlock!" John scolded.

The detective abandoned his workspace and wound his way around the countertops to snatch up his long coat where it hung next to the door. "Come on, John," he ordered, not even sparing a glance as he tugged it over his dark suit. Sherlock's jaw clamped tight with concentration as he swung open the door. "We need to go."

John scrambled from his chair, orphaning his half-drunk tea, and jogged quickly across the lab to where the diamond had landed. It glinted prettily under the florescent lighting, thankfully not lost under one of the various machines that lined the room. He picked it up and slipped it into a pocket of his jeans. Frowning apologetically to Molly, John ran after the departed detective, grabbing his coat on the way out the door.

He barreled into Sherlock right outside, not expecting to find the detective standing there and nearly knocking him over in the rush to catch up. Phone in hand, Sherlock fluidly found his footing again without so much as a break in his rapid texting. John's eyes automatically sought the stretch of pale throat exposed by the open collar of Sherlock's burgundy dress shirt, but he forced them higher to a more appropriate location.

"What's this about?" John asked as Sherlock punched out his message at lightning speed. He took the opportunity to wrangle his arms through the sleeves of his coat and transfer the diamond to a safer interior pocket. "I thought we were done."

"Not in the slightest. We've been wasting our time," Sherlock replied in a huff, swiftly glancing up. The detective's pale eyes narrowed, dancing around to analyze John's physical cues. "The diamond is a fake."

"A fake? A fake diamond," John said, incredulous. "We just happened to find a fake diamond of the exact same cut, size, and color as the missing one?"

Sherlock tilted his head. "No, John. Do keep up. This *is* the diamond stolen from Morcar's shop, but it was a fake before it was ever taken." He turned to march toward the exit, texting as he went.

"I-- how? What?" John blinked before following after Sherlock, feeling clueless as usual. The windows they passed were streaked with rain and darkness, the droplets refracting the exterior lights of St. Bart's. "As in cubic zirconium, something like that?"
Sherlock rolled his eyes and stuffed his phone back into the pocket of his coat. “Nothing so amateur. It almost fooled me.” He sighed in frustration. "All this time I've been focused on the robbery itself. Stupid, stupid. We must return to the scene of the crime, John. I need to reexamine the evidence. There’s far more occurring here than I first thought.”

John sensed all his hopes and dreams of a comfortable night back at Baker Street, back in bed, washing away with the rain. Sherlock stopped walking when he noticed John was no longer beside him. He turned, coat swishing around his legs. “John?”

John shoved his hands in his pockets and looked pleadingly at his friend. “Sherlock, can this wait until morning? I’m not sure how much longer I can keep going without falling asleep on my feet.”

“I can take care of this myself if you wish to return home,” Sherlock offered.

Leaving Sherlock was definitely out of the question. “No,” John sighed. ”No, I’ll not have you running about this late at night without back up. If you’re going, then I’m going.”

Sherlock smirked. "I thought as much. Come on."

They emerged outside St. Bart’s into the chilly night air. A few late-night cabs rumbled past, headlights reflecting on pavement wet from the evening's rain.

As Sherlock paused to fish in one pocket for his leather gloves, a homeless man wearing an oversized coat stopped in front of him. "Tenner for a hot meal, sir?" he asked.

To John's amazement, Sherlock pulled out his billfold and provided the man with a crisp twenty-pound note. "For your speed," Sherlock said quietly.

"Right generous you are, Mr. Holmes," the man replied. He pocketed the bill and opened his coat, removing a lidded coffee cup and a thick sandwich wrapped in cling film.

The man was gone almost as soon as Sherlock accepted the items. He turned to press the drink and sandwich into John’s hands. “Here. Something stronger than Molly’s dismal excuse for tea."

"Since when is your homeless network made up of takeaway delivery boys?" John laughed as Sherlock directed him toward an unoccupied bench just along the brick wall of St. Bart’s.

"They are on-call to provide any help I might require." He smirked and settled beside John, "Including sandwich runs. Can’t have my blogger passing out on me, after all. You might miss a particularly brilliant deduction. Now hurry up, we’ve got a puzzle that needs solving."

John sipped at the hot coffee and gagged. It was incredibly bitter, a probable indicator that it had been pumped with extra shots to keep John wired for the rest of the night. “Christ, I won’t sleep for a week, with this stuff.”

“If only,” Sherlock said impatiently.

He unwrapped the sandwich. A turkey club, but it looked safe enough. “You sure you don’t want half?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes as John took a bite. “Case, John. My digestive tract is offline. Besides, your
stomach’s been growling ever since we left the sewerage.” His eyes suddenly brightened as they landed across the street, where a man in a rain-dampened brown overcoat was rushing down the pavement. "Oh!"

John knit his brow and hummed questioningly as he chewed.

“That man's wife has asked to speak with him this evening when he returns home,” Sherlock reported. “She only wishes to tell him she's been keeping alpacas in the garden without his knowledge, but he's utterly convinced she knows about his habit of wearing her dresses while she's not at home.”

It took effort for John not to choke on his food and his laughter. Sherlock took inordinate delight in watching John sputter.

"Don't be cruel, John," Sherlock chided mockingly. "The poor man's terrified."

Once John managed to breathe again, he got back to properly chewing and raised his eyebrows at Sherlock. Another?

Over the course of the John's sandwich and coffee, Sherlock deduced twelve other poor souls who happened to walk past. He always seemed to pick out the most obscure and ludicrous details whenever he did it solely for John's entertainment, taking the opportunity to preen as John demanded to know how in the bloody hell Sherlock had come to such outlandish conclusions. By the time John was ready to go, his cheeks hurt from laughing and Sherlock's smile was enormous.

Sherlock worked his magic to summon a cab once John had replenished himself. The steady burn of eyestrain persisted behind John's eyes, but the recharge would keep him going long enough to let Sherlock sniff around the crime scene, collect his observations, and return home for what would likely be a marathon stint of self-absorbed brainwork.

As they climbed into the rear seat of the cab, Sherlock was nearly bouncing on his heels in his eagerness to purge the deductions knocking about inside his head. He needed to find order, to pin his thoughts upon John like evidence on a cork board and perform a full dissection.

John bought himself another few seconds to bask in Sherlock’s impatience as he shut the cab door and provided the address to the driver. The way Sherlock needed him in moments like this was entirely addicting.

“So,” John said at last, pulling the blue diamond from his pocket and settling back as the cab pulled into the flow of traffic. “Tell me.”

The bottle cap came off and Sherlock’s words poured out, rapid-fire. “The diamond’s a fake, but it is a diamond. Laboratory-grown. No serial number, no licensing, no manufacturer's mark. Only someone with in-depth expertise could tell the difference.”

“Laboratory-grown?” John asked, puzzled. “The sort they make out of cremated relatives?”

“No, no, those are made of compressed carbon left over from a corpse’s ashes,” Sherlock explained. He took the gem from John, rotating it between his fingers so it caught the passing street light. “These are grown. I’ve never seen one this large, which means someone has found a method for
creating sizable gem-quality artificial diamonds barely indistinguishable from the real thing.”

“Wouldn’t Morcar have noticed? It’s his profession, isn’t it, to know the difference.”

“He was in on the scheme, John,” Sherlock replied, as if it were the most obvious thing it the world. "He’d have to be. But he’s dead now so we can’t exactly ask him where he got it.”

“Did the thieves know it was a fake?”

Sherlock pensively tapped a knuckle against his chin. “Unlikely. It’s possible a rival manufacturer sent them, but I would wager they simply thought what everyone thought, that it was an authentic diamond. A large stone, but not so large it couldn’t be sold on the black market without suspicion. I’ve already directed Lestrade to interrogate the suspects in custody to find out for certain. But the real mystery is who created it and how many of these diamonds are out there being sold as naturally-occurring gems.”

"So, you're saying you know the difference," John said, raising an eyebrow. "Where everyone else failed to catch on."

Angling the diamond in his gloved hand, Sherlock examined it closely. "Microfabrication leaves distinctive markers, if you know what you're looking for. The easiest way is to use an industrial-grade spectrometer, but that sort of machinery is rare outside of gemological institutes or professional laboratories. Barring access to such devices, the surveyor can search for a faint orange florescence to determine whether the crystal is synthetic, but even that method can be misleading."

"Then how did you know?" John asked.

"It's too perfect."

"Too perfect?"

"True diamonds are products of nature," he pontificated. "Consequently, they include imperfections and flaws: foreign materials that got in the way of crystal formation, stress fractures, impurities that manifest as faint cloudiness. Synthetic diamonds grown in controlled settings bear no evidence of time spent in the natural world. This diamond," Sherlock said, holding it up between thumb and forefinger, "is flawless. Utterly, devastatingly, flawless."

Creeping warmth spread up John's spine. The passion and excitement in Sherlock's eyes at times like this was breathtaking to behold. John could drown in it, the way it made him feel so very alive in return.

"Incredible," John said.

Sherlock lowered his hand. His expression shifted as his gaze focused on John. "Do you think so?"

He sounded prouful, but in a way that unmistakably put great value in John's opinion. Sometimes he thought Sherlock would work no less tirelessly if John were the only person in the world to watch the detective blaze his dazzling trail.

John offered a gentle smile to mask the pangs ringing hollow in his chest. "You know I do," he replied.

"I thought, perhaps, the novelty might have worn off after all this time," Sherlock said. The facets of the jewel flashed and sparkled, almost as lovely as his eyes.
"Not yet," John replied. "Not by a long shot."

Sherlock’s face was unreadable. “Oh,” he said, sounding oddly flat. “That’s… good. Glad to hear it.”

On those occasions when John’s subconscious got the better of him, when the hour was late or the chase particularly thrilling, he sometimes found himself broaching the unspoken divide. Luckily for John, his careless insinuations (and yes, all right, perhaps one might call it flirting) had been met with blank stares and indifference. Sherlock could read a thousand subtle tells in the face of a lying suspect, but when it came to foolhardy expressions in conjunction with himself, he reacted with utter ignorance.

It was all right, really. Sherlock wasn't like that, wasn’t interested. He’d made that abundantly clear from the very start and John had no right to carry around that disheartening weight of rejection. Sherlock wanted a faithful audience, nothing more.

Remembering hurt more on some days than others. Today, in particular. He'd been especially brilliant.

John looked out the window and cleared his throat. Detectable or not, it wouldn't do to let him see.

*Change the subject. Change the subject, damn you.*

"Jesus, who'd have thought?" John forced out, glancing back. "A *fake*.

Lamplight flashed and Sherlock's face seemed larger. Closer. John watched him uncomfortably for a long moment, fear gripping him that he had accidentally said aloud something inappropriate. Sherlock's gaze bored into him, raking John over for data collection. Grown men had been cowed by that stare, but John had never found it especially bothersome. Not until he had developed something to hide.

“Eloquent as ever, John," the detective hummed at last. "Do be sure to include that compelling line in your requisite blog entry."

The tension dissolved in an instant. John masked his relief by elbowing Sherlock and shooting a cheeky grin that the detective effortlessly mirrored.

They were Sherlock and John again, off to solve another baffling mystery, perhaps even saving a few lives in the process, and there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

John directed his small torch down the alley, the beam shining off wet pavement and dingy skips overflowing with rubbish. The rain had thankfully stopped by the time the cab had let them out one street over. Sherlock, of course, had immediately bolted into the dark like a greyhound off his leash.

"Sherlock!" John hissed, sweeping the light around to locate the detective. He caught the dark blue-grey of a popped collar and a mess of curls crouching near the back door to one of the shops. Sherlock glanced over, pale eyes squinting from the brightness, and then resumed picking the lock.

John trotted towards him, shoes splashing through dark glassy puddles. Growing breaks in the clouds overhead provided reasonable moonlight, but it wasn’t quite enough to make out fine detail. "How
can you even see?” John said as he watched Sherlock work.

"Hold that light steady and I'll see just fine," Sherlock retorted.

John angled the torch onto the lock and sighed. "Can't we call Lestrade? He's got the keys."

"Too long," Sherlock huffed. “Once we’re inside Morcar’s shop it'll take but a moment to find the evidence I need."

John waited as Sherlock repeatedly rattled the locking mechanism, applying torque to his tools as he pried at the pins inside. The shop was a crime scene with a dead owner, so it wasn't precisely breaking and entering...

Suddenly, a pair of arms grabbed John from behind, pulling him into debilitating hold. He shouted and dropped the torch, kicking out to break the snare just as Sherlock whipped around in surprise. His attacker was larger, an advantage of leverage, and before John could break free a knife was being waved in front of his face. He stilled at the sight of the heavy-duty blade, honed deadly sharp from hilt to point. The sort preferred by game hunters and sportsmen.

"You've got it, I know you've got it!" the man clutching him demanded agitatedly.

Sherlock dropped his lock-picking tools and rose to his feet in one smooth motion, entirely cool and composed. "Got what?" he asked, spreading his hands to demonstrate his lack of weapon. John’s gun pressed against the small of his back where it was tucked into the waistband of his jeans, unreachable without significant risk.

"Don't lie to me!" the man shouted, shifting his grip around and touching the blade of the knife to John’s throat. "I'll kill him! I'll kill him if you cross me, I will!"

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. "Ryder, isn’t it?" he said. "That's your name. Cusack's associate?"

Ryder. John recognized the name. One of the not-as-yet-apprehended suspects in the case they were investigating. They’d seen grainy CCTV images of the thieves as they robbed the jeweler’s shop.

"I know you arrested her!" Ryder exclaimed. “I know she gave it to you! Now hand it over!"

The hands crushing John were shaking. Ryder was on edge and John calculated his options, ran through the scenarios that would get him out alive.

"We haven't got it. It's at Scotland Yard," John lied, aiming for a calm tone despite the blade pressed to his throat. "Put down the knife, now, Ryder. There's no need to get yourself in deeper than you already are. Let me go and we can help you."

Ryder snorted. "And have you arrest me too? I don't think so. Give it here!"

"We're not the police," Sherlock said.

"Don't lie! I saw you. Here with the officers, the both of you, two days ago!"

"We're independent consultants,” he stressed. "Unaffiliated."

The touch of metal left John’s neck. Ryder lowered his arm. “Consultants?” he asked nervously.

“We can consult for you just as easily,” Sherlock said. He took a small step forward. "Put down the knife and."
But Ryder tensed at Sherlock's movement, and a spike of pain lanced up into John’s gut. A blinding moment of confusion overtook him, compressed there against Ryder, and it wasn't until Sherlock’s eyes went wide and his mouth fell open that John realized he'd been stabbed.

His knees buckled and Ryder let him fall out of his grasp, the sickening slide of the blade loud in John’s ears as gravity forcibly wrenched it out of his body. John collapsed hard onto the pavement, entirely stunned. The suspect’s heels kicked high as he took off down the alley, leaving John with burning wetness soaking into his button-down shirt.

Sherlock was suddenly beside him, pushing John onto his back and lifting his head away from the pavement. Beneath his ribs everything was on fire and John couldn’t breathe properly, exhaling red-speckled wheezes onto Sherlock’s clothes. Sherlock knelt close, his free hand somehow already dialing his phone.

“Shouldn’t take it out,” John stammered inanely. “You shouldn’t--”

“Shut up, John. It's already out,” Sherlock ordered. He pressed the phone to his ear, his glove red with blood and John wasn’t sure when it had got that way, how he could be bleeding quickly enough for Sherlock to already be covered in it...

“Lestrade, we’re in the alley behind the jeweler’s shop,” Sherlock said, his voice wavering slightly as he forced it to stay even. "Yes, that shop. We need an ambulance now. John’s been stabbed. Suspend traffic, I don’t care, get them here or I swear I will never consult for you again. Ever. Ever.”

Sherlock paused and peered down at John, a scowl forming on his face. “I’m perfectly fine, can’t you hear I’m perfectly fine? It’s John. Aren’t you listening? All right. Yes.” He shifted to hold the phone with his shoulder, hand sliding underneath John's coat to press against his shirt and staunch the bleeding. John clenched his teeth as pain flared at the base of his ribs. Each breath was tight and only noticeable in the right side of his chest. He must have a punctured lung. “Pressure, is that all? Fine. No. No. I’m not going to move him unless you don’t fucking send someone right now.”

Sherlock lifted his head, letting his phone clatter to the pavement. “They’re coming. Lestrade said just a few minutes.”

“Sherlock--”

“I told you to shut up.”

“It’s--”

“Stop. Talking.”

A panic was settling over Sherlock. His breathing was growing ragged. He needed to focus on something else, something to occupy his brain before it shook itself to pieces. John squeezed his arm and furrowed his eyebrows together, raising them in an expression the detective would surely recognize. Deduce for me, Sherlock. I'm bored.

Sure enough, Sherlock took the bait. "He lost his payday,” he babbled. "Mud on his shoes. His clothes hadn't been cleaned for at least three weeks. Desperate. He's probably stalked this area for days, waiting, hoping we'd return and he could retrieve the diamond. He didn't know Cusack dumped it down the drainage well. Luck. It's just blind, boring, stupid happenstance and that's the most terrible part of all, isn't it?"

Sherlock sniffed in indignation, glancing away into the dark of the alley before turning back to look at John. "You're not dying from something so pedestrian, John. Over a bit of crystallized carbon that
all the idiotic 'experts' misidentified. No. No,” he said, shaking his head like he was trying to convince himself. “That's not what's going to happen. I refuse to allow it so keep your eyes on me.”

But John's eyes were already locked onto Sherlock's face. His breathing was growing shallow, bringing up the coppery taste of blood with each rasp of air. John could feel his adrenaline fading and the sharpening onset of pain. He was going into shock.

There had always been close calls. Most were a whole lot closer than either of them cared to admit. Risks came hand in hand with the life they chose to lead. Pain, John could bear. Gunshot wounds, blunt force trauma, broken bones; so far, he'd survived them all. Since coming home and partnering with Sherlock, dying was not something John gave much thought. In the beginning, it was because there seemed so little to live for. Now there seemed too much.

The edges of Sherlock's mouth twitched as if he wished to say more, but as his eyes flickered over John's undoubtedly paling face something shifted in his expression. The light was poor and the angle odd, but John saw it surfacing.

Sherlock had never looked at him with such anger. Poorly restrained tremors shook through the gloved fingers cradling John's head.

Sherlock needed him, even now. Even like this.

John nudged his arm and shot him that same inquiring expression.

Sherlock started rattling off less interesting deductions as they waited in the cold, mechanically informing John of the private vices of the other shop owners who used the nearby skips. Eventually, Sherlock cocked his head as he detected faint sirens, the sound growing stronger as the ambulance neared.

"One mile,” Sherlock estimated. He looked down, fleetingly hopeful. But as his gaze settled on John, his expression collapsed entirely.

Warm blood trickled freely from his mouth, seeping over dry trembling lips and dribbling past his chin. The wail of sirens echoed in the distant night air and reverberated between the rain-glossed bricks of the alleyway.

Sherlock’s hand, now slick with blood and betraying any attempt to suppress its rampant shaking, pressed hard against the ruins of John's shirt, just below the ridge of his ribs.

“Hold on, John,” Sherlock said, face gone pale and voice pitched unnaturally high. "Hold on. The ambulance will be here soon."

The dark, sticky pool underneath John was already cooling on the pavement. John inhaled a wet, shuddering breath into his one good lung and sought out Sherlock’s fearful eyes, trying to communicate what his throat could not.

Not bloody soon enough.

That was when the shadow moved just behind Sherlock’s right shoulder. A knife's edge glinted in the dark. The same blade that had been waved in front of John's face, the one that had impaled him, raised threateningly toward his distracted detective.

Desperate. That's what Sherlock had said of Ryder. Desperate enough to try for the diamond again, and desperate enough to kill for it.
No. God, no.

John roared with the last of his breath, more guttural vocalization than true words, spilling Sherlock aside and lunging to intercept Ryder’s arm before it could do any harm. Red tinged his vision and he fought with every ounce he had left, drawing reserves from some miraculous source, infusing his body with unnatural strength. He pummeled Ryder, not hearing or thinking or seeing anything but the terrible little man who dared threaten Sherlock, his knife skittering away across rainy black pavement.

But the wound won out in the end, and the tides turned, and the desperate thief was grappling John tight in a wrestler’s stance, forcing him this way and that, hitting him. They fumbled and shoved, blood pounding in John’s ears, pain rocketing through his lungs. Ryder shoved John up against the brick, slamming the back of his head into it once, twice, again and again until John’s vision blurred and his rage tunneled and one solitary thought consumed him entirely: you won’t hurt him because I won’t let you.

He thrust with the base of his palm, guided by muscle-memory through a sea of slowing time, until it connected with the throat in front of him, a perfect strike, and the accompanying crunch of breaking cartilage confirmed John had dislocated his assailant's esophagus. The fingers choking him released in panic and John was free, then he was sinking and colliding against a hard surface, consciousness hazing in flashes of bright and dim.

The last thing John saw was Sherlock, blood-stained and shouting and alive, before darkness won at last.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Untitled 8 | Sigur Rós
The light of John’s torch glanced off the warning sign in a bright flash of reflective yellow paint. UNDERGROUND CLOSED. NO CIVILIANS PERMITTED.

Timber barricades blocked the ticket gates leading to the lowest levels of London Bridge station. Sodden wood came away in John’s hands as he dropped to maneuver beneath one, sliding on his knees over the wet linoleum floor. The careful placement of the barricades, an orderly curve arranged to buffer a crowd, implied the closure of the Tube system as a quarantine measure long before the worst of it had begun. John pictured soldiers lining these barriers, forcefully turning away panicked citizens and directing them to find alternative travel routes. The dark and deserted concourse was silent now, save for John’s solitary footsteps and the echoes of dripping water as he descended into the underbelly of the station.

He had to reach Baker Street. With the bridges over the Thames destroyed and the streets of London brimming with walkers, the only option left was the Underground. The Jubilee line would take John under the river and directly to Baker Street station. From there, it was only a short walk to 221B.

Signs directed him further downward to reach the deep-line platforms, but John paused at the top of a depowered escalator to catch his breath and knead his knuckles into the flaring cramp in his side. The pain had grown worse since leaving the hospital, coming and going with a mind of its own as his body protested its return to normal functionality. He massaged the tightened muscles, wincing, as fat drops of cold water pelted him from the leaking ceiling. It dampened his soiled hair and clothing, trickling down his face and washing away his camouflage bit by bit.

John took his time with the escalator in the dark. He held the torch between his teeth and traversed hand-over-hand down the slippery steps, guided by cold, trembling fingers. Three meters from the bottom, his body took another stab at revenge as the wave of abdominal cramping intensified with a sudden, jarring twinge. John lost his balance, tumbling the rest of the distance and crashing on his knees at the foot of the escalator, knuckles scraping against the handrail as he failed to catch himself.

The pain of the landing was nothing compared to the blinding agony in his gut; John doubled over on all fours and held his wrist to his mouth to stifle a groan, the weight of his rucksack sliding off his back and dropping to the floor. Vertigo overwhelmed him, and the combined foul stenches of his sleeve and the ambient environment proved too strong. John retched up the small bit of food he’d managed to eat since waking, along with a frustratingly large amount of water.

Head spinning, John slumped against the floor as soon as he purged it all, rolling onto his side and retracting into a fetal position. Rejection of food and water by his weakened body was the last thing he needed right now; he knew he was working himself too hard too quickly, but options were slim and only growing slimmer. John closed his eyes and clutched at his stomach, snorting heavy ragged breaths and gritting his teeth through the painful muscle spasms.

Finding a walker to supply camouflage back at the hospital had been simple enough. There were plenty to choose from: the bottom floor of London Bridge Hospital practically crawled with their slow, lumbering forms. John had located an isolated walker in a dank stairwell and killed it with a quick stab to brain. Coating his clothes and hair in the rotten remains proved unpleasant work, but once thoroughly smeared the walkers took no notice of him.
Outside, despairing conditions awaited John in the naked street. Sewerages overflowed with the rising river water, washing over the roads in oily tendrils and strewing debris where it breached the retaining walls. A jumbled maze of gridlocked cars clogged the streets: cabs and buses and commuter vehicles, their doors thrown wide and garlanded with flung-open suitcases and belongings that rustled in the wind. Emergency vehicles sat unmanned and silent along the pavement.

All around, dark smoky plumes drifted against the grey cloudy sky. A noticeable blackish residue streaked the exteriors of the buildings, as if they had been subjected to flashes of intense heat. John studied the rain-smeared scorch patterns and judged them collateral damage from military-grade ordnance. Circumstances must have grown extreme for the military to approve the aggressive use of weaponry within a major population center.

Despite the signs of their efforts, the countermeasures had not worked. Walkers infested the charred landscape like nuclear roaches; they wandered aimlessly in and out of the buildings, they squirmed where entrapped in grime-crusted cars, they ambled in the hellish, hazy street.

John moved cautiously among the walkers with his heart in his throat, certain that at any moment one of their decomposing heads would turn and notice he wasn't one of them, but their clouded eyes never lingered on him for long. He was a ghost among the restless dead.

Many of the walkers wore bloodied uniforms. Soldiers and emergency workers and police officers in riot gear, people dispatched to route the crisis but who had fallen victim to it instead. It was hardest to see the mottled brown camo print of the military defiled in such a way. No soldier deserved to endure such indignity, and the sight of it fed a spark of anger deep inside John.

He made note of the walkers' injuries where he could, identifying the particular pieces of missing flesh and how, strangely, their bodies remained functional despite the losses. Most were fresh corpses to John’s eyes, cadavers he might have seen in the anatomy lab at university, although some showed more advanced signs of decay. The only constant among them was a largely intact head. The tops or sides might be gashed in, but every single walker John saw bore no serious damage to the base of their skull. The revelation all but confirmed his suspicions: the only effective countermeasure was to destroy the brainstem.

By the time John safely reached London Bridge station, his medical mind burned with a hundred different questions. A few segregated walkers milled around the entrance to the station, but once John got past the first physical blockades he hadn't seen any others. The rest of the descent was a blur of scanning dark recesses with his torch, navigating stairs, and rushing past ever-grinning adverts from an irreconcilable world.

Now there was just the hard ground at the base of the escalator. Balled up and shackled by pain, John drew dizzying lungfuls of stagnant, unfiltered air. Cold water soaked into his scrubs and mixed with the gory dressings spackled onto the cloth. Everything reeked and John wasn't sure which was worse: himself or the sewage-infused groundwater seeping in from above. If Hell existed, it couldn't be much worse than the one into which he'd woken.

*Come at once, if convenient.*

A familiar voice rang in his ears, deep and demanding and endearingly impatient. “Sherlock?” John grunted, opening his eyes and shifting his head.

*If inconvenient, come all the same.*

John blinked deliriously in the dark. “Could be dangerous,” he mumbled.
Get up, John. Don’t just lie there like a free buffet. Get up. You’ve more intelligence than that.

Sherlock’s tone, all but accompanied by a roll of pale eyes and a disdainful sigh, dripped with distaste for John’s pitiful, human failings. What would Sherlock think of John's biggest failing of all?

John pressed his forehead into the grimy floor, corners of his mouth twitching into a forlorn smile. “I should have told you,” he whispered to Sherlock. “I should have said something when I had the chance. Even if it changed everything. Even if it disgusted you. Just so you knew.”

Tell me when we’re together again. Or have you already forgotten your promise?

“No!” John pleaded, snapping his head up and reaching out into the great black nothing. “Don’t think that, Sherlock. I’m coming. I’m-”

Then GET UP, John.

With a groan, John forced himself to twist painfully onto his back, his stitches tugging taut with the movement. Strange colors swirled in his vision, electric bright against the dim arc of the ceiling. He grimaced as the cramping fought back. If he let it, his body would keep him here on the floor of this bloody station until he died.

There was no time for argument. Sherlock had summoned him. "That was an order, soldier," John emphasized through clenched teeth.

He pulled himself to his knees and clambered over to the tiled wall, collapsing against it and huffing unsteadily as his light-headedness passed. John dragged his bag closer and brought out one of his bottles of distilled water. He sipped at it with shaky hands, trying to restore his lost fluids and ease the tightness in his abdomen. John managed a quarter of a protein bar after that, with hopes that it would stay down long enough for his body to harvest the energy within.

The battle was just beginning, and something told John he would need his strength before the end.

Six centimeters of discolored river water surged around John's boots when he jumped down from the open screen doors of the station platform. The track of the Jubilee Line flowed as a shallow rivulet of rushing water, the sound echoing off the curved walls and making it difficult to hear much else. John shone his torch up the train tunnel but the beam failed to pierce the gathered dark.

He’d faced frightening missions before, but the impenetrable black before him seemed to seethe with unknown horror. Anything could be waiting, watching, lurking within.

Sherlock. Do it for Sherlock.

Sherlock was at the end of this god-forsaken tunnel. He had to be. John had promised to find him, and John did not break his promises. Not to Sherlock.

John straightened the strap of the bag over his shoulder. His fingers itched for his Sig. “Oh, you bloody owe me,” John muttered to the damp walls.

Pulling the surgical blade from his pocket, John raised his torch high and, with one long steadying breath, stepped into the darkness.
As John trudged against the water’s flow, the arcing tunnel of the deep-level Tube line shrank to a claustrophobic circumference barely wide enough to fit a train carriage. Wary of alerting anything that might be wandering in the dark, John flashed his torch only intermittently to gauge the next few meters in front of him. His light reflected off the water's surface and danced across the dirty tunnel walls. The water level appeared to be gently rising with time.

Amidst the perpetual dark and the hypnotic drone of the water, a curious presence made itself known. Several times, John thought he caught the flit of a long coat just beyond the edge of his torch light, spurring him to stumble on as fast as he could in his panic to catch up. Of course Sherlock would go gallivanting ahead, great idiot that he was. They'd often entered sewerages and tunnels and crumbling subterranean vaults in the course of their investigations, and this was no different. Just another strange adventure for the ridiculous men who lived at 221B Baker Street.

The pressure-cooker of fear inside his chest swelled as he made his blind way, threatening to burst wide with unthinkable things, things that would leave him numb and afraid and incapable if dwelt upon. But when the threshold loomed strongest, John's shadow detective would silently call to him, egging him on because they were close, weren't they? They were so close to solving this one and wouldn't it be marvelous to see the look on Lestrade's face when Sherlock rattled off his brilliant deductions? And then they could go home, like they always did, and of course Sherlock would be there waiting. Where else could he possibly be?

Lost in thoughts of reunion, the next click of John's light glanced off a glistening, bloodied face in the dark. John startled badly, stumbling backward with a shout and landing in the freezing stream of water. He fumbled with his torch and swung the light desperately around until he found the face again. The walker bared its teeth at him but didn't move any closer, and it took another minute for John to process the odd reflective glare in his cone of light.

He’d reached Southwark station and the walker was stuck up on the platform behind the safety screen. John angled his torch all down the platform. The doors were all shut, thank God. A number of lonesome walkers on the platform turned when they noticed the light, shuffling up to the clear barrier and leaving bloody streaks where they ineffectually clawed at it.

Heart racing from the fright, John struggled to catch his breath as he stood. If walkers had reached the platform, it meant Southwark station was overrun. There was no telling how the other stations between here and Baker Street fared; if walkers broke through to the actual train tunnel, there would be no escape.

John kept to the far side of the track as he passed Southwark, firmly ignoring the muffled growls of the walkers tracking his every movement, before disappearing once again into the black passage of the Jubilee line.

Waterloo station announced itself with a gentle curving of the tunnel. John kept his torch use to minimum, triggering brief flashes always angled downward, until he could be sure that no walkers were waiting on the track.
Instead of walkers, a Tube train -- the first John had seen -- blocked his path on the flooded rails in front of open platform edge doors. John shone his light down the shadowy gap between the train and the far wall, considering, before opting to climb up onto the empty platform to get around the train.

As John pulled himself up onto the platform, two loud gunshots suddenly cracked through the stuffy air. A single metallic ping rang out near John’s head, accompanied by a spark in the darkness, and his blood seemed to freeze in his veins. Battlefield instinct kicked in and John automatically dropped to the surface of the platform, flattening himself and covering his head.

A small glow flickered to life on the walls and ceiling of the station platform, like a lantern being uncovered.

“Did you get it?” asked a soft voice from some distance away.

“I don’t think so,” answered another voice, stronger and harsher than the first. “Give me a torch.”

A beam of light struck John in the face. “Don’t shoot!” he called out hoarsely, squinting from the brightness.

“What did it say?” came the soft voice.

“It’s not a walker,” said a third.

Footsteps thudded across the platform, drawing closer with the torch light homed in on John. “You! On your knees,” the harsher voice said, clearer now with proximity. It definitely belonged to a woman, though her tone reminded John of a female sergeant he once met in Afghanistan who had been particularly skilled at barking out orders. “Hands where I can see them!”

With effort, John pushed himself up onto his knees. A few more torch beams joined the first, sweeping up and down his body.

“Arms up! Drop the bag!” she demanded.

John tossed his rucksack aside and raised his hands, shielding his eyes against the glare as he did so. A woman with cropped brown hair wearing dark, dirty jeans, work boots, and a black rain slicker stood five meters away. In one hand she held what looked to be an antique revolver, and in the other a torch. Both were trained directly onto John.

“He’s gone and rolled in walker guts, Becca,” one of the other voices said from behind her. “Look at him.”

“Quiet, Peter,” Becca scolded. She didn’t take her eyes off John.

John dared to lean a little and get a look at the others. Behind Becca, two people in bulky coats huddled around a medium-sized lantern, enclosed by a nest of blankets and bags spread over a waterproof tarpaulin. One was a university-aged girl with long blonde hair tumbling out from beneath a pink knit cap. The other, a similarly-aged boy, sported an unkempt beard and thick-rimmed glasses. Hunger and fear was written across all three of their faces, each more concerned with self-defense and what John might do to them than anything else. They suspiciously eyed the residue of reddish-brown walker entrails on his clothing.

“It’s camouflage,” John explained, keeping his voice steady and unthreatening.

“Unsanitary is what it is,” Becca criticized, darkly unimpressed, “but I suppose the whole world smells of shit, these days.” She nudged his bag with the toe of her boot. “What’ve we got here?”
John ran his tongue over his chapped lips. “Supplies.”

“Supplies? Fancy yourself a survivalist, do you?” A mocking tone stained her words and a sour grimace pursed her mouth. "We’ve met survivalists. We’ve seen what sort of people they are. Scavengers who steal all you’ve fucking got—“ She kicked his rucksack, hard. “Fuck those fuckers—" And again. "Fucking—" She kept on angrily kicking it, grumbling obscenities to herself, until she punted it with enough force to land near her companions.

Becca pressed the back of her torch-laden hand against her forehead. “Shit,” she muttered as Peter reached out to take the bag. He unzipped it and dumped out the contents, a cascade of blue bars and plastic bottles and everything else John had managed to find.

John remained perfectly still. Christ, what had happened to these people? “I’m not here to steal from you,” he carefully reassured Becca. "I’m just passing through.”

Becca’s scowl communicated her skepticism, but the blonde girl next to Peter curiously raised her head as she picked through John’s supplies. “Passing through to where?” she asked.

“Shut up, Annie,” snapped Becca. The gun shifted in her hands, her aim comfortable and practiced.

John glanced tentatively over at Annie. “I’m going home,” he said, trying his best to sound friendly.

“Going home,” Becca scoffed under her breath. “If that isn’t the biggest load of shit I’ve ever heard…”

Annie gave a shy smile. “Where’s your home?”

“I live on Baker Street with my best friend," he replied. "My name is John.”

“Our home burned in the fires. Becca got us out just in time," Annie said, youthfully doe-eyed and appreciative. "What’s your friend’s name?”

"That’s enough, Annie,” Becca interrupted. She glanced back. "Anything good in there?”

Peter held up two of the protein bars. “Food. Water. Medical kit.”

“We’ll take that knife, too,” Becca said, gesturing with her gun. "And the torch. Everything, now.”

“Do you want the clothes off my back as well?” John asked acerbically.

Becca sniffed in disgust. “You can keep those.”

John tossed what he had left out onto the long empty platform. Becca shoved it all away with her boot, the wet grime of the platform smearing the objects as they scraped across it. John traced the streams of leaking water up the tiled walls with his eyes, then glanced over at Annie and Peter, who were excitedly whispering together around their newfound prizes.

“You should take them out of the tunnels,” John advised, low enough that only Becca could hear him.

"And where do you suggest I take them?” Becca gripped tighter onto her gun. "Straight into the crossfire of those fuckers up on the streets? No, I don’t think so.”

God, she had no idea of the danger. John sighed. “Listen, Becca, I’m a doctor. You can trust—”

“A doctor? Really?” Her torch beam landed on John's raised right wrist and reflected off the
identification band from the hospital. "You've got patient tags. For all I know you've just escaped from an institution. If you think I’ll believe anything you've got to say, you’re fucking delusional."

She was intelligent but exceptionally frightened, that much was clear. John studied the stout revolver clutched in her steady hands. “What is that, a Webley?”


"An old service revolver, is it? I don’t imagine it came with many rounds."

She angled the gun higher. "It came with enough."

"You know how to hold it correctly," John pointed out. "You've had weapons training."

A muscle in her jaw tightened. "I was a police officer. Before."

"And I was a soldier."

An uneasy frown rose on Becca's face. "Oh, now you're a soldier, are you? I thought you were a doctor."

"I'm Captain John Watson of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers. Three tours practicing combat medicine in Afghanistan. Do you see that?" John said, nodding toward the streams trickling down the corroding walls. “We’re below the water table, Becca. The pumps have stopped working and the Underground is flooding. The Thames is coming down on us and if that isn't reason enough, walkers have broken through to some of the platforms. They'll be in the tunnel before long. You've got to get them out.”

“We’re staying where it’s safe,” Becca hissed in desperation. Her hands shook. "Where it was supposed to be safe.” She stepped closer until the cold point of her gun pressed against John’s forehead. “I ought to shoot you right now. I ought to.”

Sweet, pain-numbing adrenaline soared through John's veins. It was ridiculous. The danger presented by this random woman -- this understandable, straightforward threat -- felt like an old friend returned to call. How many times had he stared down the barrel of death alongside Sherlock? This was human. This was John's element and, God, how he craved it.

It was as normal as John had felt since he woke. His mad, messed up version of normalcy where bombs and snipers and serial killers ruled. Any sane person would piss themselves if a gun was pointed at their skull, but no, not John Watson.

Instead, he laughed.

It erupted grateful and relieved and Becca stared at him oddly, apparently confirming her suspicions about his mental instability. John's laughter trailed off into soft chuckling. The hammer clicked on Becca's gun.

The pop of the gunshot exploded like cannon-fire next to his right ear, air gusting as the bullet whizzed past his head without making contact. John flinched and his hearing on that side blotted out into shrill ringing. Becca pushed the warm muzzle back against his head. "Stop it," she threatened.

John's brief euphoria drained away in one rapid rush. It left him dizzy from adrenaline and fear and dehydration, fully aware that he was about to be unceremoniously robbed and executed by a frightened young woman with an overactive trigger finger.
Observe. Observe, John. What do you see?

John shook his head, but Sherlock's voice emerged loud and clear through the high-pitched whine of partial hearing loss. Sherlock refused to leave him, even now. So John looked.

Becca didn't want to kill him; that much was obvious by her distressed expression. She simply saw no other choice. There was only one reason she could be acting like this, acting how John would if he had Sherlock with him. John zeroed in on Becca's younger companions.

"Are they your family?" he deduced, glancing up at the former policewoman.

Becca's face twitched in surprise, reigning in a surge of emotion just beneath its hard-nosed surface. "Annie's my sister," she said slowly, throat bobbing as she swallowed. "Peter's her boyfriend. They're all I have left and I'll not let anything happen to them. I keep them safe because if I don't, no one will."

John nodded. His heartbeat pulsed fast in his chest. "I know what it is to have someone like that. Someone you would do anything to protect. It's heavy, isn't it? The weight of responsibility. But you wouldn't trust another living soul to carry it. Not when it's them."

The kiss of the gun disappeared from John's forehead. Becca's eyes glistened wetly in the uneven light. "They're university students, they haven't-- they're just kids." Her voice broke over the words, pleading with John as if he possessed the power to save them. "They don't understand the cruelty of the world. They don't understand what people can do to each other."

John slowly reached up to pull at the loose neckline of his scrubs, just enough to show Becca the old gunshot scar on his left shoulder. "But we do, you and I. Don't we?"

She receded, lowering her gun and considering him with an introspective frown. The addictive rush of survival hit John like a drug and he swayed on his knees.

"Becca?" called the soft voice of her sister.

Becca took a deep breath and composed herself, an iron shield of defensiveness settling back into place. She took a few careful steps backward until she was close enough to give the revolver to Peter, molding his hand around the grip. "Like this," she explained. "Just keep it on him."

John knelt silently as they examined their bounty, Peter's nervous eyes watching him from behind thick-rimmed glasses as he inexpertly clutched the revolver. Annie glanced at John as Becca stuffed the protein bars back into the rucksack.

"He looks hungry, Becca," Annie said. "Look at him."

"We're all hungry. Now, be quiet," she replied, twisting off the cap of one of the water jugs and sniffing the contents.

"Becca, please."

She looked into her sister's large gentle eyes for a long moment, then sighed and tossed one of the protein bars toward John. It landed near his left knee.

Becca stood and grabbed the gun away from Peter. Her eyes blazed with tempered suspicion as she evaluated John, as generous a look as she could give under the circumstances. "Get out of here," she ordered finally, head jerking in a dismissive nod. "If I see you again, I'm shooting you in the-"
A long rattling groan cut her off, rising over the backdrop of flowing river water. Annie let out a Pavlovian shriek and Peter flinched violently, huddling in on himself. Becca stiffened, suddenly alert, and raised her gun as she whipped her head around to locate the source of the noise.

To her credit, Becca didn't start firing until the walkers appeared on the platform. They streamed out of the dark archways from the terminal concourse, limping into the lantern's glow on rotten legs, their interest increasing with every loud pop of the Webley reverberating off the walls of the tunnel. She fired haphazardly until the hollow click of the trigger signaled an empty cylinder.

John went blank on his knees as his tactical automation took over. The walkers weren't coordinated enough to climb, which meant--

High and away. They had to get high and away, but they were trapped in an enclosed underground tunnel. Where could--

John was bounding toward the platform edge doors before he had consciously thought about it, planting his feet against the upright struts to climb up onto the smooth, cold roof of the powerless train. John shouted to the others and suddenly Becca was there below him, reaching up with dinner-plate eyes. He pulled her up to safety alongside him.

Annie and Peter were slower in their response, tripping over the makeshift bedding in their bid to escape the oncoming walkers. Peter helped untangle Annie’s shoes and guided her toward the train where they met the waiting arms of John and Becca. John grabbed Peter by the cuff of his sleeve, but as he began to pull a sudden panicked epiphany overtook the young man.

"The supplies!" Peter shouted.

The moment his hand slipped away, John knew it was a lost cause.

"Come back here, Peter!" Becca yelled after him. "Peter, it doesn’t matter!"

But Peter didn’t listen. The trajectory of events read like fixed images in a picture book, and all John could do was watch helplessly from the safety of the train. Peter bolted back to their encampment as quickly as his feet would carry him, but the walkers were too close.

Peter had just got his fingers around the rucksack when they reached him. Dozens of walkers swallowed him up like the waves of an ocean, his shouts dying out with the lantern light as soon as he submerged beneath their writhing forms.

"Peter!" Annie cried out, half a sob and half a scream. She fought against John and Becca's arms, trying to go to her boyfriend.

"Annie! Annie, no! It's too late!" Becca told her, snagging her coat.

John helped her lift Annie up onto the train against her will. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she kept on screaming, louder and louder until Becca pressed her sister's face into her shoulder to quiet her.

There had to be at least fifty walkers, all crowded and compressed and fighting one another for the remains of Peter. Alone, one on one, a walker posed little threat, but gathered in a thick mob they were nearly impossible to escape.

"Your gunshots must've attracted them," John said to Becca, huffing as he caught his breath. “Jesus.”

"How was I supposed to know they'd got down here?" Becca hissed as she cradled her sobbing
sister.

John shook his head. "It's the first rule of evasion. Never give away your position to the enemy."

"What are we going to do?" Becca asked. "They'll just wait for us to come down as soon as they're done."

John considered their predicament for a few silent minutes, staunchly ignoring the disgusting sounds coming from the walkers as he scoured his brain for a plan. He glanced around the tunnel to estimate distances and measurements in the terribly low light.

"Give me the Webley," he said finally.

Becca raised an eyebrow. "What for? It's out of ammunition!"

"I know, I'm not daft!" John countered, holding out his hand. "Give it to me."

She shoved the empty weapon over to him. John picked it up, spinning open the cylinder to ensure no bullets remained. "Lie down and keep quiet," he instructed. "If they hear us we've got no chance."

Becca nodded and pressed her hands over her crying sister’s head. “Shh, love, I know. I know. Hush, now,” she whispered.

John slid into a prone position on top of the carriage and waited another five minutes or so, weighing the heft of the revolver in his palm and missing the preferable balance (and magazine size) of his Sig. Once the walkers' meal subsided and their attention shifted to other potential sources of food, John chucked the gun at the tunnel entrance leading toward Southwark station. It clattered in magnificent fashion as it struck stone and metal before splashing to a watery end on the rail line. The walkers lifted their heads at the sounds and slowly began to shamble toward its source.

John raised a vertical finger to his mouth to remind Becca and Annie to be quiet. Becca muffled Annie’s sobs with her palm and held her sister tight.

John rolled silently to his back, lying as flat as he could on top of the freezing roof as the herd of walkers moved off down the Tube tunnel. God knew where the walkers would end up, or whether the northern parts of the Jubilee line were infested as well, or whether the concave wall right above him would give way and drown them in frigid river water. Either way, odds favored the Jubilee line becoming his final tomb.

It was then John realized he could no longer feel Sherlock there with him. The comforting, shadowy presence had been swept away by the weeping of a frightened girl and the rasping hisses of the walkers below.

A stark pang of true separation hit him, so strong and overpowering that for one brief second John let slip his control. It was the slightest surrender to the fear gnawing inside him, but given the opening it burst open like a fissure. Rampaging thoughts spilled forth about his parents, and Harry, and the friends he'd known before going to war and those he'd met just after.

They were dead, weren't they?

It was the first time he actually let himself think it, weigh it, believe it. Feel it.

Mrs. Hudson, and Greg, and Molly, and Mike, and everyone at Bart’s. God, even those bastards at Scotland Yard who treated Sherlock so horribly. His coworkers at the surgery. People who didn’t
deserve to die as Peter had done. As Caroline had done. People John never would have known if it wasn’t for Sherlock exploding into his life with the force of a grenade...

God, Sherlock.

The tears wanted to come but John, hand clamped over his mouth, fought back with everything he had. This was neither the time nor the place. He rammed his emotions back down into the dark place from which they'd sprung. He needed discipline if he was going to survive. Sherlock was waiting. Sherlock was waiting. *Sherlock was waiting.*

John had promised to find him, and so he would. Whether he had to face fifty walkers, or a hundred, or a thousand, was inconsequential.

John did not break his promises.

Not to Sherlock.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: [Lead Me Home | Jamie N Commons](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=)
They called him the Colonel.

Cigarette dangling from his lips, outfitted in combat boots and a scrubbed leather jacket that looked as though it had seen its share of walkers, he paced inside the locked gate of Kensington Palace with all the predatory grace of a prowling lion.

Thunder rumbled in the brewing storm clouds overhead as Greg mirrored the Colonel's leisurely strides. Twenty feet of open air, broken only by the slim iron bars and gold-leafed ornamentation of the gate, separated them as they carefully eyed one another, taking stock while their respective subordinates bristled in agitation.

“They've got nearly thirty. I thought they only took nine,” Donovan muttered as Greg swept past. Her white-knuckled fists gripped hard onto the straps of her black police vest, resisting the urge to reach for her gun. “Showing off?”

She had always been a quick estimator. A roughshod dozen gunmen accompanied the Colonel, all of them wielding scavenged firearms in their untrained hands, but just behind them a larger group fanned out as if awaiting judgment from a firing squad. Thirty frightened adults and even a few small children stood obediently in line, each desperate enough to obey the whims of a madman they thought might protect them.

Fresh indignation bubbled up inside him, but Greg quickly tamped it down. “Human armor,” he decided with a grumble. “We can’t fire on them without risking the civilians.”

Greg paused in his copycat peacocking to straighten his own bullet-proof vest. Like his officers, his gun and knife remained holstered at his belt; he had brought his four most dependable people to this confrontation and, if at all possible, they were to avoid instigating a firefight. The Colonel did not have a reputation for conflict avoidance.

His nickname implied military service and looking at him, Greg couldn't argue against that conclusion. The Colonel’s honey-brown hair, dark blond where it caught the light, was shaved short on the sides but left longer on top. He was young, probably in his thirties, but aged beyond his years by experience. Not unlike another soldier Greg had known.

Greg scanned the Colonel’s gunmen, all of whom wore hoodies and headgear that obfuscated their faces. There was a man in a dirty white zip-up and another in blue, two who might to be women under dense layers of frayed grey wool, and a handful more in black balaclavas; it was impossible to confidently discriminate between any of them.

Sighing, Greg pushed at his bunched shirt-sleeves before cupping a hand to his mouth. "Attention," he announced. "We represent the provisional government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We have reason to believe certain members of your party were involved in the death of a police officer. Open the gates, place your weapons on the ground, and allow us to retrieve the civilians who were with our officer when he died. If you do not comply, we will not hesitate to respond with force."

The Colonel abruptly stopped pacing. He cocked his head and pulled the cigarette from his lips, an
amused smile creeping across his face. Awful habit, smoking. The last of Greg’s cravings had disappeared when he realized the smell unnecessarily attracted walkers.

"A provisional government," the Colonel said. A vague, unidentifiable lilt colored his accent. "That’s quite the claim. Been to Ireland recently, have you? Or Wales? Or Scotland?"

Greg lowered his hand. Strictly speaking, no one had been in contact with anyone outside London since... bedlam. Radio towers, satellites, cable lines – existing infrastructure lay largely damaged or powerless. Back when organized evacuations were still running, the walkers had naturally migrated to follow the food sources streaming into the countryside. Although the exodus left the central parts of London relatively clear of walkers, the city remained ringed by increasing densities of the undead and breaking in or out would be a chore. Assuming, of course, that there was anyone left alive out beyond the city to do the breaking. Not even Mycroft knew for sure, and that worried Greg most of all.

The Colonel studied Greg through the intricately wrought ironwork. “I haven't seen you before. Which one are you?”

“Detective Inspector Lestrade of the Metropolitan Police Service.”

His eyebrows rose in unexpected interest. “Ah. Inspector Lestrade,” he said, delightedly stretching out the last syllable. "My, my. We finally meet. Your name’s come up often around town. Annoyingly often, as a matter of fact.” He took a long drag on his cigarette, intense blue eyes evaluating Greg above a strong, grim jaw. “You and your gang.”

Hopkins and Bainbridge shifted restlessly behind Greg, and if his distaste for this man already burned as a small but potent flame, the dismissive way he spoke sent it into a fierce crackling blaze. But they were officers of the Met, the last vestige of anything resembling law and order in this new London, and it wouldn’t do to lose their heads.

The provisional government might not be fully functional, but it was stable, and that was a sight better than most people had to offer. Wandering alone was not a viable option when walkers outnumbered the living five thousand to one; survival meant grouping, but grouping inevitably led to violence, betrayal, murder, and all other manner of criminal behavior. As resources in the city dwindled, those left alive faced the choice between vicious competition and retreating deep into walker-infested territory. Looters and brigands now accounted for almost as much violence as the walkers.

Then came rumors of another force for consolidating people. Tales writ in blood and a name whispered on the streets: the Colonel.

A grisly invitation arrived soon after the rumors. They’d found Forrester’s remains two days earlier, strewn in pieces throughout Hyde Park to be picked over by feral dogs and a few lonesome walkers. If the M.O. and the spent shells hadn’t been enough to solve the mystery of who had done it, there was always the giant fucking piece of graffiti pointing toward the deserted grounds of Kensington Palace.

Finally trusting himself to speak, Greg unclenched his jaw to reiterate his terms. But before he could speak, a single sharp crack suddenly punctured the air and a force like a battering ram slammed into the center of his chest. Gravity inverted and Greg's shoulder blades collided hard with cold pavement, sapping the air from his lungs.

Shouts erupted all around. Greg found himself staring up at the dark rain-laden sky and the foreshortened bodies of his officers, hands reaching for their weapons despite their orders. Jesus, the
civilians--

"Stand down," Greg wheezed on half a breath, nerves ringing with disorientation as he pushed himself up on one elbow.

"Sniper. Upper left window," Bainbridge reported automatically, steely eyes locked on the great brick façade of the palace.

"Stand down!" Greg repeated.

Donovan and Hopkins froze indecisively, having positioned themselves in front of Greg to block any further shots as Jones lowered to his knees, running a hand over the front of Greg's vest to check him. Donovan glanced down, nervous, handgun half-drawn. Her eyes flicked to the others. "You heard him. Everyone stand down."

"No penetration," Jones said as he probed the point of impact, "but sir, that was an unmistakable kill shot."

"Less than fifty yards,” Bainbridge noted. “At that distance, targeting is deliberate.”

Level-headed officer, Bainbridge, even if he'd come from the Queen’s Guard rather than the ranks of the Met. Greg coughed and accepted Donovan’s outstretched hand to sit upright. “Bainbridge is right. If they wanted to kill me they’d have shot me in the head.”

The bullet, distorted into a metal blob, had lodged in the center of his vest. Greg picked it out, still warm, and let it drop to the pavement. Pain was just beginning to bloom across his breastbone. Christ, that hurt. He'd have a massive bruise tomorrow.

As Greg stood, the Colonel was back to casually smoking his cigarette. “Just checking,” he announced, shaking ash from the end and glancing up. “I was held up at gunpoint by an enterprising lad the other day. He'd stuffed cardboard down his shirt and tried to pass it off as body armor. Clearly, yours is authentic. His was not.”

That broke the last of Greg’s restraint. He was sick of losing people, of seeing those under his responsibility destroyed and damaged by this whole fucked-up mess of a situation. Anger flowed and he aggressively stepped forward, ignoring the tight pain skating across his chest. "You and your filth murdered one of my officers," Greg declared. "Don't bother denying it."

“How else could I draw you out?” the Colonel replied. He flicked his cigarette nub to the ground, landing beside the trainers of the man in the blue hoodie. “I was held up at gunpoint by an enterprising lad the other day. He’d stuffed cardboard down his shirt and tried to pass it off as body armor. Clearly, yours is authentic. His was not.”

Greg crossed his arms. Another round of thunder rolled from above, threatening to unleash a fresh spate of rain on the pitiful shell of a city below. If only it could wash this scum away. “You’ve got my undivided attention.”

The Colonel leaned against the gate, pressing close as if intending to share a treasured secret. “I’ve seen that toy of yours driving around,” he said, each word enunciated with far too much pleasure. “And that’s just the tip of iceberg. A bunker, they say. One of those top secret installations. Underground. I hear it can function self-sufficiently for years. I hear you’re hoarding down there. Generators. Food. Water. People.”

Greg frowned, a dark expression befitting the Colonel's disturbing intonations. Granted, it was only a matter of time until they heard about Pindar and, in general, Greg welcomed word getting round. Their goal was to find and protect as many civilians as possible, after all.
They harbored over seven hundred people now, packed to the gills in a bunker only meant to hold five dozen top officials in the event of a terrorist attack on the nation’s capital. Pindar stood as the last bastion of what came before: the remnants of Whitehall, the Met, and what few soldiers had survived the containment efforts.

“‘You’re not a chatty man, are you, Lestrade?’” the Colonel observed when Greg did not respond. “I like that. Confirmation via non-confirmation.” He smiled. “What I wouldn’t give to find your little hidey-hole. Something tells me we wouldn’t be welcomed with open arms.”

“We take civilians, not fighters,” Donovan spat, full of malice. “Not murderers.”

“Everyone’s a murderer, lady copper,” countered the Colonel. “It’s in our blood. This brave new world has returned us to our natural order. Kill or be killed. You wield the only power at your disposal like an ungainly stick, but you cannot fight human nature. You’re living in a dream. This,” he said, opening his leather jacket to display the hilt of a pistol, “this is reality.”

The Colonel stiffened and backed away from the gate, adopting a convincing air of military command. “Here is what will happen, Lestrade. You and your underlings will place your weapons on the ground. You will walk away slowly, with your backs to us and your hands behind your heads, and we’ll see whether the mood strikes to grant you a quick, clean death. That’s a better deal than the walkers will give you.”

Greg studied each of the Colonel’s men in turn. A few betrayed agitation in their fingertips, unconsciously twitching against their triggers. Which one was it?

“No,” Greg said, lifting his head. “This is your last chance. Open the gates and hand over any civilians who wish to come with us. I’ll not abandon them.”

“No,” Greg said, lifting his head. “This is your last chance. Open the gates and hand over any civilians who wish to come with us. I’ll not abandon them.”

“Now there’s a compelling question,” mused the Colonel, tapping a finger at his chin. “Why do all the soft sweet lemmings run to your clutches? They think you have answers. They think you have resources. And you do, I suppose, but that’s not going to keep them suckling forever. Tell me: if you’re so keen on caring for them, then why haven’t you let any of the others out once they’ve gone in?”

A few quiet murmurs passed between his officers. Greg glared at the Colonel. How could he possibly insinuate— they were saving lives, for God’s sake! The safest place for everyone was underground, warm, away from the walkers. It wasn’t a prison… it wasn’t…

“Ah, I’ve confused him.” The Colonel grinned at his gun-toting minions, prompting a ripple of low chuckles, before glancing back at Greg. “The edges of the map are shifting in our favor. I’ve been watching you and yours, Lestrade, and it’s only a matter of time before I am proved the dominant force in this little jungle of ours. Shall we make a complete set out of your officers?”

A dozen gunpoints swung level, and Greg’s heart rate spasmed in alarm. His eyes bounced wildly between the hooded and masked figures. Jesus, they all looked the same.

The Colonel shook his head disdainfully. “I’m rather underwhelmed by London’s finest, I must say.”

A droplet of sweat trailed down Greg’s temple but he stood firm, unwavering, and opted to bet on the final ace up his sleeve. “That’s why I called in a consultant,” he loudly announced.

On that cue, the man wearing the blue hoodie lunged lightning-quick toward the Colonel, his hood falling back to reveal a head of dark, messy curls. He body-slammed the Colonel against the gate and pressed the tip of his gun into his neck. Shouts of alarm rose from the Colonel’s men as they trained
their weapons on him instead.

A piercing set of pale eyes narrowed threateningly. “Open the gate,” Sherlock ordered, nearly puncturing the Colonel’s throat with the barrel of his gun.

“Shezza?” the man in the white hoodie blurted out, entirely stunned.

“Sherlock, actually,” he corrected as he tightened his grip on the Colonel’s jacket collar. “Are you all deaf or merely stupid? I said open it!”

The trees of the palace grounds creaked in the rising wind as the Colonel’s foot soldiers rushed to obey. Darker clouds loomed as the gate swung open and the Met officers fanned inside, guns finally drawn. Sherlock angled the Colonel like a human shield toward the windows of Kensington Palace, his sharp eyes watching for the sniper.

“Stay back and no one will be harmed,” Greg informed the Colonel’s people, all of them trading unnerved glances as the officers created a perimeter. The first faint tics of raindrops hit the paved walk. “We just want to speak with him. Hopkins, keep them in check.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, sighting her gun and motioning to the others.

Greg turned to Sherlock and his captive. He hadn’t seen Sherlock in nearly a day and a half, ever since the former consulting detective had conceived this mad plan to infiltrate the Colonel’s group and strike from the inside if negotiations went south. Greasy-haired and unrecognizable in stained, ill-fitting sweats, Sherlock had done a bang-up job of disguising himself. "All right?" Greg asked. “Christ, I couldn’t tell which one was you.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes behind the Colonel’s shoulder. “That’s because you’re just as unobservant as the rest of these morons. Less than twenty-four hours of nodding along with their self-righteous tripe and I was entrusted with this.” He twisted the gun back and forth, digging into the Colonel's scruff. "Imbeciles."

The Colonel, for his part, didn’t appear particularly concerned about being held at gunpoint. In fact, he looked mildly pleased that his day had taken such a diverting turn. Greg holstered his weapon and motioned to Sherlock, who grudgingly released the Colonel. Sherlock came away with the other man's gun, nicked at some point when Greg wasn't watching, and tossed it aside as he stepped back. His grip on his own weapon remained firm.

"What’s your name?" Greg demanded. “Your real name.”

The Colonel raised his hands, watchful. “What does it matter? Going to lock me up for not filing taxes?”

Sighing, Greg shot Sherlock an irritated look.

Catching the hint, Sherlock's eyes skirted up and down their captive. "Born of aristocratic parents, but not in Britain. Somewhere abroad," he deduced. "Father held a prominent position in government but rather than follow in his footsteps, you joined up for military service. Not for the money, no, there was always plenty of that, wasn’t there? You enjoy inflicting violence and the contradiction of being commissioned to do so by your own government was far too amusing to pass up. You were ranked top of your class and had your pick of assignments but chose to be stationed somewhere equatorial. Southeast Asia, I would guess."

The Colonel didn't even blink. "Where did you pick this one up, Lestrade?" he asked, smoothly sizing Sherlock up in a way that Greg definitely did not like. "Such a shame you got to him first."
He'd be all sorts of useful."

Sherlock frowned and glanced at Greg. "He's not impressed."

"Jesus, Sherlock, not everyone thinks you're God's gift to-"

"No, there's no reaction at all.” A spark of true intrigue, strange to see where so long absent, lit Sherlock's narrowed eyes. "He's seen deduction before."

Muffled gunshots rang out to the southwest, interrupting them. Greg glanced over at his officers. They had separated the civilians and those with firearms into two groups, placing the latter such that they blocked the sight of any other gunmen who might be hiding inside the palace. “Donovan?” Greg called.

“Perimeter is holding, sir,” she reported, wind rustling her curly hair. "No flares yet.”

Nodding, Greg turned back to the Colonel. The daylight was dimming fast and they needed to move this along. “Who gives the orders? Just you? How many are under your command?” he continued. “How many civilians are you holding captive? I want to know locations, weapons, everything.”

“And I want a good single-malt whiskey,” said the Colonel, "but I don't suppose I'll see much of that any time soon."

Greg crossed his arms over his police vest, fighting the urge to strangle the bloody man with his bare hands. "If you don't think I'll kill you for what I need to keep my people safe-"

"I'm sure you would," he interrupted. "You've got the eyes of a killer, Lestrade. You've done men in." The Colonel looked at Sherlock again. "This one, he's not yet killed a living man. Not seen a corpse and known he was the one who put it there."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Sherlock hummed ominously, tapping one finger against his gun. "I'm capable of a great many things."

The Colonel arched an eyebrow, utterly unperturbed. "By all means, then. My men won't hesitate to blow us all to kingdom come if I give the right signal. We'll all burn together, until there's nothing left to turn."

Sherlock, all hard lines and unforgiving angles, leaned in. "What makes you think I care?” he growled.

"You don't, do you?” the Colonel said, softly curious. “You've got a death wish. Where from, I wonder?” His eyes narrowed. “Or rather, who?”

Sherlock instantly snarled and, before Greg could even think to intervene, grabbed the Colonel by the collar, nearly choking him with his grip, and slammed a vicious head-butt into his face.

“Freak’s going to kill him!” shouted Donovan as Greg rushed to pull Sherlock off.

The Colonel smiled there against the gate when Greg finally shoved Sherlock away. Blood flowed from his nostrils. "Hit a nerve, have I?” he taunted at Sherlock. "Forgive me if I don’t turn on the waterworks. I've lost people, too. Better people than you'll ever know."

Ice cold control had taken over Sherlock's expression, but he looked ready to go in for another attack. Greg held out a hand in warning as Sherlock rounded on the Colonel again. But rather than hit him, Sherlock simply reached into the Colonel’s jacket, slow and unflinching, and removed the
Colonel's pack of cigarettes from an inside pocket.

Sherlock was gone the moment after that. Greg unclenched his hand from his holster and loosed a shaky breath, thanking God he hadn't had to shoot one or the other. Blood dripped from the Colonel's face onto his leather jacket. He smirked at Greg, waiting for his next move.

As far as Greg was concerned, playtime was officially over. He turned. “Anyone who wishes to come with us is welcome to do so,” Greg announced to grouped civilians. “We can offer food, water, power, and government protection. We intend to survive together in a community based on law and order.”

“That’s what the officer told us,” said a woman near the front. "Before they shot him.”

“Officer Forrester?” Greg asked.

“Yeah.”

“Think well on it,” the Colonel warned, bloody flecks flying from his mouth. “Think on the price for clipping your claws. A cage.”

Suspicion thrummed amongst the civilians, surfacing as drawn brows and low mutterings. Greg ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. Christ, how long had this lunatic been feeding them such rubbish?

“I promise no harm will come to any of you,” Greg said helplessly. "We're the good guys.”

In the end, only five of the thirty stepped forward. Four were adults, three women and one man, while the fifth was a young boy who paused indecisively in the middle.

Greg, noticing him standing there, came to kneel next to him on the wet ground. “What’s your name?” he asked the boy as Hopkins shot a green flare high into sky.

“Archie.” He glanced over to where Sherlock stood counting out his cigarettes. “Who is that?”

Greg smiled. “That’s Sherlock Holmes. He was a famous detective, once. Do you want to come with us?”

Archie watched Sherlock for a few minutes longer before looking back to Greg. “Yeah. Okay.”

“We’ll keep you safe, Archie,” Greg promised, guiding hand at his shoulder. "Come along.”

Bead-sized raindrops fell steadily from the darkening sky as Greg shepherded his team south through the palace gardens toward the A315. He ruefully added the shrinking visibility to his never-ending list of worries for the day. Night seemed to make sounds louder, light brighter, and eyes useless in judging the location of walkers until they were right on top of you. It was best to be indoors as evening fell.

The officers ringed their tiny knot of civilians in a defensible formation, weapons out, with Hopkins on point and Donovan trailing in the rear to watch for signs that the Colonel had sent gunmen in pursuit. Sherlock, shed of his grungy hoodie, strolled broodingly twenty feet off the garden road, absorbed in examining the foliage for reasons Greg lacked time to contemplate.
The tops of Greg's sleeves itched wetly against his skin by the time Anderson and his two-man perimeter crew joined them halfway along the route. After a perfunctory nod to the recovered civilians and his fellow officers, Anderson swooped Donovan up in his arms and planted a small kiss at her temple. Greg cleared his throat, annoyed, until one of the perimeter crewmen quickly piped up to report a kill count of seven, all of them walkers. The arterial streets around Hyde Park were curiously light on the buggers, but Greg wasn’t entirely sure whether that was due to the Colonel’s outfit setting up shop in the area or some other cause. Met patrols generally circumnavigated the parks in their search for surviving civilians; the open spaces attracted people, the people attracted dogs, and they both attracted walkers, but it was easier to deal with those threats with plenty of room to maneuver.

“What happened?” Anderson asked when he saw the coin-sized tear in the center of Greg’s vest.

Greg pressed on his sternum, wincing, as they walked. It stung rather a lot. “A relic of the Colonel’s hospitality.”

Anderson made an insolent face. "You let him shoot you?"

"I didn't let him do anything,” Greg snapped in a huff. "Christ, it wasn't exactly a textbook hostage negotiation. He made it sound as if we were the kidnappers."

“I think the Colonel likes you, sir,” Donovan remarked from the crook of Anderson's arm. “And not in a good way.”

“That blighter can toy with me all he wants, but if he touches another of my officers, I’m returning the favor.” Greg tapped a finger against the indentation in his vest. “Tenfold. With armor-piercing rounds.”

Donovan shot Greg a look of deliberate unease. “The freak nearly took care of that already.”

“His temper got out of control, is all,” Greg said. “We’re all on edge these days.”

“And how long before it’s one of us?” Anderson muttered, tightening his grip around Donovan.

A small tug at Greg’s vest provided an excuse to ignore that comment. He looked down and found Archie there, pointing excitedly down beyond the garden gate.

“Look at that!” said the boy, wide-eyed with wonder.

Greg smiled as he saw what Archie was staring at: 13 tonnes of beautiful, bullet-proof steel parked on the A315 like she owned the whole goddamned street.

A modified 6-wheel Mastiff PPV, she had been decommissioned from active duty in Afghanistan and repurposed for a pilot program with the Met’s Specialist Firearms Command. They’d removed the machine guns, the protective grill, and the classified tech and painted over the sandy-brown color with sleek black tones. She had only seen three short weeks of service before the outbreak began, serving once to siege the hideout of a multi-national drug ring. One of the officers on-scene had described the looks on the drug runners’ faces as terror of the highest order, as if seeing their intimidating grandmother come to punish her naughty grandchildren, and the persona stuck. She was the Dowager, and she had already saved the lives of Greg’s officers more times than he could count.

Lorries and other large, heavy vehicles were at their disposal, but the provisional government rode on the back of the Dowager. She cleared paths through debris-filled streets and transported teams wherever they needed to go around the city. Immune to bombs and walkers and any caliber of bullet the brigands cared to toss her way, she played dual roles as both a defensive tool and a symbol of
A dozen headless walkers decorated the A315 around the Dowager's mammoth form. Perched on top of her roof, Bradstreet and McDonald waved when they noticed the small procession on approach. After a moment they both paused, before McDonald frantically pointed off to the west.

Greg glanced aside and saw a one-armed walker in a sundress hobbling out from the tree line, mouth agape to show bloody gums and broken teeth. One of the civilians let out a feeble wail, clinging to one of the others.

"I've got this," said Donovan, unsheathing the knife at her hip. She slipped from Anderson’s arm and strode toward the walker, swiftly delivering a direct strike to brain. The walker crumpled before her, limp and leaking. “You’d think they’d learn to stay away from us by now,” she mused.

“If they could learn, we wouldn’t be forced to exterminate them like rats,” Greg sighed.

It took little provocation from Greg for his officers to start preparing the Dowager for departure. Most days left them drained, but the emotional toll of tracking down Forrester’s killers had weighed especially heavily on everyone since the discovery of his remains. Numbers being what they were, each loss to the force dealt a significant blow.

Greg frowned as he yanked open the wide double doors at the rear of the Dowager. Numbers. When had he started thinking of his officers like that? That was the sort of terminology Mycroft used when they discussed logistics. How many people would it take to clear this building, to search that radius, to collect this resource? How many losses were acceptable to make the effort worthwhile?

It was easy for Mycroft. He wasn’t the one that had to watch them die, day by day. That was Greg’s job.

“Seventeen men,” said a sudden voice, giving Greg a small start. Sherlock had reappeared right next to him in a cloud of earthy stink. Christ, he needed a wash. “Armaments ranging from paring knives to automatic rifles. They carried an excessive amount of ammunition and implied the existence of a central location that acted as an armory for their extended network. I tried to find out where. The lower-level lackeys seemed to be kept intentionally uninformed.” Sherlock shifted his head slightly, the suggestion of a shrug. “You were going to ask.”

“Yes, I was, but I’d hoped for a bit more than that,” Greg conceded.

Sherlock considered for a moment. “They’re loyal. And they’re growing. Every day he lives he attracts more unsavory survivors. They’re calling themselves the Coalition.”

“Let me guess,” Greg grated out, wanting very badly to snap something in half. "We’re the mad despots that need overthrowing?"

“A story as old as politics itself,” Sherlock replied flatly. He reached inside the Dowager and extracted his belt, just where he’d left it when they dropped him off two days ago. He slung it around his grimy track bottoms.

Greg scrubbed at his face. “Jesus, just what we need. A revolutionary.”

He looked up and found Sherlock extending an open palm. His eyebrow twitched expectantly. "I trust you've kept it safe."

Greg pulled the Sig Sauer from his secondary holster. Loaded with a full cartridge of bullets, the gun weighed heavy and the metalwork shone with immaculate cleanliness. John must have taught
Sherlock how to care for it before all the madness started, because Greg had never seen it coated in the blood or grime that seemed to adhere to every other exposed surface. Greg handed it grip-first to Sherlock, who quickly stowed it back into the waiting holster at his belt.

"Don't you ever use that thing?" Donovan asked impatiently, eyeing Sherlock’s gun as she began ushering people into the back of the Dowager. "God knows you rant about how noisy guns are at every opportunity."

"I needn't remind you, Donovan, that conservation of ammunition is a priority," Greg pointed out.

Sherlock didn't seem to care that Greg had spoken up in his defense. He scowled at the former sergeant and patted the side of the gun with one hand. "It's not for the walkers."

"You carry it everywhere. What are you planning to do, wait until it's convenient and shoot us for walker bait?" she accused.

His eyes glinted dangerously as he narrowed them. "I wouldn't be so generous as to waste ammunition on any of you," Sherlock said.

"Not for the walkers and not for us. Who is it for, then?" Donovan challenged, planting her hands on her hips.

The edges of Sherlock's mouth tightened. "It's for me."

The nearby officers passed around several looks of deep suspicion. "You?" Anderson asked.

"I don't intend to be devoured alive and I certainly refuse to be turned," Sherlock said with obvious contempt. "My mind is who I am. I will destroy my own brain stem before I allow it to devolve into that-" he gestured at one of the nearby splattered walkers- "facsimile of existence. If it comes down to it, I doubt I'll be overly concerned with how much noise I'm making."

"Now see here," Anderson spat back, jabbing a finger toward him. "I'm getting sick of your-"

“Sick of what, exactly?” Sherlock countered harshly, eyes filled with cold reproach. “The inhaler cartridges? The contraceptives? That special cream you requested from Molly? How terribly it irks you to know that you need me and I haven’t the scantest need for you? Might want to avoid biting the hand that solves your little problems.”

Anderson sputtered and Sally cursed, pushing him back with one hand. “No need to waste your bullets,” she threatened. “I’ll happily lend you one of mine, free of charge and delivered straight to your freakish head.”

“I’d tell your insipid girlfriend to shut up, if I were you,” Sherlock retorted in Anderson’s direction. “I’d hate to see the prophylactic supply run dry. God knows no one else would voluntarily spread their legs you.”

“Sherlock,” Greg said in warning.

“Don’t speak about her like that, you fucking prick,” Anderson sneered.

“I thought that was your role,” Sherlock lazily deflected. “Or are you admitting disappointment on the part of dear Sergeant Donovan?” Fucking hell, Sherlock had that look. The going-for-the-jugular one that, in years past, meant Greg would be calling Mycroft to stymie a lawsuit. “Tell me, is it relieving to know your wife is dead? No more secretly running about with your tart of the month.”
“Sherlock,” Greg loudly chastised. “Jesus, that’s enough.”

Sherlock glared at Greg, but he must’ve recognized he had crossed a line because he abruptly stopped talking. Anderson, meanwhile, was hissing out a long string of obscenities, beet-red with anger and restrained only by Donovan’s efforts.

Jesus Christ. “Everyone inside!” Greg ordered. “We’re leaving.”

Doors shut and the officers scattered, muttering to themselves, as another round of thunder broke overhead. The rain came thicker, punching out a tuneless song against the roof of the Dowager as everyone climbed inside.

When Greg looked for Sherlock again he stood a ways off, a solitary figure in the drizzly grey road. His curls drooped wetly as he slid a cigarette out of the pack stolen from the Colonel.

“Don’t you want a ride?” Greg called.

“No,” Sherlock replied, automatic and dismissive. He studied the cigarette closely, rolling it between his fingertips as if contemplating just how long he could stretch out each smoke.

Leaving Sherlock always made Greg uncomfortable, but he probably had a motorbike stashed nearby. It wasn’t uncommon for him to travel alone; he knew London better than anyone, even with the blocked roads and walker infestations.

Staring down at the cigarette, Sherlock’s head abruptly jerked to the left. A faint, involuntary body-wide shiver passed through his shoulders, as if trying to shake off a cobweb that had landed there. A frustrated scowl crossed Sherlock’s face, the same one he’d often worn when stumped at a crime scene, or when the loose ends of a case failed to wrap up tidily or a culprit got away. Sherlock crushed the entire pack in his fist, cigarettes and all, before violently hurling it over the railing and into the bushes. His left hand unconsciously pressed against his thigh, where a pocket might normally sit.

Not for the first time, Greg wondered whether Sherlock was developing a neurological disorder. He had been meaning to talk to Dr. Sawyer about it, but the unending parade of tasks bombarding Greg from every direction inevitably stole away his attention.

Greg grimaced. "Sherlock."

Sherlock turned his head slightly, just enough to glimpse greasy fringe draping over hollow eyes. "What now, Lestrade?"

Did he think Greg was stupid? That he hadn’t just seen Sherlock briefly lose control of his motor functions?

He wished for all the world that he knew how to help anymore. "Nothing,” Greg finally said. “Just—see you back at base, yeah?"

Sherlock didn’t even bother to respond. Greg watched him walk away alone.

Sherlock wasn’t infected – he at least knew that for sure – but it reminded him just how many devastating medical emergencies were gestating in Pindar, where doctors ran in short supply and portable medical equipment proved even rarer. Constable Barton was struggling to recover from a broken ankle and one of the civilians suffered a nasty tooth infection. What happened when they needed to perform actual surgery? What happened when a virus inevitably spread amongst their small, contained population?
Mulling their limitations, Greg climbed inside the Dowager, shutting the door behind him and settling on the bench across from Jones. The low ambient interior lighting did nothing for his mood.

Spying Greg’s grim expression, Jones perked an eyebrow. “All right, boss?”

Why did any of them bother asking that anymore?

“Of course,” Greg replied in what he hoped sounded a confident tone, nodding at the civilians safely seated. “We won, didn’t we?”

The engine started up and the Dowager pulled away from Kensington Palace. As the rumble of the massive wheels and the hum of the engine lulled them back to safety, Greg closed his eyes and took a slow breath, ribs stinging as they expanded.

Christ, how tragedy changed you.

Nights of distant sobbing plagued the converted sections of the main garage where most of their people slept. They swapped hushed stories that Greg himself wouldn’t have believed not long ago and shared whispered hopes for evacuated loved ones. Were they safe? Was it better, out there beyond London? Perhaps there was a village, or a farm, or somewhere they called home...

Greg had sent Sharon off with the others. Cheating ex-wife or no, he still felt responsible enough to make sure she got on one of the earliest transports out of the city. They were to head north, perhaps even as far as York, depending on the conditions. His shred of hope that they’d made it was more than most people had left.

Everyone had lost someone. Grief was a permanent fixture of life now, an undercurrent just below every thought and activity, an anchor weighted around the neck. You either adapted to bear the baggage or sank, stone-like, never to recover. No one made it through untouched, and while most coping mechanisms manifested outwardly, from despair to denial to outright anger, certain people wore their sorrow in deeper ways.

Sherlock never spoke of his loss. He never talked about John, not to anyone.

Those taking refuge with them were perceptive enough to avoid approaching Sherlock about his story. They came to Greg sometimes, glancing furtively at the isolated man, and made inquiries. You knew him before. Who did that to him? Who did he lose?

His best friend died, Greg would tell them. He'd get a confused look in return, a puzzled crease of the brow or frown of uncertainty. They'd expected it to be a wife, perhaps, or a child. Someone more important than a friend. Greg would nod in consolation and leave it alone. How could he explain it? Sherlock and John, the detective and doctor who used to give Greg headaches and miles of paperwork, who laughed at inappropriate moments and swanned off together at inconvenient times... it was something that needed to be seen to be understood.

Greg saw it in him, though. The change.

He was reckless now.

When Greg mentioned it to his officers, they pointed out that Sherlock had always been reckless. There was a method to his madness in times past, though, and as much as Greg disapproved of his practices he could always see the twisted string of logic, in the end.

Greg didn’t see the logic anymore, but then maybe logic flew out the window when the dead began to rise. Sherlock was... brutal. Uncompromising. And he’d proven, repeatedly, that he was willing to
throw anyone -- including himself -- into the line of fire for the most trivial of reasons. Sherlock was an asset at the moment, but Greg didn't know how much longer that would be true.

Greg opened his eyes. Through the slim, rectangular window above the heads of his officers, he watched the darker patches of sky demarcating the South Bank. The rain never seemed to do much for the fires. After all this time, it still burned in places. God rest the poor bastards who had gone up in the flames, and God deliver those who had risen despite it.

“You don’t like him much, do you?” Bainbridge said to Donovan, breaking the long silence.

“The freak?” she replied, glancing at Anderson’s still-red face beside her. “No. Never did. He’s a right pompous arse and liability to us all.” Her dark brown eyes shifted to Greg. “Always has been. Always will be.”

Bainbridge followed her gaze. “Is that what you think, sir?”

Greg sighed and scratched at his head. "He's… a calculated risk."

"Sir?"

Piqued by Bainbridge’s boldness, the eyes of all the Met officers were on him now, swaying with the Dowager. Most of them had never worked with Sherlock before things got messy. They struggled to understand why Greg relied on him.

"Sherlock’s a raw filament, you see," Greg explained tightly. "He burns hot and bright but can scorch himself to ashes if he's not careful. For years he managed as best he could, but he blinded everyone he met. Then Dr. Watson came along; a godsend, if you ask me. John acted as a shade for Sherlock’s raw power, a way to direct his light. He was focused. Better. Useful. For someone like Sherlock, to have that guidance ripped away so suddenly... it’s difficult. He's back to burning free, a live wire." Greg shook his head. “He'll destroy himself before the end."

"Then why are we using him?" Bainbridge asked. His question was innocent, but Greg saw the discontentment simmering in some of the older officers’ eyes.

"Because he gets the job done," Greg said, “but he'll take us along with him if we're not careful. It's called controlled detonation, Bainbridge, and it's my intention to see he leaves as few casualties as possible when he finally goes off."

"Oh," said Bainbridge, sitting back with a pensive look. "I think I understand."

"No, you don't," Greg sighed softly, half to himself. He glanced once more out the window at the wafting smoke over the South Bank, the final resting place of the only person to ever give Sherlock the tether he so desperately needed. How sad the irony that, by simple absence, he’d done more harm than good. "You don't understand at all."

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Ready Aim Fire | Imagine Dragons

Btw, Pindar is real.
And if you're curious to see what the Dowager sort of looks like...
Greg was finishing off the last drops of his coffee just as the lift dinged and the doors slid open. He stepped out, tipping his head back to drain it all, before tossing the empty cup into the nearby bin – the fifth of the day polished off – and swallowing to get the bitter flavor of burnt beans out of his mouth. The simple black drip had been purchased in a rush from a street vendor outside the hospital and yet somehow managed to taste even worse than the cheap stuff stocked at the Yard. Greg adjusted the wad of files tucked under one arm and headed off toward the large blue sign demarcating the critical care unit of London Bridge Hospital.

Wandering up to the nurse’s desk, Greg sat his files on the counter next to the landline phone. “Ah, hello,” he said, handing over his badge to the nurse seated on the other side. “I’m here to see John Watson. This place is a bit of a maze, isn’t it?”

As the nurse took the badge, his nametag caught the glare of the fluorescent lights. Russell, it read. Russell grunted in vague agreement as he examined Greg’s credentials. “Watson, eh?”

“That’s right.”

Russell raised an eyebrow as he handed back the badge. “In that case, best watch out for the nutter in the coat.”

Greg paused in slipping his badge back into his pocket. “You mean Sherlock?”

“That’s him. Strange fellow.”

“I’ve come to collect him, actually,” Greg said. “Has he given you much trouble?”

One look from Russell confirmed Sherlock’s unsuitability as a visitor. “Do us a favor, Inspector, and lock him up for the night. Good and tight.”

Greg frowned. “That bad?”

“He’s a bloody nightmare when visiting hours end,” Russell sighed. “ Starts climbing balconies and picking locks and short-circuiting the CCTV. Just two nights ago he scared the devil out of Mrs. Thurston down on the second floor when he broke in through her window. Crawled up a ventilation shaft and popped out of the women’s loo to be back with his…” Russell shot Greg an inquisitive look. “Is that his partner in there?”

“Er,” Greg said, uncertain how to verbally define John and Sherlock. “Sort of.”

Russell shook his head as if the odd assessment didn’t surprise him at all. “Good luck getting him to budge, Inspector. The nurses on staff just might kiss you if you do.”

Greg slid his files off the counter. “Thanks. I think.”

Russell pointed him off toward John’s room and Greg started down the uncomfortably off-white corridor, studying the room numbers as he went. Carts laden with medical equipment were parked along the walls, waiting on standby to be called into action by one of the many solemn, focused nurses gliding up and down the halls. They spared only the briefest of glances for a sleep-deprived
DI in a rumpled overcoat.

Looking back on it, he should have known something was wrong the moment his phone rang and the caller ID read Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock despised calling people and never did it except in the direst of circumstances, when the slowness of texting spelled the difference between life and death. And sure enough, as Sherlock recounted his situation, all of Greg’s old fears for Sherlock had burst into frightening reality. Time and again he’d warned Sherlock about running off alone, for God’s sake. And what if it hadn’t been just John? What if they both lay bleeding out in an alley in the middle of the night with no one to call for help?

Racing to the scene was a blur of sirens and streetlights and cursing over the steering wheel. Greg wasn’t the only DI who worked with Sherlock, but he considered Sherlock his responsibility when working Met cases. After hearing Sherlock’s unnaturally strained tone over the phone, Greg girded himself for the worst possible outcome. Even then, he was not prepared for the fallout.

The memories had fixed themselves permanently inside his head, like a flip book that refused to stop turning. First the alley, painted with streaks of red where the torches lit them. Then the gut-wrenching moment when the beams caught Sherlock’s pale face in the dark, his eyes full of shock as he knelt and cradled John, unconscious, in his arms. John, limp and tucked against Sherlock, with a nasty contusion on the back of his head and a heavily-bleeding stab wound in his stomach, Sherlock’s bright red glove dutifully keeping pressure on it. Both of their clothes were so soaked through with blood that a chaotic few minutes passed before Greg confirmed that it all belonged to John.

As soon as he saw the responders, Sherlock began shouting about John’s assailant, though his brain seemed to be executing too quickly for his mouth to keep up and no one could quite parse out his rapid-fire partial sentences. Sherlock, shaking badly, refused to let the paramedics take John away from him. It took four officers to physically separate them. If not for John requiring his attention, Greg fully believed Sherlock would’ve long since run down John’s assailant and left a second dying body behind.

The story came out in jumbled bits while Sherlock was repeatedly rebuffed by the emergency workers tending to John. Greg had never seen Sherlock suffer from true shock until that night, continuously losing the thread of their conversation and staring unblinkingly as the paramedics intubated John and loaded him into the ambulance. By the time the ambulance pulled away with sirens blaring, Greg knew enough to piece it all together. John had saved Sherlock’s life.

Hours of waiting in the A&E followed. He stayed with Sherlock into the early hours of the morning. For most of it Sherlock sat in silence, his eyes gone vacant in the way they did when he retreated into the recesses of his mind. Greg periodically plied him with fresh coffee, but Sherlock never stirred. Greg doubted the consulting detective was even registering his presence.

Mycroft never showed. Greg tried his personal number five times before an assistant answered and assured him that Mycroft was aware of the situation. The best surgeons in London had been called in and John would receive top-notch care, they promised. Greg supposed it was Mycroft’s way of demonstrating his brotherly affection from a distance.

After what felt like an eternity, the doctors came to deliver the news. John’s heart had stopped twice while on the operating table. It was a miracle, they claimed, that despite the blood loss and trauma it had each time restarted of its own accord. John was stable, but the diagnosis was far from good. Comatose state, they said. Prognosis: uncertain.

In Greg’s line of work, few things ever got to him anymore. The ability to distance oneself from the victim was virtually required in order to function. But Greg knew, with great certainty, his stomach
would forever churn when he recalled Sherlock's look of blank incomprehension upon being told. For someone so intelligent, so commanding of everyone he met, it suited him poorly.

Greg broke from his introspection as he spotted John's hospital room. Shaking off the unsettled feeling, he glanced at his watch. Half eight and no end to his day yet in sight. Sod it all, another coffee might be in order after this.

The rhythmic whirring of the respirator, punctuated by the regular beeps of the heart monitor, filled the hospital room. Drab-colored machinery nestled behind the sole bed and its occupant, all strung up with lines and tubes and a dozen blinking lights.

John looked unchanged from the last time Greg had visited: breathing tube taped to his slack face, eyes closed, sandy hair disheveled, and a bandage looped around the crown of his head. His cheeks fell hollow and ashen beneath all the plastic tubing. For an unconscious person, he looked extraordinarily tired.

Sherlock had camped a visitor's chair right next to John's bedside. Coat slung across the back of it, he sat slumped over to fill the gap next to John's blanketed legs. His curly-haired head rested on his folded arms with his face angled so he could watch John's unconscious form for any signs of movement. The sight reminded Greg of a giant kid. Waiting.

Under the humming of the various machines keeping John alive, Greg made out the low drone of Sherlock's voice. He was muttering something.

Greg cleared his throat. Sherlock tilted his head a bit, and his low talking stopped.

"Lestrade, go register a complaint with the nurse's station," Sherlock ordered with unexpected force, not taking his eyes off John. "They're slackin' in their duties and providing improper care."

Greg’s eyes danced around John’s set-up, but everything looked to be in order. "I'm sure they're doing everything they can for him, Sherlock," he said.

Sherlock rose off his arms and turned to glare at Greg. He looked a bit of a mess himself, curls mussed as if he’d repeatedly run his fingers through them and wearing that slightly manic expression he got when he worked a case for too long. Sherlock’s eyes brimmed with cold hatred. "I've tracked their visits. The nurses are regularly tardy in their rounds by at least six minutes. I've never seen the one with scoliosis wash her hands."

"If you’ve got a complaint, file it yourself," Greg told him.

The chair creaked as Sherlock leaned back in it, scowling. "Don’t you think I’ve tried? Why would I ask you if I haven’t tried? Those incompetent morons won’t listen. I’ve been deemed irrational. Me."

“Can’t imagine why,” Greg said diplomatically, schooling his features, and moved to the bedside table where a vase of flowers and a pile of cards rested. He opened the top file in his stack to pull out the card from the Yard. Shooting Sherlock a sidelong glance, he set it down. "When did you last eat?"

Sherlock glanced toward a wheeled tray table situated on the other side of John’s bed. A packaged sandwich and a bottle of water rested there, both unopened. Someone must have brought them for Sherlock but it didn't look like he’d been interested in eating. "I'll be fine for the next eleven hours," he muttered.

“That’s not what I asked.”
“I’m fine,” Sherlock bit out.

Setting his files on the table next to the cards and flowers, Greg sighed but let it drop. He’d come to take Sherlock home, not hound him about eating. The nearby daffodils formed a spot of bright and cheerful yellow against the dull colors of the room. “Quite the popular fellow,” Greg said, hoping to find a less treacherous topic. “Who brought the flowers? Girlfriend, was it?”

Greg managed to catch the tightening around Sherlock’s mouth.

Ah. Not from a girlfriend.

"Molly suggested they might help, which is entirely ludicrous," Sherlock explained bitterly. "The best course of action is talking to him. Research suggests that the auditory center of the brain remains active in a comatose state. There’s no evidence that the presence of flowers will affect him one way or the other.”

And yet there they are, Greg wanted to say, but if Sherlock was resorting to superstitious tips from lesser minds, he’d fallen well into desperate measures.

"He likes daffodils?" Greg asked.

Sherlock’s eyes remained on John. "Not in particular."

The whoosh of the respirator was almost soothing in its repetition. Greg circled around the bed, shoes knocking into a few empty nicotine patch boxes on the floor. He examined Sherlock’s untouched food and picked up the water bottle. Sherlock stayed silent as he came back around, but Greg saw that one of his hands was bunched in the edge of John’s sheet, as if anchoring himself to that spot in the event Greg suddenly tried to drag him away.

“They said you break in after hours,” Greg told him tentatively.

Sherlock finally glanced up to look at him, the dark patches under his eyes speaking volumes in their prominence. “If their regulations weren’t so intolerably absurd, I wouldn’t be forced to do it.”

“You’re welcome to see him every day."  

“That’s not good enough. What if John wakes up and I’m not here?”

Greg sighed and set down the water bottle before folding his arms. “Listen, Sherlock, Mrs. Hudson has been ringing me nonstop for two days now. She can’t remember the last time you went back to Baker Street for a rest. Let me call a cab for you. I’ll stay with him until the ward closes. Maybe scare the daylights out of the nurses with my badge.” He offered a weak half-smile.

“It’s better if I stay,” Sherlock countered.

“He won’t notice you’ve gone,” said Greg. “Even if he did, he’d be the first to tell you to get some sleep.”

His expression grew obstinate. “I’m staying.”

Greg shrugged. “If that’s how it is, then you should know that I did not come unprepared to negotiate.” He picked up the files on the bedside stand and tapped two fingers against the outside of the folder. “Triple homicide.”

That caught Sherlock’s attention. The consulting detective's hunger for a case gleamed palpable in
his eyes, like an addict offered a fresh hit while suffering from withdrawal.

“Hand them over,” Sherlock demanded, releasing his death grip on John’s sheet as he reached out for the files.

Greg held them away. “Not until you agree to go home.”

“I will not negotiate with you. Hand them over.”

“Just for the night, Sherlock. That’s all I’m asking.”

Deep irritation broke over Sherlock’s face. “Oh please, Lestrade,” he snapped. “Let’s not play this game. You’re appallingly bad at it.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? Firstly, you need my opinion on this case and you can’t afford to hedge its outcome on whether or not you’ll entice me to leave. Second, Mrs. Hudson has been calling you for two days, a length of time significant enough to eliminate her emotional appeal as the primary motivator for your visit. Third, if you actually believed in the soundness of your plan, you wouldn’t have brought the files with you. So hand them over if you want me to look at them. Otherwise, you are welcome to leave us.”

Sherlock glared at him, somehow positioning himself to make it feel like John was standing beside him in an equally disapproving manner despite lying unconscious in the bed.

Paper-thin bluff blown to pieces, Greg did not think Sherlock in a mood for fielding any false denials. The tactic was a long-shot anyway, and the murderer was still on the loose, so Greg relinquished the files in the interest of public safety.

“We haven’t detained any suspects, but this is a high visibility murder and it’s important—”

“Yes, yes, time is of the essence and all that,” Sherlock said brusquely, taking the thick folder. His mood lightened noticeably as he set it on John’s bed. He glanced up as he opened it, grinning. “Look what Lestrade’s brought for us, John. A case!”

Greg nodded at the two of them, finding it a bit strange but deciding to include John in the conversation anyway. “Any help is appreciated, as always.”

As Sherlock began poking through the police reports and photos and descriptions of the crime scene, Greg summarized. “Mr. Arthur Halsey, a wealthy executive in the import-export business, was found murdered along with two male associates acting as security detail. Sources indicate Halsey was a neurotic paranoid convinced a person or persons unknown were out to get him. He rarely stayed in the same location two nights in a row, and yet someone found him and shot everyone with a high-powered sniper rifle.”

Sherlock skimmed a page of the crime scene report, but after only a moment flung it to the floor. “Useless,” he said, then barely glanced at the next before tossing it, too. “Rubbish. How am I supposed to glean anything from these puerile descriptions? Don’t you have any actual detectives working for you?”

“If you could just try, Sherlock,” Greg pleaded. “Three people have died.”

Sherlock grumbled and looked to John, seeking remedy for the outrageous conditions he was being forced to work under. John just breathed through his tube.
Apparently finding some sort of meaning in that, Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Fine. Have it your way.”

Greg wondered who, precisely, Sherlock was speaking to.

Lifting a photo for closer inspection, Sherlock tapped a finger against his chin. “Had Halsey received any threats?”

“Nothing that we’ve found,” Greg replied.

Sherlock continued studying the pieces, but as his silence stretched into multiple minutes, Greg noticed his brows drawing closer together in consternation. Normally, he’d be spouting off questions as quickly as Greg could answer them.

It was just fatigue, Greg decided. Sherlock wasn’t at the top of his game right now, but he’d pushed through fatigue plenty of times before and come up with the proper resolution. Greg grabbed the water bottle and unscrewed the cap before holding it out. Sherlock absentmindedly took it and guzzled a few long swallows as he muttered to himself.

“Any theories?” Greg prompted, trying to hide his smugness. He regretted not bringing over the sandwich as well.


“We’ve no evidence she was involved. Mrs. Halsey was on holiday at her sister’s in Derbyshire at the time of the murder.”

“That wouldn’t stop a clever person.”

“What about Mr. Halsey’s business associates?” Greg suggested. “A couple of bad deals fell through a few years ago. And we know for a fact that four former business partners were in London at the time of the murder.”

Sherlock blinked a few times, like he was having trouble processing Greg’s theory.

“How the murderer found him is of particular interest,” Greg continued. “Two receptionists witnessed Halsey being picked up by private car after an appointment with his cardiologist. We tracked the vehicle with CCTV footage and determined no one was following them. They got out a mile from the row house and walked the rest of the way, most of it through private footpaths. They entered through the back door, here. Three hours later, they were shot. Someone must have had inside knowledge.”

“Or it was random,” Sherlock muttered, drinking again from his water bottle.

“No, look,” Greg said, tracing an arc across picture he’d drawn. “The sniper shot them through this window. Two shots, three deaths, and forensics timed them at almost precisely the same moment. Whoever shot them spent the time to set up and aim. We’re talking an expert marksman. A professional. It wasn’t random.” He paused with a frown, studying Sherlock’s confused expression. “I know this is a lot to think about right now, but we’re under intense pressure to find a lead-“

Sherlock’s fingers tightened around the paper. “I’m fine,” he growled.

Greg was starting to hate that phrase. “I don’t think you are.”

“I need data, Lestrade, not speculation.”
“This is all we have. We’re looking into the backgrounds of Halsey’s known associates, but nothing’s raised a red flag.”

This was the part where Sherlock was supposed to announce he had seven different theories, all of them stranger than the last. Or point out some obscure yet obvious detail all of the Met detectives overlooked and conveniently led straight to the culprit. Or reveal that Halsey wasn’t dead at all, but had switched places with his secret twin brother to stage his own demise.

Instead, Sherlock looked over at John. “Suggestions?”

John didn’t answer. His heart monitor beeped steadily and he slowly breathed, appearing oddly peaceful where he lay. Sherlock watched him for a long moment.

“The heart,” Sherlock said at last.

Greg raised an eyebrow. “The heart?”

Sherlock scrabbled around in the papers. “Halsey was seeing a cardiologist.”

“Sherlock, what does that have to do with anything?”

He pulled out a specific page and pushed it into Greg’s hands. “Scans of his appointment book are right here. Regular appointments. Check-ups. He’s got an artificial pacemaker, don’t you see?”

“He was shot with a sniper round but you think he died from a heart condition?”

“No!” Sherlock gestured sharply with his empty water bottle as he jumped up and began to pace. “It’s subtler than that. They must have known where he was in the building, which row house he’d gone into, but he’d never been in that one before. There was no discernible pattern. Unless his attacker knew where he was, specifically, and I assume the police swept his garments for tracking devices.”

“What are you saying?” Greg asked.

“You need to examine his pacemaker,” Sherlock declared. “Take it apart and get an engineer to look it over. Could they fit a global positioning device inside it? I don’t see why not. Whoever did this was playing a long game, Lestrade. They hired a contract killer and had him follow Halsey’s signal. Three hours is more than enough time to find a nest and set up the shot.”

Greg scrubbed a hand through his hair. Molly did the autopsy herself and of course she had found the pacemaker, but he hadn’t considered it a relevant detail to the case.

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“Pay off the right people in the surgical suite and you could jam anything inside someone,” Sherlock was saying. He seemed to be talking entirely to himself now, an energy lighting him up and washing away his previous fatigue, and Greg breathed easier because this was the old Sherlock, the one he needed and relied upon. “Intriguing. It had to be organized by someone powerful, someone who could secure everyone in the operating room. Money talks, but the more likely course is to dig up enough dirt on each of them to keep them quiet. Years ago, but why? An insurance policy in case Halsey turned? Then there’s obviously maintenance and testing to make sure the signal still held. John, how often is reasonable for a doctor to see a patient with-”

Sherlock glanced up inquiringly, entirely absorbed, but when his enthusiastic gaze landed on John’s unconscious form, he abruptly went quiet. A painful moment ticked by as Sherlock stared at John and remembered that he couldn’t, in fact, respond.
“It’s all right,” Greg said in encouragement. “You were on a roll, Sherlock. Just keep going. How is it connected to the sniper?”

Blinking and opening his mouth, everything Sherlock was saying seemed to have escaped him. He looked searchingly down at the scanned pages in his hand and back up to John. “I don’t know.”

“Just a lead, Sherlock,” Greg pressed. “Give us something to go on. Who are we looking for?”

Sherlock slammed down the papers and squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his fingers to his temples. “I don’t know. I can’t think.”

“You almost had it,” he said. “The pacemaker and someone following the-“

“Shut up- just- shut up, for God’s sake!” Sherlock clutched at his head, pain and frustration written all over. “Why does everyone find it necessary to be so loud all the time?”

Greg glanced around in confusion. “It’s not loud in here, Sherlock.”

“I can’t work like this,” Sherlock announced, opening his eyes. His expression grew furious. “I can’t work. What good am I if I can’t work?”

“You’re still better than the Yard,” Greg said, “but don’t tell them I said that.”

Sherlock ignored him and aimed a thunderous glare down at John. “I’m supposed to be the selfish one,” he muttered, “but look at you now.”

Greg massaged his forehead. “Sherlock, you can’t blame John for this.”

Sherlock leveled his gaze at Greg and did a poor job of shuttering the anger from his face. “Why not? All the doctors say his brain is fine. A concussion, they said, but the swelling’s gone away. He’s there. He’s right there. He just won’t come out.”

And finally, Greg realized what this was all about. Sherlock was tired, yes, and probably needed food and more water and a long sleep, but that wasn’t the source of his brain’s obvious derailment. They were simply side-effects of a much bigger problem.

“He didn’t ask to be put in a coma,” Greg said, using a gentler tone. “He took one for you, Sherlock. A big one. Don’t go around casting blame and ignoring what he did-“

"I know what he did!” Sherlock snapped angrily, and suddenly something else was there in his eyes, stark and painful and nothing to do with fatigue.

But Sherlock was too choked with furor to acknowledge whatever else he was shoving down into that black hole of a heart. Misplaced anger was a child’s response. Underneath, Sherlock was drowning in his own guilt.

Sherlock Holmes, a man guilty over another human being. Greg considered pinching himself.

"He saved me,” Sherlock continued quietly, not looking Greg in the eye. “He does that.”

“I know,” Greg said, because Christ, did he know.

Sitting back down, Sherlock placed his hand over John’s. The movement was comfortable, the signal of a new habit Sherlock had picked up since the incident that put John in his coma.

"Ryder's been released from hospital,” Greg told him. “He's awaiting arraignment."
“He's fine, is he?” Sherlock asked with a coldness that could freeze the sun. “Healthy?”

“John did a number on him but... yeah. He will be.” Greg looked at John, at the pallid color of his skin and the artificial tube that kept him breathing. “Doesn’t seem right, does it?”

“No. No, it doesn’t.”

Greg didn’t know what else to say to him. There was no cure, no best course of action. They watched John together for a time, steeped in the sounds of artificial life, until eventually Greg felt his caffeine high slipping away.

He put a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder in one last attempt at persuasion. “Please, just one night away from here,” Greg said to him, and Sherlock stiffened under his touch. “For me, Sherlock. For every favor I’ve ever done you, for every case I’ve called you in on.”

“I can’t leave him,” Sherlock said, shaking his head, and he sounded so terribly lost, like he didn’t know any other way to be. “Don’t you understand? I can’t.”

Sherlock’s fixating nature cast a double-edge sword even in the best of times, and right now all Greg could see was the self-inflicted damage. Greg had half a mind to cuff him, drag him into the patrol car, drive him home, and have Mrs. Hudson tie him down until he got some bloody sleep.

But this vigil was the only thing giving Sherlock any sense of control. John might not need him nearby in order to recover, but Sherlock certainly needed John. Greg wasn’t about to kick out the last crutch from under him.

“All right,” Greg sighed. He collected up the pieces of his files and tucked them back in their rightful folder. “I’ve got to get back to the Yard, but on my way I’ll tell the nursing staff not to disturb you or they’ll be dealing with the Met.” If that didn’t work, he could always bring out the big guns and contact Mycroft. “They won’t try to remove you again. Just promise me you’ll eat something every now and then.”

“Thank you, Lestrade,” Sherlock said, the sarcasm that typically accompanied the phrase jarringly absent.

Pausing as he reached the door, Greg watched them for a moment longer. Sherlock blinked back his fatigue, his hand still covering John’s, determined to stay come hell or high water.

He’d known Sherlock for five years and more cases than he could properly remember. The work comes first, that's what Sherlock had always told him. The rule held firm in all things. Until now.

Greg might not be as gifted as Sherlock when it came to deduction, but even he could follow the mounting evidence toward its obvious conclusion.

“Sherlock.”

The consulting detective fractionally tilted an ear toward him. Greg hesitated and considered what on earth he could say to a misanthropic genius waiting on the one he loved.

“Time,” he eventually settled on. “Give him time.”

The long fingers atop John’s hand tightened around his palm, carefully sliding down until fully entwined with John’s, but Sherlock didn't answer. He watched John's chest gently rise and fall in time with the respirator's mechanical sounds, looking lost once more.
Greg let them be.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Lonely Boy | The Black Keys
Drenching sheets of rain were pouring over Baker Street when John finally glimpsed the familiar black door of 221B. Soaked and shivering from head to foot, John huddled behind the warped frame of a wrecked cab twenty meters from the doorstep. Water streamed down his face as he raised his head to peek through the shattered window, carefully tracking the rain-hazed shapes of two walkers tottering north down the empty road. John’s eyes impatiently went back to 221B. The door was right there, for God’s sake. The compulsion to bolt toward it, toward Sherlock, twisted his gut into knots. *Patience, soldier. Getting yourself killed won’t do Sherlock any favors.*

He hadn’t seen a single living soul since emerging from Baker Street station. Abandoned cars clogged Marylebone Road as far as John could see, the only movement amongst their ranks from the occasional lone walker ambling through.

Becca and Annie had refused to accompany him into the dark of the Jubilee line. Upon descending from the carriage roof, John had scoured the station platform and recovered his torch and a few salvageable supplies. He’d given most of it to the women, everything but the torch, figuring they needed them far more than he did. The last John saw of them, they were disappearing into the labyrinth of Waterloo station in hopes of finding a way up top. He knew better than to dwell on whether they’d made it.

John wasn’t sure how long it had taken him to traverse the tunnel. Station platforms and defunct carriages passed like abandoned islands in the night. The flood on the tracks reached his knees at one point deep beneath the heart of the Thames, the ancient brickwork continuously dousing him with long streamers of fetid water. Eventually the floodtides retreated again, and John had reached the Baker Street platform unscathed.

Shards of glass now crunched beneath his boots as John rose again to check for the walkers. The darkening London skies and incessant rain obscured most outlines beyond the cross-street. For all he knew, a swarm of walkers waited just beyond his visual range.

John’s festering impatience to get to Sherlock finally overruled his caution. Rain lashed him as he broke into a hobbled run over the final distance across Baker Street, his eyes locked like a homing missile onto the lines of the black door. He turned the handle and pushed open the door and careened inside, not even bothering to check whether a herd of walkers was right on his heels.

“SHERLOCK!” John bellowed as he trampled through the hall. He barely spared a glance for the shut door to Mrs. Hudson’s flat and pounded up the seventeen steps to 221B. “SHERLOCK!”

The sitting room was cold and empty, the grey fading light from outside peeking through the partially drawn curtains, and John registered nothing except Sherlock’s absence. “Sherlock! Sherlock, I’m here!” he shouted out. “It’s me! I’m here!”

He veered into the kitchen and Sherlock wasn’t there either, so John went down the hall and shoved open the bathroom door, just wide enough to see it was vacant, and barreled straight into Sherlock’s bedroom.

Three sets of eyes stared back at him. There in the doorway, John reeled from confusion. And then one of them screamed.
An adult man – who was definitely not Sherlock – was shrunk back against the wall beside the wardrobe, one hand defensively clutching a heavy lamp base and the other sheltering two young girls, both no older than ten. The screaming girl fearfully hid her face in his shoulder, tears blotching his button-up, while the smaller one stared at John like a deer caught in headlights. She lifted a small hand and pointed it directly at him as she opened her mouth to shout. "Monster!"

John stumbled backward into the hall as the shrieking intensified. “No, it’s all right-”

But the girls’ high-pitched cries overrode his voice. In a fit of desperation John pushed into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. His face and clothes were stained a rotten brown color, his beard and hair matted with grime. If he looked like a walker, it was one recently drowned. John scrubbed at his skin with the damp sleeve of his hoodie until a recognizably human face peered back at him.

He cautiously slid open the frosted glass door to Sherlock’s bedroom. The screams had died down, but John ensured his face was the first thing visible. Only the man watched him, his dark eyes severe and untrusting. He lifted the metal lamp base in a clear warning for John to back off.

“Get away,” the man boomed. “We got here first.”

John raised his hands to show he was unarmed. “You didn’t, actually. This is- this is my flat. Is anyone else here?”

He shook the lamp base threateningly. “I said get away!”

The smaller of the two girls had by now turned to observe the conversation. The other continued crying into the man’s shoulder, and that was when John noticed it – her right arm hung limply at her side.

“Your daughters?” John offered.

The man didn’t respond, save for a slight tightening of his grip around them.

John took a step closer, craning his head to get a better look at the older girl. “She’s injured.”

“We’re taking care of it,” he growled.

“It looks like her shoulder might be dislocated,” John said. “Do you know how to set it?”

He glared and, after a moment, reluctantly shook his head.

“I’m a doctor. May I take a look?”

“Doctor?” the younger girl piped up curiously, all traces of fear vanishing in an instant. She urgently patted her father’s shoulder. “Papa, he’s a doctor. Just like uncle!”

The man slowly lowered his weapon. “We’ll see.”

It was careful work, realigning the delicate, underdeveloped humerus of a nine year old. Luckily for the girl it was only a partial dislocation, but without taking proper care John could just as easily snap the bone as fix it.
The man was called Valentin and his daughters were Gabby, seven, and Sofia, the injured party. Valentin seemed a broodish and wary man, and when he rose with Gabby in his arms to monitor John’s progress, John saw that he was wearing the leftover trousers, shirt, and tie of a professional business ensemble.

"I need you to keep her still," John said. Valentin set down his younger daughter and knelt beside Sofia, who looked up at her father in utter misery.

"Will it hurt her?" Valentin asked uneasily, his broad hands bracing Sofia as she cried.

John frowned in consolation. "It'll be quick. Steady, now."

He rotated her small arm into position and with a quick thrust popped her shoulder back into position. Sofia shrieked at the sudden painful sensation, but as soon as her joint was in place she just stared down at her arm in wonder.

John palpated her shoulder to make sure the bones had returned to their correct places. "Better?"

Eyes still wet with tears, Sofia nodded.

"Hand me your tie," John said to Valentin.

Valentin released the loose knot at his throat and pulled it free. John wrapped it around Sofia’s arm and shoulder as a makeshift sling. “There we are. Let it rest for a few days, all right?”

"Thank you," Valentin said tightly, scooping up Sofia, though something in his voice sounded a little off to John. "Let's find you girls some supper, shall we?"

John followed as they headed into the kitchen. “Just to be clear, there’s no one else here? You haven’t seen a man come through?"

“Not before you,” Valentin said, avoiding John’s gaze.

"Not a man named Sherlock?"

Valentin shrugged. "We got here yesterday. The flat was empty." He set Sofia in a chair at the table.

Looking around the kitchen, really looking, John realized just how blind he’d been while rushing through in search of Sherlock. A few battery-powered lanterns were scattered around the countertops, providing sparse lighting. All of Sherlock’s science equipment had been removed from the table. Confused, John began peeking into the cabinets and shelves, but rather than finding their old familiar mugs and plates each was filled with packaged foods, bottled water, and sanitation supplies. John certainly hadn’t purchased all that. It was possible Sherlock had done so back when the shops were open, but if he’d taken the time to stockpile supplies, why wasn’t he still at Baker Street?

A small tug came at John's sleeve. He looked down and found Gabby staring up at him with large brown eyes. "Doctor John," she said, yanking at him again.

"Yes?"

"You smell funny."

John couldn't disagree with her on that count; his scrubs were awfully rancid. The rain hadn't managed to wash out the stink of the Underground.
"You're right," John said. He picked up one of the lanterns. "I'll go change into something less smelly and take a look around." Sherlock might have left a message behind.

Gabby smiled broadly and Valentin shot him a tepid sidelong glance as he fumbled with a small stainless-steel cook stove. “Wash bucket’s in the privy.”

John returned to the bathroom. With the lantern in hand, he realized a bar of soap and bucket of water were seated inside the sink bowl. John peeled off his mangy hoodie and dunked his hands into it with a thankful sigh. Even the freezing temperature of the water couldn’t diminish the simple joy of soaping up his skin and having a decent wash. Washing his hair stained a towel beyond further usefulness, but it soon returned to its old dishwater blond color. There wasn’t a razor around anywhere, electric or otherwise, but John figured he at least looked passably civilized. By the time he was done, the water had turned milky brown. John poured it out and watched it swirl down the drain.

He brought the bucket into the kitchen for refilling, leaving it on the counter near Valentin and Gabby who were busy at the stove. Sofia watched them somberly from her seat at the table.

John passed into the sitting room where dreary evening rain was pattering against the long windowpanes. The nonfunctional furnace and lack of electricity made for a chilly refuge, but there was still a palpable sense of comfort in the familiar surroundings. Much of Sherlock’s old clutter lay untouched, as if whoever had cleaned out the kitchen hadn’t the time to attend to the stacks of dog-eared books and specimen slides and expired newspapers. The only alteration seemed to be an assortment of tinned food arranged in neat lines along the window sills.

His and Sherlock’s chairs still rested in their places in front of the fire. John grazed the back of his armchair as he passed it and lifted his lantern to cast a lonely light on Sherlock’s empty chair. How many hours had they spent here absorbed in companionable silence?

As John crossed in front of the fireplace, something crunched underfoot. He glanced down. Shards of curved, eggshell-white pottery littered the floor beneath the mantelpiece. And then John recognized a zygomatic arch, the sutures of a parietal bone, a rear molar…

Sherlock’s skull friend was strewn shattered across the hardwood.

The sight of it hit like a direct blow to the stomach. John reverently removed his boot and straightened, falling instinctively into parade rest. The concave lid of one hollow eye socket looked up at him from the floor. John would have given anything to know what it had seen. *Sherlock, where are you?*

A bruising sense of despair caught fast in his throat. John glanced forlornly around at the silent walls covered in the eccentric wallpaper he’d come to associate with home. The story was written here, the pieces of an old life crumbled into clues. John simply lacked the capacity to see what had happened. If Sherlock were in his place, he’d effortlessly align the cracks in the china to reassemble a coherent whole. He would know what it all meant.

Sherlock often referred to John’s stupidity, but in that moment John truly felt the truth of those words. How could he go to Sherlock if there was no trail for him to follow?

John scrubbed a hand through his untidy hair and sank into his armchair. He’d really thought
Sherlock would be here. Where else could he possibly go? Where else made sense for him to be? John pressed his face into his hands and dug deep to avoid breaking down entirely. If he let loose entirely of what little restraint he had left, there was no coming back.

A moment of firm concentration passed and John roughly cleared his throat. He stood, ignoring that doing so took more effort than it should, and nodded a curt salute to Sherlock’s empty chair. Even the best-laid missions required reassessment with the arrival of new intelligence. Sherlock wasn’t at Baker Street, but that did not change his objective. John hadn’t yet failed him.

Mrs. Hudson’s flat was locked. John knocked several times and waited, but no show of sound or light came from inside. 221C was unlocked, as was not uncommon due to the various handymen who streamed in and out trying make the place livable, but it too was dark when John cracked the door to peek inside.

He was just about to start back up the stairs when a curious thought arrived. Releasing the hand rail, John turned to stare suspiciously at the front door. It hadn’t been locked when he’d come rushing inside earlier. Strange, that. John went to the door and inspected the handle, turning it to prove once again that the lock wasn’t engaged. In fact, it looked as if the deadbolt had been dismantled inside its seating. Who would do such a thing? Who would take the time to ensure the front door couldn’t be locked?

Deep instinctual unease spread through him in an agitating wave. Something was definitely not right. John’s brain was waving an enormous red flag, and if he’d known of anywhere else to go that was safe and supplied, he’d have left then and there.

Against his better judgment, John began the slow trudge up to the top floor of 221B.

A rush of stagnant air and darkness confronted John when he pushed open the door of his bedroom. Quiet and undisturbed, the stale atmosphere spoke to long days unattended. The bedspread was tucked in tight – hospital corners, an indicator of Mrs. Hudson’s work – and the pillows lacked for creasing. John wondered how long had it been since he last slept in his own bed.

His first order of business was to find his Sig. Setting the lantern on the bedside table, John tugged open the drawer and sifted through its contents: loose receipts, a few pens and a pad of paper, a half-used tube of lube, even an old paperback. He usually stowed his gun in the back, but nothing metallic met his touch. John pulled out every last item and dumped them on the floor. His gun was nowhere to be found.

Disappointed, John shut the drawer. Someone must have taken it. Valentin was the suspect of greatest concern, but if he had found the gun, why was he brandishing a lamp base as weapon when John first discovered him? A gun would be more effective in fending off intruders. It was possible, but unlikely, that Valentin had it. John could only hope the gun now resided with Sherlock or Mrs. Hudson, providing what little protection it offered.

Turning his attention to locating proper clothes, John went to the chest of drawers. But inside the
second drawer, where he stored his folded jumpers and cardigans, almost every article of clothing was missing. John reached into the back recesses and discovered only worn, ill-fitting pieces he should have long since got rid of. Each successive drawer proved exactly the same; socks, shirts, jeans – nothing was left he would have chosen himself.

Sherlock might have taken the clothing too, but John could not see the logic in him doing so. More likely, drifters such as Valentin had helped themselves to the stash. There wasn’t much keeping them out, what with a front door that didn’t lock.

John discarded his scrubs for a pair of baggy paint-stained jeans and a threadbare green jumper he hadn’t slipped on since shipping off for Afghanistan. The sleeves caught on his medical wristbands and he reminded himself to search out a knife or pair of scissors to cut them off.

John next went to his cupboard to look for a proper waterproof coat, but as he rifled through the thinned ranks of his outerwear something on the floor caught his eye. He knelt and reached out for an oblong grey case that had been pushed up against the back wall.

Sliding it into the low light of the room, John’s heart skipped a beat as he gazed down at Sherlock’s violin case. What was it doing up here? Sherlock always kept it down in the sitting room, within arm’s reach of his music stand. John ran his fingers down the aged leather exterior before snapping open the clasps and lifting the lid.

The warm brown planes of Sherlock’s Stradivarius reflected the nearby lantern’s glow. John had heard that violin play countless times. He’d seen Sherlock abuse it and caress it and make it sing night after night. It was a part of Sherlock, as good as any limb, and an outlet for his unpredictable moods. Leaving it here was not a light decision.

John plucked a single string with one finger, letting the rich chord resonate through his empty bedroom, and an affectionate half-smile rose unbidden on his lips. He carefully shut the case before stowing it back in its hiding spot. It was only a small piece of Sherlock, to be sure, but John refused to let anything happen to it.

When John returned downstairs, Gabby had joined Sofia at the kitchen table, a lantern between them for a centerpiece. Gabby chatted animatedly while her older sister stared glumly down at the tabletop and nursed her sling-wrapped arm. Their father glanced at John as he entered the kitchen, his expression tight, before returning his attention to three plastic plates on the counter.

"Doctor John!" Gabby called, patting the empty chair beside her. "Sit by me!"

Valentin turned and placed before each of the girls what looked to be thick oat porridge alongside a serving of beans. "I’m sure he’ll want to find his own food first," Valentin said to his daughter.

Passive aggressiveness laced his tone, but John couldn’t really blame a man fending for his family after everything had gone, quite magnificently, to shit.

"Right,” John said. He passed Sofia and patted her sympathetically on the back. "How's the arm, sweetie?"

She sniffled a little and rubbed at it, but the tear-streaks from earlier were gone. “Hurts,” she muttered.
“I’ll bet. But you were very brave, did you know? I’ve seen grown soldiers cry worse than you when their shoulder popped out.”

“Did you doctor them, too?” Gabby asked around a mouthful of beans.

“It was my job,” John told her. He began rummaging through the cabinets to determine what he might be able to stomach. “I fixed everyone who needed fixing. Most of them, at any rate.”

John settled on tinned beans and a liter-sized bottle of water. Cracking the seal, he sipped at the water as the can warmed on the compact stove.

Gabby poked at the porridge on her plate. “Doctor John, why were you dressed like a monster?”

“To trick them,” John said, grabbing a spoon and coming to sit at the table with his beans and water. “To make them think I was one of them, just like you did.”

She considered his strategy for a long moment. “That’s clever. Isn’t that clever, papa?”

Valentin hummed vaguely around a bite of food, not looking up.

“Papa doesn’t let us near the monsters,” Gabby said. “He says they’ve got bad germs.”

John nodded in agreement. “Your father is right. You ought to listen to him.”

“It’s Sofia who doesn’t listen. That’s how her arm got all broke.”

“No it wasn’t,” Sofia protested. “Don’t tell lies, Gabby.”

John ate slowly as Gabby and Sofia sniped back and forth, much the way John had done with Harry at that age. The beans tasted rather plain, but even without seasoning they tested the limits of John’s digestive system. Thankfully, everything stayed down.

Eventually Valentin stood and cleared the girls’ plates away, Gabby’s mostly gone and Sofia’s barely picked over. John’s pushed away his own half-eaten tin, his stomach objecting further additions. "Do you know who once lived here?" he said to the girls. “A great detective.”

Sofia looked up in interest. It was the first time she’d appeared anything but sullen. “A detective?”

“Yeah. He solved all sorts of strange mysteries and murders. I used to write stories about him.”

“I like detective stories,” Sofia said.

John couldn’t help but smile. “So do I. Would you like to hear one?”

Gabby and Sofia nodded enthusiastically, so John launched into the tale of the pink lady and the deadly cabbie. The girls listened in enraptured silence as John spoke, Sofia noticeably distracted from her injury and Gabby’s face frozen in permanent awe, their father stood quietly behind them with his arms folded. They seemed to enjoy the story, so John continued on to tell them about the adventure with the Black Lotus and the smuggled jade hairpin, and thereafter it all came spilling out; story after story of a dashing, brilliant, madman detective. John related everything he could remember without his blog at hand, and when the details failed him he embellished the parts that had gone a bit fuzzy.

“Is it all just a story?” Sofia asked softly after John finished describing how Sherlock unraveled the mystery of the terrible hound of Baskerville. “Was he ever real?”

John glanced toward the music stand over by the sitting room windows. On it, pages of handwritten
sheet music had been abandoned to collect dust by their owner.

“Oh, yes,” John told them. “He’s real. He’s very real, and somewhere out there, I’ll find him again.”

“Do you love him?” Sofia said.

The question caught John entirely off guard. He gaped at her a moment and sat back in his seat. The wonders of a child’s mind never ceased to amaze. “Why do you ask that, sweetie?”

“Sofia also like stories of knights and princesses who fight monsters and live happily ever after,” Gabby teased.

Sofia shot her sister a scowl before turning back at John, shrugging. “You looked happy just then, that’s all. When you thought about him.”

Chuckling softly, John smiled at Sofia. “Yes. Of course I love him,” he said. It was the first time he’d dared say it out loud. Looking back, it seemed ludicrous he had let such trivial fears keep him silent for so long. He, more than anyone, understood how quickly chaos could descend on a battlefield. He should have told Sherlock every single day. “I love him so much it hurts sometimes. I don’t know about the happily ever after part, but God knows we’ve fought our share of monsters.”

As Valentin herded his girls to bed in Sherlock’s room, John decided to take the sofa for the night. His agitation hadn’t subsided as the evening wore on, and the ability to monitor the doorway for anyone or anything that might come into the flat put him, if not at ease, then at least into a state of manageable wariness.

He’d found a gentle analgesic in one of the emergency kits. It was welcome relief for the digestive discomfort and general soreness that seemed to radiate from every corner of his body. He hadn’t a clue how much time had passed since waking from his last extended sleep. The ache behind his eyes suggested the number of hours exceeded twenty-four. John stretched out on the well-used sofa cushions, much as Sherlock had often done during long excursions to his mind palace, and drew up the tartan blanket he’d stolen from off the back of his chair. Brisk as 221B felt, many of John’s Afghan nights had been colder and far windier.

For a long time, John lay awake listening to the rain against the windowpane and the low sounds of the building settling. Sleep eluded him much as it had when he first returned from Afghanistan, so he pulled the blanket higher and let germinate the seeds of plans that drifted through his restless mind.

Constructing a search grid for London was the most obvious strategy, although a single person checking quadrant by quadrant defied feasibility. Targets moved unpredictably and it was dangerous to travel alone. Besides, there was no guarantee Sherlock was in the city anymore. For all John knew he was hiding in the country, as Caroline the nurse had suggested, or had escaped beyond British borders altogether.

Survival had to be the top priority for the moment. Perhaps when he was fit to travel, he could leave London and expand his search radius. It was fortunate Sherlock tended to leave an impression wherever he went; survivors’ settlements might provide useful leads after weeks or even months since crossing paths with the detective—

Hands suddenly closed tight around his windpipe. John snapped open his eyes and jolted in surprise,
instinctively seizing, as a heavy mass slammed down and pinned him to the sofa.

Valentin’s face was only centimeters from his own. He looked absolutely deranged in the dark, his mouth twisted into a crazed snarl and a hysterical glint in his eyes. John fumbled at the fingers choking him, strong as vices, until the air was completely cut off from his lungs.

“Saw the way you looked at them,” Valentin hissed, squeezing tighter and shaking John violently by the throat. “Pedophile *filth*. I’ll kill you, I’ll *kill you*—“

Adrenaline-filled blooded rushed loud in his ears. John’s vision began blurring to darkness, an unmistakable sign that unconsciousness was only seconds away.

After everything he had gone through to get home, he was going to die on his own sofa at the hands of a lunatic.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: *Bottom of the River | Delta Rae*
The front wheel of the Street Triple skidded violently as it rounded the corner off Grosvenor Road. Sherlock resisted the hard jerk of the handle bars and gunned the throttle to power through the turn, the sole of his left shoe scraping naked asphalt for balance. The roar of life from the motorbike’s engine echoed lonely amongst the dark residential blocks of Pimlico.

The bike’s headlight shone off slick pavement and bright flecks of rain that crossed through its beam. Rain-soaked walkers huddled here and there on the roadside, their pale milky eyes turning in interest toward the light and sound of the passing motorbike. A few of the creatures were always loitering near the entrances to Pindar. Sherlock sped past them, their growls lost to the thrum of the engine and the patter of rainwater on abandoned metal.

Sherlock turned down a dead end road and rolled to a stop alongside an oversized skip. He ensured the front tire had edged into the path of the motion sensor before settling back to wait in the squall. The walkers were blurry shapes in the bike’s side mirrors, obscured by exhaust fumes colored red from the brake light, but Sherlock made out their slow shambling progress in his direction.

A floodlight burst into sudden painful brilliance above Sherlock, aggravating the low pulsing ache in the back of his head. He shielded his eyes from the glare and there came a sound of pneumatic pistons releasing. The asphalt in front of the bike shuddered as it began to tilt downward, sending rivulets of water trickling off the edges of the forming ramp. Sherlock revved the engine and released the brake.

Monty was on duty down below, and as soon as Sherlock guided the bike onto dry cement he flipped the switch on his station’s console. The pistons squealed again and the mechanism began to lift the platform back into its original position.

“Well, if this isn’t a sight,” Monty said, thoroughly surprised. “We were starting to pool wagers on whether you’d make it back.”

Flicking back his dripping fringe, Sherlock swung off the Street Triple. He met the officer’s gaze and a hundred insignificant details instantly crowded his headspace. Remnants of maple syrup bun on collar; consumed expired ration pack for dinner. Crease marks on earlobe; still bunking with the podiatrist. Uneven nail beds; compulsive biter. Faded incisor stains; former tobacco chewer preferred right side of mouth—

Sherlock glanced away and suppressed a wince. The pain in his skull blossomed into a steady pound.

Monty was a soft man, largely shapeless. The sort of policeman who had spent his evenings sat in a pub watching football matches and ingesting his body weight in chips and pork crackling. But he worked the door, so Sherlock humored him and said, “And whose pockets have I lined by returning intact?”

“Stamford’s, I think, the optimistic bugger.”

Behind Monty, a small CCTV screen streamed footage of the road, now dark and filled with a confused gaggle of walkers where Sherlock had once been. Monty glanced admiringly at Sherlock’s
bike as he logged the return of personnel. “Don’t think I’ve seen that one before. A Triumph, is it? What happened to the Honda?”

Gripping the handle bars, Sherlock began pushing the bike toward the maintenance bay. “I had to trade up. Walker femur got jammed in the drive shaft.”

Monty’s eyes went wide. “How’d that happen?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Shall I radio down to HQ for you?” Monty called after him.

“What for?” Sherlock said, indifferent, as he wheeled the bike away. “By now, Mycroft already knows I’m back.”

The garage level of Pindar was an unsightly industrial cavern of reinforced concrete molded into severe, boxy angles. Skeletal pipes snaked the walls and bare bulbs dotted the ceiling, casting raw light over an enclosed space large enough to comfortably fit two football pitches.

Sherlock parked his bike in line with the other motorcycles. Most were former police stock and far heavier than his stripped down Street Triple. Several members of the maintenance crew eyed Sherlock curiously as they conducted their duties, scurrying up and down the rows of diesel lorries with greasy tool kits and salvaged replacement parts. A conspicuous section of the designated fleet space was void of anything but petrol stains; the Dowager hadn’t yet made its return.

Fingers of pain were spreading behind Sherlock’s eyes as he unlatched the kickstand. He leaned over the bike and briefly rubbed at his temples, cursing the onset of a probable migraine. Right on cue, Sherlock sensed a gentle glow of doctorly concern flicker to prominence behind his left shoulder.

He straightened, brushing the nuisance aside, and fixed his sights on someone who could actually help.

Almost six hundred people lived stowed like refugees in the rear half of the garage. A grid of spartan bunks stretched all the way to the distant wall, and where those had run out old linens were strung to form makeshift subdivisions. People from all walks of life ate and slept and huddled together around pinpoints of electric lantern light, reminiscing and taking comfort in what little they had left. For most of them, there was nothing to do but wait things out while Pindar security personnel distributed the daily rations and offered hollow reassurance.

Civilians weren’t allowed beyond the checkpoints that led to Quarantine, Processing, or the restricted lower levels. Fortunately, Billy Wiggins had no such clearance and could be reliably found near the petrol cisterns. Casually situated with an oversized knapsack at his feet, the former drug dealer barely batted an eye when he spotted Sherlock on approach.

"Mr. Holmes,” Wiggins greeted mildly, unfolding his arms. “What's your taste?"

Sherlock tried to filter out the rush of deductions about Wiggins bombarding his brain. "Pain relief,” he said through gritted teeth. “Heavy as you've got."

Wiggins nodded and knelt to begin picking through the knapsack. "There's paracetamol, a selection of NSAIDs..."

"If I wanted those, I could get them myself," Sherlock grumbled.

"Something stronger, is it?"
"Opioids," he said.

Sherlock didn’t hear so much as feel the disapproving sigh from behind his left shoulder. He firmly resisted the urge to turn and argue aloud with thin air. This was medication, after all. Not hard drugs. He needed it.

Wiggins narrowed his sunken eyes. "Can't nick some off ol' Doc Sawyer?"

"You know I'm blacklisted in the infirmary."

"Hmm. Might be I've got some oxycodone stashed away." Wiggins leaned forward. "For the right price."

"What is it you want?"

"Lubricant."

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. "Come again?"

"Not a priority, the badges keep telling me," Wiggins scowled with unexpected disgust. "Think about it, Mr. Holmes. Hundreds of frightened men and women cohabiting in very tight, very confined quarters. They ask for it and I haven't got any to trade. I've a wait list and everything."

Leave it to human nature to revert to the lowest form of entertainment when the world was in the throes of ending. Sherlock shook his head and sighed. "How much?"

"Three bottles a pill. Anything extra is credit on your account."

“You’ve got yourself an arrangement."

Sherlock was dry-swallowing two tablets of (former) government-issue medication when the screech of the main bay doors signaled the return of the Dowager. The thunder of her massive engine filled the garage as the vehicle’s six wheels touched safely down on home cement, black steel sides glistening with streaks of rain. The Dowager rolled snugly into its berth and a throng of expectant mechanics immediately swarmed their beloved flagship.

The crowd gathering around Sherlock broke into scattered applause when the rear doors opened. Lestrade was the first out, blinking in the artificial light, followed by the rest of the Met officers. They began efficiently unloading the retrieved civilians, who nervously glanced around at the sheer size of their new home, and handed them off to the stewards for processing with promises of hot meals and bunk assignments afterward.

Sherlock was about to slip away from the crowd when Lestrade intentionally caught his eye, and Sherlock cursed under his breath.

“Jones, I want every firearm accounted for and thoroughly cleaned,” Lestrade was ordering as he made straight for Sherlock through the thicket of curious spectators. “Hopkins, remember you’re with Thompson’s crew checking traps tomorrow. Oi, Sherlock! Hold on a second.”

“I was just going below for a shower,” Sherlock said as Lestrade reached him, motioning to his soiled track clothes by way of excuse.
“That’s fine,” Lestrade replied, half-listening. He unsnapped his torn bulletproof vest and shrugged it off, wincing a little with the movement. “But before I forget, you’re on call for a run in the morning. Bainbridge has the list.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “At the rate they go through syringes down there, you’d think they had a world class drug habit.”

“I’m not in charge of medical provisions,” Lestrade pointed out. ”All I know is that the doctors want things, and you’re going to get them.”

“Might I offer a suggestion?”

“Go ahead.”

“Condoms.”

“I haven’t time for games, Sherlock.”

"I’m not kidding. This information comes on good authority," Sherlock intoned. "There’s going to be an upsurge in demand in the very near future. The stores are running low and I don’t think anyone fancies living with dozens of crying infants in nine months’ time. If you want my advice, send a lorry and fill it to the brim. Send two. Pregnancy tests, as well.”

“Pregnancy tests?”

"Just in case we’re too late in delivering the condoms.”

Lestrade sighed and scrubbed a hand through his damp silvery hair, causing it to stick up at odd angles. He looked like he could do with a long sleep, but that was nothing new. “You may have a point and I’ll assign someone to look into it, but right now your concern is that list. I shouldn’t have to remind you your departure privileges are on the line.”

Sherlock frowned in distaste. He didn’t need the permission of Lestrade and his incompetent officers to breach the walls of Pindar. The problem wasn’t so much their laughable excuse for security as it was the consequences of failing to turn up. One wrong move, one empty bed-check or missed roll call, and Mycroft would have his way and ensure Sherlock didn't see the light of day until London was restored to order, and that outcome was little more than a delusional pipe dream.

"Have the list sent over," Sherlock acceded. "And by the way, you've got yourself a tail.”

Lestrade glanced round and, sure enough, picked out the small boy watching them intently from a clump of adults who appeared to be fussing over him.

“Oh, that’s Archie,” Lestrade said, turning back to Sherlock. "He’s here because of you, actually. Made an impression on him.”

Sherlock lifted a skeptical eyebrow. “‘Impressionable’ is not a trait conducive to survival. Are we done?”

He received a tired nod from Lestrade, and with that dismissal started across the garage toward the lifts. As Sherlock walked, he removed the Sig from the holster on his belt and stuffed it down the rear of his track bottoms, held in place by the elastic band.

The guard’s eyes briefly touched on the empty holster as Sherlock approached. Strictly speaking, live firearms were permitted only to police officers and military personnel in the lower levels. Sherlock’s
flaunting the rule was both obvious and anticipated, but no one had ever tried to confiscate the gun.

“Good evening, Mr. Holmes,” the guard said, giving a salute, and though he couldn’t see it the motion was perfectly mirrored from behind Sherlock. Soldiers, even retired ones, never seemed capable of resisting a good salute.

The lifts were dark and powerless as an energy-saving measure, and Sherlock made for the stairwell door. Cold fluorescent rods high on the walls lit the spiraling cement steps, the stark light giving the impression of descending down a derelict launch tube of a Cold War missile silo.

The second level was a mass of winding corridors and segmented rooms housing the infirmary, canteen, and main generators in addition to the state rooms. By square footage it was larger than the garage, but nearly two-thirds had been sealed off and left de-powered due to constrained resources. Only trusted officials and critical staff made their home down below; it was a floor of comparative comforts, if a bit cramped when sleeping three or four to a room.

The provisional British Government resided on the third level. Sherlock went down there only in the direst of circumstances. Mycroft rarely de-ensconced himself from his safe and sterile office, and running into him was low on Sherlock's list of ideal ways to pass the time.

Sherlock drew a number of quizzical looks when he popped out into the hallway. He was dressed rather shabbily compared to the uniforms and pressed button-downs worn by everyone else, but the disdain in their expressions had more to do with his presence than his stylistic choices. Sherlock avoided eye contact, reducing the babble of deductions in his head to a low buzz, and pressed on toward his room.

It had been intended as a maintenance cupboard, not truly a place for sleeping, but Sherlock had staked his claim as soon as he set eyes on it. Everyone else seemed content to leave him to it; they didn’t see the value in such a small space, aside from the privacy of sleeping alone. As he entered, Sherlock switched on the electric lantern hanging just inside the door, spreading a warm glow over the cupboard's interior. The space was long and narrow with a knee-high folding bed snug against the wall on one side, affording enough walking room to reach the rear where Sherlock’s trunks had been stowed in a neat tower. Three bare boards formed shelves on the wall across from the bed and beside them were a few hooks, upon which hung his Belstaff.

Stopping beside the coat, Sherlock reached inside the left pocket to make sure its contents remained intact. His fingers brushed delicate dried petals before pushing deeper to feel for the thin chain, its metal cold to the touch after so long without handling. Reassured everything was in order, Sherlock set to removing his belt and pulled the Sig from his trousers to place on the lowest shelf.

The oxycodone was doing fuck-all for his headache. Sherlock considered going to look for Molly and having her retrieve him something from the infirmary, but the last time he asked she’d outright refused to take part. Accomplices were growing scarce. Sherlock tapped the wooden shelf and mulled his options, all the while obstinately ignoring the pair of judgmental eyes boring into the back of his skull.

Sherlock snatched up the box of nicotine patches from the top shelf. The eyes on him softened.

“Not like you let me keep the cigarettes,” Sherlock muttered as he opened the package. He’d take one soggy smoke over the whole damned box in a heartbeat.

He peeled off one patch and stuck it on the inside of his left forearm. Two days undercover without as much as a milligram of nicotine had been hellacious, to say the least. Sherlock added three more patches to his arm and tugged down his sleeve.
The brows behind him furrowed in disappointment. It wasn’t exactly safe, mixing substances, but Sherlock’s head was throbbing and his brain wouldn't stop working and eventually something had to give or else he’d be driven straight round the bend. The eyes felt like unwavering laser beams, drilling at him constantly, unceasing in their mission to rip him apart, and he couldn't keep doing this, couldn't keep stalling up on the disapproval of a dead doctor—

He slammed his fist down on the wooden shelf, rattling the handgun, and whipped around to face him.

As usual, Sherlock was greeted by nothing but empty air.

His hands were trembling and he pressed at the inner corners of his eyes, sure that his brain was about to crack through solid bone at any second.

How had he let this happen?

The doors of his mind palace hung from shattered hinges. Most of the curators were gone, leaving behind a whirlwind of disarrayed records and foreign, twisting corridors that Sherlock no longer knew how to navigate. Only one had stayed. The one person Sherlock never thought he’d wish so dearly to be rid of.

The dead walked but did not speak, and neither did he. It didn’t matter. Sherlock felt every passing judgment. His face had always been uncommonly expressive.

The allure of hard drugs had promised to drown it all out. Sherlock had scoured every crack den and dealer's hideout not obliterated in the fires, but the supply had fled along with its users. More than once, he’d nearly been bitten for his trouble.

Perhaps coming up empty-handed was for the best. He'd probably be forced to destroy whatever he found.

Sherlock turned in the dim light of his room and went back to ignoring the ever-present eyes, his fingers itching for the pack of cigarettes he’d tossed away, if only for something to hold onto.

The sweet rush of nicotine was just kicking in when Sherlock emerged from his room, clean set of clothes in hand, but as he started off toward the showers a series of irate voices could be heard ringing down the hall.

Sherlock came upon a cluster of people stopped in their tracks to watch an enormous commotion. A group of nearly twenty Met officers formed a clot in the main thoroughfare, many of them not yet changed out of their wet things, and going by the angry red faces they weren't having a pleasant conversation. Lestrade stood in the thick of it, flanked on either side by Donovan and Bradstreet, while Anderson and a number of other officers faced off with them.

Sherlock spotted Molly’s cream-and-pink knit cardigan amongst the onlookers. She glanced over at him, worried, as he silently joined her in observing the spectacle.

“This is unacceptable,” Sergeant MacKinnon was shouting into Lestrade's indignant face. "He was one of our own and what did you do? You let the Colonel get away! I say we go back with sufficient numbers and take what’s owed.”
A vigorous cheer of approval went up all around. Lestrade was about to open his mouth when Sherlock loudly interjected, “They’ll have moved on by now.”

The policemen’s heads swiveled to look at him, none pleased that he’d chosen to speak up.

“Sherlock, do you know where they’ll go?” Lestrade asked.

“No. It’s not a set pattern,” he explained. “They follow the whims of the Colonel, but it’ll be somewhere with cultural or historical significance. Desecration appeals to his sense of ego. Unless you’re willing to check every site fitting that description in London, we may have to wait until he chooses to show himself again.”

"You had him within an inch, to hear it told," MacKinnon spat toward Sherlock. "We’d be done with this business if you’d bothered to act.”

"Is that your idea of justice, MacKinnon?" Donovan chimed in. "Press-ganging civilians to perform assassinations for us?"

The officers erupted into another round of furious shouting. Fingers jabbed and spittle flew, and Sherlock tried to recall the last time he’d seen Lestrade lose his composure. He’d shouted at Sherlock plenty of times, but never with the sort of profound personal anger now written into his expression.

Anderson’s voice finally rose above the cacophony in an icy challenge. "How can we call ourselves the Metropolitan Police anymore?"

“Hierarchy has kept us alive,” Lestrade countered. "Following orders and not wasting all your bloody time questioning me and my decisions—"

“Maybe we’ve finally started asking the right questions," cut in Forbes. "You let the Colonel walk away alive. After he murdered Tommy Forrester."

“Our priority has always been the lives of our officers and the lives of the civilians in our care." Lestrade looked at each of them in turn, trying to convince them to see sense. "The moment we cross that line and bring out the executioner’s axe, what’s to stop us from killing everyone who disagrees? That’s not what the Met stands for. We help people. We don’t exterminate them.”

“Circumstances have changed,” someone yelled, inciting a chorus of agreement.

Anderson squinted at Lestrade. “Who appointed you decision-maker for all of us, anyway?”

“He's the ranking officer,” Donovan said defensively.

“Dimmock’s a D.I. too,” Anderson pointed out. “Why not him? Why are we listening to Lestrade at all?"

Lestrade stepped squarely into Anderson’s personal space, imposing his full height in a show of mammalian dominance. "Because Dimmock chose to act as government liaison, and I chose to get out there and actually do something."

Every action had an equal and opposite reaction, of course, and Anderson reacted to Lestrade’s threatening presence by shoving him violently away. Donovan immediately tore her pistol from her belt and raised it, prompting half a dozen hands to reach toward their own weapons. Anderson apparently failed to notice Donovan's drawn gun because he followed up the shove with a swift right hook, sending Lestrade dodging backwards into Donovan.
The gun went off, an enormous pop that echoed between the floor and the low ceiling, and a flare of blood arced from the back of Anderson’s right thigh. Anderson's eyes went wide as he toppled backward and Sally dropped her gun, shocked, as the nearby officers lunged to break his fall.

The onlookers exploded into a flurry of terrified chaos. People were shouting, ducking, running every which way, but Sherlock pushed past them, caught up in the dizzying entropy of it all.

“Philip!” Donovan screamed as she knelt in his blood. “Oh my God, oh my God!”

“We need a doctor!” Lestrade barked out. He was down on his knees too, putting pressure on the wound. “Bainbridge, find whoever’s on duty in the infirmary. Bring a gurney. Now.”

Time seemed to slow as Sherlock stared at the blood, the people around him nothing more than blurred figures.

Donovan had one hand in Anderson’s hair while the other lovingly stroked his face. His face was contorted in pain and she pressed her forehead to his, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Forgive me, oh God, please, I didn’t mean to…”

Sherlock’s chest clench ed up and breath refused to come. There was blood, so much blood, blood everywhere, blood on his hands. Blood stiff in his blond hair as they loaded him into the ambulance. Siren lights dancing over wet pavement. Sherlock’s stomach freefalling down a bottomless pit, desperate to crash but finding nothing there to break his fall.

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut, wrenching himself back into the present as the same sick feeling from that night washed through him.

*He isn't one of them. He isn't one of them.*

He wished he could believe it. Wished he could pretend every time he turned a corner he wasn’t searching for his face among the walkers. What would he do if he saw it?

*Destroy him. It's what he'd want.*

Sherlock wished, above all, that he’d be capable of taking that shot when the moment came, but he knew better. He knew what he would see.

Laughter lighting his face across the sitting room table. A soft smirk of pride on a rainy evening as Sherlock confidently unraveled the intricate tapestry of a murder. Dark blue eyes beneath a worried brow, watching Sherlock from his armchair with a newspaper folded in one hand and a mug of tea steaming in the other.

"Sherlock?"

Molly's voice pierced the image. She was gently tugging at his arm, gravely concerned. Sherlock looked round and saw that the hallway had already cleared out. A lone pool of smeared blood marked the site of Anderson’s injury.

"Are you all right?” Molly asked.

"Fine. I'm fine," Sherlock replied smoothly.

Molly stepped back. Her lips pursed into a small frown that clearly hadn’t to do with the gunshot incident. "Sorry, it's just— you were shaking. Staring at the wall. Are you sure you’re all right?"
"I'm fine," Sherlock insisted, perhaps more harshly than was warranted. It felt like he was breathing through cheesecloth. He went for a placid expression, but his success was debatable. "Lestrade wants us to make a run tomorrow," he deflected. "We leave at six sharp."

Molly didn’t look convinced. "All right."

"We're to get items for the infirmary," Sherlock said, glancing at the leftover blood. "I expect they'll add a few more things to the list before morning."

"Okay."

"We leave at six sharp."

"You said that."

Sherlock blinked and nodded, then blinked again. "So I did."

Molly seemed intent on simply staring at him, so Sherlock brushed past her and continued on his way. His lungs finally saw fit to loosen but his headache was back with a vengeance, pulsing away in the center of his brain like a jackhammer on steroids.

_How_ had he let this happen?

Sherlock knew his control was splintering. Cracks in the glass, spider-web thin, growing more brittle with each passing day. Eventually, the whole thing was going to come crashing down in a rain of shards and slivers.

_At least you'll be rid of him_, he told himself.

The thought was wry yet strangely comforting and, for the moment, enough to keep on moving.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: [Spanish Sahara | Foals](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQ5Z8QyZ0nA)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sirens began while Sherlock was precariously balanced on the built-in cabinetry of John’s hospital room. It started as a low drone, like a thousand gathered honeybees, before rising into a mournful howl over the entire city. Eerie as it was, Sherlock ignored it in favor of shoving a flat, collapsible table into the metal window frame. He’d scrounged up the table from the floor above and although it wasn’t a perfect fit, it would do for the time being.

Once he’d got it satisfactorily wedged into place, Sherlock jumped down to examine his work. So many other windows in London Bridge Hospital had shattered from the blast waves and sonic booms. He hoped the barrier was sturdy enough to protect John from any flying glass.

As Sherlock stood considering potential ballistic trajectories, the phone in his suit pocket began to silently vibrate. He didn’t have to look to know the call was from Mycroft; it was his fifth attempt in the past twenty minutes, doubtlessly to launch into another stern lecture about choices and safety and emergency procedures. Tedious.

Sherlock had nothing left to say to him. John was here, immobile but alive, and that was where Sherlock intended to stay.

He returned to John’s bedside as footsteps thundered out in the hall, wrapped up in shouts and screeching metal as doctors and nurses rushed about. It sounded like an air raid with the wailing sirens in the distance. Not an hour ago, uniformed Royal Marines wielding assault rifles had come through barking evacuation orders to anyone who would listen. Time was running short.

Sherlock gazed down at his flatmate’s comatose body. "John, now would be an indescribably perfect time for you to wake up," he said.

John just breathed, tranquil as ever.

The day they took out the breathing tube felt like the start of the home stretch. John finally looked like himself again, for the most part, if you ignored his shrinking body mass, wan complexion, and feeding tube. Each breath came under John’s own power, though, and every so often there’d be a promising twitch of a finger or flutter of an eyelid. Sherlock waited vigilantly, sure that at any moment John would stop pretending and open his eyes.

He’d dreamed it had happened more times than he could count, dreamed of waking to John smiling at him and stroking his hair, whispering soft promises that everything was righted now, because it made no sense for John to be in a coma. He was a soldier and a doctor and far too strong to be beaten like that.

Sherlock always woke with a mouth full of starched sheet, his back sore from craning awkwardly over the bed, one hand stiffly clutching John’s. He let himself hope for one lingering second before lifting his head to see John’s still face. Eyes closed, skin pale. Always.

"Do I need to explain what's happened?" Sherlock said, standing over John. “Are you truly so stupid?”

It wasn’t his fault, not really. There was no television in the room. How was John supposed to know? Sherlock usually spoke to him about more pleasant things, like forensic toxicology and
beekeeping and infamous serial killers through the ages.

No answer was forthcoming. Sherlock reached out to gently touch the back of John’s hand, where a wad of adhesive tape kept his cannula in place. “Mycroft suspects a biological agent, but even he’s not sure what it is. We’ve got to get you somewhere safe, John. You need to wake up.”

In the past, Sherlock had woken John from plenty of naps and dozes, and even in the middle of the night when a case demanded it. John was a light sleeper. A creak of a door or rousing knock usually did it. His eyes would fly open, instantly alert and looking for trouble. He’d never lost his battlefield instincts.

Sherlock frowned at John’s unresponsive form. “You’re not inclined to make this easy, are you? Should’ve known.”

He proceeded to whistle, and clap, and snap his fingers next to John’s ears. When that didn’t work, Sherlock tossed the spare visitor’s chair across the room from increasing distances, but the clatter was swallowed up by the ruckus out in the halls and the whine of the sirens. Sherlock played the most obnoxious of his mobile’s ring tones, including a shrill dubstep beat which he thought more than sufficient to wake the dead. John did not agree.

Disheartened, Sherlock sank down into the bedside chair, rustling his coat where it hung over the backrest.

A shadow of darkish blond stubble was coming in over John’s jawline, grown just long enough to reveal a nascent tinge of grey. His brow was set to a perpetual slight furrow, as if skeptical of Sherlock’s entire endeavor to wake him.

"Please, John,” Sherlock said, softly tenuous. “Please."

Nothing.

Sherlock sighed. "Do you hear that? Now you've got me begging. Congratulations. I expect you'll want to gloat about it."

Apparently, John didn’t.

A feeling very close to anxiety wriggled in Sherlock's stomach. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. This wasn't right at all.

What good was it being a bloody genius if he couldn’t work out something so simple? Why couldn’t he fix it? Why was John doing this to him?

Hot pressure of frustration burned at the base of Sherlock’s throat. His thoughts went wild and he tried to recall every obscure medical procedure, hoodoo practice, New Age ritual, or crackpot theory he’d ever heard of. Things he’d already pulled from his mind palace or the internet and examined over and over since the awful night John was injured.

He needed something else. Something shocking. Something John would never abide, no matter his condition.

Sherlock kissed him.

It wasn't how he had imagined it. He’d kissed John a thousand times inside his head; a flight of fancy that frequently reared its head in moments of utmost inconvenience. The compulsion to take John's mouth hit him in the park, in the lab, at crime scenes, on the couch in their flat. Sherlock thought
about it whenever John looked up at him with that private sort of amusement, or when a glint of dark humor danced through his eyes, or when he was pink-cheeked and winded with laughter after a chase. Sherlock's mind extrapolated uncontrollably at those times, like a film reel unspooling onto the floor, distracting him for hours afterward. The scenarios in his head did not lack for variety, but not once had he pictured it happening in a hospital bed as the world threatened to erupt into chaos all around them.

He’d never craved someone the way he craved John. The only frame of reference Sherlock had was the drugs; John was alive inside him, flitting through his veins and focusing his brain in the most rapturous way possible.

In Sherlock’s musings John always grabbed back, around his neck or his shoulders or his waist. Sometimes John was alarmed but appreciative, other times he punched Sherlock in the face before thinking better of it and rejoining the kiss. The John in his mind was ever-changing and fickle, even pleasantly unpredictable (as he was in life), but always, always present and responsive.

John's mouth, his real mouth, fell soft and slack as Sherlock kissed him. Sherlock tipped John’s head up for a better angle, his jaw loosely parting beneath Sherlock's lips, but John neither resisted nor reciprocated, and that was the worst part of all. John was many things, but passive was not one of them. He tasted like plastic and chemicals and the sour tang of a mouth long unused.

But this was John, and his mouth had defended Sherlock with one breath and stubbornly berated him with the next. So, Sherlock tried. He pressed and he stroked and, for God’s sake, he even cared, but no matter how Sherlock touched him, John refused to wake.

John's head slumped back down when Sherlock released him, his eyes closed and his shallow breathing undisturbed. The heart monitor beeped steadily, but Sherlock's own heart was racing in his chest.

What more did John want from him?

"Don't you dare make me say it," Sherlock said, his voice strangely choked. His fingers carded into the soft strands of John's hair. "Not like this. I want your eyes on me when I do."

The near-confession didn't sway John. Sherlock let go of him, straightening, and the telltale despondency of a black mood seemed to descend over him like a shroud. If he were back at the home, he’d be seeking out the comforts of a silk dressing gown and the well-worn sofa. Here in hospital, there was only one place to turn.

Sherlock climbed into John’s bed, moving the IV line and various cords to slot himself into the narrow gap at his side. He carefully wrapped John's arm around him before nestling against his shoulder. It wasn’t all that comfortable, but that was entirely beyond the point.

Over the rise and fall of John’s chest, Sherlock glared at the bouquet of daffodils on the far bedside table. *Narcissus jonquilla.*

The tips of the petals were drying out and soon their coloring would fade. It was stupid to think John would understand. Even if he wasn’t in a coma, John had never studied the language of flowers. The meaning of a daffodil was beyond him.

Affection. Desire. A plea for these things to be returned.

No, John was too busy sweet-talking patients and girlfriends and going to war and getting shot and stabbed—
A growl of annoyance rumbled up out of Sherlock's chest and he buried his face in John’s warm side. His fingertips found the dressing over John’s wound, prominent beneath the thin sheet and fabric gown, and traced the stiff taped edges, thinking how careless he’d been. He’d manipulated John into returning to the crime scene. He’d failed to sufficiently check their surroundings or predict Ryder’s return. Stupid, stupid, stupid. And now he was paying the price.

Sherlock lay there with John for a long time, listening to the shouts and sirens and noises beyond their control. The city was on the brink of falling apart. Sherlock concentrated instead on each soft rush of John’s breath, the regular beeps that meant his heart still beat, and the comforting warmth of his living body.

With John there to anchor him, Sherlock easily slipped into the orderly rooms of his mind palace, right at his usual entry point beside the cracked window sporting a bullet hole through its center.

He hadn’t consciously redecorated. The mind palace seemed to conform to whatever aesthetic style it wished, although the fundamental layout never changed. Sherlock had begun noticing significant alterations since the night of his first case with John.

Sherlock started off down the stately wood-arched halls. Some of the doors he passed were tightly locked and others were cracked open for easy perusal. It was soothing to have a place for everything. No loose ends, no crossed data streams.

The mind palace functioned as more of a refuge than a repository these days, and not far off the main junction Sherlock arrived at his favorite place to think. The black door to 221B looked a little odd situated in a college corridor, but once Sherlock pulled it open and stepped inside everything else seemed to fall away.

It was evening in the flat. A hearth fire crackled in the sitting room, sending cascades of golden light over their dual armchairs. The floorboards gave a familiar creak as Sherlock entered and hung up his coat, and he let himself breathe long and deep, basking in the sorely-missed pleasantness of home. There was no chaos here in his sanctuary, no conflicting news reports or outlandish accounts from delusional people. The only soldier to be found was the doctor in residence, and the only gun belonged to a trusted hand.

Sherlock went to the music stand by the window, where he’d abandoned a partially-composed violin piece. He flicked through the loose pages and watched the notes morph erratically along the staff, refusing to settle and form a coherent tune. Composing hadn’t been the same, not since…

“Sherlock?”

He looked up, and the flat shifted into a recognizable scene from almost every evening they were at home. John stood in the doorway, sleepy-eyed and stifling a yawn in the sleeve of his blue jumper as he prepared to ascend the stairs for his boring, predictable bedtime. His blond hair was mussed on one side, strong evidence that he’d nodded off while working at his laptop again.

"Night, Sherlock," came John's immutable words. "Get some sleep, yeah?"

(This part tended to change, but the implication was always the same: something to the effect of take care of yourself. Dull.)

And here the memory paused. Sherlock had come to this point repeatedly, examined it from every angle, considered every insignificant detail. He straightened beside his violin stand and scrutinized it yet again.
What was it that made him want to verbalize it? The lighting? The air of relative tranquility? It came on strongest the evenings after cases, when they had recently spent a great deal of time together. Sherlock wasn't prone to irrational bursts of sentimentality, but this was something else entirely. They were facts that needed to be stated. Undeniable. Tested and replicated.

Sherlock opened his mouth. Why was it so hard?

_I need you. I love you. Stay with me, always._

Such brief words. The simplest sentences imaginable. But, as always, a part of him faltered.

"Good night, John," he would say instead.

And with a nod and a small smile, John was gone until tomorrow.

Sherlock picked up his violin bow, twirling it thoughtfully, and turned to the window. Baker Street was quiet this time of evening, save for the occasional taxi rumbling by or the sound of Speedy's locking up for the night. The light of the hearth slowly died out, and before long twilight dark was filtering in from the tall window panes, dousing him in shadows.

Suddenly, the lamp near the sofa clicked on, interrupting Sherlock's brooding. He glanced over to find John the curator standing at parade rest in the middle of the room, his maroon cardigan and checked shirt identifying him as a projection, not a memory. He fixed Sherlock with an inquiring look.

"Anything on?" John asked, a bit hopefully.

Sherlock returned to staring out the window. "For the thousandth time, no."

"You're thinking awfully hard for having nothing on."

"There aren't any cases."

"Then why am I here?"

The damned figment had a point.

"Fine, then," Sherlock said, turning round with a sigh. He carelessly lobbed his violin bow and it crashed down somewhere behind the table. "Perhaps you can explain, in your professional medical opinion, how a virulently contagious biological agent was introduced into the population of London. They've shut down the borders and grounded all flights without knowing what it is or how it's spreading. Witnesses are clearly out of their minds, claiming derangement and resurrection and even cannibalism, for God's sake. Mycroft’s got the city under lockdown."

John pursed his lips in befuddlement. He lacked the same answers as Sherlock, but such were the limitations of talking with a projection of one’s own mind rather than a real doctor.

"Thought not," Sherlock muttered. He went to his armchair and flopped down on the cushion, fingers rising in a steeple. "Can't tell me what I don't already know."

John’s brows rose in concern. "Aren't we looking into it?"

Sherlock waved one hand, dismissive. "I can't do that until I'm in a lab, and I can't go to a lab until I get John out of this bloody hospital."

“Lestrade said to give him time.”
“I’ve given him plenty of time,” Sherlock grumbled. “More than I can afford.”

John went to stoke the fire in the grate, wisely staying quiet. The flames flared back to life almost the instant John prodded the logs, and he set aside the poker before settling in his chair across from Sherlock.

He did look nice by firelight, sitting there with his legs crossed and his fingers tapping out an absent melody on the worn upholstery of the armrests. John the curator was an exceptionally orderly person, his hair and clothes always arranged just so. He was Sherlock’s best approximation of John’s ungraspable multitudes, and he fell woefully short of the real thing.

After a time, John cleared his throat and caught Sherlock’s gaze. “Maybe you’re the reason.”

Sherlock’s joined hands fell away from his chin. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe he’s punishing you,” John explained.

“What for?”

His laughter was a painful sound. Coarse, and filled with ridicule.

“Do you really think he doesn’t know?” John asked, tilting his head in wonderment. “Do you think he isn’t repelled? You violated him just now, kissing him.”

“I don’t want to hear this,” Sherlock protested. “Not from you.”

“You were invincible, once,” John said blithely. “Nothing could hurt you because there was nothing in there to target. You let him get inside you.”

Sherlock bowed his head and ran frustrated fingers through his hair, pulling almost to the point of pain.

“Look what’s happened. You’re Sherlock Holmes and you’re afraid.”

Sherlock looked up at him. “What am I supposed to do?”

John regarded him challengingly. “Stop pissing about and solve it already.”

“I can’t, I told you—“

“I don’t care to hear your excuses. Solve it.”

"He’s in a coma,” Sherlock argued.

"Would that stop him?" John thundered right back.

Sherlock blinked. Somehow, he didn’t think it right to find a mental projection so confoundingly attractive, but this one looked like John and sounded like John, and Christ if he didn’t glow like John when he got worked up. Sherlock stood and resorted to pacing in order to shake off the feeling.

More important than whose guise he wore, the projection was right. If John refused to wake up, then he would have to come along. The hard way.

“I’ll get him out myself,” Sherlock decided. He had no idea how he was going to manage it, but a trifle like that had never stopped him before. “I’ll get him out if it kills me.”
John grinned at him, pleased with his stated intention. “That’s the Sherlock Holmes I believe in.”

The tiniest of smirks had barely surfaced at the corner of Sherlock’s mouth when the floor of 221B abruptly began to vibrate. Sherlock staggered in surprise, clutching onto the back of the nearby chair, and he stole one final look at John before the warmth of the mind palace dissolved away into the stale scent of hospital sheets. Someone was shaking him.

“Sherlock! Sherlock!”

Sherlock’s eyes flew open as he was forcefully jarred back to reality. Mycroft stood above him, a deep glower lining his pompous face.

“For God’s sake,” Mycroft said over the incessant wailing of the sirens. “Get up.”

Sherlock pushed himself upright, brushing aside the cords and letting John's arm fall from his shoulder. Mycroft dubiously eyed his position beside John, but Sherlock refused to feel anything close to embarrassment for being discovered sulking in his hospital bed. Three of Mycroft’s stooges were also in the room, two men and a woman wearing cleanly pressed suits and blank expressions, as if the city wasn't on the verge of hysteria.

"What are you doing here?" Sherlock demanded.

Mycroft clenched the handle of his umbrella, ruffling in offense like the great ponce that he was. "I'm here to fetch you, obviously, which you might have known if you’d bothered to answer your phone. Evacuation order Alpha-Two is in effect. The military has taken over containment efforts. Parliament, the Crown, and Whitehall are all effectively underground until further notice. We're leaving."

Sherlock slipped off the bed. He hadn’t anticipated a personal overture from Mycroft for another few hours, at least. The situation must be degrading more quickly than expected. “What about John?"

His brother’s face maintained calculated composure. “The armed forces are establishing field hospitals all throughout the home counties,” he said. “He'll be designated for evacuation along with a select group of other critical patients—"

"If you think," Sherlock cut in, “for one second, that I'm leaving this place without John, then you're wasting your time.”

“This isn’t negotiable,” Mycroft warned.

Sherlock shot him a look of pure obstinacy. "If you want me out, he’s coming, too."

"He requires specialized equipment, Sherlock. We don't have the capacity to care for him, where we’re going."

“Then I’ll find a way,” Sherlock said, defiant.

Shaking his head, Mycroft gave a solemn tut. “Lying, brother dear. What have I told you about lying to me?"

Mycroft suddenly side-stepped, as if angling for John’s bed, and Sherlock quickly maneuvered to stay between them, standing his ground despite the anxious turning in his gut. "I'm not leaving John,” he insisted.
"Once we depart the city, you will be reunited. I promise."

"I'm. Not. Leaving. John."

Incredibly, Mycroft took a step back. Sherlock instinctively moved forward, hoping to underscore the gravity of his position and make his brother feel cornered, but there was something odd beneath the surface of Mycroft’s expression.

"You're coming with me, Sherlock,” Mycroft said lightly. “One way or another."

It took Sherlock far too long to realize that Mycroft had lured him exactly where he wanted him.

Arms clad in formalwear grabbed Sherlock’s biceps from behind, wrenching him back, and an instant later the sharp stab of a needle plunged deep into his neck. Sherlock gave a vicious shout and shoved them away. Mycroft’s stooges released him with no trouble at all, their mission irrevocably accomplished, and Sherlock staggered across the room, his vision already swimming. No, no, NO!

Sherlock stared down at his hands as tingling numbness spread through his fingertips, and he quickly deduced he’d been dosed with a fast-acting sedative that had been precisely tailored to drop him. He wobbled and crashed into the nearby nurse’s station, futilely trying to shake it off the growing dizziness, one flailing hand outstretched to prevent anyone from coming near.

Mycroft folded his hands over the handle of his umbrella and passively watched Sherlock flounder. The world undulated and Sherlock lost balance, falling to his knees. Unconsciousness loomed like an oppressive low-lying storm front, and he glared spitefully up at his brother.

Mycroft’s face was an emotionless mask. "One way or another," he said again.

Every part of Sherlock’s body seemed to hit the cold linoleum at the same time, and he felt his muscles spasm as the last few ounces of fight seeped from his bones. He clawed blindly outward, no longer sure in which direction the hospital bed lay. “John,” he gasped, desperate to reach him.

A figure crouched down beside Sherlock. “Yes, yes,” came Mycroft's voice, softer than before, and something brushed at Sherlock’s hair. "Your doctor is well in hand."

The world was suffocating in heaviness and Sherlock wanted to scream, but the light had shuttered dim. The last thing he heard was Mycroft speaking somewhere above.

"Transport my brother to the car. And make sure to barricade this door when we go. Doctor Watson is a top priority for evacuation. Do you understand? First out."

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Silhouettes | Of Monsters and Men
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the dark of the flat, John was dying.

The musky, fermented heat of Valentin's breath pulsed against John's cheek. Dizziness swirled in his head as he pried at the hands crushing the air from his windpipe in a last attempt to free himself from Valentin's clutches, but the deprivation of oxygen had sapped what was left of his strength. The sensation of falling rushed up like a hurricane, and John was all but powerless to stop its approach.

His body, however, had not quite given up.

John kicked hard against the backrest out of trained instinct more than anything, counterbalancing the weight of Valentin on his chest. Valentin failed to anticipate it and they rolled together off the sofa. They wrestled to the floor in a mass of tangled limbs, John landing on top of Valentin, who gave a startled growl. The grip around John’s neck mercifully slackened, allowing him to draw a strangled lungful of air.

He was up on his knees and attempting to crawl away before the haze in his head had cleared. John focused on the open door of the flat, coughing up what tasted like blood or bile or worse, but a hand clawed at him from behind and snagged his ankle, sending him crashing to the hardwood.

Valentin landed on his back with bruising force and John scrambled to break free. Fingers caught him painfully by the shag of his hair, wresting his head back as a forearm close around his throat, squeezing.

“Saw the way you looked at them,” Valentin hissed in his ear. "Lusting. I'll kill you for it.”

“I wasn’t—!” John choked out.

Valentin shook him and howled. "I know what I saw!"

He’d gone insane. John tried to tell him as much, but the constriction had grown too tight. He rammed his right elbow back and upward, aiming as best he could with no visibility on Valentin’s position, and struck a soft wall of muscle, earning a sharp grunt of pain. The fist in John’s hair let go and the arm at his throat loosened, giving him the opening he needed to slip through Valentin’s grasp.

But John relied on his body perhaps more than was wise, because as he reached the top of the stairs, he stumbled. He managed to catch the railing to slow his descent, skidding down the steps and ultimately collapsing into a tumble. His shoulder smashed into the wall of the landing, breaking the fall.

Adrenaline pounded through John's veins, suppressing the pain, and he pushed himself upright to shake out his rattled head. At the top of the stairs, Valentin loomed like a predatory beast cornering its prey. His face was shadowed in the near-dark but John made out the rictus snarl etched across it.

John struggled to get his feet under him and rise. "Valentin, I'm telling you—"

The man lunged down the stairs as if taking flight, and John knew at that moment there was no reasoning with a father's rage. It was him, or it was Valentin.
John ducked out of the way as Valentin collided with the wall. He rebounded with frightening speed, fists swinging wildly, and John let his hand-to-hand intuition take over, dodging or deflecting each infuriated blow. The landing was far too small for sustained grappling and John pivoted, sensing the encroachment of the lower stairwell behind him, to let the momentum of Valentin's next jab propel him forward into empty air.

John watched as Valentin flew down the stairs and landed in the entry hall at a sickening angle, his head violently snapping back as it took the brunt of the impact. His body slid to a rest on the rug and he didn't move again.

Clinging to the banister at the top of the landing, John stared in stunned silence. His heart thumped erratically in his chest, the beats reverberating through his body like a tuning fork, and he took the steps one at a time, legs unsteady. Each breath ignited a painful fire in his throat.

He fell to his knees beside Valentin's form. No visible signs indicated he was still breathing, but John reached out to search for a pulse in his neck. He felt nothing.

Panting, John sat back against the wall. His hands shook with the shock of it all.

_Jesus Christ._

John looked at Valentin's lifeless face, already draining of its color, and tried to understand what the hell had just happened. The fight hadn't lasted five minutes, start to finish. John combed through his startled brain and failed to pick out what had led to Valentin's gross misinterpretation of his attempt at kindness.

The flat had quieted, save for the sound of rain beating against the building’s exterior. John let his head fall back against the wallpaper, eyelids slipping shut, and willed his heart rate to slow. Pain bit sharply within his abdominal wound. The rest of his body receded into one giant, dull ache as the adrenaline began to wear off.

The sudden high-pitched scream of a little girl snapped John's eyes open. Two silhouettes stood up on the landing, the taller with an arm in a sling, and John's stomach plummeted.

Gabby and Sofia’s faces were stricken with extraordinary fright as they surveyed the scene at the base of the stairs. Had they seen it? Did they know? How could John possibly explain—

Before he managed to utter a single word, tiny feet were pattering down the steps and flying toward the front door. John lunged without thinking, forcing his sore body to move in a desperate bid to stop them.

"No, it's not safe—_don't_—"

But the door flung open – God damn it, why weren't there any _locks_? – and Gabby and Sofia escaped into the darkened night beyond 221B. A gust of wet wind hit John as he staggered after them, his muscles protesting every step of the way.

He went as far from 221B as he dared, no more than ten meters out, but there was no sign of Gabby or Sofia beneath the extinguished street lights. Freezing rain lashed against John's skin and dripped into his eyes, and he turned round and round, fear twisting his gut, unable to make out where the girls might have run to in the dark. He cursed the storm before retreating back inside.

John sloshed into the hall, dripping rainwater and worn to the bone. There was nothing he could do. There was _nothing_ and he was just a useless sod hiding from the horror of it all, incapable of protecting those most vulnerable. It wasn’t right. Gabby and Sofia, the poor girls, they didn’t deserve
what the world had become.

His gaze landed on Valentin's body. Something had to be done about it. Attracting walkers in search of a meal was the last thing he needed.

It took the remainder of his flagging adrenaline to drag Valentin's corpse outside. John left him under the awning of Speedy's and resolved to sort out a proper disposal when the light was on his side.

Back inside, John slumped down against the door, cradling his head in his hands, and wept for everything the world was not.

Later, much later, John awoke in someone else's bed.

Grey pre-dawn light pressed at the windows as his eyes drifted open. He was sprawled on a rumpled duvet, one cheek nested deep in a crease of a pillow, his jumper bunched uncomfortably around his waist.

His head throbbed horribly and his stomach felt as though it had atrophied into solid stone. With considerable effort, John lifted his head and squinted dazedly at his surroundings. A framed picture of the periodic table hung on the far wall.

Oh.

He had no memory of collapsing on Sherlock’s bed, but at some point in the night he’d clearly dragged himself upstairs and gone to sleep.

His clothes were still damp and he shivered as he flexed one stiff arm, attempting to push himself up, but the movement set off a terrible body-wide awareness. He ached – oh God, he ached – and John gave up trying to move, slumping back down into Sherlock’s bedding with a low whimper.

The fight with Valentin came floating back, along with John’s absolute failure to handle the situation and prevent the girls from fleeing. Valentin, driven by madness or not, had sought out his unfortunate end. Sofia and Gabby hadn’t chosen theirs.

John grimaced and buried his head in the pillowcase, wondering at the chances that two young girls had survived a night out there on their own.

Possibly so. Probably not.

Could anyone?

Sherlock isn’t stupid enough to pass the night without shelter, John bluntly told himself.

But the walkers weren’t just outside, were they? John had witnessed the desolation inside the hospital where he’d woken. Nowhere was safe. Wherever Sherlock was, he’d been fighting for his life for God knew how long. Even someone as resourceful as Sherlock had his limits.

Was this to be the rest of John’s life? Futility searching for someone who couldn’t be found? Watching people be torn apart in front of him or lose their sanity entirely? What happened when his luck ran out?
John breathed quick and sharp, wracked by an intense wave of despair.

His darkest hours in Afghanistan hadn’t broken his will to fight. He’d witnessed atrocious things, but even when he was bleeding out on the sand and convinced it was over, the bullet buried in his shoulder hadn’t damaged his determination. But he’d had comrades-in-arms, then. People to rely on when things got messy, no matter the stakes.

Alone did not suit him. He was built to function as part of a team, a unit. He couldn’t do this by himself.

He needed Sherlock. One person to give him purpose amongst the madness.

But he was never going to find Sherlock. So what was the point?

John clenched his fists in the fine cotton sheets and swallowed back a dry sob, then another, and another, until his eyes burned with incandescent grief. *Dig deep. Find it.*

Resolving to get up was one of the hardest things John had ever done.

He pushed himself up with a groan and sat hunched in the bed linens. It took a minute for the world to wobble to a standstill, and a while longer for the despondency to ebb away enough to function. John rubbed at his neck, still sore from Valentin’s chokehold, and gingerly rotated his left shoulder, the old injury inflamed from breaking his fall the evening before.

Somehow, he maneuvered his legs to hang off the bedside.

*One victory at a time, soldier. One step at a time.*

John stood and the floor swayed. Shuffling to the doorway, he grabbed hold of the frame and closed his eyes until the undulating sensation settled down.

He navigated the hall outside Sherlock’s room with a hand on each wall. The kitchen was as he’d left it the night before, dirty dishes piled in the sink and empty tins lining the counters. John felt sick just thinking about food and opted instead for an unopened water bottle from the pack on the bar and —

There was a man in the sitting room.

John stopped in the kitchen doorway and blinked at him, unsure whether he was hallucinating.

The man stood between the armchairs, head angled down as he inspected the fireplace. He was dark-complexioned and dressed in a dull grey jacket paired with shabby jeans and scuffed trainers. John stared until the man turned and noticed him, a hint of guarded curiosity in his dark eyes.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” echoed John.

They exchanged glances for another second or two, the man’s gaze sweeping up John’s body and taking in his unkempt beard and overgrown hair. There was a sense of being weighed as he was looked over, though John couldn’t say exactly what the man was searching for, and the sensation immediately put him ill at ease.

The man’s expression maintained peculiar neutrality as he met John’s eyes again. “I’m Toby.”

“John,” he said.
“Is it just you, John?”

“Sorry?”

Toby came round the armchairs, slowly so as not to startle. “Is there anyone else here?”

John’s hand tightened around his water bottle. Admitting he was alone might prove disastrous if Toby intended to loot the flat and had backup waiting downstairs.

Toby, at least, kept his distance. “Mind if I have a look?”

His throat itched with dryness and he needed to sit down rather badly. John shook his head.

Toby offered a veneer of a smile and disappeared up the stairs. John lowered into a seat at the kitchen table and sipped at his water, listening to Toby’s footsteps as they climbed up to John’s bedroom and began tromping around inside. There was something invasive about it; the flat had changed everywhere except for that room, and it felt like a violation of the last unspoiled place where John and Sherlock’s things cohabited.

He should have said something, or at the very least followed Toby up the stairs, but he was so deliriously tired. As recompense, John forced himself to stand and search the kitchen drawers. The good cutting knives were gone but he found a dull filet knife, its handle stained chemical-brown from time spent abused by Sherlock’s experiments. John stuffed it into his jean pocket and sat back down, rhythmically rolling the water bottle between his hands.

Toby returned quickly from upstairs and made a detour down the hall to glance into Sherlock’s room and the bathroom. Seemingly satisfied that no one else was in the flat, Toby returned to the kitchen, eyeing John with his carefully impassive face.

“How long have you been here, John?” he asked.

John had to think about it for a moment. “Since… yesterday.”

“Has anyone else come along?”

"Erm, yeah," John said. He clamped his left fist and released it again. "They left."

Toby remained standing there, a bit awkwardly. What did he want? A place to stay? John supposed he couldn't very well kick a man out on the street with the walkers, no matter how apprehensive he made John feel. There was no excuse for poor manners.

“There’s plenty to share, if you’d like something to eat,” John offered. "I can recommend the beans."

Toby tilted his head thoughtfully. “Thank you. I think I will.”

John scratched at his beard as the other man rustled in the cabinetry.

“Would you like anything?” Toby asked, glancing over.

“Not hungry,” John muttered.

He ought to eat. It was crucial that he ate if he was intent on forging ahead instead of wasting away, but just the thought of eating was enough to nauseate him. Maybe in a little while, after he'd sufficiently hydrated and his head stopped hurting.

Toby sat down at the table with an open tin of beans in hand. He ate dutifully, unconcerned that they
weren’t heated at all. John looked away from the food and thought about anything but the smell.

“You know, you don’t look so good,” Toby said between spoonfuls.

John barked a laugh into his water.

“Have you got a fever?”

The question was innocuous, but it caused John to immediately glance up. Toby watched him warily, as one might a dog that had been exposed to rabies.

“I’m not—I’m not infected, if that’s what you’re asking,” John said. “Nothing’s bitten me.”

“You sure?” Toby asked, raising his eyebrows. “Sometimes the wounds aren’t deep. Scratches, that sort of thing.”

“I should ask you the same,” John snapped back.

A point of tension spread between them before Toby grinned and said, “I’m not infected. Promise.”

John flicked his eyes around Toby’s face. He was considerably cleaner than John. His hair was neat and his chin recently shaved, and the tautness of his skin suggested a plentiful diet.

Toby hadn’t come for refuge.

Beneath the tabletop, John touched the outline of the knife in his pocket. The man had at least a stone on him and several inches of height, but there was no tactical reason John couldn't beat him one-on-one. As long as his body didn't give out.

“Listen, John, I’m on my way to meet my family,” Toby said after a few more minutes of silent eating. His tone was far too casual for John's liking. "Just up the road.”

"I wish you luck, then," John said.

"My sister, she sent word they've got somewhere. With other people, as she tells it. A community.”

John slid his fingers into his pocket, brushing the handle of the knife.

"You could come along, if you'd like,” Toby continued. "I'm sure you'd be welcome."

"Not interested," John said.

Toby narrowed his eyes a bit. "If you're worried about supplies, my sister says they've got—"

"I said I'm not interested," John cut in.

"You're just going to stay here, mate?"

John kept his fingers on the knife and watched him with care. "I don't see why I shouldn't."

Toby pushed aside his empty tin. "It's people, mate."

As if that was supposed to be a comfort. John shook his head. "I know what people do. I've seen it."

"That doesn't mean you should give up on them."

He couldn't help but think of Sherlock, then, and all the ways he neglected himself out of pride and
vanity and pigheadedness. He risked his life for the stupidest of reasons and reveled in his faithlessness in other people. John had expressed to him, on more than one occasion, exactly what Toby was saying now.

John had taken his own risk the day he agreed to join Mike Stamford for a coffee in a park. He’d almost kept walking. He’d almost let the best thing that ever happened to him slip through his fingers, and here he was allowing that mistrust to rule him again.

Alone did not suit him.

John let his hand drop away from his pocket and looked up at Toby. "All right," he finally said. “I’ll go.”

He didn't have much to collect. John briefly considered taking a memento from 221B, including Sherlock's violin, but it seemed wrong to remove them from where they belonged. If things didn’t work out with Toby’s people, he would come back and join them.

Toby waited in the sitting room while John perused Sherlock’s disguise collection for the warmest coat he could find. During his search he realized the Belstaff was nowhere to be found, and the thought that Sherlock might still have it with him was as much comfort as John could hope to receive. He chose a thick fleece-lined jacket better suited for working on a wharf than a stroll through the streets of London, but it was insulated and waterproof and would see him dry no matter where he ended up. The small knife traded pockets with his coat, and after that John changed into dry socks and took a pair of matching work boots from Sherlock's stash.

Toby smiled approvingly when John reappeared, ready to go.

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Last night's rain had come and gone, and the glow of the overcast sky indicated it wasn’t long until sunrise. Toby closed the front door behind John and made no mention of its missing lock. His oversight raised an immediate red flag, and as Toby stepped onto the pavement John went back on edge, slipping a hand into the pocket with the knife.

Then he looked down, and stopped.

The body he’d left in front of Speedy's was no longer there.

"John?" Toby called, turning to see what was keeping him.

Something must've wandered past and consumed it, but there were no bones, no entrails, no signs at all that it had laid there. John glanced up at Toby.

"Everything all right?" Toby asked in a friendly tone. "It's not far."

"Sorry," John said. He tried not to let his face betray his growing suspicion. "Coming."

Toby waited until John had walked past him before picking up his gait again, following him single-file, and John's prickle of agitation shifted into dread. God, he was so stupid. He should've listened to his instincts the moment he laid eyes on the stranger in his home; the signs were there and he'd dismissed them like the great bloody idiot that he was. John squeezed the handle of his knife.
Baker Street was just as empty as the evening prior. Waterlogged refuse and scattered debris rustled slightly as the wind rose. John kept his eyes moving in a continuous scan, seeking out any possible sign of human movement. Behind him, the sounds of Toby's footsteps beat the pavement like an execution drum. He had to do something. He couldn’t just wait for the man’s inevitable move—

John suddenly whipped out the knife, spinning on his heel, and found himself staring down the barrel of a handgun.

*Fucking brilliant.*

“Drop it,” Toby ordered, bringing up his left hand to join his right where it held the gun's grip. “Keep moving.”

Gritting his teeth, John released the knife and raised his hands.

Toby ushered him down the road at gunpoint. The turned on Park and again on Ivor before John was ordered to stop.

Toby came round in front of him, gun raised. “Kneel,” he said, motioning with the weapon.

John glared at him defiantly. “No.”

“It’s for the best,” he said. “Just kneel.”

“I’d do as he says,” ordered a woman’s voice from behind John. She prodded him in the back with what felt like the muzzle of a gun.

Outflanked, John reluctantly bent one knee and then the other, lowering to the pavement. Halfway down his balance gave out and he stumbled, and the woman behind him caught his jacket collar to keep him upright.

“Stella,” Toby greeted. “Watch out, he pulled a knife on me.”

“This all?” she asked.

“Yeah. We’re clear.”


John stayed silent, refusing to move, and the woman behind him pushed him chest-first down onto the ground. They secured his wrists with a zip tie, but fear didn't truly set in until a dark cloth bag was slipped over his head, obscuring all light except for what made its way through the tight weave. They took him by either arm, raising him to his knees, before half-dragging him another hundred or so paces down the street.

John lost all sense of direction underneath the hot, claustrophobic bag, and the world became a surreal mess of sensation and sound. A heavy motor idled somewhere nearby, belching foul-smelling fumes. Muffled voices rumbled beneath the engine noise. The front of his thighs hit something flat and John felt hands on him, more hands, pulling him up until his feet left the ground and he was set on cold corrugated metal.

Doors slammed and the pinpoints of light in the cloth winked out of existence as the vehicle began to move. John closed his eyes and wondered if maybe it was better this way.
Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Alone and Forsaken | Hank Williams
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Molly prodded her fork around in the plastic wells of her tray, sighing at the sorry excuse for breakfast. The reconstituted scrambled eggs had the texture of moist ash and didn't taste much better. She'd managed a bit of the porridge, thick as congealed glue, and half the instant coffee. Her fork skewered a chunk of cured sausage and she chewed it half-heartedly.

A scant handful of people filled Pindar's canteen at a quarter to six in the morning, some lining up to fill their trays while others sat hunched on the communal benches, picking through their meals. Those coming off evening shift would flood the canteen at the top of the hour before retiring for their sleeping rotation. Days tended to start early here, and ended even later.

Molly set aside her fork. It felt wasteful to not eat everything on her plate and lick it clean besides, but the canteen staff strictly observed their policy of serving meals to everyone assigned on the lower levels. A can-opener and a good weapon were all Molly needed to feed herself. The inner-city express supermarkets were a favorite; little dilapidated gems chocked full of snacks, if one could wriggle themselves inside.

"All right, Molly?"

She looked up to find DI Lestrade standing on the other side of the table, loaded tray in hand. His silver hair was damp from the shower and he was wearing a fresh button-up with clean trousers, but the tired lines around his deep brown eyes hadn't diminished overnight. Molly wondered whether he'd got any sleep in the intervening hours.

"Just trying to find something edible," she said lightly, motioning for him to sit.

Lestrade set his tray down with a clatter and slid onto the bench across from her. "No luck?"

She speared a clump of soggy scrambled eggs and held it up. "I'm not entirely certain, but I think these eggs might've been around to vote for Thatcher."

Lestrade laughed, and the sound was a warmer presence than all the food on her tray. "That's government planning for you," he said. "Keep the stores until a rat wouldn't eat it, and a decade longer just to avoid the paperwork. Probably never thought they'd actually need any of it."

"Yeah," Molly said, frowning a little. Lestrade began eating, undeterred by Molly's warning about the state of the eggs. He looked like he could do with a helping of protein after last night, no matter its consistency.

"How's your officer?" Molly asked.

Lestrade lowered his fork mid-bite, and Molly instantly felt ashamed for bringing it up.

"Anderson? He's, erm… he's in a bit of state," he said, face turned disconsolate. "Doctor Sawyer says the bullet missed the major arteries, so she's hopeful. He'll stay in the infirmary until the worst's passed."

"And Sergeant Donovan?" Molly tentatively added. "She didn't return to quarters last night."
“She’s having a difficult time of it. Stayed with him all night. It was an accident, you know.” Lestrade shook his head. "Awful business."

Molly hated when any of her friends looked sad, but what she hated even more was the inability to do anything about it. It seemed as if suffering had become the accepted way of life for those who survived in Pindar. Sometimes she felt like the only person who saw the light at the end of the long, treacherous tunnel ahead. The light was a small and fragile thing, ready to be snuffed out at the slightest wind, but for now it burned on. Molly would see it burn on.

"What about you?" she asked. "The shouting last night… I don't think I've ever seen them speak to you like that."

"It's fine," Lestrade assured her, though Molly was quite convinced it wasn't fine at all. "They need someone to blame. Right now, that's me."

"What if they hurt you next time?"

"They won't. It'll pass." He gave a delayed nod. “It will. You needn't worry."

It was the pandering tone he’d used with the adolescent family members of those who had ended up in Molly’s mortuary, shielding them from a disappointing reality.

"We wouldn't be here without you," Molly told him. "I wouldn't be here."

"Ah, see, now that I don’t believe for a second," Lestrade replied confidently.

Molly smiled into her tray, fighting off a blush, and suddenly remembered to glance up at the clock on the wall. It was nearly six.

“I've got to go,” she realized.

She pulled a small plastic container from the pocket of her pale red quilted coat and began discreetly transferring the remainder of her meal. There wasn't an efficient way to store the half-drunk coffee, but Lestrade pulled her cup over to his side of the table with a nod. He could do with the extra caffeine. Molly pocketed the container and stood, picking up her emptied tray.

“Make sure he watches the road, eh?” Lestrade advised. “Streets are wet.”

"I will."

“And stay safe,” he added.

Molly smirked and flicked her plaited ponytail over her shoulder. “The walkers haven’t caught us yet, and I'm not about to let them.”

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Molly smuggled her leftovers up to the garage level and handed it off to Alice where she waited by the duty charts. The white-haired woman winked when Molly handed it over, quickly slipping it beneath her shawl as if nothing was amiss. She'd see that the food got to whoever needed it most. From what Molly had seen, rations for the civilians were even more unpalatable than what they got downstairs and contained only half the caloric value. Molly brought back what she could when she journeyed out with Sherlock, but carrying space proved limited with just the two of them.
She tugged on her white knit cap as she headed for the vehicle lines. Jeans, utility belt, and laced rubber-soled boots completed her preferred excursion outfit. Lightweight and warm beat out the inclination to over-accessorize. Her knife and torch were more than sufficient for most tasks.

When Molly found him, Sherlock was squatting beside one of the motorbikes and tightening the straps that held a pair of nylon rucksacks to the frame. The bike wasn't the Honda they'd ridden the past couple of trips out, but Sherlock lost his rides often enough that Molly couldn’t be bothered to feel surprise. It was a pity, though; she’d rather liked the cherry-red paint job on the last one.

Nearby, an unfamiliar young boy watched Sherlock intently from beneath a mop of unruly brown curls. He was dressed in a standard-issue grey shirt and trousers.

“Hello,” Molly said. “Who are you, then?”

The boy glanced up at Molly with wide eyes, as though he’d been caught trespassing in restricted space. There weren’t any other adults around who looked as though they might be responsible for him. With so many displaced people living in the garage, proper oversight was spotty at times.

“That’s Archie,” Sherlock answered for the boy, brushing off his hands. “ Apparently, he’s got an insatiable interest in motorbikes.”

Sherlock stood, and Molly’s mouth went a little dry. He’d cleaned up nicely from his street-drifter couture, and she thought again how impossible it was that he didn’t know exactly how he looked. He wore fitted dark denim jeans over his carefully selected black leather biker boots (Molly had watched him tear up a shoe shop in search of the perfect pair). His button-up sported an enticing neckline, the sleeves not yet bunched into their inevitable messy rolls, and the dove grey fabric made his eyes look like storm clouds. The belt slung around his slim hips was adorned with his utility knife, a torch, a radio, and the gun he always kept holstered.

“Archie, this is Molly,” Sherlock said. “She’s on our side.”

Archie squinted at her for a long moment before giving a nod, bestowing his approval. “Mr. Holmes explained how the engine works,” he said, brimming with excitement. “Explosions!”


“Maybe if you made the explosions big enough,” Archie suggested, “you could blow fire out the back and burn up all the walkers!”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. “Aren’t you a bit young for pyromania?”

“I’m eleven,” Archie said. “My dad lets me light the bonfire and everything.”

Sherlock hummed indifferently and swept a tumble of dark curls away from his eyes, turning his attention back to the bike. He reached inside the steel to tinker with some gauge or another. “I was eight the first time I set my grandmother’s drapes on fire,” he said, “though it wasn’t entirely my fault. Loose valve on the Bunsen burner.”

Archie pinned Molly with a look so pitiful that it gave Sherlock’s puppy eyes a run for their money. “Can I come with you?”

She smiled apologetically. “I don’t think that’s a good idea—“

“There you are!” cut in a woman’s sharp voice. “I’ve been looking everywhere!”
Molly turned to see a broadly-boned woman with thinning brown hair, her arms folded as she fixed Archie with a stern frown. She looked vaguely recognizable and Molly thought she might be the person in charge of displaced children.

“Come along, Archie,” she said, holding out a hand. “Leave them be.”

Archie sighed and glanced meekly up at Molly. “See you,” he said, resigned.

“Bye,” Molly said.

She watched them head back toward the civilians’ section, hand-in-hand, and felt a pang of pity for all the young ones who had suffered the loss their families. The youngest were only infants and they’d been fortunate to locate sufficient wet nurses among the survivors to supply them with food. Formula hadn’t proven a high priority for whichever government analyst had planned Pindar. The same went for women’s hygiene products.

"Here," Sherlock said behind her. She turned back toward him as he pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket, handing it over.

It was the list. Molly scanned its contents: sterile rolled gauze, 10-milliliter hypodermic syringes with assorted needles, alcohol-based antiseptic, iodine, a slew of strong antibiotic medications, bagged saline solution… and more besides.

She shot Sherlock a look of concern. “I’m not sure we’ll find all of this.”

“That’s what I told them,” Sherlock groused. “Worst possible time for those morons to shoot each other up.”

Molly tucked the list into the pocket of her jacket. “Accidents happen.”

Sherlock grumbled unintelligibly and swept up his short wool coat where it hung on one of the bike’s handlebars, shrugging it over his shoulders. It didn’t quite elongate him the way his old Belstaff did, but the effect was still intimidating. “Today’s password is ‘Cobalt Lacrosse’,” Sherlock told her.

“Cobalt Lacrosse,” Molly repeated.

“Now get your helmet. You’re driving today.”

The roads proved as slick as Lestrade had cautioned. Molly clung to the handlebars with mittened hands, holding tight whenever the wheels caught a slippery patch and threatened to skitter the bike. Sherlock rode behind her, gloved hands around her waist, doing what he could to lean in unison around each turn and providing direction with taps on her left or right side. He’d trained her on a variety of bikes, proclaiming their superiority as a mode of transportation around the city, but the Street Triple was peppier than the ones she rode before.

Beneath the muffled warmth of her helmet, the world seemed detached from itself as Molly guided the motorbike between silent buildings, silhouetted against brightening dawn-hour clouds. It was difficult to remember the bustle of the city anymore, how it swallowed you up and cocooned you in its frenetic sights and sounds. The press of a crowd on a busy street corner, the babble of a thousand
voices in one's ears. London's lifeblood had gone, leaving behind a grey and withered landscape. Empty. Cold.

The press of Sherlock's body gradually adopted a slight tension behind her, as it always did whenever they passed through the ruined carcass of the city. It pained him to see his once-beloved streets gutted by fire and crumbling from within. London had become a dead city, and a city of the dead.

Molly checked her speed as they wove through West London. They'd breached this far outside Hammersmith only a handful of times, and Molly slowed to navigate the winding labyrinth of abandoned cars that clogged nearly all the roads. Sherlock tapped her left side, probably trying to find a quicker route, and Molly peeled southward at the next junction.

But as soon as they completed the turn, Molly squeezed the handbrake hard. Rubber screeched and Sherlock grabbed hold of her, extending a boot to keep the bike from keeling over altogether. The road ahead was indeed clear of cars, but in their place an enormous herd of walkers roamed thick enough to blot out the pavement. They seemed to extend all the way down the roadway, massing like a swarm of locusts.

Molly's heart stuttered fearfully in her chest. A few walkers were glancing up at the sudden sound of the bike and Sherlock was insistently tapping her as if she didn't see the damned things, and she struggled in a blind panic to unwind her frozen fingers from the brake lever. She rapidly engaged the clutch with her other hand and downshifted, turning the front wheel at a sharp angle, and in a second they were speeding away in the direction from which they'd come.

It was another three turns until Molly felt calm enough to return her full attention to driving (their new route decidedly more conservative). Walkers were a constant danger here on the fringes of the deep city. They were slow and uncoordinated, but if the groupings exceeded three or four, things weren't so easy to handle. They'd been pulled from their ride only once, when Sherlock tried to navigate a small herd and couldn't find enough pavement to maintain their speed.

Realistically, armed survivors hiding out in the derelict shops were the more worrisome threat. Looters were cowardly, as a rule, and Molly and Sherlock had dodged their share of stray bullets and even lost two tires to spike strips. The search for supplies constantly forced them into new territory and often direct conflict with the frightened, the deranged, and the well-armed.

Most consumer-grade shops had been picked clean early. Fewer still stocked the right medications in their pharmacies. Local hospitals swarmed with inordinate numbers of walkers, and after a few near-disastrous encounters, Molly had insisted safety take priority. Small clinics were their best bet, but the main trouble was finding them without GPS mapping. Sherlock had resorted to an old-fashioned phone book, carefully crossing out each promising location as they made their sweeps.

Sherlock suddenly lifted one hand to point off to the roadside. Molly saw it immediately: an independent chemist's shop, its sign blackened by smoke and grime but still legible enough to read. A Nissan hatchback had smashed into the storefront, cracking the glass into a concave depression without breaking through, and the sight of it gave Molly a small kindling hope that the shop's contents might prove untouched.

They left the bike in the pedestrian alleyway behind the shop, concealed by a few loose sheafs of damp cardboard. Molly removed her helmet and pulled her empty rucksack over her shoulders as Sherlock did the same.

The alley was cluttered with neglected piles of rubbish leaking rancid water into the flooded sewage drains. Molly was glad for her waterproof boots as she tugged up the zipper of her coat, protecting
herself against a rising wind gust as she followed Sherlock toward the rear entry of their target.

Molly startled when a walker abruptly stumbled out from behind a set of bins, nearly tripping over its own misaligned feet, but Sherlock had his knife out in an instant, using one smooth motion to thrust the blade into the soft underside of the walker’s jaw and pierce the brainstem. It let out a rattling hiss and Sherlock let it slide off his knife as it collapsed, nothing more than an inanimate pile of human remains.

“All right?” Sherlock asked, glancing Molly’s way as he wiped the knife on the walker’s soiled shirt. Browned blood pooled in the weeds, smelling of foul things.

“Yeah,” Molly said, a bit embarrassed that she’d frightened so easily.

The back door of the shop had been painted and repainted over the years. The frame was sturdy and settled, and a wide but squat window had been installed above the lintel at some point, presumably for ventilation purposes.

Occasionally, they found that shopkeepers had left their doors unlocked in their rush to get out, but even if they hadn’t the bolts in the back were easier to pick.

Sherlock kicked the chemist’s door where it was weakest, squarely beneath the handle. It didn’t budge.

Molly pursed her lips. "Locked?"

"No. Hear that?” He hit it again, and the wood resonated with a dull thud. "It's blocked."

Picking the lock would do no good if they couldn’t clear the doorway. Sherlock eyed the narrow window up top and swept back his coat to plant his hands on his hips, estimating. "Got it?"

It would be a tight fit, but Molly nodded.

A scavenged spar of iron took care of the latch on the window, splintering the surrounding wood but allowing the top hinges to swing free. Sherlock linked his gloved fingers together to boost Molly up until she could grab the frame and pull herself through the opening, careful to avoid slicing herself on the edges of the frame.

Inside, it smelled of musty paper and stale air. Molly paused halfway through the window to grab her torch from her belt and flashed it around. The source of the blockage became immediately apparent. The shopkeeper had toppled a bookshelf against the back door, its broad side sloping down toward the floor, broken shelving scattered with tousled books. A good deal of debris carpeted the hallway beyond: papers and boxes, articles of clothing, things dropped and forgotten in the rush to pack up and leave.

Not seeing any signs of movement, Molly placed the torch handle between her teeth and inched forward through the window. The straps of her belt briefly caught on the ridges of the wood frame, but she managed to wriggle her hips through, followed by her legs. The window swung shut behind her.

Two raps came at the door below. Molly knocked a reply on the warped glass, confirming she was all right, and began to look for a way to get Sherlock inside.

But the bookshelf wasn't as stable as appearances suggested, and as soon as Molly put her full weight on it, the wood creaked and the whole structure suddenly shifted down a foot or two. Molly went skidding down toward the floor.
The rubble parted, and a shriveled arm burst from the depths of the debris. Molly shrieked in surprise and kicked back, scooting away into the mess of books. A walker’s head emerged and he gave a toothy growl, dragging himself out from where he was buried. Molly reached frantically for the knife at her belt, but the walker stopped short once its shoulders were unearthed.

It was pinned down below, unable to free itself. Blood pounding, Molly sank back and clutched the knife to her chest.

The walker rasped and scrabbled at the base of the shelves, discolored ropes of congealed fluids dribbling from its mouth. A pale splint of clavicle bone protruded through leATHERED skin. Cartilage hung flayed from its ears and nose. He struggled to reach her, completely oblivious.

Molly watched them when she could. Watched their clouded eyes for signs of pain or suffering. Whoever this man was, he’d been balding even before the change. She wondered if he owned the shop.

A knock sounded at the door behind her. “Molly? Are you all right in there?” came Sherlock’s muffled voice.

“Fine,” she called.

Molly stood on the wobbly bookcase, knife in hand. The walker tilted its head up, tracking the movement, and futilely reached toward Molly with decaying fingertips. They seemed to discern movement, sound, and light from their surroundings, but the same could be said of many non-sentient organisms. She’d yet to see conclusive evidence of higher thought patterns. Not knowing didn’t make it any easier.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, and plunged the blade into the side of its head.

Molly managed to tip the shelf by herself once she’d cleared it of the majority of the books. She unlocked the door from the inside and let Sherlock in. His eyes narrowed as they touched on her bloody knife, still jammed into the temple of the motionless walker.

“Clear?” he asked.

She took a quick visual account of her limbs. The walker hadn’t so much as touched her.

“Clear,” she confirmed.

Molly retrieved her torch and knife, cleaning it on a discarded cloth, and followed Sherlock down the cramped hall toward another door that had to be the entrance to the shop. Sherlock pulled out his toolkit and knelt to begin working the lock.

The building was unsettlingly quiet. For a few tense moments, Molly listened for telltale creaking in the floorboards above. She’d take walkers over squatters any day, even the squatters who scampered away at the first sign of confrontation. Walkers were predictable and dim-witted, and they didn’t carry firearms.

And yet. Her aunt had worked at a school for people with general learning disabilities. Outward signs did not necessarily reflect the truth of things. Were the walkers empty? Was there still a person inside?

"They're husks, Molly," Sherlock said as he worked.

Molly sniffed at his usual refrain. "How can you be sure?"
The mechanism the door clicked and Sherlock stood, stowing his tools back into his pack. He turned with slow consideration and leveled her with a cool, impassive gaze. "Theories demand evidence, and what we've seen supports only one conclusion. There's nothing in there."

"But what if they remember?" she said. "What if they can't stop themselves?"

Surely a man as inquisitive as Sherlock had considered the possibility. It was a horrible idea to entertain, but they’d both made careers of gruesome ends.

To be murdered was bad enough. To live beyond death with awareness of your actions was a nightmare all its own.

“There’s nothing inside them,” Sherlock said again, adamant, though he seemed to be telling himself as much as Molly. “Whoever they were, they’re long gone.”

When they finally got inside the shop proper, morning light was spilling in from the front windows, tempered to an ambient glow by the spiraling cracks in the panes. A dark Nissan-shaped outline blotted out a significant portion.

Molly clicked on her light. Row after row of neat aluminium shelving supported a mother lode of bottles, boxes, jars, tubes, and every other imaginable packaging material. Spots were thinned here and there, with items knocked to the ground, but it wasn’t the mad pandemonium of a strip job. Down the aisle a darkened pharmacist’s station sat undisturbed, the retractable security gate left enticingly half-raised.

They traded a disbelieving glance. Kept secret, they could pick over this shop for weeks.

Molly headed straight for the pharmaceutical counter as Sherlock split off into the aisles. She pulled out the list from her pocket (Sherlock had certainly committed it to memory) and ducked cleanly under the security gate.

Torch in hand, she parsed the shelves in search of antibiotics, comparing the names to those on the list. Most bore explicit expiration dates. She squinted at the tiny printed numbers.

"What’s today?" she called out.

"It's Thursday," Sherlock’s voice answered from several rows down. “The twenty-seventh of September.”

She shook her head and bent to examine the bottles. “I don’t know how you keep track.”

“I can’t not keep track.”

Molly picked through the supply, taking the medicine within a month or two of expiring. There was plenty to choose from, but she had to ration the limited space in her pack. For now, it would do.

She switchbacked through the aisles cherry-picking the other items on the list. The syringes she found were larger than the doctors preferred and there was no bagged saline in sight, but they’d made do with far worse.

When she found Sherlock again, he was on one knee in the sexual health aisle, stuffing bottle after
bottle of personal lubricant into his rucksack.

Molly blinked, unsure what to make of it. She’d once caught him dissolving a dozen different brands of condoms, muttering an excuse about rigged paternity in an extortion scheme. But that was ages ago.

Quarters were so tight, surely she’d have heard if he was making the rounds, as it were.

"Planning something?" Molly hesitantly inquired.

Sherlock glanced up. "It's for someone else."

She raised an eyebrow. The patch of heat in her cheeks refused to fade.

He zipped up his pack and stood, slinging it over his shoulder. “You don’t believe me?”

“Some people need distraction,” she hedged. No one in Pindar begrudged each other a little companionship during trying times. God knew they might never find it again.

“A lack for distraction is not the problem,” Sherlock said. His eyes fell to the list in her hand. “What’s left?”

There wasn’t much else. They headed toward the first aid aisle in search of heavy gauze, but when Molly turned down the row at the rear of the shop, she stopped.

Two motionless walkers lay together on a sleeping bag spread over the dirty linoleum, a woman and a boy, bearing clean puncture wounds near the base of the skulls. Molly trailed her eyes over the sallow, waxy complexions. The skin sagged where it had begun to slough from the muscle underneath. They hadn’t long been turned when the brainstems were destroyed.

They looked almost peaceful there, side by side, and Molly wondered if they were mother and child, laid out with care by those who’d known and loved them. She imagined the fear they must have experienced while waiting for the end. It sent knots twisting in her stomach.

“I don’t want to go like that,” Molly whispered.

A glint of understanding lit Sherlock’s eyes. He looked at her with… not sympathy, exactly. Affinity. Fellowship.

Sherlock pulled John’s gun from his belt and showed her the broad metallic side. His fingers curled around the grip. “If it comes to that, Molly Hooper, I will ensure you do not.”

She glanced at the gun and swallowed. “Do you promise?”

“Yes. I promise.”

“London’s last gentleman,” Molly said, smiling.

His eyes shifted. Darkened. A tic shivered through his left shoulder, and she knew who he was thinking of.

Molly softened her gaze, trying to dampen any outward sign of pity. “He’d be proud, you know.”

Sherlock’s hand went stiff around the gun.

“Still have them?” Molly asked gently.
His left hand clasped instinctively at his empty left pocket. Then it rose, more slowly, to the front of his shirt. Sherlock pressed his palm against the center of his chest and Molly caught the glint of a metal chain inside his collar. He'd taken to wearing them, then. His last piece of John.

Sherlock cleared his throat. “Pockets aren’t secure,” he said, by way of explanation.

A deep-seated ache of sorrow for Sherlock pressed beneath her breastbone, and she hoped the effects weren’t visible on her face. Stony and succinct. That was the only way he’d talk about him.

Sherlock let his hand fall away and calmly returned John’s gun to his hip. He’d never used it in Molly’s presence. She dreaded the day he finally did.

They collected what they could in companionable silence, sifting through the ransacked shelving for gauzes and ointments. Molly barely managed to zip shut her bulging rucksack with the last of it. A good morning’s haul; they’d be known to return with next to nothing when bad luck or armed brigands got the best of them. She spied Sherlock pocketing a fresh box of nicotine patches on their way out, but said nothing as a means of positive reinforcement.

At the door, Sherlock stopped and turned to help Molly shoulder her heavy pack. He adjusted the straps, clicking the buckle into place around her waist to secure the precious cargo.

Then he handed her his bag, as well. "It's time you left," he said.

Molly awkwardly accepted it, arching a confused brow. "You mean it's time we left," she corrected.

Sherlock just looked at her.

A chill descended out of nowhere. "Oh," she stiffly said. "Oh. You don't intend to go back."

His face tightened, not quite from regret. "I'm not... good for the group, Molly. I'm better off on my own."

"The runs for supplies—"

"You are perfectly capable of handling those," he interjected. “I picked out that bike specifically for you. It’s lighter than the last one, and easier to handle. A nimble ride that suits you well.”

Molly bit her lip, refusing to accept it. “I can’t do this without you. Without a partner. It’s not safe.”

Sherlock shook his head. “You’ll find someone else—”

“I don’t want to find someone else,” Molly cut in, her voice loud in the silence of the shop.

“You will, because you must,” Sherlock told her. His eyes were ice, sharp and cold. “I have something more important to do. Something I’ve come to realize can’t be done in London.”

She took a long, reluctant breath. "Finding a cure."

"Yes."

Molly mulled the bitter truth of it. They’d been stalled for weeks. No leads, no equipment, no experts to help them. They were grasping in the dark, restricted by their duties at Pindar, and one bad encounter away from being shot like vermin in the street. It was no way to conduct research.

"Where will you go?" Molly asked.
Sherlock considered for a moment. "Cambridge, I think."

“Do you suppose it’s quarantined?”

“I don’t know. It can’t be worse off than here.” Sherlock patted his pack. “Give Wiggins a go at my bag before the others. He’ll know what to take.”

Molly held it close, unsure what to say. She wasn’t surprised. A bit angry, yes, and caught off guard, but now that the words had been spoken, Sherlock’s departure seemed tragically inevitable and possibly overdue.

Perhaps she’d meet him in Cambridge one day if he sent word it was safe. She thought of wishing him well on his journey, but goodbyes of any sort no longer had a place in her vocabulary.

“You’re stopping at Bart’s before you leave?” she asked instead.

Sherlock nodded. “Naturally.”

“Then I’ll come with you,” Molly said, offering a cheerless but genuine smile. “One last time.”

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Bones | MS MR
The thick basement walls of St. Bart’s Hospital rendered the sirens a faint and chilling sound. It made Molly think of angels weeping.

She rushed down the row of mainframe switches in a flurry of white lab coat, flipping them as she went. The automated systems could keep the mortuary chambers temperature-controlled for up to a month on the backup generators, and even longer without noncritical systems unnecessarily draining power.

The ventilation system in the ceiling whirred to a standstill as Molly returned to the autopsy room. Mrs. Wentworth waited there, shrouded on her gurney, the last one to be brought in that morning before hospital services had been cut off.

As Molly rolled Mrs. Wentworth toward cold storage, the overhead fluorescent lights began shutting down in stages. One by one they flickered out, skipping every fourth fixture to maintain minimal—

**THUMP.**

Molly froze mid-stride and snapped her head toward the double doors of the mortuary entrance. The small rectangular windows were dark, save for the sickly yellow glow of the emergency lights in the stairwell.

It wasn’t coming from the stairs. It was coming from the storage room.

Molly released her white-knuckle grip on the handle of the gurney and wiped her sweaty palms on the fabric of her lab coat. She edged toward the swinging door of cold storage, close enough to peer through the reinforced glass.

There was no one inside. The grid of steel-framed refrigeration chambers sat in partial shadow, their doors locked and inhabitants safely—

**THUMP.**

Molly jolted, hands flying up to cover her mouth, as the metal door to John Doe Number Two’s chamber shuddered violently.

Something was trying to get out.

**THUMP.**

She’d had him lying open on her autopsy table yesterday. She’d removed his abdominal organs and sent samples off to the toxicology lab. He’d died of acute infection and severe sepsis from the open ulcers on his leg. It was all in the report. No one but Molly had gone into the storage room since then; she’d sent away the mortuary attendants after the first mandates for evacuation.

Molly’s heartbeat rose into her throat as she backed away from the door. God, it was impossible…

Suddenly, a stiff grip tugged at her from behind. Molly shrieked and whipped about, finding Mrs. Wentworth’s bony hand protruding from the shroud, fisted in the tail of her lab coat. Terror bridled
her and Molly screamed again, pulling desperately to get free, but the pale dead fingers were
clenched too tightly in the material. Molly wrenched her arms free, inverting the coat sleeves, and the
force of her momentum sent her lurching awkwardly forward. A shockwave of pain glanced through
her knees and palms as they hit the hard linoleum floor.

Molly scrabbled around in time to see Mrs. Wentworth’s linen fall away. She rose off the gurney,
eyes gone a grotesque milky white and mouth dribbling with discolored saliva, but Molly’s gaze was
fixed in horror on the enormous Y-shaped autopsy incision that adorned her abdomen. Mrs.
Wentworth bared her teeth and hissed, grasping outward, and Molly’s spine hit the tiled wall.
Nowhere left to go, she raised her forearms to shield herself and screamed at the top of her lungs.

POP— POPPOPPPOP—

Mrs. Wentworth’s skull exploded sideways in a hail of shattered bone and brain tissue. Her body
instantly went limp, toppling to the floor.

Gasping, Molly lowered her arms. There in the mortuary doorway stood DI Lestrade, gun raised.

“Come on,” he said, beckoning toward her. “It’s not safe.”

With shaking hands, Molly pushed herself to her feet. “Inspector Lestrade,” she said, swimming in
disbelief.

He stowed his gun beneath his long overcoat and came to her, grave with concern. “Are you hurt?
Did it scratch or bite you?”

Dried droplets of blood spattered his suit and shirt, and his tie was missing. She hadn’t seen him
carry a weapon before. Bracing herself against the wall, Molly shivered and looked at the mess of
Mrs. Wentworth’s body. “I don’t— don’t think so.”

“Blimey, you’re shaking,” Lestrade said, wrapping a gentle arm around her shoulders. “Let’s get you
out of here, yeah?”

As Lestrade hurriedly guided her back toward the door, Molly clutched at her arms, trying to quell
the tremors. “What was that? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but it’s everywhere,” he said, sounding grim. “Walkers amongst the dead. We came
as fast as we could.”

Molly glanced up at him. “We?”

“My officers. They’re collecting as many doctors as they can find. I came down here to look for
you.” Lestrade gave her a tight, reassuring smile as he led her through the double doors and into the
stairwell. “It’s all right, Molly. You’re safe with me.”

She wanted to believe him. The sirens grew louder as they made their ascent from the basement, and
the fear churning in Molly’s stomach seemed to expand with every step. She fought back the urge to
start crying uncontrollably.

On the main floor of St. Bart’s, the state of the corridor testified to a riot of recent activity. Smears of
blood and dark scuffs marked the walls and floors. Distant echoes of shouting and gunshots and
slamming doors floated down from the floors above, but Lestrade ushered her toward a grouping of
people huddled at the intersection of two long hallways.

Three uniformed officers, guns drawn, turned to greet them as they drew close. Molly vaguely
recognized the two nervous doctors standing with them; specialists from one of the labs upstairs. Nearby, Dr. Oberman sat with his back to the wall, sweat-drenched and sickeningly pallid. A necktie was winched in a snug makeshift tourniquet just above his right knee, the trouser leg soaked through with blood. The young patrolman tending to him offered Lestrade a respectful nod.

“Who're we missing?” Lestrade asked.

“Harris, Sankar, and Donovan,” reported one of the officers. “Finishing their sweeps on the second floor.”

Sighing, Lestrade checked his watch. “Five more minutes, then we’ve got to go.”

It wasn't thirty seconds later that a door down the corridor bumped open. Sergeant Donovan’s face poked out, along with the barrel of a pistol, but her severe expression didn't fade when she caught sight of everyone.

"All clear, boss?" she cautiously called.

Lestrade nodded and Donovan backed out, holding the door open. Three frightened lab technicians filed out behind her, followed by Mike Stamford, who was clutching his leather briefcase to his chest and shrugging on the second sleeve of his coat.

Donovan joined the conferring group of police officers as her charges wandered in. They looked in varying stages of distress, some of them bleeding from superficial wounds. Mike continued fiddling with his coat as Molly came over.

“Doctor Stamford?” she said.

He glanced up, slightly dazed. “Oh, hello, Molly. Bit of a spot, this, eh?”

*Understatement*, she thought. "They told the staff to go home hours ago."

Mike pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, skewing them, and shifted the briefcase into his right hand. "Oh, I had to look after the students, you know. Make sure they weren't lingering where they shouldn't be. Alicia and Michael, I found them treating a lance corporal who'd sustained scalp lacerations. Sent them off to find transport and finished stitching him up myself. I was just packing up in my office when the sergeant came through."

"Packing up?"

He nodded and cracked open the briefcase, showing her a thick stack of paper. "Got to get these term papers graded."

At that moment, a blood-curdling scream filled the air. The remaining dregs of color in Mike’s face drained away, and Molly turned in time to spot the source rounding a far corner: a uniformed man, dripping blood and limping badly, his eyes fever-bright.

"Harris!" Sergeant Donovan shouted, extracting her gun from her belt.

Officer Harris hobbled toward the group, quickening his pace in desperation, but a chorus of hoarse growls signaled the walkers were right on his tail. He hadn't made it two meters before a flood of decomposing forms staggered out behind him. They quickly overtook Harris, snagging his coat and tripping him. Harris hit the floor with a feeble cry and the walkers tore into his helpless form, ripping and biting with animalistic savagery. Molly barely avoided sicking up on the spot.
Donovan fired two shots and the two closest walkers dropped like bags of wet sand, right on top of Harris. Blood was rapidly pooling beneath his mutilated body, and Lestrade had to place a hand on Donovan's shoulder to keep her from wading in alone. More walkers poured out from around the corner, some stopping to pick over Harris, while the rest set their sights Molly and the others.

Lestrade’s voice rose over the group, steely with authority. “All right, everyone, we’re moving! Stay close!”

A pair of patrolman hoisted Dr. Oberman to his feet, supporting him under each shoulder, while the remaining officers lifted their handguns. Molly plugged her ears as they calmly shot their way down the corridor, taking careful aim and blasting apart the walkers’ heads before they got close. They felled the mob efficiently, and once the way was clear, the group broke into a shambling run.

Outside, the officers split everyone up among four patrol cars parked in front of the ambulance station. Lestrade directed Molly to the back seat of his vehicle, squeezing her in with Mike, and swept round to take the wheel as Donovan jumped into the passenger seat.

They peeled away from Bart's in a screech of spinning tires, and Molly felt like she could breathe for the first time in ages.

Then they hit gridlock.

"Come on!" Lestrade shouted, pounding on the horn in frustration as the patrol car came to an idling stop on the motorway.

“Sirens,” Donovan suggested.

“Fat lot of good that will do,” Lestrade grumbled.

Cars packed the road like Tetris blocks, inching forward now and then to no discernible gain. They soon lost the other patrol vehicles in the shifting petrol-fumed mess. Worried faces peered out of car windows all around, the seats stuffed high with hastily packed suitcases and armfuls of belongings. Some people had given up altogether, abandoning their vehicles with anything they could carry. Molly watched a woman, shirtless and bleeding from her neck, stumble between the patchwork of cars. Dogs howled and infants wailed, and above it all hovered the unending, ominous tones of the city’s warning sirens.

"Er, Inspector…” said Mike, craning his neck round toward the rear window.

A trickle of people was beginning to run past the car, away from where Mike was looking. Lestrade’s brown eyes flashed in the rearview mirror, wide with alarm, and Molly followed his gaze.

A mass of walkers was slowly filling the road, a slow surge between the cars overtaking anyone trapped or pinned in the labyrinth. Panicked people scrambled from their vehicles, slipping and pushing each other away, tumbling and shouting for help.

The patrol car's sirens flicked on. Lestrade slammed the foot pedal and the car lurched sideways, hurling the lip of the pavement. Molly bounced in her seat and clung to the metal grate partitioning the seats.

Stamford glanced at her, glasses dangling from one ear, gripping the seat like a barnacle. "Is this legal?” he shouted over the drone of the siren.

Molly shook her head helplessly. The traffic congestion became a blur of colors as they flew past, dodging signs and post boxes and light fixtures. Objects dinged the sides of the car and thumped
Despite the rough ride, DI Lestrade managed to bring them safely to their destination, which turned out to be an old-fashioned repertory theater. Inside the auditorium, dingy and exhausted people clustered in the red velvet seats. The main stage seemed to be functioning as a minor triage ward, where officers and civilians with rolled-up sleeves wrapped wounds and staunched bleeding. Molly scanned the ranks of the injured for Dr. Oberman, but it looked like the other patrol cars hadn’t made it.

Yet, tacked on the worried recesses of her brain. Hadn’t made it yet.

Mike gravitated toward the injured as soon as he noticed their presence. Donovan followed him to the stage, relief lining her face as she greeted a familiar dark-haired forensic analyst with an intimate embrace. He seemed the overseer of the medical efforts, protectively encircling Donovan’s waist with one arm as he pointed out patients to Mike.

Molly didn’t join them, though she suspected she should, and instead lingered with Lestrade. His weary, sunken eyes creased with the hint of a mirthless smile. “It’s not much,” he said, “but it’s better than out there.”

It hit her then how very close she’d come to not making it out of Bart’s at all. Words didn’t seem enough, but words were all she had. “I suppose I should properly thank you—”

Lestrade waved a hand. “It’s my job. No need for thanks.”

“But I want to,” Molly insisted. “So, er… thank you, Inspector Lestrade.”

He tipped his chin in polite acknowledgement. Then his eyes lifted, catching something at the rear of the auditorium, and he sighed. “Time to face the music,” he said.

Molly couldn’t help trailing Lestrade as he approached a gathering of solemn men and women shadowed beneath the balcony. A mixture of government types in rumpled bespoke and camouflage-printed military officials, their stern faces were fixed upon Lestrade as he made his way up the theater aisle. One such face belonged to none other than Mycroft Holmes.

“Detective Inspector,” Mycroft said, eyes flicking to Molly as if spotting an unwelcome eavesdropper. “Is this all?”

“There are more coming,” Lestrade said.

“I hope so. Nine of the Met’s finest with four patrol cars, and you bring me an academic instructor and a mortician.”

“Pathologist,” Molly corrected.

Mycroft arched a skeptical eyebrow at her. “Pathologist, yes. I suppose that’s something. Inspector, tell me I’m going to get my investment back, at the very least.”

Lestrade’s mouth twisted into a grimace. “DS Sankar is missing and we lost Officer Harris. The last I saw of the others, they were heading here.”
Unfavorable mutterings rumbled from those assembled. A muscle in Mycroft’s jaw flexed, but his expression did not change.

“I don’t believe you’ve met our military liaison, Lieutenant Dennings,” Mycroft said, indicating a stone-faced soldier in a crisp uniform, honorific badges pinned to his chest. “Staging has begun and quarantine is in effect. Once our route is clear, we intend to move elsewhere.”

“Where are we going?” Lestrade asked.

“That’s classified, sir,” said Lieutenant Dennings.

Lestrade split a dark look between them. “Lieutenant, I’m not ordering my officers to leave a safe location unless I’m convinced it’s a viable option. If you mean to lead us around in circles until the very last moment, I’d rather they be out protecting civilians—”

“Pindar,” Mycroft interjected.

Lestrade paused, eyes narrowing. “What the hell is Pindar?”

“Pindar is a where, not a what, Detective Inspector,” Mycroft coolly explained. “It’s fortified, underground, off the grid, and far safer than a temporary shelter in a theater. From there we might coordinate containment measures and evacuation plans.”

“And search and rescue, you mean,” said Lestrade.

“Of course,” Mycroft said, smiling tightly. His pale eyes landed on Molly. “Miss Hooper, would you be so kind as to help with the wounded? We need every trained hand on duty.”

“I’ve more experience with dead bodies than live ones,” Molly said.

“If it’s any consolation, you may very well have some of those before long.”

“Those are good men and women you’re talking about,” Lestrade snapped, jabbing a finger toward the stage as his stance shifted into one of overt defensiveness. “They’ve risked life and limb to protect this city and everyone in it, and I think they demand a bit more respect.”

“Of course, Detective Inspector,” Mycroft said, his deference sounding more akin to contempt. “It was not my intention to make light of the Met’s losses, but perhaps our resources would not be so thinned if we distributed them with greater restraint.”

“Restraint,” Lestrade hissed out. “Innocent people are dying and you talk about bloody restraint.”

“Innocent people are always dying, here or elsewhere. I am occupied with the functional continuation of Her Majesty’s Government in the face of unprecedented national crisis. This is beyond any one individual, including myself, and until such time as it becomes a necessary consideration, I will leave the granular thinking to you and your officers.”

Lestrade did not reply to that, although the friction between the two men remained tangibly uncomfortable. Molly took the opportunity to retreat from the lulled sparring, but she hadn’t gone three steps before Lestrade speak again, his tone hushed.

“Sherlock?” he asked.

Mycroft sniffed curtly. “Detained.”

The breath caught in Molly’s throat and she stopped in her tracks, glancing back. “Wait, Sherlock’s
“Many people are here, Miss Hooper,” Mycroft said. “Those who could make it on their own and those we deemed necessary and feasible to retrieve. People such as yourself and Doctor Stamford.”

“I didn’t see him,” Molly said. “Where is he?”

Mycroft’s eyes went icier than usual. “He’s somewhere safe, for the moment.”

“Safe? Safe from whom?”

Mycroft shook his head as if the answer were blindingly obvious. “Why, from himself.”

Sherlock had once instructed her in how to hide one’s emotions, back when she’d do almost anything to keep his attention for more than two minutes. Molly carefully ironed her features and refrained from glancing around. Like Sherlock, Mycroft was an intelligent man, but perhaps the habit of overlooking her presence ran in the family.

“I’ll just… go see if there’s anything I can do,” Molly said. “To help. With the injured.”

“Your efforts are appreciated, Miss Hooper,” Mycroft said distantly, attention already returning to more important things.

She half-jogged down the aisle. The theater was only so large, which meant the places they could be harboring Sherlock were limited at best. Molly tried to see the auditorium the way Sherlock did; each individual person, their state of mind, where they were located and what they were doing—

Off to one side, two sentries armed with automatic rifles were guarding a stage door. Bingo, thought Molly.

She skimmed along the front row of seats, making casual progress toward her target. Out of the corner of her eye she caught Mike waving from upstage, trying to catch her attention. She pretended to not see him and, spying a pallet of liter-sized water bottles resting on the floor, improvised by stooping to pick up three.

The two guards eyed her dubiously when she reached them. “I’m to make sure everyone stays hydrated,” Molly bluffed, waggling the bottles. “Mr. Holmes told me to bring water to his brother.”

The men glanced at each other, and for a second Molly worried she had made an incorrect deduction and was about to be reported.

The guard on the left pulled open the door and jerked his head. “Recital room.”

The interior hall ran like an artery behind the main stage, and no one gave the water-girl a second thought. Adjoining rooms swarmed with military personnel, fiddling with radio equipment and pointing at detailed maps of greater London. The abundance of guns made Molly nervous. She felt like a spy infiltrating some revolutionary’s headquarters.

The rooms were labeled with numbers and letters, but no titles. Some were open and some were closed. Molly bit her lip, glancing in between the forest of uniforms, when suddenly she collided with a firm, warm chest.

“Oh—! Sorry there, love,” said the tall, dashing corporal with eyes like the midnight sea. “Can I help
you with something?”

Molly sloshed a water bottle and tried not to stare. “Could you point me to the recital room?”

“Just down there,” he said, motioning with one broad hand. “Last door on the right.”

Her blush was only just fading when she located the appointed room. Though the door was closed, it was not locked, and Molly slipped inside without drawing any unwanted attention.

The recital room was just that – seating on the round that orbited a singularly pristine grand piano. And at its base, an unconscious body draped across the scuffed wooden floor.

Molly dropped the water she was carrying and rushed over. Sherlock lay on his back, right wrist handcuffed to the monstrosity of an instrument. His coat hung from a peg on the wall, an unreachable distance away.

“Sherlock? Sherlock!” She patted his face and he stirred a bit, eyes opening into incoherent slits. “Oh, what did they give you?”

It was some sort of twilight sedation, she guessed, and by the looks of things he was coming out of it.

She grabbed one of the water bottles and poured it out over his head. Sherlock sputtered weakly and blinked, grogginess holding sway.

“John?” he mumbled.

She touched his cheek. “No, it’s me. It’s Molly.”

Over the next fifteen minutes she attempted to rouse him, until finally his pale eyes widened and Sherlock seemed to recognize her. He jolted when he realized the situation wasn’t quite right.

“Molly?” he grunted, springing up on his elbows to survey the room through the stand of piano legs. “Where are we?”

“A theater,” she said. “Not sure where, exactly.”

Sherlock wobbled, and his right wrist pulled the handcuff chain taut with a metallic rattle. He scrunched his eyes and opened them again, taking in the improvised shackle.

“Oh, God,” he whispered. In an instant Sherlock rolled himself over, aligning his body before tugging vigorously on the chain. He looked up at her with utter terror in his eyes. “Molly, find the key!”

She stood and backed away. If there was ever a time for panic, it was now, but from Sherlock it was enormously unnerving. She’d once watched him unflappably stare down an armed serial killer. True desperation defied everything she knew about him.

Mycroft said he was a danger to himself. What could possibly——

"Where’s John?” Molly asked.

"The key," Sherlock demanded. “A lock pick, some wire, anything, damn you!”

"Was he brought here too?”
Sherlock spun on his back and planted his feet against the piano’s base, using the leverage to yank violently on the handcuffs. His palm had turned an angry scarlet and she feared he was about to rip off his own hand.

But bone and metal refused to break, and Sherlock slackened. He wasn’t escaping without help.

"They left him," he finally said, voice cracking. "Please, Molly, get the key!"

There was only one place John could be. Where he’d been since the incident: London Bridge Hospital on the south side of the Thames. They couldn’t very well stick a coma patient on a rundown theater stage and expect to give him proper care.

It wrenched her heart. Sherlock was single-mindedly determined to go to him, like a lost dog scrabbling at a kennel cage.

Molly was frightened. She was frightened for herself, and for Sherlock, and everyone huddling out in the auditorium. God only knew what horrors were coming for them in the hours ahead. She wanted to crumple down and scream and hide until the nightmare had ended. She could only imagine how Sherlock felt, forcibly separated from John as the structure of their lives crumbled to ruin.

Whatever happened, they ought to be together.

A key was nowhere to be found, so Molly brought Sherlock his coat. He proceeded to tear out a portion of the lining with his teeth and extract a small pick, and within a minute or two he was free of the cuff and rising on unsteady feet.

“Careful, now,” Molly said, gripping his arm to keep him balanced. “The sedative hasn’t worn off.”

Sherlock waved her off and slung his coat on, frayed lining hanging down loosely by his feet. He struggled to the door and reached for the knob.

“There are soldiers out there,” Molly warned. “Loads of them. I think they’re under your brother’s direction.”

Sherlock turned his head, just enough to reveal one infuriated eye. “If they wish to stop me, it will require nothing short of Armageddon itself.”

The door crashed open with a deafening thud. Molly followed him into the hall.

Sherlock wore intimidation like a poisonous aura when he wished it. Despite being partially drugged, his glare must have succinctly disclosed the intensity of his conviction because, to a man, the soldiers swept aside, submissively wide-eyed, as if Saint George himself had descended from the heavens brandishing his sword.

Sherlock took the lay of the command post with cold, flickering efficiency. “This way,” he said to Molly.

They started walking. The corporal Molly had run into earlier braced forward, as if to express his protestations in allowing their captive to walk free, but at the last moment decided wisely against it.

Sherlock turned them down an empty hall lined with rolling racks of costumes and theatrical props, narrating his thoughts in his usual rapid-fire pace. Molly followed very little, most of it a breathless rant against his back-stabbing malcontent of a brother, until the subject shifted to Sherlock’s immediate intentions.
“The hospital is on the south side of the Thames,” he pointed out, "so we’ll commandeer a cab, or a
motorbike, or—"

Sherlock staggered then, legs still weakened by the last traces of chemicals breaking down in his
veins. Molly rushed to keep him upright, arms clasping around his lanky torso, and he looked at her
owlishly, as if he’d forgotten his brain was connected to a body.

"You might need to drive,” he said.

Molly pushed him level. “Sherlock, I’ll help you get out of here, but I don’t think I can come with
you.”

Irritation touched his face, then anger, then grudging assent. “Right,” Sherlock said after a moment.

He turned and rolled aside the rack of costumes. Behind it, Molly was shocked to see a backstage
door, the sort that famous stage actors popped out of after shows to greet their adoring fans. Sherlock
turned the bolt and slid it open before cracking open the door. A rush of cool wind ruffled Molly’s
hair, and he slipped outside.

"Sherlock, hold on,” she called, chasing after him. “Sherlock—"

But he had stopped just outside on the pavement. Driverless cars packed the street fender to fender.
Sherlock studied them in consternation, visibly re-evaluating his plans.

“I was going to say that you’ll want a motorbike,” Molly told him. “Traffic isn’t going anywhere
soon.”

Down the pavement, the theater doors were thrown open. A handful of police officers were urging
passersby to come inside, but those milling past, looking shell-shocked and pale, were largely
catatonic to the offers of refuge. Some met Molly’s eyes in vacant fashion. There was nowhere to go.
There was no getting out.

“Wait,” Sherlock said, lifting a hand and glancing at Molly. “Do you hear that?”

Molly let out a soft breath as she realized what he meant. “Where are the sirens?”

The obnoxious whine over the city had gone. In its place, a low and distant rumbling seemed to
emanate from everywhere and nowhere. Sherlock looked to the sky.

A V-shaped formation of RAF fighter jets rocketed overhead. Vapor trails traced their path until the
angular grey fuselages disappeared into the cloud bank, the growl of the engines lingering, as though
the sky itself was cracking apart.

“What are they doing so low?” Molly nervously asked.

The squadron emerged again off to the west, aligned along what Molly estimated to be the snaking
path of the Thames. They swooped low into a perfect level line, and then smaller pieces began to fall
away.

The explosions came like rolling thunder, reverberating through the air and ground. Sherlock startled
at the noise as screams rose up around them. A series of enormous dark plumes billowed high above
the building tops, wreathed with fiery innards, and the aircraft streaked dispassionately away.

Sherlock’s knees gave out once more. He stumbled down to a perch on the pavement, powerless, his
head craned toward the roiling haze spreading through the atmosphere.
“The bridges,” Molly gasped.

“No,” Sherlock said, voice gone thin. “They’re targeting the south bank, too.”

The south bank. Where John had been left behind.

Quarantine is in effect. That’s what Mycroft said. Molly cupped her hands to her mouth, horrified.

Then the rumbling returned and a new wave of jets parted the cloud cover. Molly couldn’t tell whether they were the same grouping until they banked elegantly around, dropping fresh payloads in a renewed torrent of cleansing fire.

Sherlock didn’t move. Molly knelt beside him on the pavement, pressing her head to his still shoulder, and counted eight more passes, each as earth-shattering as the last.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: The 2nd Law: Isolated System | Muse
Bound and hooded and pressed flat to cold metal, John felt his stomach bounce in time with bed of the lorry. Beneath his head, the chassis groaned as it absorbed the drops and sways of the heavy vehicle. They’d been driving for what felt like hours, but John was well aware of the disorientation created by sensory deprivation.

The army had prepared him for the eventualities of capture and possible torture. The bark of his SERE sergeant echoed loud in his memory: *It’s not a matter of if you’ll break, Watson, but when. Don’t play the hero if you haven't got to. Bide your time and save your strength. Lives will be on the line.*

The tires hit a bump and John thought he might be sick in his hood. It was the last thing he needed and he sucked in a preventative breath, squeezing his eyes closed and concentrating on anything but the nausea.

The vehicle jerked to a halt and there came the muffled popping of gunfire; not the first time it had happened since they set out. It was during these stops that his captors ever spoke, trading low words that John failed to discern over the vibration of the engine. He strained to listen but heard only scuffling and rattling.

What they intended to do with him and why, he couldn’t begin to guess. Half-formed theories tumbled through his brain until the lorry picked up speed again and the nausea returned. John’s rapid breathing elevated into hyperventilation. Scattered stars buzzed beneath his eyelids and burrowed through his skin. By the time he noticed the engine had quieted and the vehicle brought to a permanent stop, the poor breathability of the hood’s weave had rendered him all but delirious.

Metal clanged and he was pulled from the lorry bed, his left shoulder aching from the strain of his hands tied behind his back. Foreign voices warped strangely in John’s ears, the owners nothing but shadows blocking out the pinpoints of light streaming through the hood. Hands grabbed him under each arm and hoisted him until his boots dragged numbly on the ground. They were moving him, John realized, although it felt as though the world itself was shifting while he remained at one fixed point.

Eventually he was set upon his knees and, at last, the hood cinched and withdrew in a wash of cool air.

John squinted. The outside world was brilliantly lit and vaguely spinning. It was also populated by unidentifiable figures garbed from head to toe in white. John knew it wasn’t heaven because they wore dark reflective visors as well, but the absurdity of their existence left him dazed.

Pressure under his chin guided it upward and a smaller, brighter light flashed in each eye, leaving multi-colored spots dancing over John’s retinas.

*“Pupillary response confirmed,”* said a disembodied male voice.

His coat was abruptly peeled off his shoulders and down to his wrists, where the sleeves caught on the plastic zip tie connecting them. There were hands, suddenly; too many hands, pushing him and pulling. His boots came off and his shoulder blades made contact with a hard, flat surface. John tilted
his head in confusion, staggered by the brightness. The first sound of fabric ripping arrived with the sensation of air on the bare skin of his calf. In a flash of panic, John realized they were stripping him.

“No,” he grunted, kicking outward and twisting away. “Stop.”

White gloves pressed him down and the sliver of exposure grew, rising up his leg with the sound of shears on denim. John’s pulse pounded loud in his ears and he struggled as they turned him, slicing away his jumper, his shirt, his undergarments. A loud snap sounded as they severed the zip tie trapping his arms. Cheek pressed to cold tile, he growled and squirmed as the remnants of his coat and shirt vanished with the rest. Something tugged on the hospital band around his right wrist. Voices murmured in the periphery.

Two snips and the wristbands were gone, skin stinging where the stiff paper had worn it raw.

Pinned naked like a rabbit in a snare, John shivered violently against the off-white tile. His army training largely presumed the enemy agent sought to extract strategic information or undermine the subject's loyalties. John had neither to offer, and so his mind strayed to darker motivations: bondage, experimentation, sadistic amusement.

His stomach cramping with fear. He was turned and the blank, shining masks seemed to ripple with oily viscosity, reflecting the distorted image of his own face, scruffy and shaking. A strip burned across the skin of his stomach and the dangling shreds of soiled medical tape fluttered past.

A heavy spray of warm water struck him. John flinched and swore, wrenching one fist free and slinging it toward the murky figures. They glided out of the way with infuriating ease and trapped the weak blow, wrestling his arm down with firm pressure. Water thrummed on the tile and ran into his nose and mouth and eyes, blurring his vision. A faint chemical tang flooded his senses and John coughed through the deluge, sucking down wet lungfuls of air.

Coarse textures scrubbed into the crevices of his skin. John resisted, trying to pull away, fearful that the sharp sensation would spill over into the realm of pain. Synthetic palms held him down, grasping him by the roots of hair and scraping back and forth across his scalp. John braced himself for another attempted choking, heart skittering against the cage of his ribs, but the touch was replaced by a streamer of warmth. Wet hair slopped across his eyes and John let out an involuntary whimper of relief. Whoever they were, they didn’t intend to kill him immediately.

The sound of the water faded. John blinked through the droplets beading on his lashes. Flecks of brown and black grime scummed the tiles around him, left behind by the water as it emptied into a nearby metal floor drain.

The drowse of deep fatigue sank as an anchor through his brain and body. His left arm tremored badly against the slick surface of the tile, the tendons of his shoulder sore. Vapor drifted past his nose, reminiscent of clinic corridors and his medical kit, lying open beside the bathroom sink as he patched up Sherlock’s bleeding face.

John was pulled upright into the light, all the while clinging to the image of Sherlock slouched petulantly on the ledge of the tub. Cold hands thrust John’s head forward, himself lost to the self-satisfaction of dabbing the blood from Sherlock’s split lip. I told you not to rush ahead. Look at this mess. The sound of an electric buzz came to life, followed by the vibration of a razor against John’s throat as they shaved his jaw in methodical fashion. Oh, stop whinging. I had you there, didn’t I? But despite Sherlock’s impervious tone, a thankful flicker passed through his eyes, sending a pulse of tingling warmth up John’s spine. His heartbeat quickened, skipping out its own Morse code of everything he could not say.
He should have kissed him, then. Leant in and let him know his concern was more than that of a doctor or a friend, that seeing him bloodied was like a needle in John’s lungs, unbearable to suffer and impossible to get out. He should have dropped the cotton swab and eased close between his knees, taken his beautiful face between his palms and made him promise, made him promise. No more stupid stunts. Stay alive. Stay alive for me, if no one else, because I cannot do this if you’re not here.

John distantly watched as snarls of coarse beard fell to the floor, matted with dried blood, sticking like wild burs to wet stone.

They moved to the hair on his head after that. A renewed twinge of panic shook him out of his stupor and he attempted to wrest free again, fearing they intended to shave him bald as a means of dehumanization. But as wet clinging strands of grey-blond joined the scraps of beard, he felt the tickle of trimmed hair graze his nape and ears.

Gloved fingers pressed his head downward into a mockery of a bow and began deliberately furrowing the hair along his scalp, as one might search for lice. An intense spotlight ignited overhead, washing out the world into a pale haze of pain. John jerked away from the touch, unable to escape whatever was holding his arms back. They moved to his newly shaven face after that, lifting his chin toward the awful light and rotating his head, checking the skin for something.

“Shelly, get this down,” resonated a male voice. “No signs of concealed wounds. Let’s begin.”

The light shifted – he shifted? – and a chill shivered across the damp expanse of his skin. Air whistled between his teeth, across his parched tongue and into the tight compression of his lungs, and he licked his lips, habitual. White figures moved behind the stabbing light. He was horizontal, resting on some kind of padded surface, felt it give way beneath the hard jut of vertebrae.

Latex palpated his throat, the curve of his bad shoulder. The light was excruciating.

“Fresh contusions. Did they do this?”

A garbled answer came from nearby. The words poured forth, molten, tugging at the limits of John’s hearing. He lifted his head and the environment heaved in a ballet of spiraling colors and sensations. If only he could—

Something blunt pressed into his left side. John grunted as pain shot up through the muscle, spiking beneath his ribs.

“Where did you receive this injury?” demanded the male voice.

His training surfaced, a cogent point of navigation, and he grasped for it. How to identify enemy tactics of ingratiation, sympathy, and pity. How to discern what they wanted and deflect as long as possible. This was different. He had no information of value, no reason to lie, and only more pain to be gained for it.

The source of his mystery wound. He wished he could remember.

“Don’t know,” John rasped, turning his head away.

The crook of a hand forced his chin back into the blinding light. A distorted dark reflection loomed close, and latex pressed again into John’s wound. “Where did you receive this injury?” the voice repeated.

The wet, stinging blur of disorientation seared the corners of his eyes. “Woke up and… I don’t
The question did not come again, though John felt it humming in the air. He shrank against the padding and firm fingers held him still, allowing the thorough probing of the sutures in his abdomen.

“It’s clean and nearly healed,” said a lighter voice. “Made with a straight edge. There’s no tearing and these stitches were done by a practiced hand.”

The heavier voice made a deliberative noise. “Disinfect.”

A cold, wet swab met John’s skin, burning faintly and smelling of sharp chemicals. He growled and pushed back against the hands restraining him, but there was little headway to be gained.

The fingers dug into his shoulder next, rousing the aching scar tissue within the joint. "Where did you receive this injury?"

John sucked in a shrill breath. “Af-Afghanistan.”

There was a lingering pause. John wondered if they believed him.

"Surgical scars," the softer one said. "Old. A few years, maybe."

“Soldier, then?”

The inspection continued with no more direct questions, fingers tracing faded scars and voices murmuring like an itch in his ears. John trembled and endured, waiting for the touch of a blade or snapping of a bone. Were they noting his weaknesses? Plotting how to best get what they wanted? John imagined a dank cell of hard cement, psychological torture, breaking him down bit by bit until his mind was soft as molding clay. It happened to the best of soldiers, no matter the strength of their conviction to hold out. The only difference was that John knew no one would come looking for him.

“All right, Shelly, let’s wrap this up.”

A flow of movement behind the lights, and John girded for the onset of whatever brutalities they had planned. Pain, he had experienced. He knew the agony of bleeding out in a remote desert checkpoint, the strain of marathon nights investigating at Sherlock's side, the terror of hallucinating in a forgotten Dartmoor hollow. None of that compared to the nightmare he’d woken to. None of it prepared him for what he knew was coming.

A figure appeared above him, its shining edges fuzzed by the streaming brightness. John made a last desperate attempt to resist, throwing his last reserve of determination into a punch, a shove, a bite – anything to ward off the beginning of the end. His body had reached its absolute limits, had nothing left but the will to resist, and they’d have to kill him to take it.

But the next thing to touch him was not a sharp point or a piece of frigid metal. He flinched as the weight of a towel settled over him, warm and dry.

A reflective mask peered downward. “John? Is your name John?”

The voice belonged to a woman. Her words staggered him at first, both in their softness and the gentle nature of the inquiry, as one might address a sick child newly confined to a hospital.

There was a sharp pinch at the back of his right hand. John tilted his heavy head, blinking slowly as his eyes followed the long line of an IV tube connected to a medical-grade solution bag, dripping steadily.
A tear of tape came, followed by a gentle pat over the pain in his hand. “Toby says you called yourself John,” said the voice.

As the sensation of infusing liquid crept through his hand, John did not know how to respond. He had been warned about this, about empathy and its effects. But she sounded like the combat nurse he’d woken to at Camp Bastion, after his life had come running out his shoulder and the ring of bullet cracking bone was still fresh in his ears.

Could they be... helping him?

The figure pushed at its visor with thick white fingers. A woman’s face appeared from beneath it, pale and brunette. “Don’t worry, John,” she said, compassion creasing her forehead. "You’re safe here.”

Exhaustion broke like a brittle stalk. Truth or lies, John could not parse it, could not make sense of the discord. He breathed in short gasps, searching, weighing, wanting with all his being to not have to fight. To trust was beyond his abilities, but letting himself fall was another matter entirely.

The light flickered strangely, haloing in erratic white crescents, and what followed came in flashes. A black Velcro cuff constricted his left bicep, hissing air as it took his blood pressure. Unmasked human faces above peeling shapeless bodies. Help slipping on a pair of cotton shorts. Then they were pulling him upright, arms dangling and towel draped about his shoulders, and guiding him to his feet.

Two supported him under each arm, one carrying the IV bag attached to the back of his hand. The room buzzed with noise, some of it probably meant to be speech. The white tiling morphed through a rainbow of patterns until a threshold appeared, and he was urged across it.

The walking part took a great deal of concentration and even then did not meet with much success. A draft of warmer air hit John as the colors and textures around him changed. He dimly identified the long expanse of corridor, figures here and there not wearing white.

The journey was dizzying. John got the sense of solid bodies careening past on either side. He made out shoes, mostly. Black and brown and dirty grey. He sagged like a marionette with its last wire cut, only the forceful diligence beneath each arm keeping him upright.

“Everyone back?” asked a dim, tired voice.

“Safe as you like,” answered John's left side. "A good thing, too. This one wouldn’t have lasted the week.”

“Right, well. Tell Lanner if you need anything...”

The conversation trailed off into the background babble. It was faintly industrial, clicking and whirring and scraping along, and the tired voice drifted away. His legs felt like clockwork gelatin, moving out of habit more than anything.

But then the tired voice returned. "Hold on," it said. “Hold on a second.”

The conveyor belt of floor halted. “Sir?”

“Hold on, just— lift his head, would you?”

A firm hand grabbed John by the chin and twisted his face upward. He blinked through the haze.
He caught a fringe of silver hair and dark, familiar eyes. Wide and staring.

"John?" the man asked, breathlessly stunned, in Greg Lestrade's voice.

He had only the faintest notion of passing out.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Light of Day | Anna Ternheim
"You should cut your hair," Sherlock said.

He was picking through a box of sample slides and holding up every third or fourth to check against the light. A small heap of those that met his approval were piling up on the worktop. Molly paused in sorting the lab notes and glanced at the wool-clad line of his back.

"I like it long," she said.

Sherlock turned, the box of unsatisfactory slides rattling in his hand. As he swept past her, he reached out to tug demonstrably on the plait that spilled from beneath her pale knit cap. "So do the walkers. And the brigands. And the—"

Molly swatted his hand away. "I'm not cutting it."

Sherlock let out a dreary sigh and dropped the box in its place amongst the rest of their collection. Numbering twelve in total, the boxes contained the majority of the sample material they'd gathered from across London. They would be staying after he left for Cambridge. It was far too much for one person to carry and hope to make good time.

The hum of a small generator filled the lab. The wiring job was slipshod at best, done ages ago by torchlight when Sherlock first expressed his need for a working laboratory space. Molly had meant to shore up the connections, but there were samples to process and data to evaluate, and she'd never quite found the time. The lights functioned and the equipment ran, and she supposed that was all she could ask for, under the circumstances.

Sherlock spent more time in the lab than she did, anyway, and he'd never seen fit to fix it.

"Do you want all this?" Molly asked, ruffling the thick stack of dog-eared notes.

Sherlock frowned fractionally. "I'm not sure it's wise to separate it, after everything we went through to get it."

"These measurements could contain invaluable data for the scientists in Cambridge."

Sherlock came forward and pressed the stack toward her. "That’s assuming I’m successful. It’s a gamble at best, going to Cambridge. I’d prefer if you kept it safe."

Molly nodded. "I’ll bring it to you when you’re settled in a proper lab, then."

The corner of Sherlock’s mouth flexed in what might have been appreciation.

Molly neatly squared the reports and placed them in one of the boxes on the counter before gazing out over the remaining bits and bobs littering in the lab counters. "What about the rest of this rubbish?"

"It’s not all rubbish," Sherlock said.

Molly wandered to a worktop and picked up parts of what appeared to be a disassembled portable heater. The pieces all looked rather useless, having been sacrificed to keep the lab’s power up and
running.

Nearby, three small devices rested on a tray, looking something like miniature walkie talkies.

“What’s this?” Molly asked, picking up one of the devices. It was tidily constructed and she flipped it round in her hand. There was a black switch on one side.

Sherlock came over. "They're drawn to sound, aren't they? I thought perhaps they'd behave something like a dog. Repelled by high frequencies."

"Does it work?"

"Not exactly as I'd hoped."

Molly glanced up questioningly.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll show you.”

Molly followed him into the coat locker next door, where their current guest was being held. Officially, he was Sample 22. Molly called him Tooey because he hadn’t any identification when they found him. She kept that bit mostly to herself. Sherlock wasn’t keen on naming them.

They’d arranged a sort of pen for him out of the steel lockers. Molly supposed he’d been decomposing about three weeks; his hair was falling out, and his limbs were growing bloodied from running into the fencing of his little area. Most of the time he stood hunched and gurgling to himself. The idea was to collect active samples from his brain over time, and he already had a number of holes bored into his skull by power drill for that purpose. None of them seemed to faze Tooey in the slightest.

The lights were dim inside Tooey’s pen. Molly heard him hissing faintly somewhere in the shadowed recesses. Sherlock nodded to her.

Molly flicked the device's black switch. A light on top turned green, but otherwise nothing appeared to be happening.

Sherlock lifted a hand. "Wait for it."

Not three seconds later, something pounded against the nearest locker, rocking it on its base. Molly yelped and jumped back, afraid it was going to fall over entirely. Tooey was growling as viciously as she’d ever heard and reaching between the planes of metal, desperately clawing for them.

"It doesn’t repel them," Sherlock sedately said. "It attracts them."

Molly hit the switch again and tucked the device into her coat pocket, but doing so failed to dissuade Tooey’s attentions. His milk-white eyes shone wetly and he bared his chipped teeth to expose raw, bloodied gums. Molly had never seen him so riled up, not even when they were intentionally making noise to test his sensory limits.

"We can’t leave him here,” Molly said. “After you go.”

Sherlock nodded his agreement. “Perhaps it’s time to take our final sample.”

He picked up the long metal rod they used to prod Tooey around. The thin, sharp steel shone in the sparse light as Sherlock lifted it. Tooey didn’t register the danger at all. He chomped obliviously at Molly, hissing and sputtering, and Sherlock drove the rod directly into the base of his brain cavity.
Tooey went limp, and Sherlock yanked out the metal in a slick slide of decaying bone and brain. Tooey slumped to the floor.

Molly fixed Tooey with a regretful frown. Whoever he was, he deserved better than this.

Sherlock examined the end of the rod. Excellent bits of sample matter clung to the end, and as he studied them a shadow of his old curiosity returned to his eyes.

Despite the chaos, it seemed there was still one mystery worth solving. The most important case the great detective had ever taken: unlocking the secrets of a biological pathogen capable of reanimating the dead.

From the lowliest atom to the most complex of ecological systems, all of nature obeyed a set of fundamental laws. A scientific explanation must govern the behavior of any observable phenomena, Sherlock was fond of telling her, and once discovered the phenomena could be tested, replicated, and ultimately counteracted.

The pathogen at hand, however, was unlike anything Molly had ever encountered. They’d investigated all the usual suspects: microbes, viruses, fungi, parasites. When those hadn’t turned up any explanations, they’d moved onto the less obvious causes. Prions? A form of encephalitis? Rabies? Necrosis? Hallucinogenic trances? Some modified version of leprosy? The wrath of God?

It had to be related to something. New diseases didn't just pop up out of nowhere. There was nothing remotely like it in the literature.

As far as they’d determined, the pathogen invaded the brain in a similar manner to meningitis. Soon after the adrenal glands began to hemorrhage. The brain entered shutdown, followed shortly after by the organs. Respiration and circulation failed. Not long after, death arrived. Resurrection times for the infected seemed to vary; the shortest Molly had witnessed was forty-five minutes, but it typically required several hours for the biologically dead to rise once more.

Whatever the cause, it seemed to restart the baser brain functions: eating, moving, reacting to stimuli. Destruction of the brainstem was the only permanent method to neutralize a walker.

With enough time, with enough data, they would figure it out. The primary question was whether they’d remain alive long enough to see that day.

“It would be easier,” Molly said.

Sherlock had located an unused slide in one of the locker bins. “What would be easier?” he said, holding the glass to the light to check its cleanliness.

“If it had been an asteroid or global warming or a nuclear winter like everyone always said. If we knew our species was doomed.” She looked at him. “I have hope, Sherlock. Living with hope is the worst part of all.”

Sherlock wiped a speck of brain onto the slide and hummed. “Precisely why I don’t bother.”

They returned to the lab. Sherlock angled the slide between his fingers as they walked, as if already scrutinizing it for the critical piece of evidence that might unravel the whole mystery. They hadn’t
much luck before, and there was no reason to think things would change this time around, but it
might be the last time Molly had an opportunity to discuss the evidence at hand with Sherlock before
he left for good. Surely any researchers at Cambridge would be able to find what a lone pathologist
and chemist could not. For all she knew, they’d already begun synthesizing an antidote for the
infected or an inoculation for the healthy. Perhaps all they needed was a key piece of data that her
and Sherlock’s studies could provide. It was an encouraging thought.

Her optimism died when she saw what was waiting in the lab.

There were six of them, all men. They wore grungy jackets and dirty trousers. Their boots were
stained with dried walker blood, and they were each armed with an automatic rifle. At the fore, a
handsome man with short blondish-brown hair lounged against worktop where their boxes of slides
rested. He held a lit cigarette.

“Sherlock,” Molly nervously said.

“Sherlock Holmes, isn’t it?” said the man with the cigarette. He brought it to his lips and lifted an
eyebrow. “Not Shezza? Or have I got it wrong again?”

Sherlock’s face had gone stony. “Molly, meet the Colonel,” he calmly said.

An icy sense of terror seized inside Molly’s chest. This was the man that had mutilated one of the
Met officers and probably countless others. What was he doing in a lab at Bart’s, of all places?

The Colonel pushed off from the worktop and sauntered Sherlock’s way. He didn’t have a gun
drawn, but the weapons of his associates were more than enough to keep Sherlock from drawing his.
The Colonel eyed Sherlock dubiously up and down, then reached forward and slid the gun from the
holster at Sherlock’s waist.

He inspected the weapon, his blue eyes bright with interest. “Ah, yes. Death wish, wasn’t it?”

A livid tinge of crimson spread across Sherlock’s face as he watched the Colonel handling John’s
gun. He didn’t react, however, as the Colonel opened his jacket to reveal an empty shoulder holster
on his left side. He stowed the weapon there.

Molly’s hand twitched for the knife at her belt. The Colonel caught the movement and clucked his
tongue chidingly.

“None of that, now, miss,” the Colonel said. “To the floor with it. Both of you.”

Her gaze anxiously darted to Sherlock for direction. He nodded, ever so slightly.

Molly pulled the blade out from its sheath and let it clatter to the floor. Sherlock did the same with his
own knife, the torch, and the walkie talkie.

Their obedience seemed to please the Colonel. “What’s all this, then?” the Colonel asked, glancing
round at the boxed slides and reports. His face had a lightness to it, as if they’d invited them round
for tea and wasn’t sure where they’d stashed the biscuits.

“Research,” Molly said.

He looked almost amused. “Research?”

“We’re studying them,” Molly went on. Her voice shook. “To find a cure.”

His followers, guns still trained at Molly and Sherlock, didn’t laugh along. The Colonel began sifting through the papers and slides with one hand.

He looked up, grinning. “There is no cure, miss. There’s only me.”

The Colonel pulled a lighter from his trouser pocket and flicked on the flame, then tossed it on top of the stack of reports. The dry paper instantly caught fire, licking high into the air.

“No!” Molly cried.

Sherlock had to grab her to stop her from dipping her hands into the live flame. Hours and days and weeks of work curling to embers before her eyes. Charts and data and all the effort they’d poured into stopping the death throes of the world as they knew it. Molly sobbed as blackened wisps floated upward on the warm drafts, Sherlock’s long arms gripped tightly to her coat.

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The Colonel and his men drove them at gunpoint into the darkened halls of St. Bart’s. Outside the lab, the only light came from the glow of the overcast sky through the hospital’s tall windows.

Hands on top of her head, Molly breathed long shaking breaths through her nose as she followed the shape of Sherlock’s wool coat through the failing light of the corridors. The gunmen ushered them up a set of stairs, and Molly tried not to panic. Up was not good. Up was not out. The higher they went, the harder it would be to escape whatever the Colonel had planned.

"I'll be honest with you,” the Colonel was explaining as they walked. “We had eyes out for that monstrosity of a tank. But what should my men see instead? The two of you, zipping around on that little bike of yours. When word reached me that you'd gone inside the hospital and hadn't come out again— well. I knew I had to pay a visit myself."

“If you were in want of proper kindling, you need only have asked,” Sherlock muttered to himself.

The Colonel eyed Sherlock dubiously as they reached the upper floor. He flicked the nub of his cigarette into the dimness. “Funny man, are you? I can be funny, too.”

They found their way to an abandoned lecture room lined with broad windowpanes along the far wall. A dusty chalkboard hung behind the professor’s lectern. In one corner was written a note: *Friday exam cancelled*

A messy jumble of chairs and tables filled the remainder of the room. It was as if the students had risen from their seats suddenly, without a thought to push them back in. Several personal bags and knapsacks were still situated beneath tables and hanging from seatbacks.

The armed men fanned about the room, one by each of the two doors, one at the windows—

“Fuck,” the man at the window exclaimed as he peered outside.

"What is it?" the Colonel asked.

The man at the window looked pale as he motioned the Colonel and the rest over. They went to see what was the matter and the men swore in surprise, recoiling. The Colonel, however, simply turned
and smiled back at Sherlock.

The Colonel cracked the lock of the nearest window and pushed it outward. It swung fully open, and then Molly heard it: the cacophonous, unmistakable snarling of dozens upon dozens – perhaps hundreds – of walkers, all clawing and growling and gurgling in throbbing unison just outside St. Bart’s.

“Someone’s angry they weren’t invited to the party,” the Colonel mused. “And it’s not just me.”

Sherlock’s eyes went enormous. “Oh God,” he whispered.

“Sherlock?” Molly asked.

He looked at her in horror. “The device, Molly! Shut it off! Shut it off before we're overrun!”

She hadn’t even remembered it was still in her pocket. Molly scrambled for it, and sure enough as she pulled it from her coat the light on top was green. God, had it been on since they took care of Tooey? Was it strong enough to attract walkers through the walls of a building? Apparently it was. She hit the switch but the light stayed on. Was it broken?

"Drop it!" Sherlock said.

She did, and he smashed it with his boot until it shattered into a dozen chunks of plastic casing and wires.

The Colonel's eyes flicked down to the crushed device and up again to Sherlock's panicked face. "I was wrong. You did invite them. No bother; it'll liven up the proceedings significantly.” He nodded to his men. “Make them comfortable.”

They were each seated one of the wooden chairs and tied in place with cord the Colonel's men had brought. Molly bit her lip as they tightened her wrists to the armrests and her waist to the backrest. Sherlock sat with a grimace on his face, fringe falling across his eyes.

The Colonel pulled up a seat in front of Sherlock and leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs and his face the very image of reasonableness. "Now. I think you know perfectly well why I'm here," the Colonel said. “Tell me the location of your safe house, and I'll allow you to live.”

Sherlock glared at him.

The Colonel tilted his head beseechingly. “It’s not so difficult, now. You open your mouth, say a few words I want to hear, and we all go home without any traumatic incidents.”

“I think I’ll pass,” Sherlock said.

“Passing isn’t an option,” said the Colonel. “You tell me, or I kill you. Those are your options.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Sherlock scoffed. “You’ll kill us anyway once you’re done with us, and then you’ll kill everyone down there who isn’t willing to come over to your side. Maybe everyone altogether if they put up enough of a resistance. Do what you like, but I won’t have that on my conscience.”

The Colonel punched Sherlock hard across the left side of his jaw. Sherlock’s head snapped aside and Molly winced at the brutality of it.

The Colonel sat back calmly. “I’m sat here trying to work with you and you’re making this more
difficult than it needs to be.”

Sherlock gradually rolled his head back round. He was bleeding from the side of his mouth and his cheek bore a red patch where the Colonel’s fist had connected.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Sherlock said, thick-tongued.

He pulled Sherlock’s face up by his chin. The playfulness was gone from the Colonel’s eyes, replaced by something conniving and predatory.

"I've seen men break in ways you could not possibly imagine,” he said. “And the thing I've learned, after all this time, is how to identify the weak link. I don't think you'll tell me what I want to know, Mr. Holmes, but I can't say the same for her."

The threat shattered whatever defiance lit Sherlock’s eyes. He turned his bloody face to look at Molly, but it was already too late. There was an awful scraping sound as one of the gunman grabbed Sherlock by the back of his chair and began dragging him toward the open window.

“No! Stop!’ Molly cried out.

“He had his turn,” the Colonel said, standing up and wiping his knuckles on his trousers. “Now it’s yours.”

“Don’t do it, Molly,” Sherlock urged. The gunman at his side yanked his chair up onto the sill and leaned it out the open window. “Don’t say a word!”

The mass of walkers outside were thudding and snarling and hissing. God, how many were there? Too many to kill. Too many to survive. Tears welled in Molly’s eyes as the Colonel drew in close.

"Darling," he purred. “Where is it?"

She spat at him, just like she'd seen in the movies, but the glob of phlegm landed pitifully on the shoulder of his jacket rather than in his face.

The Colonel raised an eyebrow. "Under different circumstances, I might actually admire your spunk. However, I'm afraid my patience isn't what it was. Tell me, or he dies."

"I won't," she said, voice cracking through the tears. "I won't tell you."

“That’s not what I want to hear,” he scolded. “Last chance. Where is your hideout?"

Molly nearly said it. She wanted to say it, but Sherlock was shaking his head at her and she couldn’t bear thinking of all the people that would come into harm’s way. Sherlock was right about what the Colonel would do. Sherlock might have a death wish, but there was a time and a place to take a stand. The Colonel needed them alive to get what he wanted. He was bluffing, as all cowards did.

“Fuck you!” Molly growled.

The Colonel stood back, visibly shocked by the fierceness of her tone. He blinked momentarily, and there was a fleeting instant where a glimpse of respect came through in his eyes. Molly puffed up her chest and felt the tears cooling on her cheeks. She was made of stronger stuff than even she had known.

Then the Colonel looked to the gunman beside Sherlock. “Do it,” he said.

He pushed, and Sherlock's chair overbalanced.
Sherlock's eyes went wide as, for one sickening moment, he hung suspended in perfect weightlessness. Time strung out, whittling down to an infinite span in the space between two heartbeats. Gravity took over, and just like that the window held nothing but empty air.

"Sherlock!" Molly screamed.

But the gunman beside Sherlock was gone, too, and the Colonel and the others rushed to the sill to peer down below. Horrible, ravenous noises emerged; ripping and tearing and muffled cries.

The Colonel frowned and looked up at Molly.

She was sobbing again as he came to sit in front of her.

“Now,” said the Colonel. "Shall we try again?"

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Civilian | Wye Oak
“The problem, as I see it, Mr. Holmes, is that you are not willing to face facts,” said Lady Smallwood.

Mycroft glanced at Lady Smallwood down the long meeting table. Her hands were folded atop the polished oak and her gaze level beneath the greying wisps of her tightly cinched hair. Only the slight vibration of one bouncing foot gave away her agitation.

“The facts are not in question,” Mycroft calmly replied. “It’s what to do with those facts.”

The various heads around the table nodded their agreement. Lady Smallwood was one of three MPs at hand, all of them minor political voices prior to the scattering of Parliament. D.I. Dimmock of Scotland Yard was looking down and pretending to take notes. Her Majesty’s Armed Forces were represented by three majors, two colonels and a brigadier, each from an entirely separate regiment and service. Several prominent bankers and businessmen rounded out those present. The fluorescent lighting gave them all a somewhat sickly pallor against the grey concrete walls of Pindar’s lowest level.

Mycroft stood, tugging his suit jacket straight, and pointed at the graph image projected on the large screen taking up one wall. “Pindar has crossed nine-hundred percent capacity,” he said. “Our most conservative estimates give us but a few short weeks before supply shortages begin to take a severe toll on the quality of our operations, and that’s in the unlikely event our population level remains static. Energy rationing has already cut into our surveillance capabilities. The water recyclers can no longer keep up with demand. The air filtration system is in need of constant maintenance, and our food stores, which were planned to last five years, are already running short. It is agreed by everyone here that we must utilize these last weeks to prepare our departure. This fact is not in dispute.”

“How can you say such a thing!” admonished Lady Smallwood. “We cannot leave these people to the wolves. They’re our citizens and our charge.”

Mycroft nodded his agreement. “Beyond Lady Smallwood’s concern for the health and safety of our guests, the problem has already been exacerbated beyond the point of recovery. Discharging everyone in the garage section would buy us another few months, at the most, but I believe it is in our interest to resettle before winter approaches rather than hope we make it through unscathed. The question, then, becomes where do we go?”

“North, obviously,” said D.I. Dimmock, looking up from his scribbly notepad. “It’s where everyone else went during the evacuations, isn’t it? The Met and the army will have established a safe location for resettlement.”

The militarily-inclined around the table murmured their approval of the idea.

“Hold on, what makes you think it’s any safer up there?” Wilkes asked. “For all we know that’s where the bloody things came from in the first place. It’s not as if we’ve heard from anyone, is it?”

Dimmock shot him a skeptical look. “What would you recommend, then?”
“France!” said Wilkes. “They’ve found a cure. We ought to head for France.”

“A rumor,” scoffed Major Hargreave. “Who says there’s any truth to it? We’ve heard as little from the Continent as we have from York!”

“I’d rather take my chances there than with this bloody useless lot!” Wilkes snapped.

“Mr. Wilkes,” Mycroft cut in. “A civil tone will be kept or I will have you removed from the proceedings.”

Sebastian Wilkes folded his arms and glowered in his seat.

“I still think we should head for the airports,” recommended Lady Smallwood. “We’ll fly out and head for Scandinavia after the royal fleet. We’ve our duty to preserve the government in any way we can.”

“Your plan is noble, but impractical,” Mycroft said. “Even if we found a commercial pilot, a working craft, and enough fuel to get us there, I assure you that we are all that’s left of Her Majesty’s Government. If any of the royal family is still alive, security protocols have taken them beyond our reach. We are the stewards of the nation. Our duty is to our territorial soil.”

“Where do you think we should go, then?” inquired Dimmock.

Mycroft’s gaze flicked among those seated. “Where the best of British minds have already begun unraveling the secrets of biological agents,” he said. “I propose that we head for Dartmoor.”

“Baskerville?” gasped Lady Smallwood.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. “Where else? It’s in a remote corner of the country, heavily fortified and armed, with an existing outfit of military personnel and scientists. I cannot think of a place more ideally suited to both protection and research.”

“No offense intended, Mr. Holmes,” said Colonel Douglas, “but that place sounds like a nightmare. Who wants to spend the rest of their days in Devon? I’d rather find my wife and children in York.”

“Is there any reason why we couldn’t— split up?” asked Wilkes. “I’d feel much better headed to France.”

“I’d be off tomorrow if I could,” said Lady Smallwood. “Especially with that madman out there killing our people.”

“The madman out there?” grumbled Dimmock. “Did you not hear about Anderson? Shot through the leg last night by one of our own officers!”

“It’s a matter of lax discipline, that,” said Colonel Douglas. “Inherent instability in the chain of command.”

“I’d heard it was an accident,” added Lady Smallwood.

Wilkes frowned. “If the coppers are shooting each other up, I don’t want any part of it. We’d do best to leave them behind when we go.”

“Hold on, what’d you say?” Dimmock said.

“Just what everyone’s already thinking,” Wilkes replied.
Those gathered began talking over one another, arguing and muttering and defending their own points. Mycroft sighed and rubbed at his forehead.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Mycroft loudly interrupted, letting his internal frustration rise up and get the better of him. "We don’t have the luxury of this dallying."

They silenced themselves, some more shame-faced than others. Mycroft glared at them. Perhaps the last governing body in Europe, reduced to schoolyard squabbles.

"We are not leaving anyone behind if it can be helped,” Mycroft flatly said. “We are the provisional Government of the United Kingdom. We do not bow to threats, to terrorists, or even the unliving. For the sake of the continuation of this government, we are leaving as soon as can be arranged. It is now in your hands to decide where that might be.”

"Whichever option we choose,” said Brigadier Youghal, “an evacuation operation of this scale will take significant coordination. Transport for hundreds, supplies, not to mention the difficult prospect of breaking out of London. Every probe we’ve launched reports the walkers are densest on the outskirts of the city. Even getting to Heathrow would be no small feat.”

“We’ll lose people,” said Lady Smallwood.

“We’re already losing people,” Dimmock reminded her.

They all shared solemn looks. No one seemed eager to call for a firm proposal.

Mycroft sighed. “I can allow you a short time to consider the choices before a vote is cast. We will reconvene tomorrow and form a decision. I urge you to consider the benefits of Dartmoor.”

Wilkes cleared his throat. “I must inform you, Mr. Holmes, that I intend to head to France to find the cure whether it means parting ways or not.”

Mycroft eyed him coldly. “That is your prerogative, Mr. Wilkes, and I wish you luck in doing so. For the rest of you, however, I must offer my sincerest warning against splitting up. If we are to function as a governing body, we must stay together. I will not see unfounded fear destroy what we have fought to preserve.” Mycroft looked up and nodded. “Good day, ladies and gentlemen.”

The men and women stood and began filing out of the meeting room. As Mycroft watched them go Dimmock tucked his notepad under one arm and approached him with a furtive look.

“I want you to know that I’m prepared to support the Dartmoor plan,” Dimmock said in a low voice. “Publicly. And I can bring along a large portion of the Met to your side. They’re bitterly divided over what happened to Anderson last night.”

“And on whose side do you fall in that quarrel?” asked Mycroft.

His eyes shifted. “There’s talk of new leadership. Disfavor with Lestrade. So I’ve heard.”

Mycroft regarded him carefully. Dimmock was a buffoon, but he was a buffoon willing to crawl beneath Mycroft’s thumb and stay there for the foreseeable future. No group had been as troublesome as the Metropolitan Police since they’d arrived in Pindar, and Mycroft was not the least bit unaware that those disturbances had in large part to do with Lestrade. His refusal to follow orders to the letter had got more than one person killed. He swelled Pindar’s ranks with new additions and openly enabled Sherlock’s willful behavior. If someone more controllable were to take Lestrade’s place, Mycroft’s tasks would be made all the easier.
“I would be most grateful for any persuasion on my behalf,” Mycroft told Dimmock. “Most grateful.”

Dimmock seemed to get the message. He grinned lightly and nodded before following the other committee members out.

Anthea was waiting by the door to escort Mycroft into his adjoining office. Inside, the same drab concrete walls encircled a sturdy desk, rows of Cold War-era cabinets, and a youthful portrait of Her Majesty. The office was considerably less roomy than Mycroft’s other discreet offices around London. The original intention was for the Prime Minister to be based here in the event of a disaster, where he or she might make the decisions necessary to combat whatever foreign power threatened the nation. Mycroft took a seat behind his desk.

Pindar first broke ground beneath Pimlico during the rebuilding efforts after the Blitz. Government planners realized the potential for the building project to be masked by topside construction. After forty years of clandestine work and another fifteen spent outfitting the structure with the latest technology, Pindar should have been more than ready to take on the challenges of a biological calamity.

And now here they were, trapped like rabbits in a warren for fear of the wolves outside. Of course, Mycroft had made his own share of blunders. Believing that the city could be recovered had been the first, but his gravest error was in keeping everyone within Pindar for so long, even after outside contact amongst government channels broke down. Every day they tarried underground, convincing themselves they were invulnerable, was another irretrievable step away from the world as it had once existed.

The only upside was that Sherlock was safe, or at least as safe as Mycroft could make him. It was true he required a short leash or else threatened to break off the chain entirely, but Mycroft was well practiced in giving him just enough rope to provide the illusion of freedom.

The unfortunate loss of John was the only significant complication. Initially, Mycroft had held no doubt that Sherlock would emerge stronger in the aftermath. His brother was irritatingly resourceful about that sort of thing, but as time passed and Sherlock withered like a plant cut off from the light, Mycroft had begun to consider the flaws in his analysis.

Sherlock had long been coddled and catered to by their indulgent parents, and Mycroft knew he was no less at fault. He’d thought the doctor a good companion for Sherlock in the beginning; a tempering presence and reminder of a world separate from the over-dramatic, flamboyant one in which his brother chose to reside. But John was soon seduced by Sherlock’s fantastical escapades, and before Mycroft knew it he was sending Sherlock regular reminders not to get involved. He was already involved, of course. Perhaps it was for the best that those cancerous feelings get rooted out. Mycroft now wondered if they hadn’t grown too deep for removal.

Anthea returned and set a dark grey mug of tea beside him.

“D.I. Lestrade is here for you, sir,” she said.

Mycroft hummed and steepled his fingers. His next meeting wasn’t for forty-five minutes. “Inform him I am occupied presently.”

“I have, sir. He says it’s an urgent matter.”

“It’s always an urgent matter.” Mycroft waved her away. “Tell him I’m busy.”
“He says it’s of particular importance to your brother,” Anthea said.

Mycroft mulled over the plea. He could not afford to ignore anything to do with Sherlock, no matter how trivial.

“Let him in,” he said at last. “Five minutes, I’d say, then step in to announce I am needed elsewhere.”

Anthea nodded. “Of course, sir.”

She left the room. Only a moment later, Detective Inspector Lestrade barreled his way through the door.

Lestrade was huffing to catch his breath, having apparently run all the way down to the third level of Pindar. His silvery hair was a mess, as if he’d been running his fingers through it repeatedly, and the anxious look in his eyes confirmed that something deeply disturbing had arisen. He was more than shocked. He was horrified.

Mycroft stood immediately.


Weighted silence settled over the room as they stared at one another.

Mycroft frowned, the barest downturn of his mouth. "Impossible," he said.

Lestrade pointed violently upward. "Well, he’s up in the fucking quarantine cells right now, so I don’t know what to tell you!"

Mycroft turned. He strode toward the door on the east side of the office and pushed it open. On the other side, the surveillance room was lit was an eerie glow of dozens of screens. Most of them were trained on the garage and the other public spaces of Pindar, such as the canteen and the infirmary. Others showed empty alleys and roads upon the street level, devoid of movement save for the occasional walker ambling slowly across the screen. Three technicians were on shift for monitor duty.

"Power to grid 63C," Mycroft snapped. "Now."

The technicians rushed to flip the correct switches, rerouting the trickle of power in the compound to the cameras in the holding cells. One of the television screens flickered to life and rendered the contents of the cement-walled cells in muted shades of green.

All of them were empty, save for one. A man lay, unmoving, upon the bed in Cell 5, with a blanket shrouding most of his figure. A saline drip on a portable metal rack fed into the back of his limp right hand.

Unconvinced, Mycroft approached the faded image.

"We don't think he's infected," Lestrade said, "but security isn't willing to move him to the infirmary without another few hours of observation. He’s dehydrated and half-starved and he fainted as soon as he saw me." Lestrade rubbed a distracted hand through his hair and paced. "Jesus. Jesus. I tracked down the retrieval team and they said they found him at the Baker Street trap. God, he went home. He went home and we weren’t… Where the hell did he come from? How? Sherlock said he was dead, for Christ's sake! This isn't something I'd expect him to get wrong."
The man's head was turned away and the angle of the footage was less than preferable.

"The left shoulder," Mycroft said.

"What?"

Mycroft turned, his face going stern. "*The left shoulder.* Is there a bullet wound?"

Lestrade scowled. “You don’t believe me when I say it’s him? I saw the bloody man every week for two goddamn years. But if that’s not good enough, *here.*”

The D.I. dug around in his pocket and produced two stained paper strips. He waved them about until Mycroft reached out to take one.

Mycroft held it up to the light of the monitor. It was a hospital-issue wristband and there, printed plainly: *Watson, John H.*

"God, and Sherlock," Lestrade said, clapping a hand to his forehead. “All this time... *God.* It's a bloody miracle."

Mycroft crumpled the wristband in his fist and looked up. "There are no such things as miracles," he said. “Only coincidences and oversights."

Lestrade shook his head, eyes wide. He looked rather dizzy. "What are we going to tell Sherlock? Jesus, when he gets back..."

"You may return to your duties, Detective Inspector," Mycroft smoothly said. "I'll take on the responsibility of informing him. Brother to brother."

Lestrade nodded distantly. "Right. Okay, right."

Mycroft ushered him back into the office, closing the door to the surveillance room behind them. “You’ve done excellent work,” he said to Lestrade, trying not to sound as strained as he felt. “Obviously these little field trips were worth something.”

“God, no kidding,” Lestrade said.

“Keep me informed of any developments. As soon as he is capable of answering questions, I’d like to know."

“Sure. I’ll just... I’ll go and interview the crew again,” Lestrade said. “See what else I’ve missed that can help piece this together.”

Mycroft offered him a veneer of a smile. “It’s much appreciated.”

Lestrade nodded robotically and turned to leave. As the door clicked shut, Mycroft spent a few silent moments considering the alarming nature of this turn of events.

“Anthea,” he said.

She was there at his side like a shadow. “Yes, sir?”

Mycroft gravely regarded her. "When Sherlock and Miss Hooper return, my brother is to be immediately confined to his room. Zero outside contact until I am present. He is not to know, under any circumstance, that Doctor Watson is in our custody."
Apocalypse Radio: Everybody Wants to Rule the World (cover) | Lorde
He wasn’t Mycroft’s usual driver. He wore a camouflage hat and a combat uniform, and kept an automatic rifle propped beside him in the passenger seat. Of course the vehicle wasn’t Mycroft’s usual black sedan, either; it was a military Land Rover outfitted with bulletproof glass and bomb-resistant paneling.

The vehicle bounced along the streets of London and Mycroft glanced at Anthea in the other seat. She was texting rapidly on her mobile, coordinating relevant parties per Mycroft’s instruction. He had been told Pindar would be ready for habitation as soon as they arrived. But given the turbulent nature of present circumstances, such assurances could no longer be relied upon. There was no backup plan. Not anymore. He had waited too long.

Mycroft cleared his throat, his hand flexing for want of an umbrella handle. “The Lord Chancellor?” he asked.

“Helicopter departed three minutes ago,” Anthea said. “Satellite control is having trouble tracking anything beyond London airspace. We should receive confirmation once his transport reaches the Atlantic carrier group.”

If they reach the carrier group, Mycroft nearly appended. He clasped his hands, all too aware he was exposing his discomfort. “Any response from the Prime Minister’s detail?”

She glanced up. “Still nothing, sir.”

“The Home Office?”

“No word yet. Rendezvous instructions are being broadcast on all remaining government channels.”

Her Majesty’s household had got away. That was all that mattered. Ministers might be re-elected, but the lineage of the monarchy could not be so easily replaced. The question now came to the state of Her Majesty’s realm at such a time as she returned. If she returned. If there was anything to which she could return.

Mycroft gazed out the window at the smoke-streaked sky. "Keep trying," he said.

The state of London was difficult to discern beyond the obstruction of the escort convoy. Phone lines were down and the mobile networks were intermittent at best. Most of the city’s remaining population had concentrated in the western boroughs, attempting to find transport out of the city. The bus lines had stopped running. The motorways were crammed. Reports from the few surviving military units within the city had grown erratic. Those key central locations secured and cleared now formed a tiny sanctuary crumbling around the edges. The unliving increased exponentially with every ticking hour, and the fall was coming. Mycroft had waited too long.

It is not a time for panic, Mycroft told himself. Panic is for the irrational. Panic is for the weak.

The Land Rover screeched to a sudden halt, jack-knifing in the middle of the street. Mycroft rocked violently in his seat, thrusting out one hand to keep from bashing his head into the doorframe. Anthea collided with him and her mobile went thumping somewhere below the seat. Mycroft pushed himself upright in time to see the driver, Collins, extracting his rifle and taking aim out the driver’s side.
window. Shouts of "Contact!" rose up from the soldiers manning the other convoy vehicles.

“What the bloody—" Mycroft cursed.

“Keep your head down, sir,” Collins said, one eye pressed to his rifle’s sight.

Mycroft turned round to gain a more dignified seat in the footwell. “This road was supposed to be clear, captain,” he said coolly. “I ordered it clear.”

Collins spared him a dubious look. “With all due respect, sir, I am under orders to protect you at all costs, but I will not hesitate to knock you unconscious if you continue to talk. Noise attracts them.”

The rapid popping of gunfire echoed down the street. Mycroft tugged his suit jacket into a reasonable state of order, given his scrunched position. Something was shaking and he looked round to see it was Anthea beside him, huddling within the adjacent footwell. Her usual calm and collected demeanor had turned suddenly frightened. Her eyes were wet. Mycroft stared at her, shocked.

The mounted gun on the vehicle in front of them lit up like a demolition hammer. Mycroft plugged his ears yet each expelled round resonated like a small explosion within his chest cavity, his bones, his brain. Metal rattled and men shouted and the firing became a chorus of weapons.

Mycroft had experienced live ammunition fire only a handful of times, during arranged demonstrations at MI-5 training facilities. There was a reason he left the fieldwork to others. Side arms were no longer a gentleman’s weapon; that distinction belonged to tactical satellites, CCTV streams, and real-time intelligence briefings.

The Land Rover rocked and Mycroft caught a flash of camouflage in the driver’s seat. Collins was out of the vehicle, running off toward God-knew-where. Despite the pounding of his heart, Mycroft experienced a surge of indignation at being abandoned by his designated bodyguard and managed to pull himself half onto the seat. He dug into the self-armament kit attached to the base of the seat and withdrew the Browning semi-automatic pistol.

Anthea was crying softly on her knees. Mycroft clutched his weapon and glanced nervously toward the windows. His tie was abominably tight. Rounds popped all around them. The tops of army helmets swooped past the smoky sky. The vehicle swayed again and he didn't suppose it was Collins returning.

A man abruptly slammed into the side of the Land Rover, and Anthea screamed behind him. But it wasn't a man. Not any longer.

It was a gruesome thing; shuddering and putrescent, mouth drooping wide, peeling fingers splayed. It rasped horribly as its blood-ridden face smeared streaks of crimson across the pane. Mycroft looked into its milk-white eyes and saw absolutely nothing staring back.

This was how it was to end? Each of them a soulless reanimation, driven to the basest of human instinct? Eradicated utterly as a rational species?

His finger quivered on the Browning's trigger. He had waited far too long.

Two shots rang out in quick succession, and the unliving creature’s head burst apart in a shower of bone and brain matter. Its dark hair dragged greasily through the spatter as it slid slumping down the side of the Land Rover.

The door swung open. It was Collins.
"Sir?" he said, reaching out. “Are you all right, sir?"

Mycroft glanced blearily around at the overcast daylight. The soldiers were patrolling between the vehicles, poking the remnants of the bullet-riddled unliving.

"Yes," Mycroft said. “Yes, I'm quite fine."

Two soldiers helped him out of the Land Rover, and Anthea as well. He was still holding the Browning. Collins reached for it.

"Safety's on, sir," he said, snapping the catch back and forth. "See?"

Mycroft blinked. "Oh. Yes. I'll remember that the next time."

It was an unanticipated encounter, the convoy leaders determined. A nearby building hadn’t been thoroughly checked. The unliving had escaped when an alley door was breached.

Soon, they were back on the road. The rest of the ride was comparatively uneventful.

“Two hundred and twenty-one Baker Street, sir,” announced Collins when they arrived at their destination.

Anthea’s eyes were still red and puffy, but she nodded to him, her phone recovered and her fingers flying once more. Mycroft carefully disembarked from the Land Rover to find Baker Street largely deserted, save for a few solitary figures running down the pavement and the occasional vehicle screeching past. The soldiers of the convoy formed a perimeter around the vehicle line, rifles raised.

Mycroft took a moment to compose himself, which under any other circumstance would have been an unacceptable indulgence. He breathed slowly, steadying his heart rate. He needed control. Control and unwavering intent. If anything, what Mycroft had just experienced incontestably confirmed the necessity of what he had come to do. He could not allow Sherlock to meet such a fate. Not if there a breath left in Mycroft’s body to prevent it.

He knocked on the door to 221B. It opened, revealing a pair of figures with burly muscles beneath their military uniforms.

“Haven’t lost him, I hope?” Mycroft asked, falling a bit short of a dry tone.

“We’ve got a wire on him,” said one. “He knows we’re watching.”

Mycroft stepped inside the entry hall. “That wouldn’t stop someone as enterprising as my brother.”

Mrs. Hudson was long since vacated from the premises. Given Sherlock’s present distractions, it was the least Mycroft could do to ensure his brother’s landlady had a guaranteed spot on the transports out of town. She had drawn quite the mawkish figure, Anthea had told him, as she was rushed from Baker Street without the opportunity to say farewell to the overgrown adolescent to whom she let. She was gone safely to the north, as with so many others, and Sherlock hadn’t even offered Mycroft a word of thanks.

A series of heavy thuds were coming from the floors above. Mycroft trod his way up the stairs to 221B.

The sitting room was as disheveled as ever, though Sherlock was nowhere to be seen. Two large trunks took up most of the walking space at the center of the room, one shut and other with its lid yawning open. Mycroft tapped the base of the open truck with the toe of his shoe and peered inside.
It was mostly-filled with articles of clothing and scientific equipment and other things Sherlock had deemed a necessity. The sleeve of a beige jumper poked out from beneath a stack of folded dress shirts. Mycroft sniffed faintly.

The violin by the windowsill was gone. Sherlock hadn’t packed it and Mycroft did not expect him to do so. It was a fragile and expensive item that would not do well in crowded conditions underground. Where would Sherlock store it? Somewhere safe, Mycroft thought. Somewhere trusted. Somewhere he wished dearly to return to.

John’s firearm lay atop a stack of reference books on the coffee table. Mycroft eyed it warily, his right hand tingling with the remembered weight of the Browning. How did one manage to fire with perfect composure under such duress? He had frozen there, stilled to inaction. And yet John had done it many times, he knew, from the CCTV collection he’d managed to compile. He’d done it the very first night of his acquaintance with his brother.

Mycroft was not ungrateful. After all, he had entrusted John with his highest charge. Sherlock was presently alive only because he allowed and accepted John’s intervention; a role which Mycroft was continually denied.

John had yet to complete his last act of protection.

It was at that moment Sherlock came thumping down the stairs like a squalling storm front. He paused briefly in doorway when he saw Mycroft standing among his chosen possessions. He wore a suit, thank God. They hadn’t time for that dressing gown nonsense.

Sherlock’s eyes darted around, clearly picking up on the turbulent events in Mycroft’s recent past. He didn’t mention it, however, and his dark expression flickered into a mask of ambivalence as he crossed into the sitting room. He had one hand in his left trouser pocket and carried in the other what appeared to be a small leather-cased gun cleaning kit.

“Come to check I’m still here, have you?” Sherlock asked.

His tone was exceedingly flippant. Mycroft grimaced. “These measures wouldn’t be necessary if you had a shred of sense left to you,” he said. “What were you thinking? That you’d row across the Thames?”

Sherlock did not bother to meet Mycroft’s gaze as he tossed the leather kit into the open trunk. His fingers moved within his left pocket.

“You very well know the quarantine of the south bank was enacted for a reason,” Mycroft went on. “The situation is now critical—”

“The situation’s always critical,” Sherlock interrupted with profound irritation. “Or dire, or desperate, or whatever obnoxious term you decide to dredge up.”

Mycroft was not amused. “You know what would have happened,” he said tepidly. “You would’ve been torn limb from limb the moment you set foot on the far shore.”

Sherlock did not respond to that, instead moving toward the desk to rifle through the mess of papers and books and knick knacks piled there. His non-response was response enough. The realities of the dead rising were no longer lost on him. It seemed he simply did not care.

“We’re losing the city,” Mycroft said.

Sherlock glanced up, his eyebrows low with anger. “Of course you’re losing the city. The
government can barely keep order in the best of times. Throw in a few military egos and an unprecedented disaster, and you’ve got the makings of ineptitude of the highest order. I’m shocked you remembered where to find the key codes to Pindar.”

“Our emergency protocols were structured to counter acts of terror,” Mycroft said.

“And what about bioterror?”

Mycroft stepped toward him. “This is not bioterror, Sherlock. This is everywhere. This is a pandemic a thousand times more volatile than SARS or avian flu or H1N1. We obviously did not account for our own citizens turning against us after they’d died. If a government official had proposed such a threat as realistic, they’d have been ridiculed both professionally and personally.”

Sherlock slammed down a stack of books on the desk. “And look what’s become of the nation.”

“Blame us if it makes you feel better,” Mycroft told him. “Blame me. I did not prepare for events such as these. Our response is evolving moment to moment. There is no blueprint here.”

“You waited too long to act,” Sherlock accused.

“I know,” Mycroft said. “I know.”

There was silence between them. Sherlock did not appear shocked by the admission, and Mycroft did not find it embarrassing. It was the truth. They both knew it. They no longer had the luxury of frivolous games for saving face.

Sherlock moved to the fireplace and began restlessly pacing between the two plush chairs. “Surely someone somewhere…”

The thin press of his mouth and distracted look in his eyes indicated he found sense in what Mycroft had said, though it probably felt too generous to admit it. Sherlock’s hand squeezed inside his left pocket and Mycroft caught a glimpse of a thin chain wound between his fingers. Military origin, standard issue, the metal bright and clean.

Oh, Sherlock.

He must have found the dog tags whilst poring through the things upstairs. He was rubbing them devoutly. He seemed to be floating through the flat like a puppet before a paper backdrop, the metal discs in his pocket the only things grounding him to the present reality. As if he simply might vanish through the solid walls of 221B, pulled by the universe toward the one person he could no longer reach. Newton’s apple was not blamed for its failure to resist gravity’s tug. It simply required an outstretched hand to save it from its nature.

“There’s one more thing,” Mycroft said.

He’d considered how this moment might go. What he would say. How he might feel. Now, here in Sherlock’s presence, Mycroft found the facts of the matter bolstered him.

And the facts were these.

They’d lost contact with the patrols sent to keep order on the south bank. The checkpoints had seen the trickle of survivors turn into a flood of the unliving. The military was pulling out. Footage from the drones showed shops burning, cars overturned, buildings spewing smoke, the shambling forms of the recently deceased. The south bank was lost. Irrevocably.
John was probably dead already.

Probably dead. But 'probably' wasn't good enough for Sherlock. Mycroft didn't need to be worrying about his younger brother while he continued his doomed crusade to get to John. He needed Sherlock safe, locked-down, and under control. He had to deliver certainty.

Thankfully, he had Sherlock's sentiment for the doctor working in his favor. It blinded him on most occasions. Today, it would save his life.

"Sherlock," he said.

“—should've begun the evacuations long before it got to the point it did,” Sherlock was saying, having apparently launched into a rant without Mycroft’s notice. “It’s unconscionable. Anyone with half a brain could see it was getting out of hand. And there we were cowering in the streets and no one had a clue what was happening twenty kilometers away. And why are you here? Shouldn’t you be off, I don’t know, coordinating something that matters?”

"Sherlock," he said again.

His tone caused Sherlock to stop dead in the middle of his pacing. Stiffness infused his shoulders. Sherlock slowly turned to look at Mycroft.

Understanding hit, and something perished deep in his brother’s eyes.

"No," Sherlock softly said.

Mycroft frowned in condolence. "I'm sorry."

The hand in Sherlock's pocket clenched tight. His face grew pale. His mouth opened but no words made their way out. Sherlock Holmes was speechless.

"South of the Thames is entirely overrun,” Mycroft said. “The hospital included.”

There was a sudden terrifying moment when Sherlock’s eyes blazed with such anger that Mycroft thought Sherlock might actually move to strike him. Instead he whirled in place and slammed his fist down on the mantelpiece, rattling the skull and papers and other rubbish that covered it. His fingers gripped tight to the wood and he hunched there, seething.

"You said he would be evacuated,” Sherlock growled. “You promised he would be evacuated!"

Mycroft shifted with discomfort. “I watched the video feed from the drones as the helicopters were destroyed, Sherlock. Everyone inside the hospital has been killed or turned."

The skull smashed into the floor in a shower of delicate bone. Sherlock stood over it, chest rising and falling like some half-mad beast. His hands were in fists, one dangling the loose chain of John’s dog tags and the other shaking with irrational rage.

He looked up, pain in his eyes. He looked as if he might be sick. "He's not— he's not—?"

Mycroft shook his head. "The staff had orders to preemptively sever the base of the brainstem in the event of being cut off. He isn't one of them."

"But you don't know."

If John wasn't yet dead, he would be very soon. There was nothing to be done.
"I didn’t wish to be so explicit with you, Sherlock, but it seems you’re forcing my hand. We were in radio contact," Mycroft said, quite aware that he was sealing the fate of one John Hamish Watson as he spoke. "He was first on the list. I listened as they did it."

The lies came so easily, and Sherlock's emotional state was already adrift on tempestuous seas. His little brother's argumentative attitude died with John Watson. Mycroft might have felt badly for it, if it hadn't meant the difference between Sherlock's living and dying.

"Come along," Mycroft said, motioning toward the stairwell. "Our transport is waiting. I’ll send them up to collect your things."

Sherlock blinked several times, standing there, his shoulders hanging like a puppet cut from its cords. He looked around in a daze; at the flat, at the trunks, at the broken skull by his feet. Then Sherlock did as he was told, and went.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: The City Surf | Jamin Winans
“Fuck you!” Molly cursed. Within the lecture room, the Colonel sat staring.

The chair beneath Sherlock wobbled dangerously as it leaned out the open window of St. Bart’s, held steady only by the grip of the Colonel’s man beside him. His assault rifle hung loosely from his neck, dangling at the perfect height for snatching if Sherlock’s arms weren’t strapped securely to the wooden arms of the chair.

Dizzied from the adrenaline coursing through his body, Sherlock tilted his head to get a look down below. Two floors of indented stone siding fell away to an open courtyard where hundreds of walkers were gathered, each of them growling and rasping and scrabbling upward for the source of the hypersonic noise that had drawn them. Pale, lifeless eyes peered up at Sherlock’s hanging form, their mouths open and gnawing on empty air.

He did not wish to meet that end. Sherlock glanced around at what he had to work with. Tied limbs, an inattentive man tipping his chair, the four additional guards inside the room all welding rifles. Sweat trickled down the nape of his neck and the chair quivered again. God, he just needed time to think his way out of this. If he were lucky Molly would buy him that time.

The Colonel, inches from Molly’s face, turned to look in Sherlock’s direction. “Do it,” he said.

He was falling. Sherlock instinctually thrust out his foot in an attempt to catch himself but his boot instead snagged something soft and pliable, an ankle or a calf, and the man standing beside him opened his mouth in alarm and they were plummeting backward out the open window together.

He’d fallen before. Off bridges and fences and cab roofs and into skips and rubbish heaps. He’d once fallen between two buildings when he misjudged the distance between the iron rungs of the escape ladders. It always seemed to happen with a distilled sense of the world; every action and microsecond crystalline clear in its irreversibility.

I’m falling to my death, he thought, almost serenely, as the inches of stone sailed upward and away. I’m going to die. The Colonel’s man was spread-eagled, his screams fused with the wind and the sound of the walkers, his clothes flapping as he fell.

The chair back slammed into the brick of the courtyard and Sherlock only had enough time to register the hissing, oozing, dead faces looking down before the Colonel’s man landed on top of him. Wood cracked beneath Sherlock’s back and the other man was tugging at him, trying to use Sherlock for leverage to turn around and get to his feet, but the crowding figures had already closed in upon them. The Colonel’s man shrieked as the walkers began tearing at his back. Cloth ripped and blood began to seep as he screamed and screamed, being pushed down onto Sherlock in the crush of walkers trying to get at them. Sherlock gritted his teeth as the warm gush of blood soaked into his clothes and he pulled frantically where his arms were still bound to the split wood of the chair. The other man’s eyes were right in front of him, shocked into bulbous circles, his mouth open and wailing as he was mauled apart. Sherlock shoved and pushed and wriggled fiercely, the rope tugging at him in all the wrong places. The blood on his jeans was hot and the walkers sounded like rabid jackals gorging on a kill. Something grabbed at his boot and he kicked it away, twisting round until the other man’s weight slid off him. Sharp juts of wood poked at his sides and he got his knees under him, somehow, slipping in the fresh flow of human blood across the brickwork.
A forest of rotted legs and dirty shoes and torn trouser legs were all fighting for their turn at the Colonel’s man. Sherlock shuffled forward on hands and knees, the remnants of the wood and rope like anchors at his waist. It stank like death and decay and Sherlock gagged as he crawled, fingertips scraping across the brick. The legs thinned and then out of nowhere the stone barrier of a wall appeared, blocking him, preventing him from moving forward. He was being dragged backward by the pieces of chair lashed to him and he wrenched out of the shambles of the chair, the walkers behind him crushing the wood and snapping the limbs. Sherlock found glass there, a window, half-height for the basement rooms and barely large enough to fit a human. It was shut and shuttered and he bashed it with one blood-stained knee until the glass cracked. He kneed it again and again. There was scraping behind him and he glanced over his shoulder. The walkers were no longer fooled by the pieces of the bloody chair and were shambling in his direction. Sherlock turned back to the window and put all his weight behind his boot and smashed through the glass, raining shards inward to the dark.

He shimmied into the hole just as yellowed fingers grabbed for him. Sherlock wrenched himself through the frame and tumbled onto a long broad table in the pitch black, rattling metal implements. Light streamed in from the broken window and walkers’ arms poked through, clawing scratches into the paint on the wall. Sherlock rolled again and landed on the linoleum floor.

It was a lab of some sort. Steel-topped work benches and enormous wash basins and racks of marked vials. The room was long and off to one side the double doors to the hall were thrown wide. Sherlock clambered to his feet, wincing at the pain in his knee, guiding himself along the smooth, cold tables. A crash behind him made him turn. A walker had fallen through the shattered window, impaling itself on the metal nozzle of a gas valve, and another walker had already pressed its head and shoulders through the window. Sherlock swore under his breath and half-hobbled down the row of workbenches toward the open doors. But shadowed figures now lumbered where it had previously been empty, probably attracted by the ruckus. The walkers in the hall wore white lab coats and badges.

Sherlock turned, leaving a bloody streak on the shiny metal, and headed deeper into the lab, the only direction he had left. He shoved aside rolling carts and toppled shelves behind him. At the end of the room there was a heavy door marked CAUTION. Walkers were following on his trail, climbing over the makeshift roadblocks, snarling mouths and blank eyes fixed on him.

He turned the locking wheel and dragged the door open, casting enough light inside to see it was a temperature-controlled chemical storage room. Tiers of carefully labeled bottles lined the shelves. Sherlock launched himself inside and pulled the door shut behind him. The mechanism clicked and he turned the lock and fell backwards onto the dark floor as a number of heavy bodies thumped against the metal outside. A small rectangular window high on the door was the only light source, cluttered by the silhouettes of a dozen dead fingers clamoring to get inside.

Sherlock lay panting on the floor as hollow bangs and thuds rang out in the stale, chemical-laden air. The pins and needles of adrenaline shook through him as he palmed urgently at his clothes, damp all over with blood. He wasn’t sure if any of it belonged to him. It was too dark to tell. For all he knew he’d been bitten or scratched and had only hours left. He didn’t feel any pain besides the knee that had bashed in the window and his shoulder where he’d landed, but the adrenaline might easily cover that up.

By now, Molly was likely dead by the Colonel’s hand. If not, he would torture her for information until he got what he wanted. Sherlock knew he ought to go find her and put a stop to it, even if he was doomed to infection. He listened to the growling and scrabbling just beyond the metal door. If he set foot outside, he was in for a painful and horrifying death. Even if the walkers in the lab cleared out of their own accord and he somehow made it back into the courtyard, he wouldn’t make it past
that many walkers. They hadn't radioed into Pindar about their diversion to Bart's. Even if Mycroft sent someone looking, they would be headed to the wrong part of the city.

No one was coming. Sherlock wasn't leaving. Bart's was lost, and so was he.

*It’s time.*

Sherlock blinked up at the shadowed ceiling. After so many close calls and narrow misses, from events before and what followed later, this was how the story ended. He’d carried it with him, all of it, along with the scars, both tangible and not.

He sensed a small, reassuring smile in the dark. A soldier’s nod acknowledging an end of watch. *It’s time.*

There was a weight to the decision which he hadn't anticipated. A formality, like the final lowering of a curtain. He still had the choice, and that was why he had to take it.

Sherlock reached down for the gun in his holster.

His breath caught as his fingers met empty leather.

“Shit,” he hissed, through gritted teeth. The last time he saw the Sig, it was in the Colonel’s hands.

His final way out was gone.

It was a terror he hadn't experienced for some time, being without the gun. The last vestige of his control had been taken from him. Fear rose hot into his lungs and throat. Sherlock swallowed and breathed deeply, fighting back against the sensation.

With pain, he pushed himself upright and went to sit against the far wall. His fingers felt sticky with blood. He wiped at his nose with a forearm, smelling blood there as well. Through the door, the walkers rasped an indelicate chorus as they thumped against the metal.

He had only one weapon left to draw upon. Sherlock closed his eyes, and he was home.

The 221B of his mind palace was an alien and uninviting place. Cold grey ash covered the grate in fireplace. The drapes fluttered at the window, knocking about against the table and bookshelves. Beyond the windowpanes, an impenetrable darkness reigned.

Sherlock hobbled to his chair and took a seat, still wearing his blood-stained shirt and jeans. He hadn’t spent much time here since the curators had gone. There was no reason to come, besides sentiment, and sentiment had never done him any favors. Sentiment was the great black mass at the center of his universe slowly pulling him apart.

The chair across from his was empty, the red of it like dried blood in the dark, its owner loosed from the cage. The skull on the mantelpiece seemed to be grimacing. The books and papers among the shelves, the items Sherlock had so painstakingly arranged to suit his needs, bore worn and unreadable spines. Still, this place was the closest thing he had to comfort.

He had only made up his mind to leave for Cambridge that morning, after they’d finished with the chemist’s shop. Disdain for idle errands was part of it, but then Molly had hitched up her rucksack and looked at him with those hopeful eyes. There was something in her expression that had solidified it, the differences between them. Molly was waiting for the world to return. Sherlock knew it was not coming.
Leaving had been the right decision, even if it ended like this. There was much he had failed to put right, but amends might still be made.

Sherlock looked to the vacant chair across from his. “Forgive me,” he said.

He did not receive an answer.

Sherlock leaned forward, pressing his head into his palms, and sat in the dark with his lonely, silent shadow. Together, they waited for the end.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Run Boy Run | Woodkid
Apprehension tugged heavy within Greg’s chest as he jogged down the stark cement hall of the Quarantine ward. On either side, nondescript doors and bulletproof panes provided fleeting glimpses within the small, empty cells. Only one cell was lit, down near the end of the hall where a small congregation of Quarantine workers had gathered.

Greg pulled up, huffing, as he joined them. Officer Lanner was speaking earnestly with two other security guards. Beside them, Shelly glanced up at Greg over her thin paper mask, clipboard in hand.

“He’s woken?” Greg asked.

“See for yourself,” she said, nodding toward the one-way window.

Greg turned to look. The cells hadn’t much to them: a shelf of a bed, a thin mattress with a fitted sheet and blanket, and whatever medical implements the staff had seen fit to bring. The nurse inside John’s cell was fiddling the drip line rack, the I.V. bag exhausted of its contents. Behind her, John was huddled in the back corner of his cell bed. They had given him the standard grey t-shirt and athletic bottoms that all new residents wore. His knees were drawn up and he was staring at the nurse as though she might imminently attack him.

Greg let out a slow breath. God, it was him. John bloody Watson. Not dead, not in a coma, not anywhere Greg had ever expected to see him again. He had started to doubt himself every time he walked away from the cell, wondering if he was just seeing what he wanted to see. But no; that was definitely John Watson. All he required was a prig of a dark-haired detective beside him for the likeness to be unmistakable.

John was a bit gaunt. His freshly-shaven jaw line was more pronounced than Greg remembered, but he at least looked a sight less pale than when they’d brought him out of Processing. Greg had been able to confirm for the Quarantine workers that the stitches in John’s abdomen were from a previously inflicted wound. He was bruised rather severely in places, however, and Greg wondered yet again just how in the bloody hell he’d found his way to Baker Street.

_God. A miracle._

“And he’s not infected?” Greg asked, eyes glued to the glass.

Shelly jotted something on her clipboard. “He’s not showing symptoms, no.”

“What is it, six hours now?”

“Five and three quarters by my watch.”

He glanced at her. “What have you told him?”

Shelly tucked her clipboard under one arm and raised a sobering eyebrow. “That he’s in an underground government safe house and that we don’t mean him harm. I’m not sure he believes us. He hasn’t been especially keen to answer our questions.”

Greg nodded. “He’ll talk to me. Someone he knows.”
Above her mask, Shelly’s eyes crinkled with a smile. “That’s why we called you in. We’re due to take him to the infirmary soon and I think your presence will make it easier on everyone.”

The security guards opened the door, allowing the nurse who had been attending John to emerge. She held the bundled I.V. line in one gloved hand and patted Greg’s shoulder with the other, a smile evident on her face as well. A successful retrieval and resuscitation was one of the few bright spots left to them. Greg couldn’t help but feel a bit of that joy himself. With a final nod to everyone waiting there in the hall, he carefully pushed inside the room.

John was still wedged where the walls met. He looked to be on the verge of a small panic; his shoulders rose and fell with quickening breaths, and his fingers were pressed to his forehead, covering his face. But there was no telltale rasping in his throat that indicated an infection, and for that Greg could leap the bloody Channel.

“John?” Greg said.

He couldn’t remember that last time those dark blue eyes had looked up at him, but here they were again. Like old times. Sherlock had once said that John was uncommonly simple to read, as people went, and anyone might discern his mind if they paid enough attention. Sherlock was incorrect about that in several important ways, but Greg tried regardless. He read shock, and fear, and confusion in John’s darting eyes.

John lifted his chin. His hands fell away from his face. “Greg?” he whispered.

In different circumstances Greg might have hugged him, but everything about this was absolutely baffling. They had set up a folding chair beside John’s bed. Unsure of exactly what to say, Greg motioned toward it. “Do you mind?”

“No,” John said, polite despite his bewildered state. “Of course, no.”

Greg sat himself down and looked at his friend. John was blinking at him like an owl that had just gained its sight. And Christ, Greg almost laughed aloud. John was going to be fine. They were all going to be fine.

“I thought I’d hallucinated you,” John said.

“I could say the same,” Greg replied. “How are you feeling, John?”

John didn’t seem to register the question. He dazedly glanced around the small concrete cell. “Where —?”

“Underground safe house, like they told you,” Greg said. “We picked you up from Baker Street. Do you remember?”

His bleary-eyed gaze landed on Greg. “Yes,” he said. And then it was as if an electric jolt surged through John’s entire body, abruptly waking him; his head snapped up and his expression filled with alarm. “Sherlock?” he gasped. “Do you know where Sherlock is?”

“John, he’s—”

"Is he here? Is he safe?"

“He’s fine,” Greg assured him. “He’s fine. He came with us. There’s hundreds of us down here.”

John’s eyelids squeezed shut. He went a bit wobbly, as if he might pass out again, and slumped
back, covering his face with his hands. "Thank God," John breathed between his fingers. "Thank God, thank God."

"John," Greg gently said. "What happened to you?"

John dropped his hands to look at Greg. Wet drips trailed from the outer edges of his eyes. "I don't know. I woke up in hospital."

"You were in a coma," Greg said. "That's the last I saw of you. You were in that hospital for weeks. And God, we left you there."

"He's all right?" John said. "You're sure?"

"Yeah, last I saw him."

John closed his eyes briefly. "Last you saw him. He's not here?"

"He's— well, not at the moment, but we're expecting him back soon."

John sat up. His gaze turned to steel. "Where is he?"

John had tugged on the pair of soft-soled shoes before practically marching out the cell. Greg followed close behind and shot a quelling look to Shelly, Lanner, and the others, who appeared unsure whether they should stop John's progress.

"He's due for the infirmary, Inspector," Lanner said.

"I know, I'll— I'll get him there soon," Greg told him. "Radio down for us, would you?" He turned to see John was already halfway down the corridor. "John! Oi, hang on a second!"

John glanced over as Greg caught up. The overhead lights made his eyes look fierce and sunken. He wasn't entirely steady on his feet but Greg held no illusions that he wouldn't hunt for Sherlock in his undergarments if necessary.

"What is this place?" John demanded, sounding every bit the soldier. "Is it secure?"

"Pindar, yeah," Greg said. "Top secret facility to preserve and protect government functions in times of crisis. We're under Pimlico."


"He runs the show down here," Greg said.

John gave an ambiguous grunt. "Weapons?" he asked.

"Weapons, vehicles, gear, supplies. You name it, we've got it." Greg frowned. " Mostly."

"I'll need to borrow a few things," John muttered.

"John, we're scheduled to move you down to the infirmary. Doctor Sawyer—"
“Sarah’s here?” John asked.

Greg nodded as they walked. “Her, and Doctor Stamford, and a few others we scrounged up. You’ll be the seventh full physician once we get you sorted.”

John considered this for a long moment. Of anyone, he understood the value of medical personnel in a place understaffed and under siege. Then he shook his head. “I don’t have time for that right now.”

Greg sped to keep up with him. “It’s for your health, John,” he insisted.

“The only place I’m going is wherever Sherlock is,” John said.

“We have a strict policy about allowing doctors outside. Once you’re in, you’re in.”

John came to a standstill then. He turned, fixing Greg with a disquieting glare. “And who’s going to try and stop me?” he said. His tone was low and unnervingly steady.

“The big burly blokes with the handguns,” Greg said. “John, he’s out with Molly like I said, but if you need proof we can head to Operations and radio out to them. He’ll be back soon.”

“You said he was overdue.”

“Well, he is, but sometimes they get held up for one reason or another. It’s really nothing to worry about—”

“You’re sure?” John cut in. “Because the Greg Lestrade I remember would be on Sherlock’s trail at the first sniff of trouble, whether he wanted it or not.”

Greg blinked helplessly at him. John was right, of course. Half his job before the outbreak had involved wrangling Sherlock in some way or another. He’d come racing across town the moment there was a hint of something wrong, and it wasn’t just to appease the watchful eye of the British Government. He cared for Sherlock. Not in the way John did, obviously, but...

He thought of Molly. She’d volunteered for reconnaissance duty alongside Sherlock. Greg had tried to convince her to take up medic duties, safe in the infirmary, but she’d reasoned that she was smaller than anyone in Pindar except the children. They needed people who could fit through the holes in the city’s destructed landscape and they couldn’t very well send prepubescents into such danger. A courageous woman, Molly Hooper. And Christ take him if Greg would allow anything to happen to her.

He looked worriedly to John. “We should get to Operations,” he said.

They headed for the closest stairwell. Once inside, John peered down the precarious height stretching down to the bottom, and perhaps for the first time glimpsed the true scope of the facility. Stairwells punctured Pindar like nails in a coffin, and with the lifts purposefully removed from service it was the only expedient way to descend into the lower levels. As a vital center of function, Operations sat well at the bottom.

John held the railing rather tightly as they made their way down. It was obvious his body wasn’t at peak ability, and that he found it frustrating. For his part, Greg was rather astounded that John was capable of moving around at all after an extended coma.

“John, how did you end up at Baker Street?” he asked.

“I walked,” John said, his attention fixed on the placement of his feet.
Greg stared. “Sorry, you walked?”

“I woke up. I walked.”

"How? The bridges are out."

John’s gaze flicked upward. "Sure, but the Tube tunnels aren't."

“Christ,” Greg murmured. The Tube. It was rather ingenious of him, actually. Then again the tunnels were probably dark, flooded, and filled with who knew how many walkers. Greg glanced at John’s grim expression. He didn’t seem keen on going into additional detail, and Greg wasn’t sure he wanted to hear about it.

“You’ve probably got questions,” Greg offered instead.

John snorted. “Questions are about the only thing I’ve got.”

“You’ve seen it out there?”

His eyes and bruises spoke volumes. “More than I wanted,” John said.

“Then you know as much as I do,” Greg told him. “Came on quick. It was only a day or two before things got out of hand. The quarantines broke and we lost the south side of the Thames. Ended up here, for all the good it’s done us.”

John came to a halt in the middle of the stairwell and turned, brows furrowed. “Hold on,” he said. “You’re saying no one knows what this thing is?”

Greg sighed. “None that I’ve met. There’s talk of researchers in France who might have a cure. Just rumors, really. I don’t put much stock in that sort of thing.”

John frowned darkly.

“I know it’s not what you wanted to hear, John. I wish I had answers. Truly. It’s stark raving and impossible, but it’s happened.”

His words didn’t put John at his ease. In fact, it seemed to harden him, like a piece of forged metal.

“And you left me to die out there,” John said, with a soft and chilling certainty.

Greg shook his head. “We all thought you were dead, mate. That’s what Sherlock told us.”

His eyes grew. “Sherlock told you I was dead?”

“Obviously he got it wrong,” Greg said. He rubbed anxiously at his neck. “Blimey.”

John just stared at him. Sherlock got things wrong all the time; they both knew it. But this one wounded John deeply to hear of it.

“He wouldn’t have left you there on purpose,” Greg tried. “Christ, I know he wouldn’t.”

John’s gaze turned away. “Where’s this Operations?” he said.
It took all of five minutes to convince the security guards at the entrance to level three that John was not, in fact, a roving stranger who had snuck into Pindar and coerced the head of the Metropolitan Police to bring him downstairs to commit sabotage. Still, they took their time asking pointed questions, all the while studying John's grey clothing with suspicion. Greg noticed John impatiently eyeing their side arms in return, but fortunately the guards allowed them to pass before an incident came of the delay.

They emerged into the third level. Greg held out a hand at first, keeping John from bursting suddenly into the middle of the hallway. It wasn't nearly as busy on this floor as the upper two, but security would not take kindly to a non-uniformed stranger creeping about in the midst of sensitive operational areas. Greg glanced up and down the hall. Only a few officials were in view, talking intently or waiting idly with paperwork in hand. They wore business clothes and regulation uniforms. Greg wasn't sure where they got their starching and pressing done in a place like this.

"This way," he said, motioning for John to follow. Worst case scenario, they'd run directly into Mycroft and he'd demand to know why Greg had John sneaking about down here rather than being taken directly to his office. An encounter with Mycroft was improbable, given his penchant for staying locked up behind as many doors as humanly possible. Still, Mycroft seemed enormously interested in questioning John personally. Could it be he cared that much about his younger brother's best friend? Perhaps he was desperate to see for himself whether John was capable of taking on physician's duties? God knew they needed all the doctors they could get their hands on, but Greg thought it unlikely. The staffing troubles of the infirmary rated low on Mycroft's list of priorities.

The P.A. system buzzed to life, giving Greg a bit of a start as he and John slipped down the hall. The voice in the speaker nattered on about schedule adjustments as they reached the glass door taped with an index card. The word *Operations* was scrawled upon it in hasty permanent marker.

"This is the government?" John asked as Greg pulled open the door.

"More like one-third of a government," Greg said. "Half, if you're being generous. We've got eyes but not much else."

Greg had never considered himself a technical man by any means, but even to him Operations seemed a mess. It was a broad room lined with long desks and rolling chairs that made his back hurt just looking at them. Server towers blinked along one wall, protruding thick cables that ran the ground like snakes. Whomever had first taken control of this room during the outbreak had the foresight to bring a few modern consoles and monitors, now squashed in front of older equipment that had probably been state-of-the-art about twenty years earlier. Part of the room was used as storage for spare uniforms, riot gear, handheld radios, bullet-resistant vests, and other law enforcement paraphernalia. They'd left the garish overhead lights off, at least, plunging the handful of technicians in pools of low light as they watched graphs and charts etch lines across their screens.

The very center of the room was the only portion Greg found useful for his own purposes. A large underlit station bore a table map of Greater London. It was excellent for planning external operations. Large colored patches and lines, borne of countless weeks of intel, demarcated areas of danger or opportunity. Officers Hopkins and Gregson were bent over the map, pens in hand, talking in low voices as they pointed out items of interest to one another.

Greg approached Morton, the bespectacled, rail-thin radio technician seated at one of the nearby consoles. Beside him was a radio receiver set, although he was presently clicking away at the screen of his computer.

"Do you have Holmes and Hooper?" Greg asked. "We'd like to speak with them."
Morton looked up and Greg and John, eyebrows lifting at the unexpected intrusion. "Oh. Hello, Inspector. I'm afraid I don't have them just now. We're still waiting on a check-in."

Greg blinked. "You're waiting on a check-in? When was last contact?"

"Almost seven hours," Morton said. "We received a checkpoint confirmation and then a notice they were going dark. Haven't heard from them since."

"They haven't checked in and you didn't bother to tell me?" Greg asked, stunned.

Morton's eyes went wide. "We have procedures, sir. Procedures you set down—"

Greg raised a hand, quieting Morton. The man was right; he was in charge of external operations and if he spent his time listening to every slight delay, he'd have time for nothing else. Issues like this were only brought to his attention after a certain threshold of time, which apparently they hadn't reached. Seven bloody hours...

"Get them on the radio," John said. His eyes had that steely edge to them again, like a blade poised to strike. God help whoever crossed its path on the way down.

Morton must have felt similarly about the way John looked, because he gave a quick nod and unhooked the receiver's handset. He twisted a dial and electronic static fizzed from the speaker.

Morton lifted the handset. "Shakespeare and Gloriana, this is Lion's Den, over. Shakespeare and Gloriana, come in."

John quirked a curious eyebrow at the names.

"Their call signs," Greg told him.

Morton adjusted the dial again. "Shakespeare and Gloriana, confirm. This is Lion's Den on standby."

They waited a span of several minutes. Nothing came through save for static. John shifted restlessly, and Greg wondered how badly he wanted to grab the handset and shout into the void until Sherlock answered back. As a former soldier he had to know the risks of radio communication. They only shared what was absolutely necessary over the airwaves for fear of who else might be listening.

Morton finally reseated the handset and looked at them. "They've been out longer, sir," he reminded Greg. "Once overnight when they got stuck waiting for a herd to clear."

"Yes, but they made contact," Greg pointed out. "We knew exactly where they were."

John's jaw was set in a harsh line. Greg could almost see the words written across his unhappy face. You said he was fine. How is this fine?

"Maybe their batteries are bad," Morton suggested. "Or they dropped the radio. Or—"

"Find them," Greg said. It was an order, not a request.

Morton nodded. "Satellites are patchy at best, sir, and the coverage windows are even worse. It'll take a short while to relay the last known coordinates."

"Do it," Greg said.

"They've got GPS?" John asked as Morton turned back to his console.
Greg looked at him. “Sort of. Sherlock brought home a new motorbike last night and we installed a tracking device without his knowledge. Standard procedure. It's one of the few reasons Mycroft lets him go out at all.”

This information seemed to put John a bit more at ease, though it was like the softening of a rigid stone block. Greg had always seen John as the more affable between him and Sherlock, but he suspected he was finally getting a glimpse of the man who had shot a serial killer without the slightest hesitation. The man who'd survived Afghanistan and kidnappings and being strapped to explosives by a criminal psychopath. Perhaps more than anyone left in Pindar, John Watson was made for what the world had become.

"Sir," came a female voice. Greg turned. It was Hopkins over by the map table that had spoken. "Is that him?" she asked.

Greg managed a smile and approached them. "Yes, it is. John, I believe you’ve crossed paths with officers Toby Gregson and Stella Hopkins. This is John Watson.”

John came cautiously over.

“You're looking better, John,” Gregson said, offering an outstretched hand.

“Welcome to Pindar;” Hopkins added.

Rather than taking Gregson's hand, John watched him in a hard sort of manner. He obviously recognized him. "You were in my flat," John said, his tone defensive.

Officer Gregson retracted his hand and looked to Greg, unsure.

“Er, that's my fault," Greg said. "I should've explained it, John. We found you because you fell into one of our traps."

John looked puzzled. “Traps?”

“Our mission is to bring as many people as we can to Pindar, but it’s inefficient to go door to door and root out all the survivors hiding in the city," Greg explained. "We set up traps to make it easier. Load it up with food and water then come round every now and then and catch people like flies in a bottle. Got a dozen or so traps around the city, Baker Street included. You just happened to fall in because you lived there.”

There was an awkward space of silence as John glanced among them. His left hand clenched into a fist before loosening again. Then he pressed his right hand to his forehead. It seemed a struggle to speak. "Christ, I thought... someone could have said something. Anything. I thought you were going to kill me."

"It's easier to withhold compassion until we know," Hopkins gently said. "We bring people here for processing and if they're bit or showing signs of infection, they're removed. We have a twenty-eight percent rejection rate."

John lowered his hand and gaped. "Removed? You can't mean you just... toss them out on the street?"

Greg sighed. "It's for the safety of everyone who lives here, John. Imagine if they turned."

John considered it. Even he could see that an enclosed underground space with walkers loose inside wasn't going to end well. “Do you get lots of people this way?” John said.
“We used to,” Gregson said. "Now, not so much. We don’t take the dangerous ones, the unstable ones. Sometimes it feels like that’s all there is left.”

“But you took me,” John said. There was a sense of a hanging statement at the end. You took me but you shouldn’t have done. Greg’s officers had told him what they’d found in 221B. A man they’d thought possibly unhinged.

“I nearly didn’t,” Gregson admitted. "Then you offered me food. Very politely, in fact."

John looked down, nodding and blinking.

Gregson brightened a little. “And sorry about drawing a weapon on you back there. I know the look of a fighter when I see one.”

“John’s a retired army doctor,” Greg told them.

“Cor, really?” Gregson said. "Glad we found you, then. Could always do with a few more steady hands.”

“He worked with Sherlock, before.”

Hopkins narrowed her eyes. “You mean this is—”

“Yeah,” Greg said.

She traded a look with Gregson. “Oh. Oh bloody Christ. He’s going to go mental, isn’t he?”

“Hopkins,” Greg warned. “Not the time.”

John was eyeing him dubiously.

“He’s fine,” Greg insisted. “Really.”

“Every time you say that it becomes harder to believe,” John said.

Morton arrived in their midst just then, with a printout in hand. “Here we are,” he said.

He laid it over the map, and the lighting from the table's surface allowed the lines of the smaller portion of map to align transparently with the larger one, leaving both their markings visible. The printout covered much of Central London, and there in the middle were a few tiny dots tagged with their respective GPS coordinates.

“It’s not much to go on, is it?” Greg said. "When’s the most recent timestamp?"

“We had decent coverage about five hours ago," Morton said, pointing to the dots. "We picked them up here, here, and here. Final timestamp is here.”

Greg rubbed at the back of his head as he looked at the map. For all he could make of it, Molly and Sherlock had been joy-riding through random streets of Central London.

“Five hours,” Hopkins hummed. "They could be anywhere by now.”

"Weren't they headed west?” Gregson asked.

"That was the itinerary, yes,” Morton said.
"Then why the bloody hell are they all the way over here?"

"Maybe they decided to go elsewhere for supplies," Hopkins said.

Greg shook his head. "They were supposed to gather medical necessities for the infirmary. It's urgent, with Anderson's injury. Molly knows that. Sherlock does, too. They wouldn't have gone elsewhere unless something greatly out of the ordinary has happened."

"You think they were picked up, sir?" Hopkins wondered. "By hostile parties?"

"Who just let them keep their motorbike?" Greg scoffed. "Unlikely."

"Does Sherlock have any reason to go to Bart's Hospital?" John suddenly asked.

The certainty in John's voice put an end to all other speculation. Greg and the others turned. John was staring down at the map as if he could make Sherlock's present location pop up simply by the force of his gaze. His brows were knitted together in deep thought.

"Sometimes," Greg said. "They've got a small generator. He's keeping samples there for study. But we cleaned Bart's out of medical supplies ages ago."

"That's where he's gone," John said.

"How do you know?" Greg asked.

John picked up a black marker and leaned over the printout. He began connecting the dots by tracing over the streets of London. When he was finished, John rose and tapped the snaking line. "It's part of his back-alley route to Bart's. We took it often enough when we were being watched by unfriendly people. You can drive this portion, but the final timestamp is where you need to leave navigable roads. They probably left the bike and continued on foot. Lots of fence-jumping and skip-climbing. I doubt there'd be any walkers through there."

Silence fell upon the room.

"Blimey," Gregson breathed.

"You're sure, John?" Hopkins said.

John nodded. "Positive."

Greg looked to Morton. "Bart's wasn't on their itinerary, was it?"

"No," Morton said. "Not as far as I was told."

Greg patted him on the arm. "Good work, mate. We'll take it from here."

Morton nodded and returned to his station while Greg turned to his officers. "Get a team ready to head out. Quietly, mind you."

"You really think they're in danger, sir?" Hopkins asked.

"I don't know," Greg said, "but I don't have a good feeling. Sherlock and Molly have both helped us more times than I can count. Now they're counting on us."

"Not to mention Mr. Holmes will have our collective hides if we let anything happen to his brother," Gregson added.
Greg sighed. "I'll let him know we're mounting a rescue party. He'll sign off without question, but
don't allow anyone to join the group by his order. I'd like to be gone before the ink's dried. Now go."

Hopkins and Gregson nodded jointly and dashed from the room. They were perhaps the two police
officers Greg trusted most in Pindar, and he hated that he had to think of them in those terms. The
last thing he wanted was for Mycroft to have a chance to fill the rescue party with people loyal only
to him.

Greg looked over to find John directly beside him.

“T'm coming with you,” John said.

He shook his head. “John, I already explained that we don’t allow doctors outside—”

“I'm coming with you."

Greg had never felt threatened by John, though God knew John had used threatening words on him
before. Usually in relation to how Sherlock was being treated by the Met. Back then he was like a
parent come to warn the school headmaster that his child best not be picked on any longer. But the
threat was no longer in John's words. It was in his eyes, resolved and looming. Greg had seen it
before while working homicide: the look of a man fully prepared to kill you to get what he wanted.

John was tired, and weakened, and injured. But if anyone could save Sherlock Holmes, it was him.

“Come on, then," Greg said at last. "Before bloody Mycroft finds out."

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Take Us Back | Alela Diane
Chapter 19

John grunted in pain as Officer Jones tightened the straps of his bulletproof vest.

Jones stopped adjusting the vest and looked up, concerned. “All right, mate? You got broken ribs?”

The pain faded to a dull throb. John exhaled slowly through his nose. “Bruised, I think. Get on with it.”

Jones shook his head. “You’re a mad son of a bitch.”

He tugged again, and John grasped onto the front grill of the Mastiff to keep from falling over.

John hadn't seen a Mastiff patrol vehicle since Afghanistan. This one was painted a shimmery matte black rather than the usual dusty tan that matched the desert. The Met officers had referred to it as the Dowager. She certainly struck an imposing figure, parked amongst the smaller utility vehicles in the massive garage level of Pindar. Even the lorries couldn't compare. There was something soothing about seeing a Mastiff again; a sense of the familiar regimented lifestyle John had adopted during deployment. They were on a mission, like old times. Except now it was Sherlock waiting on the other side.

All around them, the team was prepping: Toby Gregson sorting gear, Bradstreet counting ammo, Hopkins talking to one of the mechanics, and McDonald half-hidden in the driver’s compartment of the Dowager. A delay like this wasn’t common for a reconnaissance team, they’d all agreed. Sherlock was usually self-sufficient during his excursions. John had followed their lead as the preparations got underway, despite his growing agitation. He pictured Sherlock injured, or trapped, or in over his head. Maybe he’d run across people who required his aid? Perhaps his and Molly’s research had led to a breakthrough? Whatever the reason, the tightening in John’s gut told him he was needed there. Now.

John gazed over at the row of police motorbikes. He could be at Bart’s in no time at all, on one of those.

"That about does you," Jones said, stepping back. He brushed at the weave of one shoulder strap. "Not military grade, but it does the trick. Bullets and biters alike."

"It's lighter than I'm used to," John said. It was also less constricting. He shrugged a bit to settle the vest and it slid comfortably over his long-sleeve pullover. The ribbed shirt was undoubtedly military surplus, going by the smooth shoulder patches typically worn by cadets. He’d also managed to find a spare set of workman's boots and fatigue trousers colored a drab grey-brown that would blend nicely into the urban environment of London above.

While Jones turned to rummage through the equipment bin, John shrugged on the lightweight Gore-Tex jacket Jones had given him, then picked up the cup he’d left on a nearby petrol drum and tossed back the last mouthful of its contents. The Met officers had brought him a sort of protein slurry made out of powdered supplements and water. It was like swallowing gritty mud, but John’s stomach found it pleasant enough. He almost felt like himself again.

“Can’t go until Inspector Lestrade gets here,” Jones said.
John looked over and realized Jones was watching his left hand flex convulsively. “I know,” John said. He set down the empty cup and stilled his left hand with his right. “I was just never very good at this whole ‘hurry up and wait’ business.”

“Where’d you serve?” Jones asked.

“Afghanistan.”

“Iraq for me,” he said. “Then I came home and joined the force. Thought I’d seen my share of killing. Now here we are.” Jones gave a rueful smirk. “Funny thing, isn’t it?”


“You probably don’t remember, but I used to work crime scenes under the Inspector,” Jones said. "Saw you and Sherlock Holmes in action more often than not."

John blinked up at him, trying to place his face, but Sherlock was like a bonfire while in the throes of an investigation. Everyone else faded into the background.

John frowned. “Sorry, I don’t…”

Jones raised a hand. “It’s all right. The important thing is I know you’ve got firearm experience. Most officers around here don’t even have that. We have to waste ammunition training them on empty tins.”

He looked aside. “Bainbridge, fetch that case, would you?”

Steven Bainbridge turned round over by the weapons he was sorting. God, he’s young, John thought. Jones was in the neighborhood of thirty but Bainbridge couldn’t be a day over twenty-one. He was dressed with the habitual precision of a soldier. John imagined he wasn’t officially part of the Met; the soldiers he’d seen around Pindar were fewer than the police, and out of necessity seemed to have absorbed into whatever hierarchy remained.

Bainbridge handed a small case to Jones, who thanked him and unclasped the catches. Inside a layer of foam held two handguns and two magazines apiece. He removed one of the guns – a Glock – and handed it to John grip-first.

John took it. It was larger and lighter than his Sig, but the balance felt wonderful after so long without a proper weapon.

“Double trigger,” Jones said, pointing to the gun. “That’s your safety. Don’t put your finger there unless you mean it.”

“I always mean it,” John told him. He took one of the magazines from the case and snapped it into the base of the grip, then slipped the Glock into the empty holster on his left hip.

Jones gestured to the rest of the equipment in the bin. “Walkie talkie, torch, extra magazines. A knife, if you like.”

John nearly passed over the knife for the rest of it, then thought better. If anything, he could use it as a cutting implement. As far as he was concerned, an enemy combatant that got past his gun deserved to take a bite out of him. He accepted the items and clipped them to his belt.

“Sally?” Hopkins suddenly said over the mechanical din of the garage.
John turned. D.S. Sally Donovan was marching toward them from the direction of the lifts, her face harshly set and her eyes glassed with signs of prolonged pain. Behind her were several other people, following her at a cautious distance.

Hopkins was wide-eyed with concern. “Sally, what are you doing here? I thought you were in the infirmary with Philip?”

She had to be referring to the gunfire accident with Anderson. John had heard snippets here and there about it. None of the Met officers had accused Donovan of intending to actually harm him, but by the look on her face she placed the blame squarely on herself.

“They said all we can do is wait,” Donovan said tightly. “I can’t stand bloody waiting.”

“You’re not… you’re not thinking of coming, are you?” Hopkins asked. “At a time like this?”

Donovan glanced directly at John for the first time. There was no surprise in her expression at seeing him alive. Instead, her red-rimmed eyes narrowed a bit, and the edges of her mouth flicked downward.

“I’m here for Molly,” she said, looking back to Hopkins. “That’s all.”

She trudged on toward the Dowager. John watched her go. He’d seen that look on soldiers’ faces before: brothers in blood beside themselves with fear and grief as John and the other surgeons wheeled their comrade into the surgical tent. They had nowhere to direct their emotions except in exacting revenge on the nearest Taliban nest. Soldiers died that way. Those afflicted needed counseling and rest. But this wasn’t the army and there was no chain of command to enforce such decisions. Donovan answered to Greg, and Greg was soft when it came to his officers. And to Sherlock.

The tightening in John’s stomach returned as he thought of Sherlock. He hated waiting just as much as Donovan.

“John Watson,” said a voice. “Unbelievable.”

It was Mike Stamford. He was among the small group that had followed Donovan toward the prepping team. The others were handing over supplies and medical kits. They looked young, probably aides-in-training. Mike was the only one wearing a white doctor’s coat. He was just as John had last seen him: good-natured and plump, with glasses balanced on the bridge of his nose and a slightly disheveled look about him.

“Mike,” John said, as Mike took his hand and shook it in vigorous greeting.

“You don’t know how happy I was to hear they found you,” Mike said. He let go of John’s palm. “Sarah’d be here too, but she’s on duty in the infirmary. She cried when she heard.”

“Really?”

“It’s not every day an old friend returns from the dead.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Or an old boyfriend, for that matter.”

John blinked. “That was a while ago.”

“So she said,” Mike chuckled. There was a knowing smile behind his eyes. “Now you’re off with this lot when you know perfectly well where you ought to be.”
He meant the infirmary, John surmised. He fixed Mike with a firm look and placed a hand on the Glock at his side.

“You’re right,” John said. “I do know where I ought to be.”

But rather than lecture him, as the entirety of the Met had tried to do, Mike clapped him gently on the shoulder. His eyes were soft.

“Bring him home safe, John,” Mike said. “Molly, too.”

John nodded stiffly.

The officers around them went into a sudden flurry. Greg Lestrade had returned from his visit to the depths of Mycroft’s office, looking more harried than usual. “All right, I want to see arses in seats!” he called as he strode in their direction. “We’re leaving!”

Hopkins handed Greg his bulletproof vest as he went past. “Sir?”

Greg swept his gaze over the state of the preparations and shrugged the vest on. “Mycroft’s bloody furious, but we got clearance.”

“What did you tell him?” John asked.

Greg looked at John skeptically. “I told him you’ve just woken and you need time to rest before you’re ready for visitors. It won’t be long until he discovers the truth. I imagine I’ll be brought in for disciplinary action once we get back. He can sod it for all I care.” He glanced up. “Are we ready?”

“Ready as we’re going to be, sir,” said Officer Jones.

“Right. Let’s pack up and move out.”

John nodded a farewell to Mike and followed Greg to the rear of the Dowager, where Bainbridge was pulling open the double doors. Bainbridge startled back as a small figure dashed out between them and slipped round the side of the vehicle.

“What’s this?” Greg groused. “Archie? Bloody hell, be careful there!”

A young curly-haired boy popped out from under the chassis of the Dowager, his face smudged with grease. “Is Mr. Holmes back?” he asked.

Greg folded his arms. “We’re off to fetch him. This isn’t a play area, lad. We’ve got loaded weapons.”

“He said he’d show me the engine,” Archie sighed.

“It’ll have to be later,” Greg said. He paused, then frowned fractionally. “And if he doesn’t do it, I will. Now get along before you’re missed.”

Archie made a face like he’d swallowed sour milk, but he did as Greg instructed and set off toward the civilian areas. Greg shook his head and rubbed at his neck. “He’s incorrigible, Archie. Looks like he’s found a role model who won’t be much help there.”

Jones, Gregson, and Hopkins began climbing into the Dowager and settling into their seats. Donovan and Bainbridge followed, while Bradstreet and McDonald settled into the driver’s seats. Greg offered John the last seat in the rear, but John waved him off, opting to be the one who stood.
The doors were shut and everyone strapped into their safety harnesses. The Dowager rumbled to life beneath their boots, and for the first time since the nightmare had begun, John felt the scales of power tipping in his favor.

“It’s his bike, all right,” Greg said. He threw back the flap of tarpaulin to reveal the glistening steel and chrome of the parked motorcycle. Two fat knapsacks were strapped on either side of the rear of the frame.

“Just where you said it’d be,” Officer Hopkins said, looking at John.

Sunlight was breaking through the seams in the cloud cover overhead. Standing in the street, John surveyed the abandoned motorbike. His left fist went into a rhythmic clench. The officers were watching him closely.

“On to Bart’s, then?” asked Bainbridge, shouldering his rifle.

“On to Bart’s,” Greg agreed. “Take those, as well.” He pointed to the knapsacks full to brimming with the medical spoils Sherlock and Molly had been tasked to retrieve.

John turned, lightheaded. His chest felt like a spring coiled too tight. He reached the open doors of the Dowager and hopped inside. It wasn’t long before the others joined him, the knapsacks stowed beneath the seats, and the doors were shut once more. The Dowager shuddered forward, and they started off again.

John gripped the ceiling rail and watched the ghosts of London pass beyond the slim rectangular porthole. The landscape rolled past in the scent of diesel oil and the sway of rubber over cracked road. He’d never seen London so empty. The windows of shops were dark eyelids shut to the horror they had seen. The evidence was everywhere. Broken glass, shattered posts, cars run into the brickwork. Smoke drifted between the alleyways and out of the planes of roofs. The marks of devastating warfare were all too familiar.

It was different, seeing it from the safety of armored transport. It was how he’d watched villages burn in the high desert. Except there were no wailing mothers, no screaming children, no echo of gunfire from a kilometer away. Just silence.

Now they were headed to Bart’s. It was where they’d met, him and Sherlock. A thoughtless stroll through a park and a chance reunion with an old university mate had sent his life spinning in impossible directions. Wonderful directions. Sherlock had changed absolutely everything. It was the two of them now, no matter the distance or the difficulty. If Sherlock needed him, if Sherlock was in trouble…

If walkers had got him... if he wasn’t Sherlock any longer...

John closed his eyes and breathed deep. He could not stand to think of it.

Too late. Too late.

His eyes opened, and he became aware of Greg’s gaze on him. He was seated just next to John, strapped in by the shoulders.
“Out with it, mate,” Greg said.

John looked down at him, shifting his hold on the rail as the Dowager’s tires hit a bump. He couldn’t let himself go down that dead end of thought. They were going to find Sherlock and Molly, safe and whole. They were going to take them home. And when John had Sherlock there, under his protection, he’d tell him…

He’d tell him.

“How is he?” John asked.

Greg shook his head tiredly. “We’ve all seen better days.”

John gave him a look.

Reluctantly, Greg sighed. He scratched at his hair as he mulled the question, sending the silver into messy tangles, before finally meeting John’s eyes again.

“He’s taken it hard,” Greg said. "Harder than I expected. First the coma and then… everything. This. You.”

“Me?”

“He thinks you’re dead, John. I told you.”

John glanced out the window again. The trees along the road were dead and dying, shriveled to brown papery things. Autumn had come early. It seemed as if all the life had been leechd from London.

“Listen,” Greg went on. “Whatever he says, whatever happens, just give him time.”


“Just... time,” Greg said uneasily, as if skirting a delicate point. He sighed and rubbed at his face. “Christ.”

At that moment the Dowager came to an unexpected halt, rocking John forward and almost toppling him into Donovan’s lap.

“Inspector,” came the worried voice of Bradstreet from the driver’s seat. “I think you need to see this.”

Greg unsnapped his harness and ducked between the two rows of seats. John was after him in an instant, crowding into the narrow passageway that led to the front berth. John stuck his head through the gap, and the breath was stolen from him.

The familiar lines of Bart’s stone edifice was surrounded by a sea of shambling corpses pressed around its base. The dozens of walkers John had seen in the Underground and wandering the devastated streets of Southwark were a trickling trifle compared to numbers now before him. The ambulance bays were smashed open and the walkers were trundling inside, drawn like a slow seep of water into a drain. If there were this many outside, there had to be countless more in the interior courtyards and passageways of the hospital.

Sherlock was inside somewhere. Adrenaline shivered through John’s limbs, down to his fingertips, readying for a fight. The world seemed to sharpen, to brighten. Sherlock was inside somewhere, and
John was going to get him out.

“God,” Greg whispered beside John.

“Sir?” McDonald asked, uncertain, from the copilot’s seat.

They were waiting on the order. Greg’s face was locked in stunned dismay. Any tactician with eyes could see that breaching the hospital was a profoundly suicidal prospect.

“You don’t have to come with me,” John said.

Greg looked at him for a long moment. Then he turned around and faced the others who had volunteered to come. They were craning their heads to get a look out the front windscreen, and by the paling of their faces they knew precisely what they were in for.

“Anyone who wants to leave is free to do so now,” Greg said. “Find a vehicle, head for Pindar, and don’t look back. Otherwise, we’re heading in.”

Hopkins and Gregson exchanged glances. Bainbridge remained silent despite his uneasy look, Jones was hard-eyed, and Donovan’s glower went unchanged. None of them moved to get up.

“We’re with you, boss,” Gregson said. “It’s the right thing to do.”

Greg nodded. “So be it. McDonald, Bradstreet, I need you to get us in close. The Dowager can handle a crowd, but if too many walkers get under her we’ll be stuck.”

“There,” said Bradstreet, pointing to the low section of wall running along the hospital’s perimeter. “Think you can reach it?”

“If we get on the roof of the vehicle, we might,” John said.

“Good. That’s our entry.” Greg looked to the drivers. “Once we’re in, you’ll need to draw away as many walkers as possible if we’re to have any hope of leaving again. Do you understand?”

“We’ve got a horn,” McDonald suggested.

“Too loud,” John said. “Those things carry, even in the desert. We don’t want to attract more walkers from the surrounding streets.”

“The engine noise should be enough,” Bradstreet said. “Look, they’re already interested.”

He was right. The fringes of the walker crowd was already tottering their way, surely but slowly. Bloody faces were turning amongst the rest. Did they follow herd behavior, John wondered? Would the densely packed center follow simply because their fellow undead were doing the same?

“Give it a rev or two and we should be attractive enough,” Bradstreet said, watching the group headed toward them. “We’ll lead them on a merry chase.”

Thus it was decided. Everyone unbuckled their harnesses and adjusted their equipment as McDonald and Bradstreet maneuvered the Dowager. The mass of walkers thuded against the steel hull and bumped beneath the suspension. Through the portholes it was apparent that the vehicle was a magnet of noise and movement; walkers were emerging from the ambulance archways, drawn by the commotion.

But the vehicle shuddered and stalled as it backed toward the low wall, and John heard curses from the driver’s compartment. Scraping noises echoed all around them, accompanied by the faint
growling gurgles of hundreds of undead throats. John gripped the hilt of the Glock at his side and
tugged at the bulletproof vest under his coat. Beads of nervous sweat ran down Bainbridge’s temple.
Hopkins’ face was stricken. Finally the vehicle lurched, freed of the blockage, and the beige stone of
Bart’s slid into view out either window.

“It’s now or never,” Greg said. “Go!”

The back doors of the Dowager swung open, and John’s first thought was to be impressed with
Bradstreet’s handling of the large vehicle. He had stopped the Dowager the perfect distance from the
wall, so that the two panels of the doors neatly boxed them in against the stone, preventing walkers
from swarming them the moment they opened. There were two walkers directly in front of them, and
before John could raise his weapon two sharp pops from Donovan’s gun struck the creatures
between their brows. They slumped to the pavement, but walker limbs were already flailing under
the door panels, clawing at the metal.

“Go!” Greg yelled.

Greg went first, quickly exiting the rear and pulling himself onto the Dowager's roof, followed
immediately by Hopkins and Bainbridge, and then John found himself facing the open doorway. He
stowed his Glock and stepped onto the doorframe, pushing himself upward with the toe of his boot.
Greg and Bainbridge grabbed his arms and yanked him up onto the beveled steel roof.

From up top, the sound of the walkers was utterly chilling. John imagined it must be what it was like
to be treed by a wild beast, prowling about as it waited for you to make one fatal mistake. Except
rather than a lion or a tiger, it was a blanket of disfigured human faces hemming the Dowager on
every side, clamoring for his blood and body.

John turned as Greg and Hopkins hoisted Donovan up. She pointedly ignored John’s attempt to help
her step past them. They next reached for Gregson down below, but there came a series of sudden
shouts as Gregson’s foot slipped in its hold. The Dowager’s rear doors creaked and the walkers
pressed in, shaping the panels into a triangle. John’s Glock was in his hand in an instant and he fired
three rounds, striking three skulls, and they pulled Gregson, shaking, to the rooftop. Jones was the
last one left, his arms protruding from the small opening left by the Dowager’s doors. He shoved
against them to gain enough space to be pulled up, but the walkers had the weight of countless
bodies all pushing, and the doors creaked again. Greg shouted at Bainbridge and Hopkins to lower
him down. Donovan was rapping at the front windscreen and yelling at Bradstreet and McDonald.
Gunshots echoed. John rushed forward to help hold onto Greg as he attempted to extract Jones, but
confused chaos had already erupted. Jones was down below, his face and arms bloodied, fending off
walkers by firing indiscriminately into their faces. There was a scream and shout, and then Hopkins
was in John’s ear ordering that they pull up Greg.

Greg sat blinking, spattered with Jones’ blood. Jones himself was gone, swallowed by the gorging
swell of walkers. Hopkins looked dazed. They weren’t getting back inside the vehicle, John realized.
The only way forward was Bart’s.

Not wasting any time, John tucked his Glock and bounded off the back of the Dowager, leaping for
the stone wall. He grunted as his stomach collided with the coarse stone, and he proceeded to drag
himself onto the flat surface.

“Up!” John shouted at the rest of them. “Up, damn you!”

Donovan made the leap, then Bainbridge. Hopkins and Gregson came after, and lastly Greg, still
bloodied. The Dowager revved its engine and skidded forward once, then twice, pushing through the
walkers and jostling as it ran over those who didn’t make it out of the way. The surge of walkers
swept forward in the Dowager’s wake, entranced by the noise. John rose to a crouch and scrambled along the stone, making for the cornice of the building.

He smashed in the first window he found with the base of his Glock. They piled in through the jagged opening, helping each other through, and collapsed inside to catch their breaths. John went to the window frame to watch the Dowager inching round the bend in the road, leading the walkers away like a hulking pied piper.

John turned. They appeared to be in an administrator’s office of some sort, and as they gathered their breaths. Greg stood with his arms folded in the corner, while Hopkins and Donovan were leaning against the desk. Gregson was sitting with his back to the wall, head cupped in his hands. Bainbridge was watching the others vacantly.

“Damn it,” Hopkins muttered, wiping at her eyes.

John bowed his head. He hadn’t known Jones long, but he had been a fellow soldier and deserved his due respect.

“He was a damn good officer,” Greg said, looking up. “Damn good. Let’s not allow his sacrifice to be for nothing.”

Nods of agreement came all around.

“Five minutes to collect yourselves,” Greg added, though it visibly pained him to say it. “We’ve still got a mission to complete.”

St. Bart’s was an enormous place to search on foot. They decided to start with Sherlock and Molly’s generator-powered lab, as that was the likeliest place they had gone. John clicked on his torch as they swept down the hall, wondering if they were going to burst inside only to find Sherlock and Molly idly waiting around for the walkers outside to clear. It wasn’t apparent how that quantity of walkers had got there in the first place; the officers were quick to tell John that herds of that size had only been seen on the fringes of the city, not in the cramped, winding streets of inner London.

Greg led them to the lab, but no one was there. The power was running, however, and it smelt suspiciously of recent fire. Slides and implements were strewn across nearly every surface, though the source of the smell remained a mystery until Bainbridge found it: a box full of papery ashes and leftover metal nibs of the sort you’d find joining folders.

“They were here,” Greg said, sweeping his torch around. “But they left.”

“Are there other functional labs?” John asked. “Would they go elsewhere to use the equipment?”

Donovan was digging through the burned box. “Sir, I think this is their research.”

John and Greg came round to look inside. Donovan lifted out a partially intact page and pointed to a section of legible script.

“That’s Sherlock’s handwriting,” John said, taking the paper. He pointed his torch beam at it.

...subject fails to react to doses of arsenic administered intravenously. Unclear whether result is due
to lack of cardiovascular activity or immunity to high concentrations of heavy metals in the bloodstream...

“Why would they burn it?” Greg wondered.

Donovan shook the charred remains of a pocket lighter from the ashes. “They didn’t,” she said. “Someone else was here.”

The three of them stared at the lighter. Greg looked ill. “Let’s keep moving,” he said.

Despite the dimming afternoon light from the windows, most of Bart’s was dark as a grave. They moved as silently as they could, keeping their torchlights pointed downward. Sounds seemed to magnify in the emptied halls. Distant moaning and scratching came from indiscriminate directions. They ran across walkers here in there, alone or in pairs, and dispatched them with swift stabs to the head. They were dressed as doctors and nurses and patients, mostly, rather than the varied outfits of the hordes outside the walls, and John was hopeful it meant the herd hadn’t broken into the buildings themselves.

John strained for any familiar sound that might lead him to Sherlock: the echo of a baritone, the flap of a coat, the softer pitch of a female voice. Finally, they did hear something. The coarse tones of a man drifted down the corridor, higher than Sherlock’s voice and decidedly angry.

Greg led them down the corridor, until it became apparent the sounds were coming from round the next corner. There was a dull thud every few seconds, and John was able to make out just what the voice was saying.

“Come out of there, you little slut!”

John crouched at the edge of the corner and tilted his head round to see. Five men were gathered beside a closed door. One of them, shining of leather, was holding a pistol while his comrade nursed what appeared to be a badly injured hand. Blood dripped from his palm as he murmured in pain. The others had rifles hanging from their shoulders.

One of them was at the door, ramming it with the stock of his weapon. “I said come out of there!” he demanded. “You’re in for it, sweetheart!”

“Christ,” Greg whispered. “It’s the Colonel.”

“The who?” John asked, looking up at him.

“The man in the leather jacket,” Greg explained. “He’s a… warlord. Sort of.”

“Warlord? What are you talking about?”

Greg shook his head. “Well, he’s got people, and weapons, and goes about killing anyone who doesn’t give him what he wants. They’re called the Coalition, and odds are they didn’t come round for a friendly chat.”

The man banging on the door growled and picked up speed, smashing at the wood. There was an unsettling creak, but the wood failed to give, and the man stepped back with a grunt. “This bitch is going to get it, I swear to God!”

“Shoot out the hinges,” said one of them.

A handheld lighter flame flicked into existence. The man wearing leather -- the Colonel -- shrugged
and held it to his mouth, lighting a cigarette waiting between his lips. “I’ve a better idea,” he said, pocketing the lighter and taking a puff. “Let’s find some of that bleach and vinegar. Give her a good whiff under the door jamb there. See how she likes a bit of chlorine gas.”


Firearms rattled as they were removed from holsters. There were only six of them against four automatic rifles, but they had the element of surprise on their side.

“One,” Greg breathed.

The Colonel started laughing to himself.

“Two.”

John clutched his Glock with both hands.

“Three!”

They lunged round the corner in a bright hale of flashing gunfire. The Colonel’s men were poorly trained; they startled and flew apart, waving their rifles awkwardly as they tried to get their hands in the correct positions for firing. The Colonel’s cigarette dropped from his mouth like a flare and he stepped back casually, dispensing shells from his handgun. John skidded low and knocked the knees out from under one of the men and shoved an elbow into the back of another, letting them fall and leaving them to the officers behind him. He swept up like a shadow and pounced on the Colonel, the only one of them showing a modicum of proper technique. John caught him by the throat and shoved him back. He pressed his Glock’s muzzle to the Colonel’s chest and trapped the Colonel’s right hand against the wall, his pistol aloft.

“Well,” said the Colonel. “You’re a spirited one.”

John would have shot him right there if he wasn’t in need of information. The Colonel regarded him calmly as the sounds of fighting raged behind John, smacks and grunts and stifled bursts of rifle rounds. John opened his mouth to say something, but in that moment a torchlight flashed across the pistol in the Colonel’s hand. It was a black Sig Sauer, scuffed in all the right places, and John recognized it instantly.

“That’s my gun,” John said in disbelief. “Why do you have my gun?”

The Colonel’s gaze swept from the gun down to John, something dawning in his expression. And then he grinned.

John’s eyes narrowed. There was only one answer: it had to have been in Sherlock’s possession. His blood went from cold to boiling in an instant. John ripped the Sig from the Colonel’s hand and shoved the barrel under his chin.

“Where’s Sherlock?” John roared.

Something glanced across John’s back, and he instinctually quirked his head to one side. It was sufficient distraction for the Colonel to knee him in the gut. Despite his bulletproof vest the blow was enough to knock the wind out of him and send pain lancing through his ribs. The Colonel shoved him violently aside and John landed hard on the floor, crumpling in a dizzy spin of pain. Footsteps pounded in the distance, shots popped overhead, and then the sounds died down. John managed to roll onto his back.
The Met officers were bloodied and winded, but they were all standing. The four assault rifles were lying on the floor, along with the unmoving body of one of the attackers. The Colonel and the rest of his men appeared to have fled in a trail of smeared blood and disarmament.

“All right?” Hopkins asked, offering a hand to help John up. He rose shakily to his feet and winced, pain blooming as the adrenaline of the moment slipped away.

“Got one right in the stomach,” Donovan said. She smiled in satisfaction as she ejected the empty magazine from her pistol. “That cocksucker won’t make it past the front door.”

“Everyone else okay?” Hopkins asked, but no one was paying her any attention. Instead, they were watching as Greg approached the dented door.

Greg rapped lightly on the wood. “Molly? Molly, are you in there? It’s Greg Lestrade. They’re gone.”

The door opened, and for a second John thought there was actually no one inside. And then he realized Molly was already hugging Greg, her face planted in his chest and her plait dangling as she sobbed.

“It’s all right,” Greg said, stroking her back. “It’s all right, we found you. Thank God we did.”

It took Molly several minutes to lift her face away from Greg’s chest. She was bleeding from her scalp and her cheeks shone with tears. Donovan came over to softly speak to her. Molly nodded and reluctantly let go of Greg. She looked exhausted and frightened beyond belief.

“You’re all right?” Greg asked, brushing a loose strand of Molly’s hair away from the sticky trail of blood on her forehead. “Do you need medical attention for that? John can take a look.”

It wasn’t the ideal way Greg could have mentioned John’s presence. Molly’s eyes darted to John and she seemed to have an abrupt seizure where she stood. She glanced back at Greg in alarm, as if he might be pulling an elaborate joke. When she realized it wasn’t, her trembling hands flew to cover her mouth.

“John,” she gasped. “Oh God, oh God.”

John slid his Sig into his belt holster and walked toward her. He should have been crying from relief, too, perhaps. He should have felt something, but there was no room left for it. He was a hound fixed on Sherlock’s scent, relentless in his pursuit, and fresh blood had come at last.

John reached out to hold her shaking shoulders still. He looked her dead in the eye. “Molly, where’s Sherlock?”

Tears were streaming down her face. “He fell,” she whispered.

A chill struck John. Her anguish brown eyes said everything: Sherlock was gone. She knew it for a fact.

It couldn’t be true. It couldn’t be true unless John had the evidence before his own eyes. He had come so far. It wouldn’t be true.

“Show me,” John said.
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“I bit one of them on the hand,” Molly said. “Right down to the metacarpals. That’s how I got free.”

She was leading the group of Met officers up the stairwell to the first floor of the hospital. As they walked their footfalls echoed through the empty recesses above them. Beside her, D.I. Lestrade’s expression was a mix of astonishment and concern.

“Christ, you’ve got a pair,” Lestrade said. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

Molly touched her fingertips to her scalp, feeling the dried blood. She wasn’t entirely sure she was all right. It was disorientating to be free after being trapped for hours, listening to the vulgar shouts of men who wished her harm, with no recourse except to hope the Colonel’s men would give up and leave. But they hadn’t been keen on abandoning their last opportunity for information. She’d expected to die in that room, alone and helpless. It still felt like a dream, having Lestrade and Sally and everyone else there.

Lestrade touched her arm as they reached the top of the stairs. “Molly, I asked if you’re sure you’re all right? Shall we let you to have a rest with Sergeant Donovan?”

Molly quit picking at her scalp, and shook her head. “No. No, I— I need to show you.”

The moment the Colonel had let Sherlock go kept replaying in her mind. She should have done something. She should have told the Colonel what he wanted to hear. A lie, a tidbit. Anything to keep him from doing what he did.

Molly glanced at John. He was at the rear of the group of officers, and he looked as if he himself had witnessed Sherlock’s fall. His eyes were dark and distant, his hair in disarray. His clothes were loose and he kept one hand planted on the gun at his belt. He was a mess, certainly, but he was also the most wonderful thing Molly had ever seen.

*He’s alive.*

She’d only half-listened to Lestrade’s hurried explanation. It didn’t matter how they’d found him; John was here and breathing and walking, and Molly’s emotions were terribly torn. The world of late just kept on taking, and here it had given something back only a smidgen too late. Sherlock would never know. He had deserved to know, and Molly’s heart was breaking for them both.

John met her eyes, and Molly looked away.

At the end of the corridor they arrived at the room where the Colonel had taken her and Sherlock. Several of the desks were overturned, and the window through which Sherlock had fallen still hung open to the cloudy sky.

“They pushed him right out there and into the walkers,” Molly said. She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve, hanging back with Lestrade as John and the others approached the window to investigate. “At least he took one of those bastards with him. The sounds… the sounds were awful.”

Lestrade and Hopkins grimaced. Bainbridge, Gregson, and John crowded into the window frame, peering down into what must be a horrible scene. Molly knew what walkers did to people.
“My god,” Bainbridge gasped.

“I don’t want to see it,” Molly said, glancing up at Lestrade. “I don’t want to see him like that.”

“It’s fine,” Lestrade told her. He placed an arm around her shoulders. “We’ve just got to be sure.”

“He was going to leave,” Molly whispered. “He was headed for Cambridge. We just came to gather the research a-and—”

“Molly, there isn’t anything you could have done,” Lestrade gently said. “It’s not your fault.”

There was kindness in his eyes, and wet warmth blurred Molly’s vision. She sniffed and wiped away the tears pooling in the corners of her eyes.

Bainbridge and Gregson were practically hanging out the window to get a clear look, but John had stilled. After a moment he made a sudden turn, his expression so strained it appeared almost blank.

“There’s only one,” John said.

“What’s that?” Lestrade asked.

John dropped down from the sill and headed straight for the door. “I need to go down there.”

Gregson poked his head up. “It’s not safe, John. The walkers.”

“You’re mad,” Donovan added.

Lestrade moved to catch John before he left the room. “What are you saying?”

John fixed a level glare at the D.I. “There’s only one set of remains,” he said with dangerously careful enunciation. “Molly said two people fell. From this distance I can’t bloody tell whether it’s Sherlock.”

“There’s not much left,” Gregson said from the window. “Are you sure it’s only one?”

“It’s one,” John said, trying again to push past Lestrade. “I’m going down.”

Lestrade grabbed him by the arm, stopping him, and frowned. “John, there is bravery and there is suicide. I know you don’t want to face this. I understand. But he’s gone. No one could possibly survive that fall.”

For the first time, Molly saw the cracks forming in John’s impenetrable facade. He blinked at Lestrade, a wet shine to his eyes. His left hand gripped tight on his gun.

John looked at Molly. “You saw him fall?”

“Yes,” Molly said.

“Is that all? Did you see what happened after?”

“John... I’m so sorry.”

“Did you see it happen or not?” John snapped.

“No,” Molly admitted. “They didn’t let me look.”

“Do you care to give a second opinion, then? As a pathologist.”
Dead bodies in the morgue, she could do. Autopsies and remains scraped up from crime scenes were all in a day’s work. But she didn’t know any of those people. They were bits of flesh and bone beneath her scalpel. Sherlock was her friend.

But so was John, and he needed closure if he was to survive a loss so enormous. Molly was the only other person present qualified to identify human remains. He trusted her opinion. So she swallowed back her fears and nodded at John.

Hopkins and Sally parted to allow Molly to pass. Bainbridge stepped down from the window and Gregson offered out a hand to help her up. Molly climbed onto the sill and felt a sickening lurch as she looked down into the courtyard where Sherlock had died.

Walkers were scattered throughout the brickwork. The herd had apparently thinned since the subsonic beacon had gone off; most were waddling toward the ambulance archway, drawn away by something more interesting than the foodless courtyard. Bits and pieces of human remains, brownish-black, were identifiable all over the place, and Molly supposed it was detritus that had been knocked off the walkers when more had been present.

Molly shaded her eyes and peered down at the clump of viscera directly below the window. Patches were still glistening with the dark red color of recently exsanguinated blood. A handful of walkers were poking around at the leftovers, but there wasn’t an awful lot left for consumption. Bloody bones were partially visible, picked clean of muscle and entwined by slowly drying ligaments.

Molly tried to adjust her frame of mind to that of the impartial pathologist, the body nothing more than a murder victim in need of identification.

“I see... one mandible,” she said. “Two femurs. One spinal column.”

John was correct; it was one body. The faintest spark of hope flared inside her, and she quickly scanned the courtyard for signs of a second set of bones, but found no promising evidence. She turned to glance back at John. “From up here, I don’t see another victim.”

“You’re sure Sherlock took someone with him?” Lestrade asked.

“Yes,” Molly said.

John gave a brutal smile. “It’s one fucking body, Greg, unless they magically conjoined during the fall.”

Lestrade rubbed at the back of his head. “How is that possible?”

“We won’t know until we look,” Molly said.

“I’m going down,” John said, firm enough to drive nails.

Lestrade let him pass. Molly followed. Reluctantly, so did the rest of them.

Soon they had reached the ground floor and the stone archway encompassing the door that led to the courtyard. John wrenched the safety bar away and removed the bolt.

A blinding crack of daylight streamed into the dimmed hall. Molly helped him shove the heavy door aside. John barged recklessly ahead, and she reached for his shoulder. “John, be careful.”

From a level vantage point, the walkers in the courtyard seemed a great deal more plentiful. John appeared to agree, for he paused on the stoop and drew out his gun as his eyes swept the scene.
Molly still saw no trace of Sherlock.

“Shall we radio Bradstreet and McDonald to sound the horn?” Gregson asked. “To draw them away?”

“Not unless we want to make our getaway even more of a nightmare,” Lestrade said. “Fifty walkers now or hundreds later? Take your pick.”


A knot of walkers huddled several stories below an open window. Molly made a mental map, which confirmed it was the correct spot. She pulled the gun John had given her from the waistband of her jeans and nodded in his direction.

“You’re going to get yourselves killed, or worse,” Sally said, but she drew her weapon all the same.

They entered the courtyard in formation. John was the first to pop off a round, nailing an elderly walker wearing a hospital gown right in the center of his forehead. The Met officers opened fire in short succession, and the group advanced in a steady flow of aiming and shooting. The walkers grew thicker as the gunshots echoed between the stonework buildings. Molly hadn’t practiced much with handguns, and after a few misses Lestrade handed her his utility knife to use instead.

They reached the human remains in good time. The walkers picking at the leftovers rose and growled, stinking of fresh rot. John shot one in the temple and another in the eye before knocking them away with ruthless efficiency. Molly stabbed one behind the ear, a woman with patches of scalp missing in long dark hair. She hissed horribly as she died.

When Molly looked round John was already knelt beside the remains, gently probing the fragmented skull. Molly stooped beside him as the others positioned themselves on guard, and she realized there was even less to work with than she’d hoped. The bones were stripped clean and half the crown of the head was missing.

“It’s a male,” she said, “but that’s not going to tell us much.”

“Look,” John said. He pulled down the mandible so that she might peek inside. "Dentition doesn’t match. This one's got silver fillings in three of the molars."

Hope bloomed in Molly’s chest. "It's not Sherlock?"

"No,” John said.

“What’s that?” Lestrade called.

“It’s not Sherlock!” Molly told him.

John began crawling over the blood-smeared bricks. "Molly! This. See this?"

Blood and bloody bits covered nearly every spare inch of the ground. There had been a lot of blood from the dead man and most had soaked between the cracks in the bricks, but John had identified a curious pattern amongst the random markings. Long, mono-directional sweeping motions. Clear signs of fabric. The impression of a boot toe. And—

A handprint.

John hovered his palm over the mark, comparing its relative smallness to the hand of the person who
“Sherlock,” he whispered.

"Oh my god,” Molly said.

They followed the trail quickly, picking out signs left and right, with Lestrade and the officers firing away at the walkers who got too close. Chunks of broken wood, more shoeprints, pieces of rope...

"The window!" Molly called.

Smashed in from the outside, it was less than a foot high with a large bloody imprint beside it where a grown person appeared to have lain. Molly dropped down to peer inside. It reeked of decomposing flesh, and within she heard the unmistakable scuffling and grunting that signified walkers.

She might fit through the opening, but it was too dangerous to go on her own. Molly stood up. "He went inside," she said. “It’s full of walkers.”

"Do you know which room it is?” John asked.

Molly nodded. "One of the basement laboratories. I can find it."

Her heart was pounding so hard she was amazed the sound hadn’t drawn every walker in the hospital. She located the door to the correct wing of the hospital but it was locked from within, and they ended up smashing through a nearby window to gain entry. As Molly ran down the hall she lost all fear of what might be round the next corner, living or dead, and the solitary walkers they discovered fell quickly. John’s footfalls behind her formed the same hopeful beat that was thrumming in her veins. He’s alive. He’s alive. He’s got to be alive.

Then the beat abruptly ended as they reached the bottom of the basement stairwell. Molly rounded the corner to find the hallway filled with a horrific sight. Walkers jammed the corridor beneath the flickering emergency lights, with their growls filling the stagnant air like the buzzing of a hive. John pulled his knife from his belt to wield in his empty right hand, his expression staunchly undeterred.

The Met officers clattered down the stairs behind them, huffing for breath. Molly looked to Lestrade, then to John. “It should be the third lab on the left,” she told them. “Just a few more feet.”

“Bloody hell,” Gregson grumbled. “Just a few more, eh?”

Hopkins snapped a fresh magazine into her pistol. “We’ve come this far, Toby. Don’t quit on me now.”

“No, no. This is terrific.” Gregson wiped his brow as he caught his breath. “Christ, could anyone even be alive down here?”

“Sherlock got this far,” Lestrade reasoned. “If anyone’s luck would hold, it’s his.”

The narrow confines of the hall made fighting a difficult prospect. John and D.I. Lestrade took the lead, funneling the walkers one by one down so that Molly and the others could dispose of them easily. It was messy work, with nowhere for the spatter to go except the crusted walls or their exposed clothing. Molly wiped her hands on her coat several times and pressed on toward withered skin and peeling faces, glassy eyes and the foul smell of decay.

They made their way into the lab and a feverous speed overtook John. He took to clubbing the walkers hard across the skull, smashing in one head while firing off a round at another. The lab was
in shambles from what Molly could see, with a mass of walkers ambling blindly round in the confined space. The Met officers took aim and began to fire. Bullet casings flew through the air and the echo of gunshots ricocheted off the glossy steel.

At last the final walker fell to the wayside, and the lab became dismally silent. The broken window to the courtyard offered a rectangular beam of light. This was the correct room, but Sherlock wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

“He couldn’t have made it far,” Lestrade said.

The officers began shifting debris and searching through the equipment. Molly traced her torch beam around, and the evidence of Sherlock’s presence was unmistakable. A bloody palm print glistened on a worktop, a boot-tread streaked the floor, vials spilled like dominos across the shelves. She sidled past tables and overturned shelves, following the trail. “I’ve got something,” she said.

Molly’s light landed upon a heavy door situated at the far end of the lab. A hundred malformed handprints grimed the surface of the metal beneath a small, grubby window. It was a chemical storeroom, if she remembered correctly, and the perfect place to hide. Molly’s heartbeat fluttered in her chest.

The other officers had stopped their rummaging. Molly glanced back at them. Lestrade raised his brows and tilted his head, deferring to her to decide how to proceed. In the shadows behind him, John looked ghostly and more than a little unbalanced. He blinked and raised his gun, his arm trembling faintly. The other officers did the same, wary of what might be inside the storeroom. Molly motioned for them to stay quiet, and hesitantly approached the door.

“Sherlock?” she called. "Sherlock, are you there?"

She waited a minute or two, but there came no answer. Would she need to open the door herself? What would she find inside?

He’s a walker. He’s gone. We’re too late—

Molly forced the thought away and focused on what a living, breathing Sherlock might be thinking. He had every reason to hide. Possibly he suspected she was still under the Colonel’s influence. He couldn’t know otherwise.

"Sherlock?" she called again. "Cobalt Lacrosse."

At the use of their password, the circular handle of the door gave a sudden creak. It turned slowly, glinting in the torchlight between the patches of filth that covered it. The door inched forward and a seam of darkness appeared, but it did not open any further.

Molly swallowed past the growing thickness in her throat. "It's all right, Sherlock. I promise it’s all right. We were saved."

"Who’s with you?" came Sherlock's voice, tinny and hollow. He sounded in physical pain.

There was a sharp discharge of breath behind her. Molly quickly glanced over and found Lestrade pressing a hand to John’s chest, urging him to stay put. Raw, insuppressible emotion contorted John’s face.

“Hold on, mate,” Lestrade murmured to him.

John’s gun sagged toward the ground, but he did not move.
Molly looked back to the storeroom. “D.I. Lestrade is here,” she called to Sherlock. “And… others. The Colonel’s gone.”

The crack in the door widened.

"Please come out, Sherlock,” Molly said.

A tall silhouette emerged from the dark. Sherlock raised a hand, shielding his eyes from the glare of the torches.

Dried blood caked his jeans and stained his shirt a dirty rust-brown. His face and neck and hands were smeared with it. He moved distrustfully, favoring his right leg, as he eyed the walkers piled around the base of the storeroom door.

Sherlock’s gaze swept up to the group, landing on Molly at the forefront, before darting to Lestrade. The D.I.’s presence seemed to lend credence Molly’s story, for Sherlock’s posture eased considerably. Then his eyes locked onto John, as if drawn by an inescapable force of magnetism, and Sherlock froze.

Relief broke across John’s face like a sunrise, shattering what remained of his dark, determined expression. He lowered his gun.

“Sherlock,” John breathed.

Then his brows creased as he took in the full measure of Sherlock’s bloodied state. John shoved his gun into his belt and in an instant he was crossing the distance between them, grabbing Sherlock’s hands and checking him over for signs of injury. “God, are you all right? Did they bite you? Did they scratch you?”

Sherlock tensed when John touched him, and remained rooted in place as John checked his arms and up along his shoulders, voicing a string of queries regarding Sherlock’s health, before gently cupping Sherlock’s neck to inspect his head.

Sherlock’s eyes flicked wildly as he tried to reconcile what he was seeing. The man who was supposed to be dead. The man who couldn’t possibly be standing there. The questions flew past him, unheard and unanswered.

John tilted Sherlock’s head down and looked him firmly in the eye. “Are you injured? Sherlock, are you injured?”

As they stared at one another, the rigid lines of John’s body began to soften, and his medical concern was replaced by a quiet sort of tension. It seemed to weigh upon the room and everyone within it. John’s hands fell away from Sherlock, visibly trembling.

Sherlock was pale. Paler than Molly had ever seen him. His face was a blank, ashen mask as he studied the living ghost before him. Then, finally, Sherlock took a tiny, shuffling step forward. His eyes, wide and stunned, shone like fragile silver discs.

"John?"

The question was quieter than a whisper, and the single most heartbreaking thing Molly had ever heard.

John swayed for a moment, and then with lightning speed launched forward to wrap his arms around Sherlock. Caught in the crushing hold, Sherlock blinked in confusion and managed to look down at
John. Slowly, he lifted his arms to return the embrace.

It was John’s legs that gave out first, but their mutual grip on one another brought Sherlock down with him. They thudded to the floor together, and the impact seemed to wake Sherlock up to the reality of the situation.

His face moved, finally: his mouth dropping open into a belated frown of horror, his eyes growing round with shock, patches of color returning to his cheeks. He squeezed John’s jacket until the knuckles turned white.

They slumped together on the dirty floor, an amorphous bundle of bunched coats and interwoven joints with no definitive clue where one ended and the other began. As Molly watched Sherlock’s expression slowly unravel, she was quite sure that he wasn’t registering any of it. He didn’t say a word, silenced for once by this miracle.

Sherlock closed his eyes and buried his head against John’s shoulder, his world returned to him, resplendent, from the ashes of his despair.

Molly turned away to give them a moment’s privacy, wiping at her eyes, and discovered that D.I. Lestrade was smiling softly at her. She hadn’t realized how exhausted she’d become, both physically and emotionally, but it all seemed to hit her now in a whirling surge of happiness and relief. Sniffling, Molly smiled right back at Lestrade.

Suddenly, a long and distant sound cut the sentiment out from under her. It sounded like a foghorn to Molly, or a deeper version of an emergency siren, echoing from somewhere beyond the hospital.

Everyone glanced upward, including Sherlock and John from their position on the floor.

“That’s the Dowager’s horn,” Bainbridge said.

Gregson looked concernedly to Lestrade. “Oh God. They weren’t supposed to do that.”

“Don’t they know it’ll draw more walkers?” Sally asked.

“Of course they do,” said Hopkins.

The sound kept carrying, uncomfortably long. “It’s not stopping.” Molly said.

Gregson’s hand went to his weapon. “Something’s wrong.”

The officers looked to Lestrade, waiting for his assessment, but the D.I. was the most troubling of all. His eyes were shut, and he simply looked pained.

“We’ve got to go,” Lestrade said, lifting his head and opening his eyes. “Now.”

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: Demons | Dry the River
Chapter 21

Greg was helping Sherlock down the final stretch of hospital corridor when Hopkins appeared at the far end, waving frantically. Sherlock had one arm slung over Greg’s shoulder and was moving as quickly as he could manage. Despite the added support, Sherlock grit his teeth with every hurried step.

“They must’ve found the Dowager,” Greg said. He looked round at Molly and John. “Can you take him?”

“We’ve got him,” Molly said.

“You’re sure?”

“Go,” John insisted.

Greg slipped out from under Sherlock’s arm and John took his place. John didn’t look all that capable of keeping a grown man upright, but the fire in his eyes said otherwise. Sherlock’s knee seemed to be his only source of pain, and since the injury wasn’t anything so critical as a walker bite, Greg had no issue leaving Sherlock in John’s competent hands.

They had bigger problems now.

Greg broke into an open run down the hallway, his holstered gun knocking against his thigh. The incessant horn was even louder than when they’d first heard it down in the basement, coming in impatient rounds that were certain to draw unwanted attention. Circumstances may have forced Bradstreet and McDonald to risk summoning them despite the dangers.

He reached Hopkins near the door, but rather than take him outside to the street she led him into the receptionist’s lounge next door. Colorful children’s toys dotted the floor between thinly padded chairs. Donovan was on the radio over by the receptionist’s desk while Gregson and Bainbridge peered out the window.

“What is it? What’ve we got?” Greg asked.

Hopkins nodded toward the window. “See for yourself, sir.”

He walked to Gregson and Bainbridge and gazed beyond the shuttered pane. “Shit,” Greg hissed.

The Dowager was parked on the street just outside, along with a handful of other four-wheel-drive vehicles. The front doors of the Dowager's cab hung open, and all around the vehicle stood an assemblage of shrouded, gun-wielding people. They wore hoodies and balaclavas and dark, heavy outerwear; coats of all sizes and God, there were even a few kids among them. They surrounded the Dowager and sat atop her steel hull. One man was perched on the driver’s side step, one hand reaching inside to sound the horn. And in the very front, the Colonel stood lazily smoking a cigarette and holding a pistol to Bradstreet’s kneeling figure.

The men round the edges of the group had created a perimeter and were methodically firing at any walkers that got too close. The stream of walkers seemed to be picking up, a sure sign that more were on their way by invitation of the horn.
“What are they doing?” Gregson asked.

“It’s a siege,” Bainbridge said.

“God,” gasped Hopkins. “Where’s McDonald?”

Over by the desk, Donovan looked up, holding her radio to her chest. “Sir, I’ve got Lion’s Den over shortwave,” she said. “If they scramble they can get a rescue team here in an hour.”

“We’re not going to last an hour,” Greg said.

Donovan nodded bleakly. “I’ll tell them to do what they can.”

“Sir, what should we do?” Hopkins asked.

Greg grimaced. “First thing’s to have them stop making that racket.”

He unlatched the window and pushed it open. It’s what they wanted, he expected. To get a response. As soon as the Colonel saw Greg in the window frame, he held up his cigarette and the man pounding on the horn abruptly stopped. Bradstreet, his hands on his head, glanced upward. He looked terrified.

“Inspector Lestrade,” called the Colonel. He flicked away his cigarette. “There you are. My friends have been anxious to meet you.”

“Where’s our other driver?” Greg demanded.

The Colonel glanced around. “Other driver? You mean that one?”

A few of the armed men parted. McDonald lay twisted and bloody on the asphalt just below the cab, as if his lifeless body had been carelessly pushed from the driver’s seat. Gregson and Hopkins swore loudly. Greg recoiled, and a burning outrage sprang up in his gut.

The Colonel tapped his gun against the crown of Bradstreet’s head. “I suggest you play nicely, for this one’s sake.”

“What is it you want?” Greg said.

The Colonel chuckled. “You know what I want. What we want. Tell me where your little hide-out is, and you may actually get out of there alive.”

All the air seemed to leave Greg’s lungs. He blinked and pushed back from the window, stricken by how grossly out of his depth he felt. This had started as a rescue mission. Now he only had moments to negotiate the fate of a half dozen people. He looked to Hopkins and Gregson, Bainbridge and Donovan. They were all staring right back, fear and uncertainty in their eyes. Could they get out round the back? Another exit?

Gunfire rang out in the street, and Greg turned to look. The walkers on the edges of the Colonel’s force were coming thicker now, pressing in. There was no telling what hordes were waiting at every other exit point. And the second Greg made a run for one of those, the Colonel wouldn’t hesitate to storm after them. With Sherlock injured, they wouldn’t make it far. And there was Bradstreet to consider. Greg couldn’t abandon him, nor the Dowager.

Greg quickly scanned the situation on the street. The hooded men fighting off the walkers were backing up as they loaded fresh magazines into their assault rifles. And then Greg noticed something:
the Colonel twitched slightly whenever a spray of rounds went off. He was anxious. He was exposed. He was making a show of control, while in reality he had no more mastery over the walkers than Greg.

It wasn’t much to work with, but leverage was leverage.

“All we’ve got to do is stay in here and let the walkers take care of you,” Greg called out. “Give us our man and then we’ll talk.”

The men sitting atop the Dowager joined in the firing upon the encroaching walkers. Shouts went up and the line of men near the front of the vehicle wavered and shrank back. Scowling, the Colonel grabbed Bradstreet by the collar and twisted the tip of the gun into his scalp. “You underestimate my resolve, Inspector. Shall I enlighten you?”

“NO!” Greg shouted.

The Colonel fired. Bradstreet’s skull exploded horrifically onto the pavement, and the Colonel kicked his body forward. Someone screamed and Greg’s hatred went molten, clouding his thoughts and his sight. Hands tugged at his arms, preventing him from barreling right out the lounge and into open exposure to the Colonel’s weapons.

“I will kill every last one of you!” The Colonel shouted over Bradstreet’s slumped body. “I will bleed you one by one until I get what I want! The bunker. It’s location. It’s access codes. Everything!”

“You fucking psychopath!” Hopkins shouted back at him.

The Colonel spun and waved to his men. “Form up! Shoot out their limbs if need be, but leave the lungs and throats. They’re no good to me if they can’t talk.”

It was a nightmare in slow motion. Donovan was back on the radio. Hopkins, red-faced, pressed defensively against the wall. Bainbridge was staring wide-eyed out the window. Gregson shook, his pistol in hand. They were all going to die. They’d already lost three officers today; good, brave men who deserved better than the bloody ends they’d met. And yet those remaining held their positions, performed their duties, did not cower in the face of a grisly end. Then there were the civilians. Sherlock, and John, who had only just found each other. Molly, who could only be blamed for trying to do the right thing. The whole mission meant nothing if they died here and now. Greg had brought good people to their deaths.

Greg spun into the open window, raising his hands and throwing his gun aside. “All right! All right.”

The Colonel looked up. There was blood on his jacket sleeve; backsplash from his murder of Bradstreet.

“Sir, what are you doing?” Gregson hissed.

“Pindar. It’s called Pindar,” Greg called. “But the only way you’re getting in is if we have a chance to evacuate our people. You don’t harm a single one.”

The Colonel cocked his head, moderately amused. “You want me to take your word on that, Inspector? All of a sudden? That you’ll just vacate the premises and hand it over.”

Greg nodded. “That’s the only way it’s going to happen.”

This caught he Colonel off-guard. Clearly he expected a prolonged, bloody overture to get what he wanted. He glanced at his men fighting off the walkers. The undead were now piled knee-high.
Time was short, and he knew it.

“How long for this ‘evacuation’?” the Colonel asked.

Greg scrambled for a number. “A week,” he blurted.

“I’ll give you four hours. Under my supervision.”

“No. You allow us to evacuate, then you get the location.”

“One day,” he countered. “Or I can just kill you now.”

“Two days,” Greg replied. “We have sick and wounded.”

“Fine. Two days,” the Colonel said. “But I’ll need reassurances. A body. A person. Collateral, if there’s to be a deal.”

“Collateral?”

“Yes.” He kicked Bradstreet’s corpse. “This one’s no good anymore. I’ll need someone I can keep. Someone you’ll come back for. You have three minutes to provide an acceptable candidate, or I’ll send my friends inside and wash the walls with your blood.”

Greg stared at him.


Greg turned, his mind reeling, and his officers barraged him with a dozen questions all at once.

“How could you—?”

“Sir—?”

Greg pushed past them all. “I need a moment to think.”

“You’re not planning to actually give them Pindar, are you?” asked Hopkins.

“Of course not!” Greg snapped. “He just needs to think we’re serious. Buy Pindar time, get them ready. He’ll come for us one way or another. I’ve lost enough lives today.”

He scrubbed at his hair and paced through the lounge. His thoughts stuck on Bradstreet, how frightened he’d looked there on his knees. Waiting for his commanding officer to save him. Greg ran his hands across his mouth.

He spotted Sherlock seated on an administrator’s desk in an office just beyond reception. Papers and files and a withered potted plant had been shoved onto the floor, and Sherlock’s crusted jeans had been sliced the length of his calf up his injured leg. John was carefully palpating the knee joint as Molly looked on. Sherlock was staring at the top of John’s head as if in a daze.

“Strained it, I think,” John said as Greg joined them. “Nothing broken or infected, thank God.”

“I told you, I’m fine,” Sherlock said.

John’s mouth formed a thin, skeptical line. “We’ll give you a once over when we get back, just to be sure.”
“I’m fine,” Sherlock grumbled.

“Greg, what’s wrong?” Molly asked.

John and Sherlock both looked at Greg, and their eyes narrowed.

“It’s the Colonel,” Greg told them hoarsely. “Bastard’s killed Bradstreet and McDonald. They’re readying to kill us, too.”

“God,” Molly whispered.

John straightened. “What are our options?”

“Nothing,” Donovan said, passing in from the lounge. “He’s already made a deal, the idiot.”

Molly looked shocked. “You made a deal?”

“I bought time,” Lestrade explained. “But he wants a hostage as collateral. Someone we’ll come back for.”

“Me,” said Donovan. “Sir, I’m your second in command. He knows how loyal you are.”

“No,” Greg scoffed. “God, no. You’re a woman.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Donovan demanded.

Greg sighed. “It’s different, Sally. It just is. They’ll torture and possibly kill whomever goes with them. I know what men like that will do to a woman, simply out of spite. So do you. No.”

“There’s always me,” John offered.

“No,” Greg and Sherlock shouted at precisely the same time.

John arched an eyebrow between the both of them. “Why not? I’ve trained for this sort of thing.”

Greg shook his head. There were times that reminded him precisely why John had fallen in with a mad detective. John looked barely capable of standing under his own power, let alone enduring captivity and torture, and here he was openly offering to do both.

“Because,” Greg said in a gentler tone, “we’re short on doctors just now, and if the Colonel figured out that’s what you are, I doubt we’d ever get you back.”

Seeing reason, John pursed his lips and nodded faintly. Sherlock looked paler than when he’d first set eyes on John.

Bainbridge, Hopkins, and Gregson were in the doorway. “We haven’t got long,” Gregson said. “Shall we draw straws amongst the officers, then? That seems fairest.”

“There’s no point,” Donovan said, frowning deeply at Greg. “He’s already decided. He decided the moment the Colonel said it.”

“No,” Molly whispered.

Greg looked at her. At everyone. They were waiting for him to say it, and he realized Donovan was right. The decision was made.
"I'm going," he told them. "It's me. That's final."

There were no arguments for once, though Greg saw the anger, the resignation, the fear. The others grimaced at him silently, like a man come early for his own funeral. Greg only felt a sort of giddy lightness. A final act of service for those who had sacrificed so much.

He turned to Donovan. She was furious, and wouldn't look him in the eye until he reached out to touch her hand.

"Sally, the Met is your responsibility now," he said. "You've got to look out for them. You've got to protect them. I'm relying on you. Do you understand?"

She puffed up with a long breath. "We're not going to leave you with them."

"You've got to," Greg told her. "You know the Colonel can't be trusted. He'll break any bargain he makes. Don't even try coming for me. Talk to Mycroft, get him to see reason. And for the love of God, get everyone out of Pindar while you still can. They've debated leaving for weeks. It's time, Sally."

She blinked back tears and nodded firmly. "It's been an honor, sir. A privilege."

He looked to his other officers. Bainbridge was stony-faced. Hopkins was shaking her head in a silent plea. Gregson looked overwhelmed. Greg tipped his head, respectfully. Damn fine officers, each and every one of them.

Sherlock, still seated on the desk, seemed to have finally got the gears of his gigantic brain back in slow working order. His brows were slightly furrowed, and Greg knew a catastrophic idea forming when he saw one.

"Whatever idiotic thing is running through your head, delete it," Greg told Sherlock. "It's not worth it. You know it isn't. I didn't come here to drag your arse out of the fire just for you to waste a second chance."

Sherlock's eyes darted to John and back again, and Greg supposed he got the meaning. John glanced back at Sherlock just a hair too late to see the look. He frowned a little, then nodded at Greg, and gave him a formal salute.

Molly was the only one in tears. "Don't do this," she said.

"I know you'll watch out for everyone," Greg told her. "I know you'll help them to make the right choices."

"I promise," she whispered.

He experienced a strong urge to lean in at that moment. It resulted in an abortive half-lurch that Molly apparently took to be the beginnings of a hug. She embraced him gladly, wrapping her arms around him, and Greg gathered her slight frame into his.

They followed him into the hall, Donovan and his officers sticking close as if they intended to protect him still, John and Molly trailing behind with Sherlock. Greg removed his belt and let it fall to the floor. The windows glowed with daylight. Greg strode toward them, resolute, and pulled open the door leading to the street.

The Colonel's men had formed a tight line ten yards out, and when Greg appeared, unarmed, the Colonel motioned for them to hold. Greg paused on the stoop and raised his hands slowly, placing
them on the back of his head, signaling his intention to give himself over.

The Colonel appeared surprised at first, before a faint, self-righteous smile arose on his face. Greg descended the short stair and crossed the pavement, keeping his eyes steady on the Colonel even as gunfire rang out on both sides. He stopped just short of the line.

“Acceptable?” Greg gruffly asked.

If the acting head of the Met wasn’t enough to give his officers and the people of Pindar a stay of execution, no one would. The Colonel tilted his dark blond head.

“Acceptable,” the Colonel agreed.

As the men moved to bind Greg’s hands roughly behind his back, his gaze fell to the massacred bodies of Bradstreet and McDonald. He was shoved forward into the crowd of armed men and he stumbled briefly. Angry, militant eyes glared at him from the masked faces all around.

“You won’t get away with this, you arse,” came Donovan’s voice from the direction of Bart’s.

Greg turned his head. “Sally, don’t,” he warned.

The Colonel walked past Greg. “Sally,” he said, quite curiously. “Taking over for the Inspector, are you? Well, then. I suppose we should arrange things. If you want to retrieve him whole, meet me... somewhere pompous, I think. Victoria Memorial in front of the palace. Keys to the kingdom and all that. Two days’ time, as negotiated. Sundown. You’ll bring me the locations of every entrance and exit to Pindar, every access code, every piece of technical specification. If you don’t bring enough, he dies. If I believe you’re lying to me, you die. And if I see a single weapon on your side, I won’t allow the innocents to go in peace. Are we clear?”

“Clear,” Sally muttered.

Someone pushed Greg forward again, toward the idling Dowager. The vehicle was dirtied by streaks and smears of drying blood and walker bits. They’d really done a number on her, bringing her to Bart’s, and yet somehow knowing she’d fallen into the Colonel’s hands was the more repugnant thought. They’d thrown open the rear doors, and Greg had the unpleasant feeling that once he went in, he wouldn’t be seeing daylight again.

“My God,” he heard the Colonel murmur. “He’s alive?”

Greg was given the opportunity to look over. The Colonel was staring back at the front stoop of Bart’s, where among the resentful expressions stood Sherlock, leaning on John.

“I’ve seen a number of remarkable things in my day, Inspector,” the Colonel said. “That one, he’s special. Sherlock.” He looked over. “He infiltrated my men. He made a mockery of us with that little stunt at Kensington. Hand him over in your place, and you may buy yourself a bit of mercy when the time comes.”

If Greg hadn’t been decided before, that sealed it.

“You’ll have Sherlock over my dead body,” he said. “And several others, I have no doubt.”

The Colonel shrugged casually, as if all this mattered little in the end. “Very well. An agreement’s an agreement. But what about the little spitfire we were toying with earlier when you so rudely barged in? I think you’d come back for her.”
Greg simply glared. He would not grace the Colonel with any other response. Let him know what Greg was willing to do to protect those few left to him.

The Colonel looked ready to break into a laugh, but at that moment the fighting men broke on each side. The dead encroached like a tidal force, steadily, uninhibited, washing away both dead and alive. Greg was thrust between the parted rear doors of the Dowager and men scuffled in behind him, shoving as many inside as could fit. Tires squealed, gun barrels clanked, and Greg sent up a silent farewell to all that he had fought for.

He only hoped it had been enough.

Chapter End Notes

Apocalypse Radio: The Parting Glass | The Walking Dead OST
Gun primed, John took aim at the oncoming walkers, their rotting faces made brighter and sharper by the adrenaline coursing through his body. Officer Hopkins was helping Sherlock toward the ambulance as Gregson and Bainbridge cleared the interior. The wheeled gurney skidded and clattered onto the asphalt, followed quickly by loose equipment and supplies. Although the sound of the Dowager roaring away had attracted the attention of most of the walkers, St. Bart’s ambulance station was out in the open and in no way secure. John and Sergeant Donovan fired on the encroaching undead.

“We’re not actually abandoning Lestrade, are we?” John called to her.

Donovan scowled. “Not the time!”

“We can’t leave him with those people.”

“Shut up and get in,” she ordered, motioning toward the ambulance.

With the Dowager driven off by the Colonel’s men, the ambulance was the only chance to get out before the growing tide of walkers enveloped their position. Hopkins pushed Sherlock into the back of the vehicle, now emptied save for the single built-in bench on one side, and called for the others to make a break for it. John picked his way backwards as he shot, boots sliding on the pavement’s slick residue of blood and entrails.

Gregson turned around as Hopkins jumped inside the ambulance behind Sherlock. “Where’s Molly?” he asked.

John quickly scanned the road, the walkway, the empty arch that lead into Bart’s courtyard. “She was just here,” John said.

“Christ, just what we need,” Donovan said. “Toby, we’re going back to look for her—”

“There!” called Hopkins.

Molly was sprinting through the archway, waving her arms. “Wait! Wait for me!”

“Molly, come on!” Donovan shouted.

A straggling walker on the pavement lunged clumsily toward Molly. She ducked aside, far faster than the failing reflexes of the dead, and leapt onto the rear steps of the ambulance.

“Sorry,” Molly said to Donovan as she dipped inside. “Had an errand.”

Donovan shook her head. “Bloody hell, Molly. Sit down. We’re leaving.”

Gregson and Bainbridge made for the ambulance cab as John took one final round of shots, nailing three walkers square in their foreheads, until the gun’s cartridge clicked empty. Ammunition spent, John holstered the Sig and finally abided Donovan’s shouts to get inside. He jumped into the bay and slid onto the small section of padded bench beside Sherlock, with Molly crouched just across from them. As soon as Hopkins and Donovan were inside, they pulled the doors shut.
“All clear!” Hopkins called.

Bainbridge waved on the other side of the cab porthole, and the vehicle swayed into motion.

“Hold on!” Gregson shouted from the cab.

The chassis shuddered as the wheels bounced hard over solid obstructions. John grabbed the ceiling frame with one hand and reached over to keep Sherlock in his seat; objects thumped against the ambulance walls and drummed beneath the bay floor. The vehicle lacked the clearance of the Dowager and John heard the drive shaft struggling to obey the engine’s rotations. A terrible metallic grinding sound rattled through the undercarriage.

And then, suddenly, the friction ended. The road turned smooth and quiet, and John straightened in his seat. Out the front windscreen, the walkers had thinned to a scattering of lone figures amid burned out cars and empty streets.

For the first time in far too long, John felt as if he could breath. The grimy, weary faces of Molly, Donovan, and Hopkins, were stunned and relieved. John realized his forearm was still stretched across Sherlock’s sternum. Sherlock wasn’t looking at him, and John withdrew it.

Gregson stole a glance back through the cab’s porthole. “Everyone all right back there?”

“We’re good,” called Hopkins. She traded looks among everyone. “We’re good, aren’t we?”

“Bainbridge, call it in,” said Gregson. He passed the handheld radio to his copilot. “Let them know we’re on our way.”

The radio buzzed as Bainbridge found Pindar’s channel and gave their status.

John swayed gently with the vehicle, basking in warm relief. Sherlock was pressed beside him, safe and whole. John studied him, tracing his familiar profile through the grime. They’d each been through hell. Somehow, they were together again.

Sherlock kept his eyes ahead.

“I went to the lab,” Molly said, breaking the soothing rumble of the road. “That’s where I was.”

“The lab?” Donovan asked.

“There’s nothing left,” Molly said to Sherlock. “The research. It’s just ashes.” She revealed two small electronic devices in the palm of her hand, and offered them out. “I got these, but that’s all. I’m sorry.”

Sherlock didn’t take them. After a moment Molly slipped them back into her pocket, looking dismal.

“It’s not your fault,” Sherlock said.

Molly nodded, but it didn’t look like she believed it.

“Let’s just get you home,” Hopkins said, giving Molly a reassuring squeeze of the shoulder.

John glanced at Sherlock again. He still wasn’t looking at him, and it was becoming uncomfortable.

“I thought you might have questions,” John said in a low voice.

Finally, Sherlock’s gaze shifted to John. Though his face held no particular expression, his eyes
seemed unspeakably different. Sherlock was a man who had spent his life chasing the unanswerable, the improbable, the incredible. Something rested deep behind his eyes, and it no longer looked like a question.

“Tell us, John,” Molly said.

She smiled faintly; an acknowledgement of sparing him Sherlock’s silence. The Met officers were studying him as well, probably seeking any sort of distraction from the tragedies of recent hours.

So John began to share everything that had happened since he awoke in the hospital. Beside him, Sherlock’s distant expression indicated he was only partially listening, but the rest of John’s audience held rapt attention as he told them of the Underground and returning to Baker Street. He left out the bits about the two young girls and their father who had attacked him. Under different circumstances Sherlock might have picked up on the omission.

He was describing being picked up by the Met when the radio Bainbridge had set on the ambulance dashboard crackled to life.

“Echo team, we have visual,” said a static-filled voice. “Do you read us?”

Bainbridge picked up the radio. “We read you, base. We’re in the ambulance,” he said.

“Pleased to see you’re in one piece,” the voice answered. “Stand by for escort.”

Twin police motorbikes swerved in front of the ambulance, their tail lights glowing in the darkening streets. The motorbikes led them down a narrow side road, and abruptly the ambulance was descending a steep incline. The failing overcast sky vanished, replaced by artificial light and the industrial sounds of Pindar’s garage level.

Guided by security personnel, the ambulance rolled into one of the restricted vehicle bays. In an instant the rear doors were popped open, and it seemed as if a crowd of technicians in protective suits descended upon them. Molly and Hopkins were pulled quickly from the vehicle, then John was tugged out into the dizzying press of rubberized suits and sealed masks. Altered voices were asking a dozen questions at once, loud and incomprehensible, and John turned anxiously to look for Sherlock. Two suited technicians were helping him down from the ambulance deck. John shoved back through the rubber suits, refusing to be separated.

A masked technician blocked John’s way. “Doctor Watson, you’re to come with us,” he said.

“No, I’m going with Sherlock,” John said. He made an attempt to shove past again, but was met with uncompromising resistance. Thick gloves had him by the biceps.

“He’s headed for decontamination,” explained the masked technician. “If you’ll just come this way —”

“I’m his doctor,” John insisted. “I’ve already examined him. He’s not bitten.”

“That will be for Processing to decide. We can’t risk contamination.”

Donovan was being removed from the ambulance and a protective circle of workers were whisking Sherlock swiftly away, like body guards escorting a VIP. A panicked desperation took hold of John. He shoved away the hands grabbing at him and drew his gun, pointing it straight at the technician.

“How about this, hm? How about this sort of contamination? Now let me through.”

The technician carefully raised his hands. “Put the weapon away, Doctor Watson, or we’ll be forced
to detain you in the holding cells.”

“Yeah?” John said. “You can bloody well try.”

“John,” interrupted a soft voice. It was Molly. “John, there’s no need.”

She came up beside him and touched his arm, guiding it down. “He’ll be fine. I promise. You’ll see him once you’re both through.”

John relented, finally, not seeing any other way. He holstered his weapon.

“Where to?” he asked the techs.

They did not take him toward Processing, where Sherlock and Molly and the others had gone. Instead John was brought to a small room containing a table with two chairs on either side. Atop the table was a plastic bin, and he was directed to place his equipment within it.

John had been through decontamination training. This was not part of a typical procedure. He eyed the technicians warily before depositing his gear into the bin: the walkie talkie, the knife, his bulletproof jacket, his boots, his belt. Giving up the Sig was the most difficult part.

“I’ll expect that back,” John said as he set down the handgun.

They carried the dirty gear away, and John was left alone in the cramped quarters. There wasn’t a clichéd two-way mirror, but the CCTV camera in the corner of the ceiling sported a small red light. His clothes itched with damp sweat and drying blood.

It felt as if he had been waiting an eternity when the door finally opened. In stepped a short, slim man John recognized.

“Dimmock?” he said.


John didn’t move. “I want to see Sherlock.”

“Take a seat, and we’ll discuss it.”

“I want to see him,” John said. “Now.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible for the time being,” Dimmock said. He was carrying a folder and placed it on the table, then pulled out the chair nearest to him and sat down. “You were never officially cleared to enter Pindar, you see. Consider this your entrance interview.”

“Jesus,” John hissed. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Four of your officers sacrificed their lives and that’s what you want to talk about? Fucking bureaucracy?”

Dimmock pointedly averted his gaze. “I’m well aware of the casualties brought about by D.I. Lestrade’s recklessness. As is Mr. Holmes. That will be dealt with, I assure you.”

His tone was chosen with care, and not a little bit derogatory. John narrowed his eyes. “Yeah? Well
you can tell Mycroft that we owe Greg our lives. Each and every one of us. Including Sherlock.”

Dimmock studied John impassively for a moment. “Noted,” he said. He motioned again toward the chair opposite. “Now, will you take a seat?”

“I’ll stand, thanks,” John said, folding his arms.

“So be it. We come now to the matter of your admittance.” Dimmock opened his file folder. “You were supposed to remain in the holding cells prior to this interview. Until we discovered that certain members of the Metropolitan Police removed you against orders.”

John frowned. “You’re saying I’m your prisoner? Is that it?”

“No, not a prisoner,” Dimmock said. “You’re a doctor, and a highly valuable asset. We do not clear doctors for surface operations under any circumstance.”

“Fuck off.”

Dimmock raised an eyebrow. “However, in light of your successful retrieval of Mr. Holmes’ brother, we wish to formally extend an offer for a position here. Conditional upon clearing decontamination, of course. Due to your profession, you will be granted priority access to all restricted floors and full rations, as well as a place in one of the medical shift details. Shifts run twelve hours each day, in addition to time set aside for training assistant personnel in basic medical duties.”

“And when can I see Sherlock?”

“Is that an acceptance of the offer?”

John pursed his lips. “Yes.”

“Then I suppose you can see him as soon as you pass Processing and receive a clean bill of health from the medical staff.” Dimmock spun the folder, placed a pen on top, and slid it toward John. “Sign here, please.”

John picked up the pen and looked at the form. It was some sort of writ on Whitehall letterhead, essentially conscripting John as an emergency aid worker under government jurisdiction. Possibly, it was the most pointless piece of paper John had ever seen. He pulled it close and signed it, leaving behind a bloody-brown smear of a palmprint. John shoved it back to Dimmock.

He glanced at the bloody print and tentatively closed the folder. “Welcome onboard, Doctor Watson.”

Dimmock stood and headed for the door.

“Dimmock,” John said.

The D.I. turned.

“About what happened out there. I’d like to provide a statement regarding Greg’s actions. About how he saved us.”

Dimmock offered a slight smile. “I’ll certainly let you know if your participation is required in this investigation.”
The technicians returned to collect John soon after D.I. Dimmock left.

“Where’s Sherlock?” John demanded as they jostled him from the interview room.

“This way to decontamination,” said one of the techs.

“You’ll tell me if something happens? He’s not bitten. I told you.”

“If you’ll just come with us, doctor.”

The voluntary decontamination area had the feel of school gym showers. Dingy white tile separated the room into individual stalls, each with their own curtain. There was no sign of Sherlock, nor anyone else, in the immediate vicinity, though John looked until the technicians prodded him toward of one of the shower stalls.

They held out a heavy plastic bag for his clothes. John peeled off the garments one by one, taken aback by how filthy they appeared against the off-white tile. Finally, he was down to his shorts, and they had him take those off too.

His skin was sticky from the combination of sweat, dirt, and dried blood. The techs had him spread his arms while they conducted an initial visual exam for fresh wounds. He passed with flying colors, and was directed toward the nearest stall.

John stepped inside and closed the curtain. There weren’t any knobs on the wall to control the temperature or flow, but after a few seconds the showerhead automatically turned on.

The hot streams of water felt like Heaven on earth. There was a packet of washing gel that smelt of chemicals. John scrubbed it through his hair and across skin, scouring through the disgusting remnants of Bart’s and all that had happened. Stepping into the cascade to rinse himself, John closed his eyes and let the water drum against his skull. The sensation drowned out the thoughts of Greg and walkers and madmen out to kill them.

Sherlock had looked stunned when he first laid eyes on John. Up until that point, John had entertained grand imaginings about how things would go; he’d rescue Sherlock, see to his safety, and lay bare all that had gone unsaid. He’d wasted years pretending it wasn’t happening. And he’d thought it would be easy, telling Sherlock how he felt. Facing him in reality was far more difficult. Perhaps it was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

The shower shut off of its own accord. John lifted his dripping head and swept back the fringe of his hair. Outside the shower stall, he was subjected to another visual exam, just to be sure. Once satisfied that he wasn’t infected, the technicians gave him a thin towel to dry off.

He tied the towel about his waist and was led to another room off the showers. It resembled a locker room, where collapsible tables were piled with neatly folded grey shirts, track bottoms, and zip jackets. As the technicians signed off on the paperwork declaring John fit to mingle with the rest of Pindar, the female attendant handed John a stack of clothing.

But the clothing she passed him weren’t the same shapeless greys he’d been given previously. John unfolded the pair of jeans. Dark wash, his size. Beneath the jeans was a soft blue long-sleeved shirt, clean pants, dark socks, and a pair of trainers.

The attendant saw his face. “Mr. Holmes had those brought for you,” she explained.
John looked up. “Mycroft?”

“No, his brother.”

At least it proved Sherlock had passed decontamination.

John dressed carefully behind a paneled divider provided for privacy. His sutured abdomen was beginning to throb steadily, and it was an effort to bend to lace his shoes. There was even a small mirror hanging lopsidedly on the wall. John stood and looked at his reflection. The outward normality of his appearance made for a discomforting contrast with how he felt.

He was given his approval slip and showed it to an armed guard at the door. “Looks like you’re due next for the infirmary,” the guard noted after checking his clipboard.

“I’d like to find Sherlock, actually,” John said.

“We already sent him down. I’ll show you the way.”

The guard escorted him into a dim, narrow stairwell on the other side of the door. They descended one floor down and emerged into a much more populated hallway than the lower levels John had previously seen. Men and women scurried along the corridors, chatting and pointing at papers in their hands. Many wore an eclectic mix of military and police uniforms. Others had outfits befitting a casual office environment. John hadn’t the best memory for faces, but nevertheless scanned them for anyone he knew.

“Mess hall,” said the guard, pointing toward one particularly busy area. By the activity, it appeared dinner was in session. “Showers and toilets are off that way. Majority of the bunk rooms are just past those. Infirmary is over here.”

They wound through the network of interconnected halls and reached a pair of double doors, not dissimilar to a hospital. The guard motioned John inside.

In Afghanistan they were set up with tents, mostly, but despite the rustic environment the army had shipped in state-of-the-art surgical equipment. Pindar’s infirmary resembled a laboratory forced to evolve into a G.P.’s office, a local clinic, and a surgical center all in one.

It was evening, and thus most of the space was lit by solitary lamps. They had six gurneys assembled as makeshift patient beds. One was half-obstructed by a movable curtain. Someone lay behind it, unmoving, and based on the discoloration of the lower legs, John suspected it was Anderson recovering from his gunshot wound.

There were two permanent examination benches closer to the main doors. Molly was leaning against one and having her lip daubed by Mike Stamford. On the other, Sherlock sat brooding as Sarah Sawyer examined his knee.

John’s eyes fell on Sherlock, and the tension lodged in his chest dissipated in a flood of thankfulness. Soft, loose curls framed his face. He was clean and freshly dressed in a pair of jeans and, strangely, a t-shirt under a worn button-up. It made him seem far younger than his years.

“How does it look?” John asked.

Sarah and Sherlock both glanced over.

“John!” Sarah exclaimed. She excitedly rolled backward on her stool and came to give John an enormous hug. Over her shoulder, John saw Sherlock look away.
“Oi! There you are!” Mike called, pausing in his ministrations to Molly.

Sarah released John, wiping at her eyes as she smiled. “God, it’s good to see you. You don’t know how good.”

“He’s all right, yeah?” John asked.

Sarah nodded. “Knee’s strained. A few scrapes and bruises, but it could’ve been worse. Far worse. He’s a lucky bastard.”

“I told you he’d already diagnosed it,” Sherlock said, stepping down from the examination bench.

“You’ll need to rest that knee,” Sarah told him. “Not likely to happen, knowing you, but maybe John can convince you to stay immobile for a while.” She fished in a drawer and handed Sherlock a small packet. “Paracetamol for the pain.”

Sherlock looked rather unimpressed with the prescription, but pocketed the medication.

Mike had finished with Molly and the two of them were making their way over, Molly’s split lip clean and tended. Mike shook John’s hand.

“Sorry to hear about Lestrade, mate,” he said. “I know you were friends.”

Molly sniffled into her sleeve and walked quickly past them, out the door.

“Is she going to be all right?” Sarah asked.

Mike gave a small sigh. “I don’t know. I’ll make sure she gets a meal in her, at least.” He followed after Molly.

“Well,” Sarah said to John. “You’re next.” She patted the examination bench. “Shirt off. Let’s take a look.”

John sidled onto the thin padding and tugged his shirt over his head, wincing a bit. Even after the heat of the shower, his back was sore and stiff from what must be an impressive bruising.

Sherlock straightened when he saw. “Christ,” he murmured.

“‘Christ’ is right,” Sarah said, snapping on fresh gloves. She leaned over John to inspect his back. “You’re a whole other shade of black and blue. How does it feel?”

John grimaced as Sarah traced his scapula. “Tender,” he said. “Haven’t felt the bones shifting or clicking. I don’t think anything’s broken.”

Her gloved fingers came round to his bruised throat, lifting his chin. “And this? I’d say it was a choking pattern.”

“Erm. Disagreement,” John said.

“Thank God you came out on the right end of that. I’d hate to see the other guy.” Sarah pulled over her rolling stool and sat down. “All right. On your back. Let’s see the damage.”

John shifted to lay inclined on the bench, and Sarah directed the lamp onto his sutures. She tutted when she saw them. “These should’ve come out weeks ago.”

“I know,” John said. “I hadn’t any sanitary tools.”
“Then let’s get to it,” Sarah said. She rolled aside to rummage through her supplies.

Sherlock stood watching in the dimness beyond the halo of lamplight. His gaze was on John’s stomach, where the small black sutures formed an uneven line.

Their eyes met. For a moment it was just the two of them, with no outside distractions or dangers, and John’s stomach seemed to hang mid-flip.

It had never been so awkward between them. As if John’s reappearance was an inopportune houseguest, and now Sherlock had to grudgingly adjust his evening’s plans. The world may have changed, but this, their base friendship, was supposed to be the one untouched constant. John had relied on it. He had survived for it. And if he had lost Sherlock, too…

_Say something, you coward._

His mind came up blank, and the moment passed. Sarah rolled back into John’s view, her basin filled with tweezers, fine angled surgical scissors, disinfecting alcohol, and steri-strips. She began applying the disinfectant to the sutured skin.

With Sarah there, a shield between them, John felt bolder. “How did it happen?” he asked, nodding toward his injury.

It was the wrong thing to say. Sherlock blinked up to John’s face and shifted uncomfortably. “Knife,” he said. “A stabbing.”

“Who did it?”

“You don’t remember?”

“No.”

That surprised him. “A suspect,” he said. “No one, really. I should’ve—”

Sherlock cut himself off sharply and diverted his eyes once more.

“It’s not uncommon, not remembering,” Sarah said as she traded the alcohol for the angled scissors. “Comas are a funny business. We wrote you a card at the surgery, you know.”

“I saw it,” John said.

She began to carefully clip and remove the sutures, one by one. “Doctor Calloway even organized a pub night in your honor. Raised a toast to your recovery and collected donations for TBI research.”

“Did things look that hopeless?”

“Sherlock would be the one to ask. He was there for all of it.”

John glanced up, but Sherlock was no longer in the room. He jerked up onto his elbows. “Sherlock?”

“Now where’d he run off to?” Sarah said.

John sighed. “God knows.”

He felt an urge to tumble off the bench and run right out into the hall, shirtless and partially-sutured. It took considerable effort to rein it in. Sherlock was safe in Pindar. Perhaps he was even joining
Molly and Mike for a much-needed meal. John decided he could live with that.

He settled back down, allowing Sarah to resume the procedure.

“How is he?” John asked.

“How do you mean?” Sarah said.

“He’s barely said ten full sentences to me since we found him. How is he?”

She made an incredulous noise. “No worse than the rest of us, I’d imagine. Which is to say, not well at all.”

“He’s different,” John said.

Sarah looked up at him. “He thought you were dead, John. We all did.”

John frowned. “He’s different,” he said again.

A groan rose through the darkened infirmary, startling John for a moment until he realized it had originated from behind the curtain where Anderson lay.

“Thank your stars he’s not over there,” Sarah said.

“Is it bad?”

“Worse by the hour, it seems. We can’t keep a sterile environment and the leg’s turning gangrenous. Once you’re recovered we can look into options. You’re more experienced in field amputations than I am.”

“Amputation?” John said. “Do you think it’ll come to that?”

“It’s looking more and more likely. Don’t tell Sergeant Donovan, of course. We’ll propose it to her when and if the time comes.”

John mulled the prospect of performing major surgery. “We’d need to find a sterile room. Or as close as we can get.”

“That might require looking outside of Pindar,” Sarah pointed out.

“John,” said a sudden, deep voice.

Sherlock had somehow slipped back into the infirmary. As John looked over, Sherlock set a small bowl of oatmeal and a flimsy cup of tea onto a nearby swiveling medical tray.

“You brought me food?” John asked in puzzlement.

Sherlock pointed at the ridge of John’s ribs, just above where Sarah was pulling out the last of the sutures. “You’re underweight,” he said.

“I’ve been on the coma diet,” John said, dark-humoredly. Come to think of it, he was actually rather hungry. The nausea he had previously experienced was long gone.

Sherlock retreated to stand against the wall as John dug into the oatmeal. It was warm and filling, and exactly what he needed. He sipped the tea to wash it all down.
The brew was unpleasantly weak. John cringed. “Ugh. This is awful.”

“I know,” Sherlock said. “Makes Molly’s seem like high tea at Buckingham Palace, doesn’t it?”

“Not as bad as the time you left out the milk after pouring mold cultures. I think I drank penicillin.”

John thought he saw the edge of Sherlock’s mouth twitch. “If I remember correctly,” Sherlock said, “you had a sore throat that cleared up shortly afterward.”

“Dumb luck,” John said. “As usual.”

“To dumb luck, then.”

John raised his cup of tea. “To dumb luck.”

It was like working a rusty hinge. A spot of grease, a good turn, and he and Sherlock would be all right. John drank to that, if nothing else.

Sarah finished up shortly and wiped the excess disinfectant off John’s stomach, free of any remaining sutures. She carefully taped the steri-strips over the healing wound and proceeded to clean up her materials, pulling her gloves off inside out. She stuck it all in a flexible bag marked BIOLOGICAL WASTE.

“Where do you dump it?” John asked, indicating the bag.

Sarah shrugged. “Our crews tried to find hazardous waste skips at first. Now they just toss it wherever’s safest. Where we don’t expect anyone to be.”

John sat upright and pulled his shirt on. Stomach pleasantly full, he was beginning to feel a bit drowsy. He yawned.

Sarah came over with a packet of paracetamol for him. "Here. Might want some water from the canteen to wash things down. Now, you’ve been through a lot, and I’d like to keep you under observation tonight. You can sleep here in the infirmary—"

"He's staying with me," Sherlock interrupted.

John and Sarah looked over at Sherlock where he leaned against the wall.

"John needs rest, not an earful," Sarah said.

Sherlock pushed off and rounded on her with a scowl. "You don't know a damned thing about what he needs. He'll never sleep if he stays here. He's survived on his own for days. Under stress, John reverts to his military training. That means tactical thinking. That means identifying threats. Look around us, doctor. Two entrances on opposing sides of the room that are impossible to simultaneously monitor from any one position. Strangers coming in and out at all hours, medical implements usable as weapons. The infirmary is a defensive nightmare. Now, he's coming off a prolonged adrenaline high so he'll need to sleep within the next hour. Badly, but he won't. Not here. Tell her, John."

"Beggars can't be choosers, Sherlock," John said. “I'll take this over camping outdoors with the walkers.”

Sarah frowned. “Well, perhaps we can sort out a bunk in the medical quarters—”

“Are you even listening to me?” Sherlock cut in. “He won’t sleep. Not unless he’s feeling secure.”
“Have you got somewhere better?” John asked.

Sherlock nodded. "My room. The best one in this ant hill."

Sarah looked skeptical. "You can go with him if you want, John, but you’re due back here in the morning for a thorough physical. All right?"

John hopped off the bench. Sherlock’s face was impassively hard, but there was a touch of smugness in his eyes. He was insufferable when he was right.

“Go on, then,” John said.

Sarah returned to her tasks as they departed the infirmary. Dinner seemed to have ended, and the inhabitants of Pindar dispersed. The halls were dimmer now as night shift came on. Sherlock led the way, all the while favoring his right leg.

“You okay?” John asked. “I can help, if you like.”


He reached beneath his button-up and pulled out a handgun.

“My Sig,” John said, astonished. It had been thoroughly cleaned and looked good as new. “How did you—”

“A lieutenant in the weapons detail who owed me a favor,” Sherlock said. He passed it over. “Figured you’d prefer if it was close at hand.”

John traded the gun between each hand. Already, he could sense the tension in his muscles decompressing, with Sherlock close by and a means to protect the both of them. He hadn’t realized just how amped he’d been.

John gratefully looked up. They were standing in the near-deserted hallway. Sherlock was standing close, and smelt faintly of chemical shampoo and clean laundry. After all this time he seemed to know what John needed before John did. He wondered how long it had been, since the accident. Since they’d stood like this, talking.

Clearing his throat, John tucked the Sig into his jeans. “Thank you,” he said.

Sherlock seemed as if he wanted to say something, as if words were hanging just on the tip of his tongue. His pale eyes swept across John’s face. Was he even happy that John was back? Or had he simply forgotten John’s existence while he was gone, like always?

“Actually, I think I’ll take you up on that offer,” Sherlock said. He rubbed his thigh, just above the knee. “It is a bit sore.”

They turned, and John circled an arm around Sherlock’s waist, supporting him, as Sherlock’s lanky arm draped his shoulders. He was warm, and lean, and the solidest thing John could remember touching. Together, they walked.
Apocalypse Radio: In the Water | Anadel
Chapter 23


It did not make sense. The inputs did not match the outputs. The chemical equation did not balance.


John was beside him, a living presence beneath his arm as they traveled together down the hallway. Sherlock’s brain was working again, however slowly, and yet it was still struggling to process the facts. The breadth of John’s shoulders. The exact shade of flaxen blond-grey hair. The crown of his head in perfect reach of Sherlock’s nose.

*It was John who found you,* Molly had quietly told him as they waited to enter Processing. *If it wasn’t for him, you would still be trapped in that lab.*

That wasn’t correct, of course. If it wasn’t for John, Sherlock would have been two years addicted, missing, or dead. Probably all three in short order.

John was saying something.

“What?” Sherlock said, blinking quickly.

John looked up. His brows came together, and God, his eyes. Perfect and alert, and so very close. “I said, you know we can’t just leave Lestrade out there. No matter what he told us.”

Lestrade. Right. Kidnapped by the Colonel, along with the Dowager. Sherlock glanced away down the corridor. “I’m working on it,” he said.

He wasn’t working on it. He only dimly recalled giving it a moment’s thought. How long ago was that? His brain had proven hardly navigable before the shock of finding John, and now it seemed he had been left with a maze of broken glass, its jagged edges biting sharp.

“Sherlock?” John asked, gently. His eyes had not left Sherlock, and concern was growing in his features. “Where’s your room?”

Sherlock looked round. Thank God, they were going in the right direction. The maintenance closet he called home was not ten meters ahead. “Just here,” Sherlock said.

They reached the door. John slid out from under his arm and got the handle. Pitch darkness greeted them, and John immediately balked. He glanced tensely at Sherlock, unwilling to move forward into the dark.

Sherlock stepped into the room and struck the electric lantern hanging just inside the door. The recognizable shapes of four walls, shelving, and a folding bed seemed to ease John’s apprehension.

He waited until John felt safe enough to enter, then shut the door behind them. It was a bit snug with two people instead of one, but not uncomfortably so. Sherlock watched John as he surveyed the Belstaff hanging on its hook, the barren shelves, the bed, the stack of trunks at the far end of the room. He didn’t look especially impressed.
“Well,” John said, turning. “What’s so great about this room, then?”

Sherlock pointed to a grate on the wall near the floor, softly humming as it ventilated air. It stood about one meter tall and a half meter wide, covered by a latticed metal screen. "Emergency exit," Sherlock said.

“Emergency exit?” John echoed.

“It’s one of the reasons I chose this room,” Sherlock explained. “It connects to the duct network. A reasonably agile person might get in and out of Pindar through there.” He pulled a small link of janitorial keys from his pocket. “And this is the only key set for the room.”

“So we can—”

“Lock the door, that’s right. And have your own private escape hatch.”

John swayed a bit as he processed Sherlock’s proposal. He looked at the grate for a long moment before moving to examine it. He crouched beside the grate, running his fingers over the screws and along the edges, as if to confirm for his own peace of mind that it was a reasonable option for quick departure.

With John’s back turned, Sherlock took advantage of the opportunity to greedily scrutinize him. He hadn’t got the best look at John’s injuries during Doctor Sawyer’s examination. He was bruised, and exhausted, and undernourished. Just looking at the stitchwork on John’s abdomen had triggered sickening memories of the attack that had caused his coma. Sherlock’s stomach clenched unpleasantly, and he placed a steadying hand against the wall, careful to make sure John didn’t see.

Apparently satisfied with Sherlock’s plan, John stood. Seeing his face again, the tightening in Sherlock’s gut seemed to loosen.

“Good?” Sherlock asked.

“Good enough,” John said.

He came closer. Sherlock’s skin prickled. The room was heating more quickly than normal, with John’s added body warmth. They looked at each other.

John cleared his throat. “I don’t suppose… my parents? Harry. Chelmsford, did anyone make it?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock said, truthfully.

“Do we have satellite phones? Anything to communicate?”

Sherlock shook his head. “We haven’t been able to raise anyone outside London.” He paused, then added, “I’m sorry.”

Small, distressed emotions played across John’s face. “That’s… something,” he said. “Coming from you.”

“We got Mrs. Hudson out of the city before the worst of it,” Sherlock told him.

“And she’s safe?”

Sherlock didn’t need to say it again. That dreaded phrase: I don’t know. John nodded shortly, and his left hand squeezed out a quick series of fists.
Sherlock waited, unsure what he should do. He strongly desired to reach out to John, touch him, feel again his realness. Instead, he folded his arms behind his back.

John swept his eyes across the hanging Belstaff and frowned lightly at the box of nicotine patches on the shelf. And then his gaze landed on the trunks, and he seemed to register what they were.

“You brought these from home?” he asked.

“Yes,” Sherlock said. “Just the necessities.”

John walked over to the closest trunk. The lid was already thrown back, in Sherlock’s haste from earlier. John peered inside. “I was wondering where you’d put…”

He stopped. At the brim lay a stack of folded shirts, jumpers, and other tops. Carefully, John lifted up the soft sleeve of a cream-colored cardigan.

"This is mine,” John said, astonished. He dug, layer below layer. "My clothing. My things." He pulled out the leather-clasped cleaning kit for his gun, then glanced at Sherlock, confused. "You packed them?"

It wasn’t an accusation. And yet, Sherlock felt strangely exposed.

"At the time, I believed you were coming along,” Sherlock said. “The plan was to evacuate you and reunite at an emergency shelter outside the city."

John gripped tight to the leather kit. The trunk, his clothes, all of it, troubled him deeply. Sherlock had been instructed to pack for an unspecified length of time and he hadn’t given a second thought to packing for John, too. He knew John’s wardrobe and possessions almost as well as his own.

Eventually, John looked up. "Why was I left?"

His voice was quiet, but it seemed to fill the entire room. Sherlock’s throat inexplicably closed in on itself. They looked at one another, lingering in the uncomfortable silence.

It took a moment for Sherlock to find his words. "You weren't left, John,” he said. “You were dead."

John glowered. He dropped the kit into the trunk and came forward. "Brilliant deduction. Do I look dead to you?"

"Obviously not."

“I know you stayed with me while I was in hospital," John said. It wasn't a question. "Which means you left me there. Why?"

This was not a conversation Sherlock wanted to be having. His insides curdled, and he glanced helplessly at the floor, the wall, the useless nicotine patches.

“Sherlock?” John said, snagging his attention. “I asked you why."

He felt again the cold hospital room floor, the sedative working in his veins, the look in Mycroft’s eyes as he took from Sherlock the only thing worth saving. Behind his back, his hands shook.

“Mycroft,” Sherlock finally admitted.

“Mycroft,” John repeated.
“His methods were… effective.”

“Effective? You mean he forced you to go?”

He watched as John worked through the idea. It was the truth, if only a portion of it. Sherlock scoured John’s face with his eyes, desperate that he understood. *I didn’t want to leave you. That was the last thing I wanted.*

John folded his arms, head nodding at the floor. He blew out an annoyed breathed. “Bloody Mycroft. I’ve been in warzones safer than that hospital. Anyone in their right mind would get out. I certainly wouldn’t have wanted you to be— well.” He looked up. “Not there. It’s just— I had no idea what had happened. When I woke up.”

“I know.”

“I thought you might be— dead. You know.”

The look in his eyes had changed, like a dark shadow passing over water. Pained. His arms were still folded, his fingertips digging trenches into his own biceps.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said, stifflly.

John blinked, and nodded. The shadow in his eyes vanished, the moment of vulnerability gone.

John cleared his throat. “Well,” he said. “I… I still don’t quite understand. You said I was stabbed, yeah? Then how did I end up in a coma?”

“Head injury,” Sherlock said. “Intracranial trauma.”

John had already said he remembered nothing from that night. News of a secondary injury appeared to surprise him. “Intracranial trauma?”

”May I see?” Sherlock asked.

“Where—”

“Turn around.”

John regarded him for a moment. Slowly, he spun so that Sherlock faced his back, and tipped his head forward.

His hair was clean and fresh-cut, and scented lightly of chemicals. It shone pale gold in the lamplight, smoothed into submission by unconscious habit, right down to the small tail at his nape. Sherlock gently carded his fingers through the strands, marveling how it felt just as soft as it had always looked. He ran his thumb up the back of John’s head, flipping the hair like a picture book. Faint scarring blemished his scalp, but it wouldn’t be noticeable unless shaven.

John reached behind his head, and Sherlock guided his fingertips to feel the subtle scar tissue.

”That's what caused the coma?” John asked.

”Brick wall,” Sherlock murmured. “Several... several impacts.”

He had seen them all. Counted them as they happened. The air in Sherlock’s room had grown stifling.
"They said there was no permanent brain damage," Sherlock went on. "I examined the CT and MRI scans myself. You simply... refused to wake up."

John angled his head. "Refused?"

"I asked quite politely," Sherlock said.

John turned to face him again, dropping both their hands away. "Are you actually accusing me of staying in a coma on purpose?"

John had been healthy and strong. There was no biological reason for the coma. And yet as Sherlock faced John’s thorough confusion, the logical foundation of his statement evaporated. John was stubborn, but not vindictive.

“Perhaps ‘refused’ is too strong a word,” Sherlock admitted.

“I’d say so,” John snorted. “Let me get this straight… I was stabbed, and received major head trauma. All at once.”

“In short succession. The stabbing came first, and then… you had a fight. With the suspect. And he did that to you.” Sherlock pointed at John’s head.

“Hold on. I fought him after being stabbed?”

“Yes.”

“And then he slammed my head into a brick wall.”

“Yes.”

“And it put me in a coma.”

“That’s right.”

“Christ,” John muttered.

John was a doctor. He knew how much blood the human scalp, thick with capillaries, could produce. Not to mention the organ-rich abdomen. His eyes widened as he began to piece together the extent of his injuries and the devastating scene they had created.

John’s mouth parted, softly. “Sherlock…”

A warm shiver crept up Sherlock’s spine. John was so close. Sherlock watched him work through it. What it must have been like, calling the ambulance. Waiting in hospital for news whether he’d lived or died. Watching over him while he was in his coma.

There were things John couldn’t know. The kiss Sherlock had given him in his final attempt to wake him. He’d thought it his only keepsake, the feel of John’s cold lips on his. But now John stood here, alive and awake and everything Sherlock had wanted since that night.

An unexpected tension coiled in his stomach. He abruptly envisioned lifting John up and kissing him, pressing him into the wall and kissing him and kissing him, burying himself in John’s heat and life until John crowded out every other thought. Just the two of them here, in this place. A world all their own. John was a drug, and Sherlock hadn’t known the depths of his own withdrawal.

John’s tongue swiped across his lower lip. “Sherlock,” he said. His voice had gone short. "Listen, I
The bed was only a half-step away. He imagined shoving John onto it, climbing over him, splaying him out and nuzzling into his throat. The soothing rumble of John’s voice in his ear. Sherlock’s fingertips tingled with the need to touch him. To shut out everything but him.

John swallowed and fidgeted. “That is, I should tell you—”

His lips were dry. He looked overwarm. Sherlock waited.

"I should probably get some rest," John finished at last. He cleared his throat and glanced down. “You were right. About the— about the adrenaline crash."

The cold backlash of reality rolled over Sherlock, and the images in his brain instantly broke apart, freeing him from their grasp. Sherlock pressed his hands into painful fists behind his back. He couldn’t afford to let himself think that way, not around John.

"Tired?" Sherlock managed.

John smiled faintly. "Exhausted."

They were still standing quite close. Sherlock increased the distance between them as he motioned toward the bed. "Then take the bunk. It isn't much, but it's yours."

"Are you sure?" John said.

"Oh, I'll be awake for hours, yet," Sherlock said. The casual tone was coming more naturally. "Might as well put it to use."

John really did look tired. With a grateful nod, he removed the Sig from his jeans and set it on the shelf, beside the box of nicotine patches and the electric razor. John sat heavily upon on the bed and began tugging at his shoes.

Sherlock sought refuge near the closest trunk, its lid still propped open. “If you want anything more comfortable for sleeping—”

“I’m fine,” John sighed, tossing a trainer into the corner. He struggled with the second one, seemingly uninterested in the effort required to remove and replace any additional articles of clothing.

Sherlock scanned the meager items on the shelves. “I’m sure we can sort out toiletries if you—”

“Tomorrow,” John said. He broke into an enormous yawn and finally got the second shoe off.

“Right,” Sherlock said.

There was only one pillow. As John climbed into bed and settled himself under the blankets, Sherlock turned, attempting to busy himself by poking through the contents of the trunk without seeming to keep watch.

“What did you say this place was called?” John said.

Sherlock looked up. John’s half-closed eyes were on him. “Pindar,” he told him.

“Never heard of it.”

“It was a military base, originally,” Sherlock said. “Though it was converted to political use during
the seventies. We thought we’d be here only a few days. Long enough to sort out a permanent solution.”

John frowned and rolled onto his side, adjusting himself until his back was pressed against the wall. This position seemed to comfort him; his body visibly relaxed and he brought one arm up under the pillow, resting his head on top.

Sherlock perused the interleaved piles of his and John’s things. Should he sort them out by owner?

“And how many people here?” John asked. He was fighting to keep his eyes open.

“Over seven hundred, now,” Sherlock said. “They came in large groups in the beginning. Brought by the police and the military for safe-keeping. Then the police and the military stopped coming. We found more, in twos and threes, and eventually lone individuals. We’re lucky to get two a week now. But the Met hasn’t given out hope. They keep sending sorties out to check their ‘traps’. That was Lestrade’s doing, mostly.” Sherlock turned. "Naturally, we've far surpassed capacity—”

He stopped talking when he saw that John was already asleep.

A triumphant sensation pressed inside Sherlock’s chest. As predicted, John’s subconscious identified this place as a safe location and let him sleep soundly. Sherlock shut the trunk lid, his task forgotten.

John breathed gently against the pillowtop. Sherlock sat carefully on the bedside and watched him for a minute or two, making sure his breathing came at expected intervals. Gently, Sherlock reached out and pressed two fingers to the inside of John’s exposed wrist. His pulse was slightly elevated. His adrenaline was on its last legs, still fighting for attention, but the exhaustion had finally won out.

John looked so tired. He would sleep for days if left undisturbed, and Sherlock had half a mind to let him.

And he was unreasonably thin; thinner than when Sherlock had first met him. Sherlock automatically began calculating the caloric intake required for John to get back to fighting strength as quickly as possible. He’d watch John’s meals and ensure he was fed correctly from now on.

Sherlock rose.

He considered his coat, briefly. In the past, it acted as a suit of armor while he was out facing the world. Now it seemed as if it was a relic from a simpler time. Sherlock brushed the textured wool and dipped his hand into the pocket. He pulled out the dried daffodil blossom from within, delicate as folded rice paper.

A terrible sensation was beginning to fulminate beneath his breastbone; a silent burning outrage for the one treacherous person at the source of so much pain. Sherlock glanced at John, and tucked the flower in his own jeans pocket before slipping from the room.

He locked the door behind him, and stood there for several minutes until he’d sufficiently convinced himself that John was safe inside, and that no one else had access to him.

Finally, he was off down the corridor.
Thinking it didn’t help. The irrational part of Sherlock’s brain was howling for him to run back and check. Cool sweat lined his palms, and his pulse was starting to race. He found the stairwell and plunged forward, descending toward the bottom-most level of Pindar.

John was like an eclipse. His presence blotted out all other considerations. But as John fell away from Sherlock’s immediate orbit, the embers of anger and frustration were blowing themselves into a blinding fury.

The guard on duty leapt back a solid meter when Sherlock came crashing through the stairwell door, and upon seeing his face did not make an effort to inquire about his business there. The government floor was awash in its usual drab haze, and if there were any staff in the hall, Sherlock failed to notice them. His eyesight tunneled to the inconspicuous door near the end of the corridor.

Three of Mycroft’s deputies were inside the secretary’s office, engaged in various stages of paperwork. They jolted to life as Sherlock stormed through.

Anthea was the only one who attempted to stop him. “You can’t go in there,” she said, leaping to her feet. “Mr. Holmes—he has another meeting—”

Sherlock shoved open the door to Mycroft’s office, sending it slamming into the wall. Mycroft was perched behind his desk, bridlign with alarm, and in the center of the room sat Sergeant Donovan in a hard plastic chair. They were obviously mid-conversation and Sherlock couldn’t care in the least. He stood seething in the doorway, fixated upon his brother.

A strangled pause followed. Mycroft looked uncomfortably from Sherlock to Donovan. “Er, I’ll expect your report filed with D.I. Dimmock, Sergeant,” he said. “He is now head of Met operations.”

Donovan stood with a muttered, “Yes, sir.” By her body language, it had been a fraught discussion. She eyed Sherlock warily as she moved past him to leave.

“Sir,” Anthea said, helplessly, behind Sherlock. “I tried to stop him—”

“Leave it to me,” Mycroft abruptly told her.

There was a sharp click as the door behind Sherlock was shut.

Mycroft looked at Sherlock. Tension danced behind his eyes, and within the lines of his face. “Take a seat and—"

Sherlock strode into the middle of the room and kicked the plastic chair off its feet, sending it skidding across the concrete and smashing into a file cabinet.

Mycroft instinctively recoiled behind his desk. "Sherlock—"

"Let’s set one fact straight before I begin,” Sherlock interrupted. “The only reason I am not already thirty miles down the motorway, with you and every other person here but a distant memory, is that John is very tired and needs at least one night's rest. Tomorrow I'm leaving and I'm taking him with me. Anyone who wishes to follow can try to keep up. I'm done, Mycroft."

His brother’s complexion blanched as he absorbed the ultimatum. He was doing a marvelous job of keeping calm, under the circumstances. Thinking was all Mycroft had by way of self-defense; Sherlock could physically dismantle him in seconds if he chose to, and Mycroft was keenly aware of that fact.
“If it is your desire to go,” Mycroft eventually said, “I will not stop you. However, I must remind you that our doctors are not permitted to leave—”

“Don’t—you dare—”

Mycroft straightened. “He’s a doctor, Sherlock. We can’t afford to lose even one.”

“You lied to me,” Sherlock thundered. “Straight to my face, you told me he was dead. Don’t know why I expected anything different, really. Especially from you.”

Mycroft puffed up his stupid chest, and glared. “Don’t pretend as if you haven’t deduced why, Sherlock. You know why I did it. You even understand it, as much as you are able. You would be dead now if I hadn’t done it.”

“You lied about John.”

“I lie to you all the time. It’s never bothered you before.”

“You lied about John.”

The tiniest betrayal of surprise reached Mycroft’s face. His sneer vanished.

“Is that what this is about?” Mycroft asked. He sighed and shook his head. “I told you not to get involved. Ages ago. You realize you’ve brought this on yourself?”

Sherlock slammed a fist down on the desk. He had never hated his brother as much as this moment, in no small part because, deep down, he knew Mycroft was right. He had done this to himself. He had allowed this to happen. Mycroft was by no means blameless, but Sherlock was equally as culpable. At so many points he had made the wrong decision, had failed, had chosen sentiment over reason. John had nearly died; he had died. And now all of Sherlock’s failures had returned to haunt him.

“We’re leaving,” Sherlock grated out. “Tomorrow.”

Rattled, he turned to go, his brain a jigsaw mess. He needed time. He needed to think.

“You have a stake in what we’re doing here, Sherlock,” warned Mycroft’s cold, precise voice. “Don’t turn your back. It’s your duty to stay and help put things right.”

Sherlock faced his brother. “What are you talking about?”

Arching an eyebrow, Mycroft took a seat behind his desk. “Perhaps your excursion to Baskerville had unintended repercussions.”

“Baskerville?” Sherlock said, struggling to follow his meaning. That was ages ago, when he and John went to Dartmoor to investigate the sighting of the spectral hound.

Mycroft laced his fingers together. “You disrupted sensitive biological research. They study diseases there, Sherlock, did you know? In addition to the genetic experiments you so happily intruded upon. There are entire sealed laboratories for pathogens that might wipe out the human race.”

Sherlock gaped. ”You’re suggesting that John and I are responsible for all this?”

”I'm suggesting we can't know for sure unless we go there,” Mycroft said. “If Baskerville is the source of the contagion, it may prove to be our salvation as well.”
This was his new plan, then. To blackmail Sherlock into sticking around out of misplaced remorse.

“We don’t owe anyone here anything,” Sherlock said.

“Perhaps not,” Mycroft agreed, “but will John see it that way?”

Sherlock towered over Mycroft’s desk. “Do you think I couldn’t get him out of here unseen if I wanted to?”

“I know you could. However, I’m betting John will not so easily abandon innocents in need. Especially if he feels guilty.”

Sherlock scowled. “Stop it.”

“Imagine the row you’ll have when you ask him to go. Whatever your feelings toward my decisions, they were in your best interest. Do you think John would fault me for protecting you? Or were you planning to ask him to leave under false pretenses?” Mycroft tilted his head introspectively. “It’s not so very different from my tactics, I think.”

He shouldn’t have come down here so soon. He should have given it until morning. But the need to confront Mycroft had grown too strong, and despite Sherlock’s efforts he was not equipped to argue toe-to-toe after a long and overwhelming day. Mycroft watched him blandly, waiting for Sherlock to find fault in his logic.

“The row you’ll have is the matter of your atrocious actions today,” Mycroft said. “Sergeant Donovan told me of the circumstances under which they found you. And while I am pleased you came through it largely unharmed, I need not tell you that if you hadn’t diverted from your planned route, this would not have happened. Those who died are on your conscience, Sherlock. Yours and Lestrade’s, God help him. Certainly no one else can.”

“There will be no official recovery effort,” Sherlock numbly realized.

“Sergeant Donovan made an impassioned argument that we do so. Frankly, we cannot trust this Colonel to keep his end of the bargain, nor negotiate reasonably, and we will not relinquish our only safe harbor in London. I see no benefit in risking ourselves. If he tortures our location from Lestrade, we will stand ready to defend ourselves. Until then, we shall resume preparations to depart the city on our own terms.”

“You’re underestimating the Colonel,” Sherlock said.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. “Do you have a better plan to offer?”

Not receiving an answer, Mycroft nodded and touched a small stack of paper on his desk. “Now. You have made it clear that your interest lies in researching a cure,” he said. “Surely you can conclude Baskerville offers the best chance to do just that.”

Sherlock oscillated. Could Mycroft be right? Could it possibly have been Baskerville? Cambridge held attraction as a center for research, but what if it meant heading in entirely the wrong direction? Sherlock had seen evidence of other top secret projects being conducted at Baskerville while they were there. Suddenly, Cambridge seemed much more of a longshot.

“If we go,” Sherlock said, “then we’ll go on our own.”

“Getting there won’t be easy,” Mycroft observed. “You, with a doctor, alone on the road? Imagine if anyone found out what he was. I shudder to think what they’d do to get their hands on him. You can
try by yourself, if you like, but why not put our resources to use? A large group, heavily armed, with equipment, vehicles, supplies. We don’t know what’s waiting for us beyond London. Will you at least consider it?”

Sherlock regarded him skeptically. “I won’t make any promises.”

“Talk it through, if you must,” Mycroft said, looking up. “Let us not make any rash decisions.”

There was a bureaucratic finality to his last statement, as if he’d decided the conversation was over and Sherlock was now allowed to take leave of his presence. Before Sherlock could open his mouth again Mycroft lifted a hand.

“I already know what you wish to say,” Mycroft warned. “To leave you and him alone, to never again involve myself in your affairs. Rest assured that I will do so.” His expression grew distasteful. “But tread carefully, brother mine. You know where this leads. You know what comes at the end of this road. Look at what sentiment has already done to you. Look at what you’ve become.”

He didn’t much recollect returning to the maintenance closet. His hands shook as he unlocked the door, and the pounding in his chest didn’t slow until the hinges swung open and he saw John peacefully asleep where Sherlock had left him. Sherlock entered, locking the door once more.

The room seemed smaller than it had before. The lantern’s glow painted stark and angular shadows across John, the walls, and the furniture. John had pressed himself so far back against the wall that he had left a wide strip of empty mattress in front of him.

*Sentiment*, echoed a cold voice in Sherlock’s head.

Something tight constricted in his chest, and suddenly he was no longer sure what to do. Sherlock had planned to pass the night watching over John, but despite his earlier insistence on staying up, fatigue was settling upon him. His head ached. His knee hurt. He would be stiff in the morning, no matter how he slept.

Sherlock’s gaze drifted to the bare mattress alongside John, and he felt a dangerous temptation. He ought to go before things got worse. But would his brain let him sleep if he went elsewhere?

He did not realize the decision had been made until he found himself slipping off his boots. Carefully, Sherlock climbed into the bed beside John.

The movement of the thin mattress barely disturbed him. John had one arm tucked under the pillow and the other resting against his stomach. Sherlock nestled into the remaining space, face to face with him.

He shouldn’t be doing this. He should go, before John woke up. He had caused John, and everyone, so much suffering. He was choosing self-destruction, and no matter how good it felt in the moment the regret was almost certain to come. Mycroft was right. John had fractured him. John was going to break him unless he learned how to resist.

He hadn’t learned how to do that yet.

For a long time, Sherlock looked. Just looked. Memorized. Compared John’s face to the fading
replica in his mind. Drifted in the gentle, clean scent of him. Wished he did not want John as badly as he did.

"Good night, John," he softly said.

Sherlock reached up, and the lantern’s light winked out of existence.

The infirmary was quiet at this hour of the evening, and Sarah Sawyer was thankful for the reprieve.

She sat finalizing her medical reports at the cluttered desk the physicians all shared. Each of the seven who had returned from St. Bart’s were accounted for and approved to mingle with the rest of Pindar’s population. Then there were the three dead, each with their own certificate. And lastly, one missing in action. Mike had already added the names to his weekly ceremony of remembrance. He believed it was good for the base, psychologically, to attend a formal gathering and make time to grieve.

Sally Donovan had come and gone. She had silently watched her boyfriend, unconscious in his medical bay, and hadn’t asked for a prognosis. His pale skin and burning temperature told its own tale. Sarah had stood with her for a time. Eventually, Sally left.

A small droplet landed on the paper before her. Sarah wiped her cheek to catch the next one, streaking away the tears with the heel of her hand. With Mike turned in for the night she was the only physician on duty until twelve, and it would not do for a walk-in to catch her crying.

There came a faint rasping sound. Sarah looked up, sharply, toward the curtained corner of the room. She rose from her seat.

Officer Anderson was moving slightly in his gurney bed. His wounded leg was uncovered, the thigh wrapped in antiseptic-soaked gauze bandages. The lower portion of the leg was swollen with edema and discoloration.

Half-conscious, he rasped again. She lifted an eyelid and brought out her pocket torch. His pupils refused to constrict. His eyes rolled aimlessly. He hissed out a breath, long and wet.

She hadn’t the equipment nor the supplies to treat the infection. They had pumped him full of antibiotics and IV fluids, tracked his urine output, and even cobbled together a blood culture station. And yet, his organs were failing.

After a final fluttering wheeze, he stilled.

Sarah checked manually for his pulse. What little warmth he had left was leaving him. The arteries in his neck were unresponsive.

She gently let go. "I'm so sorry, Philip," she whispered.

There would be time in the morning to call for Sally. She deserved a rest, and there was nothing to be done tonight.

Sarah pulled up the bedsheets to cover him and drew the curtain, then returned to the desk to draw up the fourth and final death certificate of the evening.
Chapter End Notes

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